

KAI(E)ROTIC MOMENTS: RESISTANCE AND ALTERNATE FUTURES IN BURLESQUE

PERFORMANCE

by

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

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Time to go dance in the rain.

DEDICATION

*Dedicated to Lola and the Libertines,
for filling my life with inspiration, transformation, and glitter;
for introducing me to Lacy.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>LIST OF FIGURES</u>	7
<u>ABSTRACT</u>	8
<u>CH. 1: INTRODUCTION: THE IMPACT OF POLITICS, PERFORMANCE, AND DESIRE</u>	9
INTRODUCTION	9
LITERATURE REVIEW	12
<i>Rhetorical Studies</i>	13
<i>The Matter of Audience</i>	21
<i>(Queer) Wor(l)d Making</i>	28
KAIEROS	33
<i>Kairos</i>	34
<i>Eros</i>	40
<i>Queering Desire</i>	46
PERFORMER, SPECTATOR, RESEARCHER: RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY	54
CONCLUSION AND CHAPTER SUMMARIES	62
<u>CH. 2: UNDERSTANDING BURLESQUE’S RHETORICAL POSSIBILITIES</u>	66
SOME HISTORIES AND DEFINITIONS OF US BURLESQUE	66
<i>US Burlesque from 1868 to 1996</i>	71
<i>Neo Burlesque and Its Politics</i>	77
<i>Feminist or Post-Feminist? Empowerment or Exploitation?</i>	86
BURLESQUE IN TUCSON	88
<i>Black Cherry Burlesque and Burlesque for the Soul</i>	88
<i>Tucson Libertine League</i>	94
<i>191 Toole</i>	99
CONCLUSION	102
<u>CH. 3: RESISTANCE REVEALED</u>	104
BURLESQUE’S PUNK ROCK SENSIBILITY	104
<i>Aggressively Subversive</i>	104
<i>Tapping into Collective Rage</i>	110
DISABILITY’S DEFIANT SEXUALITY: JACQUELINE BOXX	114

MAKING AMERICA GAY AGAIN: KITTY CATATONIC	128
CONCLUSION	145
<u>CH. 4: UNMASKING ALTERNATE FUTURES</u>	148
SUPER(S)HERO PERSONAS AND UTOPIAN FUTURITY.....	148
<i>Armor for Battle</i>	148
<i>The Never-There Promise of Queer Utopia</i>	155
LET ME LIVE THAT FANTASY: JACQUELINE BOXX.....	161
FAT BLACK GIRLS CAN: THE BIG BANG MCGILLICUDDY	170
CONCLUSION	182
<u>CH. 5: CONCLUSION: FUTURE FANTASIES ON THE STAGE, THE PAGE, AND</u>	
<u>BEYOND</u>	185
EROS AND DESIRE/S AS RHETORICAL	187
PERFORMANCE TO PROMOTE EMBODIED RHETORICS	192
EXIGENCY: PERFORMANCE AS PART OF THE LARGER STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL	195
<u>WORKS CITED</u>	199

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: 191 TOOLE VENUE MAP 99

FIGURE 2: 191 TOOLE STAGE..... 101

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways performance offers opportunities to resist sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, fat phobic, and ableist narratives. Through ethnographic research with the Tucson Libertine League (TLL) burlesque community in Tucson, AZ, I argue that the erotic desire/s of narrative striptease reveal the rhetorical possibility in burlesque performance – its capacity to be politically persuasive. Engaging an intersectional feminist methodology, I use interviews, observation, performance as method, and act analysis to study acts by a heterogeneous group of woman-identified performers who identify as lesbian, queer, trans, fat, of color, and/or disabled, and center their performances around these intersectional subjectivities. My inclusion in this community as a performer allowed me to participate and observe from backstage, on stage, and in the audience. I also produced and performed in a 16-act show, “Tucson Libertine League presents: Future Fantasies” as a part of this project.

Following Audre Lorde’s characterization of the erotic as a source of personal power and the Ancient Greeks’ depiction of the god Eros as foundational to human existence, I utilize a complex understanding of erotic desire beyond simply the sexual, to its reflection of deeper knowledges and self-determination. The nature of live performance means that burlesque performers have access only to their brief time on stage and the particular audience in front of them in order to utilize burlesque’s rhetorical potential. In response to a paucity of literature at the intersection of desire and *kairos*, the propitious moment for action, I develop the concept “*kaieros*,” the interpretation of the erotic (*eros*) as a kairotic opportunity for rhetorical intervention that signals a potential re/negotiation of meaning around performers’ intersectional subjectivities. The rhetorical encounter of performer-audience interaction during narrative striptease holds the potential to shift conceptualizations about what and whom can be desired, desirable, and desirous, and by whom. This momentary rhetorical potential is made possible by erotic desire’s mutability, its characterization as a fluid entity and experience (for both audience and performer). Desire becomes multivalent and powerful, capable not only of putting bodies and subjectivities in dynamic relationship with one another but also, by extension, of re/negotiating meanings around those bodies and subjectivities.

This dissertation reveals two ways in which burlesque performers employ the rhetorical possibility of narrative striptease’s *kaierotic* exchange: by staging rageful resistance to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism, thereby recruiting the audience into their protest; and by offering snapshots of potential alternate futures, utopic times and spaces where racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism no longer exist, and where these intersectional subjects are valued and desired. Not only do I underscore performance’s role in rhetorical efforts to re/negotiate narratives around intersectional subjectivities, but I also demonstrate how burlesque performance, specifically, urges more extended study, within the field of rhetoric, of bodies and desire/s as rhetorical actors. Finally, I discuss the ways in which this research reveals the benefits of collaborative projects between artists and academics concerning minoritarian subjects and social transformation.

CH. 1: INTRODUCTION: THE IMPACT OF POLITICS, PERFORMANCE, AND DESIRE

INTRODUCTION

Standing behind the curtain, I struggled to take a full breath, my ribs penned in by a mixture of nerves and tight satin. My gown strained a bit in the waist against the tuxedo shirt beneath it. Perhaps I should have been more worried that stepping on stage seconds later would mean disrobing in public. Instead, I wondered if the audience, gathered in the bar with the promise of bared breasts, would understand and enjoy the story I wanted to tell them. The narrative I had composed was intended to help me chronicle what I had long experienced as misunderstandings around my queer subjectivity. Would they find anything interesting in this story? Would they discern how to read that story through the long gloves and bow tie and pasties? Leaving the stage that night, I had revealed more than my skin, discovering during my 3 minutes and 26 seconds in the spotlight the dynamic possibility of disrupting normative narratives about my queer subjectivity on the burlesque stage.

Burlesque is a genre of performance in which the performer, accompanied by music, advances the arc of their act by progressively removing articles of clothing to culminate in a (typically) nearly nude reveal. I had already been an enthusiastic audience member at burlesque shows in Tucson, Arizona for years before this debut performance as Lacy O'Ceans in September 2015. Given my excitement and distraction on show night, I never really got answers to the pre-show questions enumerated above. As both a performer and a doctoral student in rhetoric and composition committed to intersectional feminist social transformation, different questions emerged, however, about this new hobby of mine: in what ways could burlesque's storytelling capacities be leveraged towards the aforementioned intersectional feminist social

transformation? (How) did different performers in the community around me conceptualize burlesque's rhetorical potential? For performers with predominantly minoritized subjectivities, could this rhetorical potential contain possibilities for social change? How do audiences react to performances by women of color, queer women, trans women, fat women, and women with disabilities? How were these reactions impacted by spectators' similarly and/or distinctly situated subjectivities?

The phrase "situated subjectivities," as I use it here, illustrates the intentionally social and relational framing I offer for various categories of embodiment and social relationship (such as race, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability) in my efforts to answer the above questions in this dissertation. With a particular interest in the interactions between performer and audience, and as a researcher, performer, and audience member myself, "situated" "subjectivities" better captures the power-inflected dynamics at play between people than language suggesting each individual is in possession of an "independent" "identity." As poststructural theorist Michel Foucault notes, there "are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 781). Subjects, then, are molded in particular ways by *external* social forces and do not emerge so formed at birth. These forces that mold subjects and subject them, via control, to behave in particular ways "cannot be studied outside their relation to the mechanism of exploitation and domination" (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 782). Mechanisms of exploitation and domination, such as education, law, guidelines around "acceptable" sexual practices, among others, by turn, work to naturalize certain subjects while rendering others Other. By extension, that which is considered "natural," is considered "real."

As feminist rhetorician, poststructural philosopher, and queer theorist Judith Butler claims, however, the “real” is a “phantasmatic construction[, an] illusion...of substance — that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can” (*Gender Trouble* 199-200). Such a failure of a subject to be/come something, that is, the inability for one to successfully embody the imagined archetypal standards for any given racial, sexual, gender, etc. category, might seem damning. Such “failures,” however, offer room for subjects to potentially shift “naturalized identities” within bodies that become “the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (*Gender Trouble* 199-200).

Such performances of everyday subjects in everyday spaces (not within theatrical performance) reconfigure identity as “an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, [thereby] open[ing] up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed [when] identity categories [are taken] as foundational and fixed” (*Gender Trouble* 201). In other words, while subjection dispels the illusion that our social categories are steady, reliable, and anticipatable (the “independent identity” I eschewed above in lieu of “situated subjectivity”), subjection creates opportunities to shift the very meanings around such subject categories. Power creates the patterns of subjection but these patterns also leave space to re/negotiate the impacts and meaning(s) of that power. This dissertation, as the opening scene illustrates, is concerned with the *effects of identity* that burlesque performers produce on stage, with the ways such performers embody and narrate their varied and various subjectivities. By intentionally constructing and performing their subjectivities, the burlesque performers in the Tucson Libertine League (TLL) community where I have performed and researched for over 3 years demonstrate their clear understanding of the processes of subjection as described above. Moreover, they are moved by the possibilities of agency afforded by these processes to re/negotiate meanings around their

intersectional subjectivities with/in their performances, seizing upon the performer-audience relationship as yet another social space where subjects are created and shaped. The term “identity” would arrest these performers, while the term “subjectivity” centers and highlights the systems of power and social dynamics these women must navigate in order to assert themselves self-consciously, both on stage and off, within a racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, fat phobic, and ableist world.

More than that, however, “subjectivity” acknowledges the opportunity/ies for performers’ purposeful action/s within said systems of power and social dynamics given that those dynamics show up within the venues where they perform. The time and space of these purposeful actions are where I situate this dissertation - where my research was conducted, where I watched Tucson burlesque performers in awe, where I have learned to become one of them, and where erotic desire/s change all of the people in the room.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I situate the literature review for this dissertation at the intersection of rhetorical studies, feminist and queer theory, and literatures on audience from both rhetoric and performance studies. The term “intersection” should be understood here not as the single point where lines intersect but as the roomy space where roads meet, where movement and interaction between this already interdisciplinary scholarship is possible and, at times, robust. The conversations between the texts and scholars in this review are largely pre-existing, united by scholars’ bodies of work, lines of theoretical inquiry, and citational practices; separating this review into 3 discrete and distinct sections is somewhat challenging. As such, I have attempted to simultaneously gesture at distinction while making a place for the overlaps between the disciplines which have most influenced this project.

Rhetorical Studies

I begin in what prominent queer rhetoric and composition (R/C) scholars Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes call an “impossible” place: queer rhetorics (“Queer”). The struggle to incorporate “queerness” into R/C exceeds the common hurdle of cisheteronormativity that exist across disciplines. In “Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition,” Alexander and Rhodes’s claim that “[q]ueerness exceeds the composed self” directly contradicts the central goals of R/C, historically speaking: to provide students with the skills to evaluate the texts and arguments of others (those authors’ compositions) and to respond in kind (to compose themselves) (181). The majority of so-called queer interventions into R/C have centered around texts, narratives, and compositions which offer space/s for LGBTQ identity/ies in the curriculum (Brueggmann and Moddelmog; Chesebro, “Ethical Communication and Sexual Orientation”; Crew and Keener; Crew and Rictor; Elliott). For example, Harriet Malinowitz’s *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities* deftly argues for the inclusion of lesbians and gay men and their literacy practices into a rhetoric and composition canon. Subsequently, genres like the coming out narrative have enjoyed a place in many first-year R/C courses. A more capacious understanding of queer and queerness, however, challenges the limitations of this type of queer rhetoric and composition. “[I]f queerness is the excess of sexual identities, the part that exceeds easy and knowable encapsulation in identity, then it is also the excess of composition, of stories, narratives, arguments, and texts that are easily, knowingly ‘composed’” (Alexander and Rhodes, “Queer”183). Given the disciplines’ historical investment in language, writing, and speech as the preferred means of persuasion, expression, and communication, it is clear how and why “queer” has, according to scholars such as Alexander and Rhodes, posed such a challenge to rhetorical studies and composition. Queer’s

overflow beyond the boundaries of identity, discipline, genre, and translation is representative both of queer's irreducibility to/in language but also its refusal to be separated from the body.

In the 1992 special "Queer Issue" of *Pre/Text: A Journal of Rhetorical Theory*, the first solid foothold for queer rhetorics within the field of rhetorical studies, issue editor and rhetorical studies scholar Margaret Morrison imagines what queer rhetorics might do to bridge language and embodiment, or else what new thing queer rhetorics might produce where language and bodies meet: "I am seeking rhetoric(s) that enact corporeally in language suggestions of 'queer,' a 'queer rhetoric,' in which desire/bodies put into play a kind of linguistic music that so confuses the Symbolic's binary-based systems that we are forced to begin thinking differently" (Morrison 13). Morrison centers bodies and desire/s, and, critically, the inseparability of bodies from desire/s or vice versa. She characterizes desire as the "impell[ing]" force of queer rhetoric "that is driven by and drives through bodies" resulting in the dissolution and "confusing" of binaries which have typically characterized rhetoric (21). As such, divisions between speaker and audience, subject and object, become less distinct when considered through queer rhetoric(s) (Morrison 14). (Women-of-color rhetorics have also dissembled such divisions within rhetorical studies such as Anzaldúa; Chávez, "Embodied Translations;" Kishimoto and Mwangi; Ore.) This project expands upon desire/s's transformational potential especially as Morrison describes it above. Queer rhetorics, as I take them up here, engage with *normative* desires, desires which have been framed by racist, ableist, fat phobic, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies, in order to expose the mutability and instability of such desires across *all* categories of identity (instead of focusing solely on sexual identity). By working directly on those dynamics which can reduce non-normative subjects to the undesired Other, queer rhetorics reveal interpersonal experiences and interactions to be ripe with potential for revolutionizing meaning/s around both normative

and non-normative subjects and the desire/s that dis/connect them.

With the publishing of some of this project within *Pre/Text's* re-visitation of queer rhetoric(s), “Dirtysexy: Queer Rhetorics” (2018), I urge rhetorical studies towards a queer rhetoric(s) that deepens its connection to the *sex* of sexuality and continues to pursue the meaning/s made by and between bodies. Given the use of bodies as an expressive medium, performance as a rhetorical space epitomizes what Morrison saw at the intersection of rhetoric and queer theory: “a rhetoric impelled by force of desire always in excess of categories’ grids and oozing out them, irreducible and intractable, breaking open, breaking up, deflecting from a straight path (bent), downright perverse or quite queer, turning aside or away from what is generally done or accepted, stubbornly resisting authorities, cures” (21). Exceeding this conceptualization of queer rhetoric, however, performance moves beyond desire as *the impelling force of* rhetoric and into desire *as rhetoric itself* within the exchange between performer and spectator. Where once a meaning maker’s queer desire or identity rendered their epistemological practices “queer rhetoric/s,” the queering *of* desire by intersectional subjects in this project manifests new visions of queer rhetoric/s which change dominant mis/conceptualizations of LGBTQ women, women of color, feminist women, fat women, and women with disabilities. If the queer rhetoric of the past underscored the instability of subjectivity/ies, a new queer rhetoric of and as performance turns to the queer mutability of desire/s *between* subjects as the site of possible resistance and future-building in conversation with forces of normativity *and* anti-normativity.

The oozing perversity of queer rhetorics as detailed above signals the importance of sexual rhetorics to this project as well. The emergence of sexual rhetorics mirrors the emergence of its queer counterpart. It originated in “deep readings of authors and orators whose sexuality

has often been elided in discussion of their work,” fruitful “recovery work” that “often eschews the thorny question of what, precisely, might be a sexual rhetoric” (Alexander and Rhodes, *Sexual Rhetorics* 7-8). Attention has been paid to the identity/ies of the writer/speakers/creators themselves (Chesebro, *Gayspeak*; Darsey; Dean) to representation of sex/uality in mass media (Carstarphen and Zavoina), and to historical views on sex (Jensen; Reumann), with less attention to what might be sexual within the specific rhetorical theory they proposed. In the introduction to the singular anthology, *Sexual Rhetorics: Methods, Identities, Publics*, Alexander and Rhodes point to the work necessary for sexual rhetorics to emerge and thrive: “(1) a recognition of the dense and complicated ways in which sexuality...constitutes a nexus of power, a conduit through which identities are created, categorized, and rendered as subjects constituted by and subject to power; and (2) a careful tracing” (*Sexual Rhetorics* 1) of what Foucault calls “anti-authority struggles” that are in “opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge” as mediated through sex and sexuality (Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 780-781). In other words, sex/uality is “robustly rhetorical — a set of textual, audiovisual, affective, and embodied tools through which bodies and psyches are shaped and cast in particular identity formations and through which such bodies and psyche might potentially be recast and reformed” (*Sexual Rhetorics* 1). As forces and conditions shaped by and, in turn, capable of shaping social life, sex and sexuality exceed the personal, individual, or identificatory and become relevant to the public sphere and larger social dynamics of politics and power.

This queer shift from the bedroom to the streets is in direct conflict with the predominating mandate to restrict sex to “the appropriate place, with the appropriate people,” i.e. monogamous heterosexual sex in private, not public (Alexander and Rhodes, “Queer” 180). This very notion of the “appropriate” can be found in rhetoric emerging from Ancient Greece, where

being “decorous” or “appropriate” were much-valued virtues in the ideal orator (“Queer” 180; see Cicero; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*; later Stoics). Sexual rhetorics demands recognition of the ways desire becomes tightly regulated by rhetorical studies that dismiss sex/uality in the name of “decorum.” Sexual rhetorics also acknowledge that an engagement with sex/uality is necessary because “the discourses, identities, affects, and embodied practices clustered under the rubric ‘sexuality’ ...carry and vector the weight of ideological pressures on bodies and minds” (Alexander and Rhodes, *Sexual Rhetorics* 1). Ignoring sex/uality while engaging with the rhetorical force and impact of other ideological pressures placed on bodies and minds – race, gender, or ability, for example – renders an incomplete understanding of the rhetorics at play in everything from small daily interactions to large-scale political movements.

Sexual rhetorics’ imperative for rhetorical studies to recognize the “rhetorical force of sexuality and the sexual force of rhetoric” mirrors Jonathan Alexander’s urgency for composition to incorporate sex/uality into literacy studies (Alexander and Rhodes, *Sexual Rhetorics* 8). Alexander defines sexual literacy as “the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms” (Alexander, *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy* 5). Reframing literacy this way elucidates the relationship between literacy and activism and underscores how a conceptualization of literacy that ignores sex/uality, especially queer sex/ualities, inflicts harm (Pritchard 24; see also Fields, Martin, Licona, and The Crossroads Collaborative;). For example, through in-depth interviews with Black LGBTQ people in *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*, Eric Darnell Pritchard underscores the ways in which literacy practices, broadly understood, can be both normativizing and/or restorative, especially for those whose

gender, sexuality, and experiences render them vulnerable to sexism, homophobia, and transphobia (compounded always by racism, ableism, and fat phobia) (24-25). Critically, while both Alexander and Pritchard examine the importance of literacy practices on a personal, individual level, they point to the ways in which these practices can never be disentangled from larger systems of culture and power. Recognizing the role of sex/uality in rhetorical, writing, and literacy practices enables scholars within these disciplines to take up sex/uality's "simultaneous creation and intervention into the public sphere," work that is central to this project (Alexander and Rhodes, *Sexual Rhetorics* 8). Understood this way, sexual rhetorics and sexual literacy cannot be seen as optional, peripheral, or specialized areas of study but essential components of any thorough examination of the rhetorical practices shaping political and social realities, both historically and contemporarily. As Alexander claims, "our language and meaning-making systems are always already sexualized" (*Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy* 18; italics removed).

Approaching meaning-making systems as always already sexualized demands a shift to broader conceptualizations of "rhetoric" beyond its historical understanding as "the use of language for the purpose of persuading others" (Gencarella and Pezzullo1). Limiting rhetoric to language inherently neglects queer and sexual rhetorics by virtue of eclipsing the importance of bodies, embodiment, and social interaction/s to meaning-making and persuasion. Sex and sexuality are not the only lived experiences that are overlooked when rhetoric ignores bodies. As Phaedra Pezzullo notes in her afterword to *Text + Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method*, a "scriptocentric and ocularcentric bias tends to marginalize the embodied rhetorics of communities constituted by people who are like most of us, assuming we have never held an elected office, worked for a mainstream media outlet, or had the luxury of legibility to those in dominant positions" (185). Furthermore, a lack of explicit attention to bodies reifies one particular kind of

body and embodiment as “normal” and neutral at the expense of non-normative and disabled bodies and subjects. (Throughout this dissertation, I use both the adjectival “disabled woman” and the so-called person-first “woman with a disability” to reflect the range of conflicting perspectives on these choices. For some, “disabled” is a word laden with stigma while others, including the performer Jacqueline Boxx interviewed here, consider it a powerful term that frames their day-to-day existence as hampered *by the world around them*, not by virtue of their living with a “disability.” More on the various models of disability in Chapter 4.) In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer highlights the parallels between homosexuality and disability’s “pathological past[s]” and forwards what he terms “compulsory able-bodiedness” as a counterpart to compulsory heterosexuality (1; 2). Compulsory able-bodiedness, “which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness...in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice versa” (McRuer 2). Just as heteronormative, patriarchal culture renders femininity and queerness as aberrant by virtue of framing masculinity and heterosexuality as neutral standards of measurement, an able-bodied culture assumes that “able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for” (McRuer 9). Inherent to this assumption is a simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of disabled bodies and people with disabilities: a culture that overlooks the value of embodied experiences, broadly speaking, refuses to recognize bodies that do not fit into an able-bodied schema; a failure to fit results in erasure and an inability to imagine such bodies as desiring and desirous (Kuppers). In some instances, however, these bodies inadvertently become the center of attention by virtue of easily visible non-normativity, attendant comportment, and/or the use of accommodations or devices for support; their embodiment is deemed asexual but

excessive, spilling out of the space and mold compulsory able-bodiedness demands.

Rhetorical scholar Deborah Hawhee claims that rhetoric's historical participation in this erasure of embodied ways of knowing and persuading, as well as non-normative embodied experiences, can be explained by "disciplinary division, overspecialization, and mind-body separation" (*Bodily Arts* 4). Overcoming this division, overspecialization, and mind-body separation serves to expand rhetoric's reach beyond language, writing, and speech. As disability and rhetorical studies scholar Jay Dolmage notes, "writing [rhetoric] *from* bodies we would do history differently, not just by recognizing 'other' bodies, but also because our histories and rhetorics might more closely represent the difference and diversity of our bodies themselves" (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* 16). Increased attention to embodiment also functions to broaden the field's access to a fuller range of human experience and communication. As Hawhee notes in *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*, "[b]oth bodily learning and bodily culture are shot through with desire and knowledge, often connectively transmitted through optical, aural, and tactile exchange" (Hawhee, *Bodily Arts* 191). In other words, despite the "dominance of language and writing [coming] to stand for *meaning* itself" in older conceptualizations of rhetoric, embodied practices "not based in linguistic or literary codes" also produce knowledge (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 25). Embodied rhetorics enable the analysis and valuing of these practices – the interactions between bodies and the surrounding world, as well as the interactions between bodies. Studying experiences of desire/s and the erotic necessitates a departure from the mind-body split Hawhee cites as a root cause of the elision of embodiment from rhetorical study. Furthermore, such study undermines the overvaluation of particular conventions of the field itself that are in tension or intersect problematically with both queerness and (mental) disability. These expectations, such as rationality, security, coherence, truth,

independence, and productivity, demand a tidiness, precision, and uniformity which leave no space for non-normative embodiments or the expression of messy embodied experiences such as erotic desire/s (Price, *Mad at School* 5). Embodied rhetorics create space for more bodies, experiences, and social interactions.

Within this project, then, embodied rhetorics are critical to understanding the ways in which performance can communicate and re/produce knowledge and, thereby, speak back to systems of power as well as create spaces to imagine alternatives to oppressive narratives and racist/misogynist/transphobic/homophobic/fat phobic/ableist violence. As ethnographic and performance studies innovator Dwight D. Conquergood notes of the valuing of embodiment as it appears in performance studies, such attention allows for an “epistemological pluralism” (“Beyond the Text” 26) in order to push back against the notion that “only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity” and recognizes that embodied practices such as performance have a claim to those things as well (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* xvii). Critically, rhetorical attention to bodies must necessarily span beyond just the bodies of speakers or performers to also include attention to the other set of bodies within both rhetorical and performance encounters: the audience.

The Matter of Audience

“Since both rhetoric and performance are audience-centered social acts, studying them requires one to consider how people are making choices about how to engage and, ideally, how to move another person or group of people” (Gencarella and Pezzullo 2). That is, in order to fully examine a performance’s rhetorical message, one must look beyond the message itself to consider the performer’s choices, goals, and intentions, their relationship with their spectators (both as they attempt to shape said relationship in addition to the ways in which it actually

unfolds during the rhetorical encounters). This relational aspect of burlesque performance exceeds that of the choices considered typical for any given performer's composition and craft across other performance genres. While rhetorical scholars Stephen Olbrys Gencarella and Phaedra C. Pezzullo correctly note the ways in which both performance studies and rhetorical studies are "audience-centered," it is debates within the latter's body of scholarship which take priority in this project. Rhetorical and composition studies literatures are forwarded here because of their emphasis on appeal and their focus on the composing process *in addition to* the final performance. Rhetorical approaches suggest that, for the performer, the audience is ever-present: in their mind as they create and rehearse their acts, in the venue on show night. Rhetoric and composition have consistently focused on how to treat and study audience, sometimes offering competing conceptualizations of the term.

As rhetorical studies scholars William A. Covino and David A. Jolliffe note in *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries*, "audience" is a deceptively complex and complicated concept. It could "refer exclusively to those who *hear* a speech or performance, as suggested by a strict translation of *audio*, to hear" (12; emphasis in original). "Audience" becomes much more complicated, however, when one considers the role of recordings (the audience for a live performance versus those who see/hear recording of the performance), medium (written works that are then performed), and the fact that "most of the texts we encounter are never spoken, but instead are written and, like transcribed spoken texts, may be read by anyone who happens to pick them up" (12). Furthermore, "[i]t is true that in the course of history each philosopher has been able to conceive of that audience in a different way, and that in one and the same epoch and in one and the same milieu the universal audience of one philosopher has not coincided with that of another" (Perelman, *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities* 48). Different rhetoricians will

relate in various ways to the same audience. To this point, contemporary views of audience differ from traditional rhetoric's conceptualization. For Covino and Jolliffe, this older image of audience has three shortcomings (quoted here at length):

First, it largely limits attention to the primary, immediate auditors in a rhetorical situation, and generally ignores any subsidiary, mediated audiences. Second, the traditional view tends to assume an antagonistic relationship between the rhetor and the audience; it tacitly posits that there is some ideological, emotional, or psychological condition that must be changed within the auditors before they can accept the rhetor's ideas. Third, the traditional view ignores the shared, dialectical nature of communication by characterizing the rhetorical interaction as moving in one direction, from the rhetor to the auditor: The rhetor is the sender and the auditor is the receiver. (Covino and Jolliffe 13).

As studied in this dissertation, performance, while primarily concerned with its immediate audience, assumes a more congenial relationship between performer and audience, and relies upon audience-performer interaction to complete the rhetorical exchange.

Rhetorical scholar Chaim Perelman claims the "attitude we have toward the audience governs our attitudes toward means of persuasion" (Perelman, *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities* 166). Thus, a performer's choices, as she plans her act and as she performs it live, are inherently shaped by the relationship she fosters with the audience, in her head as well as with the actual embodied audience in front of her. In other words, not only do perspectives on the role of audience vary, as noted above, but there are also multiple approaches a given composer might take to the act of conceiving for whom they are actually performing/writing/arguing. Within rhetoric and composition scholarship, the most pervasive definitions of audience are "audience addressed" and "audience invoked." Fundamentally, these perspectives boil down to

treating the audience as a discrete, known entity for whom the author can confidently construct a persuasive argument; or the author can construct an audience for themselves, using their imagination in the absence of certainty over who their readers are.

For example, when writing a letter to a friend or colleague, discussing common ideas or experiences, a writer addresses an auditor personally and immediately as a known entity.

On the other hand, when writing an article for mass publication, a writer must *inscribe* or *invoke* the interest, knowledge, and needs of a presumed audience. In either case, the rhetor determines the *role of* the audience as part of the process of composing” (Covino and Jolliffe 14).

There are, of course, benefits and drawbacks to each approach, which become significantly more complicated when these perspectives are extrapolated from written discourse to live performance.

Of the “audience addressed” perspective, rhetoric and composition scholars Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford explain, “Those who envision audience as addressed emphasize the concrete reality of the writer’s audience; they also share the assumption that knowledge of this audience’s attitudes, beliefs, and expectations is not only possible (via observation and analysis) but essential” (Ede and Lunsford 156). Within the context of a performance, this would mean that the performer has knowledge of who is coming to her show that night, both in terms of specific people (her partner, her best friend, that person she met at a bar once who RSVP’d “yes” to the Facebook event) as well as shared characteristics among the venue’s typical audience (these features might include race, socioeconomic class, or political beliefs reflecting those of the community in which the artist is performing). Despite a tight focus on the precise and “real” audience, “audience addressed” can include two different audiences by virtue of the composing

and revision process: through the process of creating and rehearsing an act, the performer analyzes her performance by imagining what her interpretation might be if she were an audience member for her own act; come show night, the en fleshed spectators finally take the performance in as it has been constructed for them (Wall 12). Despite envisioning the rehearsing performer as her own audience, the “audience addressed” perspective runs the risk of focusing on the audience to an extent which renders the composer’s assessment of their own work irrelevant, extending to the audience “the sole power of evaluating” the text/argument/writing (Ede and Lunsford 158). The addressed audience “not only judges writing; it also motivates it” (Mitchell and Taylor 250).

If the “audience addressed” is constituted of flesh and blood humans, “audience invoked” is a “construction of the writer” (Ede and Lunsford 160). Ede and Lunsford concede that those espousing this perspective don’t

deny the physical reality of readers, but they argue that writers simply cannot know this reality in the way that speakers can. The central task of the writer, then, is not to analyze an audience and adapt discourse to meet its needs. Rather, the writer uses the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader---cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text.

(Ede and Lunsford 160)

This perspective is largely built off of literary scholar Walter J. Ong’s 1975 article, “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction.” In it, he claims that audience can be understood as always fictional (“invoked”) because “the writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role...and the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself” (Ong 12). There is no way of knowing precisely who is in your audience. There will be countless unknown strangers among the performer’s friends, unanticipated subjects

among the usual spectators. The audience invoked by the composer is largely shaped by the different opportunities the composer's chosen medium affords them to interact with their potential audience. As rhetoric scholar Herbert W. Simons notes, the types of interactions can span from the total isolation of/from commercial mass media publics (an actor accepting an award and the television viewing audience in their living rooms) to the intimacy and extended contact of in-person group work (97). Typically, though, the amount of interaction between composer and audience falls between these two extremes. In opposition to the pitfalls of the "audience addressed" that diminishes the role of the writer, "audience invoked" *undervalues* the audience's role in a given composition (Ede and Lunsford 164).

In their review of these two opposing views of audience in "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," Ede and Lunsford ultimately conclude that both of these perspectives leave compositionists and rhetors wanting, alternately elevating or deprecating the role of the composer or of the audience, respectively. Espousing a

fully elaborated view of audience, then, must balance creativity of the writer with the different, but equally important, creativity of the reader. It must account for a wide and shifting range of roles for both addressed and invoked audiences. And, finally, it must relate the matrix created by the intricate relationship of writer and audience to all elements in the rhetorical situation. Such an enriched conception of audience can help us better understand the complex act we call composing. (Ede and Lunsford 169-170)

This living and assumed-relational dynamic between composer and audience, while important to rhetorical encounters in the broadest sense, is especially relevant to live performance. It is also where the literatures from rhetoric and composition can meet performance studies literatures on

audience. As performance studies scholar Bryan Reynolds highlights, "performance studies is not beholden to any one academic discipline or method in particular and is enthusiastically committed to interdisciplinary analysis of multiple variables to any performance" (Reynolds 1). As such, I imbricate performance studies perspectives on audience here in the spirit of the transdisciplinarity inherent to Reynolds' description of that field, while centering rhetoric's commitment to understanding the creator-audience relationship as fundamentally rhetorical. The creativity that composer and audience share within that rhetorical encounter, as Ede and Lunsford discuss above, is epitomized in what Conquergood calls co-performative witnessing.

In her analysis of Conquergood's concept "Co-Performative Witnessing," performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison describes this as the "dialogic performance" resulting from the "reciprocity of [audience] engagement [with the performer] – the inter-animation of response and address" (829). Madison shares reflections on her conversations with the late Conquergood shortly before his death, when he had elaborated on what he anticipated would come next in his work in the field of performance studies. In their exchange, Conquergood described the praxis of co-performative witnessing as the audience being "radically engaged and committed, body-to-body" with performers (and vice versa), "a politics of the body deeply in action with Others" (Madison 826). For Madison, this dynamic between performer and audience, orator and auditor, writer and reader, is "ultimately a political act, because it requires that we do what Others do with them inside the politics of their locations, the economies of their desires and their constraints, and, most importantly, inside the materiality of their struggles and the consequences" (Madison 829). The political nature of doing performance together, "particularly when it involves a struggle for social justice," connects performance back to rhetoric and the art of persuasion (Bailey 22). Audience is important not just because any analyzed performance has an

attendant audience present but also because audience is critical to a politically-motivated performer's creation and execution of their act. Social justice-inflected acts seek to put forth an argument or commentary on the state of the world around them; as such, the relationship forged between performer and audience is best understood through a rhetorical lens. The emergence of a performance through cooperative social (inter)action also connects this project to performativity, especially as this latter concept first appeared in and emerged out of queer theory, the final body of scholarship in this literature review.

(Queer) Wor(l)d-Making

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler offers her conceptualization of identity as performative in juxtaposition against other accounts of identity, namely epistemological accounts. The epistemological account employs the “language of appropriation, instrumentality, and distancing” to engage a “strategy of domination that pits the ‘I’ against an ‘Other’ and, once that separation is effected, creates an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of that Other” (*Gender Trouble* 197). For Butler, this epistemological account must itself be conceived of as a performative. But what does signification mean here? Signification, in this framework, is the landscape which the “I” is always already a part of: “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have” (202). In other words, “‘identity’ is an *effect* of discursive practices” and can only be understood and recognized within a particular set of pre-existing rules, signs, and referents (24, emphasis in original). Critically, these rules, signs, and referents are invisible and the “I” of a given identity “only appears as such through a performativity that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalize its effects” (197-8). What Butler means here is that identity expressions only ‘make sense’ in the context of

rules and language which make those expressions meaningful as a particular identity; we only recognize and understand identities which are already a part of the unspoken discursive scripts of which we are a part. Thus, while someone who identifies as a man might choose to wear dresses, their expression of man-who-wears-dresses will not be understood as “man” in a discursive field which only understands dress-wearers to be “women.”

Not coincidentally, my own time on stage has been instructive regarding my understanding of Butler’s identity as performative. It wasn’t until the panicked re-choreographing of my debut burlesque act that a performative understanding of gender and sexuality, and the powerful, invisible role of signification, resonated most meaningfully for me. The story I chose to tell in my act was my experience of being read as heterosexual despite identifying as queer (itself a reflection of the discursive rules that understand a femme presentation and cismale partner to signify a “straight” identity). In the act (the act from this chapter’s opening scene), I move through various personas, demarcated by costume changes: ball gown, opera-length gloves, and a boa give way to a tux, fedora, and bow tie. Ultimately, my “big reveal” brought me down to suspenders, thigh highs, panties, pasties, and the hat. It was through these costume choices that I was attempting to constitute a queer subject as “a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible innovation of identity,” specifically with respect to the articles of clothing and what they “mean” (*Gender Trouble* 198). Wanting the audience to see me transform from a high-femme persona to a butch persona to some mixture of the two, I called upon the discursive rules that enable particular (normative) understandings of those costume pieces. In order to convey the gendered and sexualized identities which might shift from heterosexual to queer, from femme to butch, I played with and against “the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex [(my assigned-female-at-

birth body)], culturally constituted genders [(woman and femininity)], and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both [(my costuming, choreography, and performance choices)]” (*Gender Trouble* 23). Within the context of my burlesque community and mentorship, these facets of building and delivering on a performance are simply that - putting on a show and telling a story. With Butler’s performativity in the back of my mind, however, I understood my four-minute act to be engaging with more than artifice and acting.

In the ten days leading up to the performance, a mentor offered helpful criticism which led to the creation of a new costume piece and the reconfiguration of my opening choreography (during which my character was at her most femme). As I stood in my living room, sweating under the large faux-feather boa I was using, I realized I couldn’t remember how “women” moved. This was a fascinating moment as my own sartorial and embodied expression is typically very femme; I wear dresses and lipstick and heels because I love all of those trappings of stereotypical (and queer) high-femme femininity. And yet I found myself turning to my partner at the time, a heterosexual, cisgender man, and asking him, “How do women move? How do I need to move my body to show my audience that Lacy O’Ceans is a fancy, elegant lady at the start of my act?”

It was the fact that I had to ask him that question, and the fact that he was able to answer it so well (choreographing most of my opening movement) that highlighted the importance of the performative and its connections to performance. While I move through the world everyday “doing woman” in ways that constitute my gender identity as such for those around me, performing woman in a self-conscious manner felt suddenly confounding to me, felt unnatural to my bones and foreign to my skin. Butler explains that

words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying [presences and] absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (185; emphasis in original)

Of course, there is fun wordplay to be had here (reveal, fabrications, acts) that invites connections between Butler's work and burlesque performance, but it is the task of conveying an identity through performative gestures in the midst of an actual performance for a literal audience that accounts for performativity's role in this project. Within this context, such performativity conveys not only present experiences of various subjectivities but also seeks to imagine the possibility of such experiences in other contexts or times.

The matter of time's slippery role in social experiences of subjectivity constitutes another linkage between this project and the queerness of other world-making projects. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz claims that queerness is not here yet. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future. The future is queerness's domain. (1)

While this almost, not quite, approximate quality might be understood as a frustrating impediment to the promise of queerness, Muñoz offers this concept as proof of resilience and

imagination. While others have explored “queer time” as a function of moving differently from or counter to normative life (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*; Dinshaw, et al, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities;” Edelman, *No Future*, Freccero, “Fuck the Future;” “Queer Times;” Freeman, “Introduction to ‘Queer Temporalities;”” *Time Binds*; Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*; McCallum and Tuhkanen, *Queer Times*), these perspectives account for the present-tense of queer living. Queer world-making “hinges upon the possibility to map a world where one is allowed to cast pictures of utopia and to include such pictures in any map of the social” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 40). To bring queerness into performance, then, is to imbue performance with the capacity for “collective political becoming,” collaborative future-building, within a precise, fleeting present (189). Performance can become an “aesthetic and political practice” pushing performers and audiences, together, “out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter” (189).

It’s fitting that this literature review concludes with queer-of-color critique (QOCC) from José Esteban Muñoz as such work scaffolds the theoretical intervention offered below. Notably, a significant portion of my literature review is dominated by white (often queer) scholars. I emerge through these literatures to explicitly engage with the theoretical contributions of QOCC and women of color feminisms (WOCF) for a couple of reasons. First, in service of a research project that aims to decenter whiteness as well as ableist cisheteronormative epistemologies, QOCC and WOCF represent citational politics that embody these goals. Second, these literatures offer a fundamentally intersectional framework that values the epistemological contributions of often undervalued voices, especially given that voices of Black women and queer people of color themselves have been marginalized within supposedly radical or revolutionary queer and feminist spaces and literatures (Troutman 179). It is through the intersectionality of this

scholarship that connections are fostered across lines of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class, providing a fitting framework through which to analyze performances by intersectional subjects. Having explored the disciplinary bodies of work and some of the key figures in my toolkit, I turn now to that which I've built with them in the middle of this intersection: kaieros.

KAIEROS

As noted above, rhetorical performance necessitates intentional and strategic interactions between audience and performer in order to be successfully persuasive. During sexualized performance, such as narrative striptease like burlesque, these moments of performer-audience interaction are rooted in desire (Werner "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque;" "Deploying Delivery as Critical Method"). I argue that an audience's desirous reactions to and interactions with intentionally sexualized bodies and performances offer an opportune moment for rhetorical re/negotiation. Critically, I attend to audience *reactions* and observable performer-audience *interactions*, shying away from claims to be able to know, measure, and observe actual lived experiences of erotic desire/s by either spectators or performers. This choice reflects not only the decision to situate my ethnography among burlesque performers, instead of burlesque audiences, but also manifests the rhetorical nature of my interest here. Performers are likewise unable to map, track, anticipate, or measure the precise erotic desire/s of their audiences, necessitating that they make rhetorical choices based upon an imagined audience (as explored above), the spectator reactions they observe from the stage, and/or the interactions they facilitate between themselves and the audience. The greater tangibility of visible *expressions of* desire translates into a greater observability of the rhetorical dimensions of those desirous exchanges as they emerge within live performance.

After all, "while uncompromising in its demand for attention, desire is also elusive and

destined to fade;” it is only ever right now, just as live performance only ever happens in the present (Harvey and Shalom 1). That is, desire and performance are both kairotic moments. Beyond merely kairotic, the moments where erotic desire/s and performance intersect are “kaierotic,” the term I offer here to understand how and why the erotic desire/s of sexualized performance provide a rhetorically useful opportunity to reconfigure erotic desire and, in so doing, re/negotiate narratives about performer subjectivities. In what follows, I will illuminate the ways in which a queer conceptualization of erotic desire/s makes re/negotiation possible in these kaierotic moments.

Kairos

On a fundamental level, to examine the exchange between any performer and audience is to attend to kairos. In her foreword to the edited collection *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, rhetorical scholar Carolyn R. Miller briefly sketches “two different, and not fully compatible, understandings of *Kairos*,” predominantly attributed to Cicero and Gorgias, respectively (xi-xii). “In one view, most prominent in Cicero, the Stoics, and later Ciceronians, *kairos* is closely associated with propriety or decorum. It becomes a principle of adaptation and accommodation to convention, expectation, predictability” (Miller xii). In his description of the ideal orator, Cicero sketches a speaker who “speaks in the forum and in civil causes in such a manner as to prove, to delight, and to persuade” (17). Thus, this eloquent speaker does not confront or otherwise disrupt their audience as they “judge what is necessary for every one [sic], and [therefore they] will be able to speak in whatever manner the cause requires” (Cicero 17). In order to speak eloquently for their cause, the ideal orator must engage in the challenging task of seeing “what is becoming,” that is, of identifying and conforming to the decorum of the moment, social situation, and occasion (Cicero 17). Cicero’s association of

kairos with decorum, behavior that is becoming, fits poorly in this project because, broadly conceived, burlesque represents the work of generations of women to eschew the stifling conventions of “proper” behavior (for women, people of color, people with disabilities, etc.), as the next chapter will elucidate; beyond that, the performers at the center of this study venture beyond the predictable or archetypal burlesque act, challenging also expectations placed upon them by virtue of their various intersectional subjectivity/ies. They do not seek to accommodate any spectators that espouse racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobia, fat phobic, and/or ableist expectations but aim instead to persuasively challenge them.

As Miller explains, “[i]n the other view, *kairos* is understood to represent not the expected but its opposite: the uniquely timely, the spontaneous, the radically particular. If decorum counsels us to be accommodative, this sense of *kairos* encourages us to be creative in responding to the unforeseen, to the lack of order in human life” and human interaction/s (Miller xiii). This second view is largely attributed to Gorgias who, in his prose poem *Encomium of Helen*, rhapsodizes on the immense power of persuasion in its many forms.

That persuasion, when added to speech,
 can impress the soul as it wishes,
 one may learn
 first from the utterances of the astronomers,
 who, substituting opinion for opinion,
 taking away one but creating another,
 make what is incredible and unclear
 seem true to the eyes of opinion;
 and second, compelling contests in words,

in which a single speech,
 written with art, but not spoken with truth,
 may charm and persuade a large multitude;
 and third, the struggles of philosophic arguments,
 in which swiftness of thought is also shown
 making belief in an opinion easily changed. (Gorgias 81)

Here, Gorgias explains the many ways in which a persuasive speech can influence the listener, provided that the speaker be willing to shift their tactics to suit the circumstances at hand (obfuscating the truth with artful delivery versus overwhelming the listener with evidence of the speaker's intelligence, for example, depending upon the given rhetorical moment).

In his *Defense of Palamedes*, Gorgias offers more observations on the necessity of circumstantially-specific rhetorical action, giving voice to Palamedes as he argues for his own innocence in a Greek court:

Appeals to pity and entreaties and the intercession of friends are of use when the trial takes place before a mob; but among you, the most distinguished of the Greeks, and deservedly so regarded, it is not proper to resort to persuasion by means of the intercession of friends or entreaties or appeals to pity, but it is right for me to escape this charge by relying on the most perspicuous justice, explaining the truth, not seeking to deceive you. (Gorgias 92)

Finding himself arguing for his life, Palamedes explicates the need to craft his arguments in response not only to his audience but also to the constellation of factors defining that particular moment in court. Palamedes suffers a “loss in [his] speech, unless [he] learn[s] something from the truth itself and *the present necessity*” (85; emphasis mine). The goal of his speech may

ultimately remain the same (the truth itself), but there is no hope in persuading any who hear it if the speech is not interacting with “the [specific] forces pushing on the encounter” (the present necessity) (Hawhee, “Kairotic Encounters” 25). “The timely action will be understood as adaptive, as appropriate, only in retrospect; it cannot be discovered within the decorum of past actions. As such, it resists method, making rhetoric unteachable” (Miller xiii). These unteachable moments, bearers of rhetorical possibility, are present within live performance and the audience’s influence on each idiosyncratic, ephemeral act. I turn, then, to this second understanding of *kairos*, with particular interest in what Miller refers to in Gorgias as the “uniquely timely” and “spontaneous.”

Here is where the critical need for attention to *kairos* in the study of live performance begins to rise to the surface. The nature of live performance means that performers have access only to their brief time on stage and the particular audience in front of them in order to utilize the performance’s rhetorical potential. Time is important here but not as a duration or measured quantity or a causal relationship between one point and another. “That is, instead of viewing the present occasion as continuous with a causally related sequence of events, *kairos* regards the present as unprecedented, as a moment of decision, a moment of crisis, and considers it impossible, therefore, to intervene successfully in the course of events merely on the basis of past experience”¹ (E. White 14). Past experience alone, whether rehearsing an act or recalling another performance for another audience, cannot help an artist perform for and engage with the audience in front of her. Her performance history/ies and preparation “must be adapted to new circumstances that may modify or even disrupt” the original act she had planned (E. White 14).

¹ I owe my initial curiosity about the liminal relationship that time has with performance of/about intersectional subjectivities to Michelle M. Wright’s *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. This text played a pivotal part in early sketches of this project.

On the stage, “[k]airos discovers in every new [performance] a unique opportunity to convey meaning on the world” (E. White 14). Put another way, to borrow from rhetorical scholars Carl G. Herndl and Adela C. Licona’s work on agency and social action, sexualized performance offers a rhetorical performance that is itself “a form of *kairos*,” in other words, such performances are comprised of “social subjects realizing the possibilities for action presented by the conjuncture of a network of social relations” wherein that network of social relations is the performer-audience relationship developed during the course of an act (135). As Conquergood highlights, “[p]erformance flourishes in the liminal,” in this kairotic immeasurable time where performer-audience relationships are momentarily fostered (“Beyond the Text” 32).

Seduction also flourishes in the liminal, epitomizing what communication studies scholar Lisa Storm Villadsen describes as “a study in the mastery of time or *kairos*” (38). A successful seduction, the performer’s capacity to use this opportune time or momentary opportunity on stage to disrupt normative narratives about intersectional subjectivities “depends...on [their] adaptation to an always mutating situation” (E. White 13). While the venue, stage, lighting, and other aspects of show production can be shifting parts of any given performance (specifically) or performance career (broadly) for these artists, the one mutation they can count on every time is the audience, who changes not only from one night to another but also from one moment to the next. As rhetorical studies scholar Maggie M. Werner notes, regarding burlesque specifically, the audience’s erotic desire/s help shape, and are shaped by, the performer. That is, the context of a burlesque show presumes a relationship of seducer and seduced between performer and audience, with evidence of erotic desire/s taking the form of observable audience reactions and their interactions with performers (Werner “Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque;” “Deploying Delivery as Critical Method”). Such seduction of the performer’s

audience via intentional rhetorical strategies transforms a sexy act into an exercise in “erotic persuasion” (Werner, “Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque” 1). This persuasion “dissociate[s] the [performance] from anything outside of the moment by deliberately and perhaps even explicitly rejecting external norms or values as relevant” (Villadsen 269). Desire is now; desire exists solely in the space of the venue. Desire is kairotic. In other words, this seduction is only possible if the performer remains fully rooted within that particular performance, in that particular moment, on that particular stage in front of that particular audience. Seduction, as rhetorical scholar Michelle Ballif notes in *Seduction, Sophistry and the Woman with the Rhetorical Figure*, “confuses the boundaries between to seduce and to be seduced” through this complete mutual surrender to the present moment (Ballif 87).

These blurred boundaries between seducing and being seduced begin to reveal the inherent queerness of understanding erotic desire/s as kairotic (examined more fully below). The very presumption that the spectators’ erotic desire/s offer an “opportune moment,” a “possibility for action, the condition for choice, which was – prior to the [performance] – unavailable,” brings queerness to the fore (Ballif 80). It is only possible for erotic desire/s to offer such a moment of rhetorical possibility if those desires are mutable, if the erotic is a fluid and shifting entity and experience (for both audience and performer). This instability of desire, its object/s, its expression, and the experience/s of the desiring subject/s, takes place both on the stage and in the audience. Even as the performer works to seduce her spectators, she allows the audience’s attention and desire to shape her performance. The performer “is not simply a seducer who imposes subjective will by means of deception, for the ‘logic of seduction,’ as it were, imposes itself equally on the seducer and the seduced. That is, in order to achieve success, the [performer] as seducer must be ‘seduced’ in turn by the occasion” and by the audience before them (E. White

38). Different audiences express different desires and the same performer may have different things to offer to her audience depending upon the night. It's attention to these particularities which make the audience's erotic desire/s a source of potential rhetorical power and possibility instead of merely or solely a source of potential sexual fulfillment (of either audience's or artist's desire/s). After all, seduction "draws its persuasive power from pleasure" (Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque" 1), from prolonging "the pleasure-taking performance [and kairotic moment] of the very production" (Felman 28; Erickson and Thomson) while never promising to "fulfill audience desire" completely (Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque" 7). This is the kairotic use of the erotic, harnessing these desires *in/of the moment* in order to recirculate them and, in so doing, re/negotiate meaning around intersectional subjectivity/ies.

Eros

In order to fully understand the depth and capacity of the erotic and erotic desire/s in this context, it's helpful to explore the various meanings imbued in "eros" and "erotic" and how those concepts are at play during a sexualized performance. Like, *kairos*, *eros* has its roots in Ancient Greece. While "eros" also has its own contemporary meanings, I turn to Ancient Greece to explore the broader transformational potential of "eros" found there in an effort to connect those possibilities to Audre Lorde's contemporary articulation of the erotic and to more fully engage in Black feminist thought. The Oxford English Dictionary reveals that, while the etymological root of "eros's" modern use is Greek, its contemporary meanings are founded in both Christian writing and Freudian Psychology: "sexual love" and the "urge towards...sexual pleasure" ("eros, n."). "Erotic," by extension refers to anything pertaining to sexual love and passionate love ("erotic, adj. and n."). Thus, because of aversions to (and legal prohibitions against) public sex

practices, “eros” and the “erotic” are currently coded as private experiences (Berlant and Warner). The Greeks’ understanding of eros did not limit its reach in the same way: “A recurrent feature of ancient Greek political discourse was the assertion that erotic passion was a causal factor in the emergence and maintenance, as well as the decline, of the Greek polis. Eros, the most private of passions, was believed by ancient political thinkers to be of the utmost public relevance” (Ludwig 1). Political ethics scholar Martha C. Nussbaum and historian Juha Sihvola underscore that eros was “constantly” and “intensely” reasoned about in Ancient Greece (2). Thus, eros was not only a part of public life but of intellectual life as well, undermining contemporary divides between reason and passion, cerebral and embodied.

Linking eros not only to the public arena but to a fundamental organizing principal of Greek life (the city-state) reveals a “less reductive view of eros, which relates it to sexuality without making the two terms coextensive” (Ludwig 9). This more complex, nuanced view of eros stems from competing origin stories for the god Eros. In his poem, *Theogony*, about the genealogy of the Greek gods, Hesiod offers two accounts. In one account, Eros emerges as either the son of or attendant to Aphrodite (*Theogony* lines 187-207). Because Aphrodite is the goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and reproduction, being a son or attendant to her means that the god Eros and, by extension, “all eros[,] may be seen as arising from sexual desire, its root cause” (Ludwig 9). Eros is secondary, nonexistent without the sexual. This falls in line with most contemporary uses of eros, as noted above. The other account of Eros found in *Theogony*, however, complicates and expands this understanding. When Hesiod asks the “Muses who dwell on Olympus” to describe the creation of the gods, the following is revealed to him (line 116):

First came the Chasm; and then broad-pathed Earth, secure seat for ever of all the immortals who occupy the peak of snowy Olympus; the misty Tartara in a remote recess

of the broad-pathed earth; and Eros, the most handsome among the immortal gods, dissolver of flesh, who overcomes the reason and purpose in the breasts of all gods and men. (lines 116-122)

This version of the story places Eros's origin before even Kronos, the god of time, or Zeus. As such, this account forwards Eros (and eros) as foundational to human life. Looking "back to this pre-Aphrodite myth of Eros for evidence of his original domain" (desire, broadly understood, as opposed to solely sexual desire), led orators, poets, and philosophers to "place...apparently diverse passions on a continuum with one another, so that the logical progression, for example, from sexual license to tyranny or from citizen lovers to loving the city" would seem unproblematic (Ludwig 9; 2). So unified under the category "desire," these public and private yearnings are of equal relevance to eros.

In fact, in *Eros and the Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory*, political scholar and historian Paul W. Ludwig claims that "[e]ros therefore provided [the Greeks] with a bridge, missing in modern thought, between the private and public spheres" (Ludwig 2). While Ludwig helpfully enriches potential contemporary conceptualizations of eros here by revealing the Ancient Greeks' engagement with the concept, he incorrectly asserts that modern thought is missing a bridge between the private and public spheres. Even a cursory engagement with feminist movements, theory, and/or writing from the second wave onward reveals the ways that women have lived this bridge. Women of color especially, in writings like the world-making *Combahee River Collective Statement*, the pivotal anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, and Audre Lorde's influential essay "The Master's Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master's House," have centered their activism around the notion that "the personal is political" since writer and activist Carol Hanisch coined the phrase in 1969

(Hanisch). While this phrase perhaps too neatly captures the lived realities of minoritarian² subjects, it represents the “process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual” (Crenshaw 1241-2). The example Kimberle Crenshaw offers in her canonical article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” is “battering and rape[:] once seen as private (family matters) and aberrational (errant sexual aggression), [they] are now largely recognized as part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class;” certainly a more contemporary formulation of this example would account for experiences of domestic violence by groups other than just women (1241). Crenshaw claims that “[t]his process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others. For these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development” (1241-2). Furthermore, so-called identity politics have long served as the bridge between public and private that Ludwig searches for in modern thought. However, Crenshaw rightfully thwarts any idealized perceptions of identity politics, exploring how identity politics have “been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice” which often take up identity categories (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) in isolation, “ignoring intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, [for example,] this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped

² I borrow this term from performance scholar and queer-of-color theorist José Esteban Muñoz who uses it to describe groups of people (queers, people of color, people with disabilities, etc.) who are “punished [because their] existence [does] not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). I find it more useful than terms like “minority” as it better captures the systems of power which render some groups less visibility, less humanity, and fewer rights than others. That such groups are positioned thusly is a result of external processes by virtue of their (perceived) race, gender, sexuality, class position, ability, and/or embodiment, rather than resulting from their own choices.

by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class” (1242). She argues for approaches to social justice and identity politics that take into account intersecting patterns of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ableism. This intersectionality strengthens the bridge between public and private that “the personal is political” built and populates it with a greater number of voices able to speak to the totality of their experiences.

As a Black, lesbian, mother, warrior poet, Audre Lorde is one such voice, drawing attention to the possibilities eros offers to contemporary intersectional subjects seeking social justice, a perspective that aligns with Hesiod’s pre-Aphrodite account of Eros and the subsequently broad implications for eros and the erotic. Lorde’s essay, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” offers a “a massive and communal theoretical dialogue that reimagines the erotic away from Western designs, spiritually reaffirming it for women and people of color especially” (Stallings 9). In the essay, Lorde notes that, not only has the erotic been made into “the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation” and the purely pornographic, but women especially “have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society” (54; 53). Foucault likewise observes the diminishing of sexuality and desire/s to cold and clinical study in his canonical text, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1*, describing the so-called “scientific” study of sex as “so many procedures meant to evade the unbearable, too hazardous truth of sex[,] a science of made up evasions” (53). In contradiction to examining desire/s as a collection of “aberrations, perversion, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements, and morbid aggravations” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 53), Lorde views the erotic as a greater connection with a depth of feeling, power, and information about the truest self with a capacity for changing the world, following the narrative that offers Eros as a foundational figure. I challenge, however, Lorde’s assertion that to

understand this capacity of the erotic is to put it in tension with “the pornographic,” which she claims is the *opposite* of the erotic. Pornography,³ Lorde claims, “emphasizes sensation without feeling” (54). In contrast, rhetorically savvy sexualized performances allow for the pornographic and the sensational to be sources of power as well, recognizing that sexual desires are also a deep (though not defining) part of how people move through the world. In fact, “[r]ecognizing the power of the erotic within our lives[, as a deep source of knowledge *and* as a sensational experience of bodily desire,] can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (Lorde 59). The erotic has potential rhetorical power *because* of sex, sexuality, and sexual desire, not in spite of it.

At its core, the genre of sexualized performance is about sex and issues related to the body, but is not focused on the audience’s sexual gratification. “The performance is a tease” (Werner, “Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque” 3). Counter to Werner’s claim that burlesque “doesn’t pretend to be more than the tease itself” (“Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque” 3), however, the purpose of most of these performances is to get “the audience members thinking about the entire woman and what she’s thinking, feeling, and creating, and the ideas around the act she’s doing” (Baldwin 53). I argue that these performers use the fomentation of erotic desire/s inherent to sexualized performance in order to “get them thinking,” making relational use of the kairotic moment of live performance to “collapse...the distance between audience and performer” (Willson 33). This

³ There is a rich debate around pornography, the pornography industry, and sex work among feminist thinkers and activists. I don’t engage that conversation here as neither I nor the performers I interviewed consider burlesque performance pornography, though it might be fair to call these acts “pornographic” as most could be considered “titillating” (“pornographic, adj.”).

distance is further collapsed by the give and take between stripper⁴ and audience – cheering, hollering, clapping, reacting to specific moments within an act, booing, silence – that contributes to the spontaneous performance choices which can shape an act’s narrative.

Before detailing the ways in which these performers collapse the distance between themselves and the audience through a queer understanding of erotic desire below, the intersection of *kairos* and *eros* — the kaierotic moment of burlesque — bears one final look. Debra Hawhee describes “[k]airotic impulses [as] habituated or intuitive — even bodily...[T]hey depend largely on the rhetorical encounter itself and the forces pushing the encounter” (“Kairotic Encounters” 25). Within the bar, theater, or concert venue, the forces pushing on the burlesque performer’s encounter with her audience are that audience’s engagement with and expression of erotic desire/s. “Burlesque dancers know the feeling of the audience’s gaze on their bodies and have learned the power of a sultry glance or a suggestive body movement” (Baldwin 130). Those sultry gazes and body movements, in concert with costume, character development, and an act’s narrative, constitute “political claims [made] in the public sphere, [the] rehears[al of] alternative social formations, and...challeng[es to] people’s feelings about controversial issues” (S. Warner 108). The kaierotic moment is the occasion when the performer engages with the audience’s erotic desire/s as mutable and unstable, recognizing this permeability’s rhetorical possibilities. The artist converts desire from a unidirectional experience (spectator desiring stripper) into a dialogical one by queerly reimagining the erotic desire/s exchanged between themselves and the audience.

Queering Desire

Like all savvy rhetoricians, the performers I interviewed are knowledgeable about the

⁴ Explanations for my use of the word ‘stripper’ appear in Chapter 2.

rhetorical situation and kairotic opportunity within their live performances. As narrative stripteasers, they correctly anticipate, and aim to create, a dynamic between themselves and their audience rooted in desire. Specifically, the performers understand that the audience members bring with them a desire to see bared women's bodies (that undeniably sexual component at the center of narrative striptease), but the artists also understand the larger context informing those desires. Performers choosing to center their acts around their intersectional subjectivities and experiences are often performing experiences of trauma, rejection, or anger in the face of ableism, fat phobia, transphobia, homophobia, and racism. While these artists are not immune to the insecurities or standards set by the US media and society in which they are steeped, these experiences result in an awareness that many of their spectators' erotic desire/s may be shaped by ableist, fat phobic, transphobic, homophobic, and white supremacist systems. The work of anticipating particular (normative) desire/s among their spectators is rhetorical work on the part of the performers to "invoke" their audience while composing an act and to reason how best to appeal to an audience with such desire/s. To say that such an audience exists only due to its invocation by these performers, however, as Ong notes of the writer's reader, would be misguided. It is impossible to fully escape the expectations set by normative standards of embodiment and desire/ability and by mainstream burlesque practices that center performers like Dita Von Teese:⁵ white, thin, heterosexual, able-bodied, and, in her case, surgically altered in order to fully embody and perform a normative fantasy. Whether or not those expectations are brought directly into the venue by a specific member of the audience, the performers are always

⁵ I do not mean to vilify Dita Von Teese here. The self-consciousness with which she molds and markets herself reveals as much intentionality as I attribute to the TLL performers. I recognize that, for some, this self-consciousness functions to denaturalize the feminine beauty standards to which she conforms and to expose the labor behind normative fantasy and her type of world-making. When I compare her performance to that of the performers interviewed here, however, I am not swayed by this idea.

speaking back to/about these broader social systems in addition to the people in the room.

Of course, these expectations and conceptualizations of what/whom are desirable are also shaped by the specific burlesque scene and culture of which any given show or troupe is a part. For example, troupes like Switch N' Play intentionally center queer and trans people-of-color (QTPOC) performers while the brASS: Brown RadicalAss Burlesque troupe was “created by queer women and women of color to redefine a scene that they say has often failed to provide them, queer and transgender performers opportunities” (Thompson-Hernández). Both based in Brooklyn, NY, these troupes reveal the benefits of performing in larger cities and communities such as New York City, San Francisco,⁶ Seattle,⁷ and Los Angeles. Even within these spaces, however, it can be difficult to challenge all assumptions about burlesque performers' bodies. For example, while troupes and shows creating spaces for queer, QTPOC, and POC performers and audiences are becoming more common, there are fewer spaces and events seeking to include, to make themselves accessible to, and/or to make visible bodies, performers, and/or audience members with disabilities. Nevertheless, these performers and performances work not only to diversify the bodies on stage but also invite a diversity of bodies in the audiences, thereby additionally diversifying the standards of beauty and desirability at a burlesque show. The cultivation of and attendance to desire/s brought into the venue by the *specific* audience necessitates a flexible relationship to audience. While crafting an act, the performer invokes her audience, as discussed above; once thrust on stage for live performance, however, the audience becomes real. Through interactions and feedback, the performer quickly adapts to and shapes the

⁶ For example, Mangos with Chili, the floating cabaret of queer and trans people of color which ended in June 2016 after 9 years due to displacement from the Bay Area as the result of rampant gentrification (“All that You Touch You Can Change”).

⁷ For example, the ongoing monthly Sunday Night Shuga Shaq show, Seattle's only all POC burlesque revue.

erotic desire/s of the specific audience (the “audience addressed”), making the kairotic performance choices that are most likely to result in rhetorical success in that particular moment.

Responding to such variety alone, however, does not leverage erotic desire/s’s rhetorical potential. An explicitly queer approach to such desire/s enables these performers to create moments for renegotiating meaning around their intersectional subjectivities. Here, it’s critical to unpack more precisely what I mean when I refer to a queer approach to desire, or to queering that desire. If *queering* something pushes back against “the regimes of the normal” (M. Warner xxvi) and engages “the fractal intricacies [and intimacies] of language, skin, migration, state” (Sedgwick 9), then queering desire is the complication of erotic desire/s, broadly, and the non-normativization of normative erotic desire/s, specifically. My use of the term “normative” here is intended more capaciously than the characterization of specific sexual subjectivities or practices. In other words, “normative desires” in this context refer not only to heterosexual desires and what some term “vanilla” sex practices but also include sexual desire/s for white bodies, cis bodies, able bodies (and brains), and thin bodies. Of course, experiences of violence, revulsion, invisibility, and hyper- or de-sexualization are not experienced identically across these subjectivities; by extension, desire/s are policed and politicized distinctly across subject categories as well. My aim here is not to frame all “normative” desire as “the same” so much as to hold these desires up together against the work these artists do to push back against homophobia, transphobia, racism, fat phobia, and ableism alike, often simultaneously. I deploy “queer” here with the same capacious, somewhat utopic, vision that historian and transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker brought to her initial encounter with queer theory in the 1990s: imagining “an anti-oedipal, ecstatic leap into a postmodern space of possibility in which the foundational containers of desire could be ruptured to release a *raw erotic power* that could be

harnessed to a radical social agenda” (213; emphasis mine). The raw erotic power of queering desire/s is evidenced in the broad and varied capacity of “queer” to trouble the normative across *all* subjectivities (instead of “privilege[ing] sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity” and other normative desire/s) (Stryker 214).

By generating desire for their bodies and stories during their acts, these performers not only multiply the potential objects of the audience’s erotic desire/s but also expand that desire’s possibilities. Desire becomes multivalent and powerful, capable not only of putting bodies and subjectivities in dynamic relationship with one another but also, by extension, of re/negotiating meanings around those bodies and subjectivities. This re/negotiation, the performer’s transformation of the burlesque performance’s desire/s into something new, is queer. Critically, I am not arguing that any and all desire at a burlesque show is thus queer (as in sexually non-normative). It is the *circulation and (potential) transformation* of desire that is queer here. Desire is not exchanged *directly* back and forth between the stage and the spectators; it becomes kinked during this movement, dissipating in multiple directions or returning it back to its originator/s. The slippages between what some in the audience think they want and what they learn they (might) want over the course of a striptease can be queer. That those desires might shift radically from act to act within the same show is also queer. The fact that those desires need not be pinned to specific subjectivity/ies is queer too. When I say that erotic desire is queered during these burlesque performances, what I mean is the destabilization of desire’s object/s and its meaning at a particular moment, in a particular performance, is queer. This queerness is where the rhetorical possibility of erotic desire/s emerges.

While “queerness” within academic contexts can read as overly white, I engage with QOCC and WOC feminism in this project due to the way those theories highlight how

intersectional subjects perform and interact with the world: at the place where their queerness meets their brownness meets their disability meets their fatness meets their feminism. Like the brASS burlesque troupe, the performers with whom I've done my research do the work of resisting, identifying with, and transforming whiteness, cisheteronormativity, ableism, and body shaming in all of the ways those forces are overlaid and compounded. There are many facets to the "phantasm of normative citizenship" that are survived and negotiated through the rhetorical choices of their performance art (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 4). My interviews were filled with echoes of this intersectional response to "[s]ocially encoded scripts of identity [that] are often formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, and various other identificatory distinctions" (6). For example, The BIG Bang McGillicuddy never separates her blackness from her fatness, or from her daughter's disability, when she describes the beauty standards she rejects on stage (McGillicuddy). Aphrodite Adams told me that, while representation in art and media are important to her, she feels that "we've seen [her] story before," as a white trans woman, and she "want[s] to see [more] trans performers of color" (Adams).

This critical approach to the normative desire/s, especially, is fundamentally intersectional, recognizing the interlocking systems of white supremacy, cisheteronormativity, and ableism upon which those desires are built. But beyond merely rejecting these normative desire/s and restrictive mainstream narratives about their subjectivity/ies, the Tucson performers use narrative striptease's kairotic moment in order to "expose...the [normative desire/s]' universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits [their] workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (Muñoz, *Disidentification* 31). In order to expose and recircuit the normative desires and narrative/s about LGBTQ/of color/feminist/disabled subjectivity/ies projected onto them by the audience, these artists offer

“[r]edefinitions of bodies, beings, desires, and relationships” through their transformation of the audience’s erotic desires (Licona, *Zines in Third Space* 70).

Offering their bared skin and selves as “[n]ondocile, noninnocent, [and] re-membered,” as the *intentional* objects of the spectators’ gaze/s and desire/s, holds the possibility of disarticulating their subjectivities from the normative narratives which minoritize their perspectives and render them unsexy and unworthy (Licona, *Zines in Third Space* 70). This queered, kinked looking back enacts the “scrambl[ing] and reconstruct[ing] of normative desire/s’] encoded message [and that message’s] universalizing and exclusionary machinations,” the machinations which would tell these artists that they are unworthy of the spotlight and feeling sexy (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 31). By prompting a desirous reaction among their spectators, these strippers create the possibility to desire fat/of color/feminist/LGBTQ/disabled women and to witness them also as desiring subjects.

This potential re/negotiation and multiplicity of meaning between audience and performer gets to the heart of burlesque’s very nature. In *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, historian Robert C. Allen highlights that burlesque is,

open to multiple interpretations and meanings [by the audience]....There is no moment in burlesque in which we are told what we are to make of what we have seen on the stage, no character who speaks with the voice of moral and authorial omniscience, not even [a singular] author to whom we could ascribe the meaning of the ‘whole thing’ if we wanted to. (27-28)

This openness of meaning makes the audience’s role in a burlesque performance somewhat unique among the performing arts in the West; the performer-audience relationship reflects burlesque’s closer kinship to performance art than, say, traditional Western ballet. While the

performer skillfully uses choreography, costume, and character to tell non-normative stories about their subjectivities, the wholeness of their act *cannot exist* without the audience's participation in constructing its meaning.

Performers do this by trading the object of the audience's desires (increasingly naked bodies) for expressions of enthusiasm for *that specific body, in that specific moment*. For example, in an act of my own for Tucson Libertine League's Rainbow Revue: A Show for Pride (September 2017), my character was crafted as a stereotypically butch queer woman performing to Beatrice Eli's "Girls," complete with cliché flannel and baggy, ripped denim. When I turned my back to the audience, swinging my hips as I prepared to pull my jeans down, I paused, faced them over my shoulder, and put my hand to my ear, asking to hear their encouragement and desire for more. I would not reveal my lacy thong until the audience appreciated my well-worn jeans (a demand my super(s)hero persona Lacy O'Ceans makes more easily than Casely Coan could). Like my fellow performers, I invited the audience to catcall, scream, and throw money onto the stage, to make their desire for me known, but insisted that they express desire the *version of myself that I chose to share*. Those who may have walked into the venue believing only high-femme femininity and lingerie is sexy are required to participate in the collective desire for butch femininity and working-class Americana. I would not argue that my actions to queer this erotic exchange close the openness Allen attributes to a burlesque act's meaning; erotic attraction is slippery, unstable, and subjective. Signifiers like flannel and lace hold different meanings for different spectators. But, as with any performance or rhetorical action, if we burlesque performers cannot win you over entirely, cannot wholly persuade you to see the world the way we do, we will minimally challenge the world you see and make you think. We deny normativity a sole claim to sexiness and refuse to be defined wholly by the audience in front of

us, using our position in the spotlight as a position of momentary, possible power. The capacity to *look back* at spectators as subjects within performance, not merely objects of the audience's gaze, allows us to refract the power normative conceptualizations of our subjectivities might have out in the "real world." While I interacted with my audience that night in order to demand more desire for my butch character before she became a bit more femme, another audience on another night or in a different venue (an explicitly queer venue, for example) might not need such prompting. Still other audiences might hurl homophobic slurs at me. The act of holding my hand up to my ear, demanding more expressions of desire from the audience, can be considered an exercise in shifting power in and for the moment. In the context of a dynamic where hoots, hollers, and catcalls are the primary form of unambiguous communication between artist and spectator, to offer silence is to take power and erotic desirability away from the stripper. In halting the performance until the audience's desire was communicated to me *before* I transformed from butch to femme, I demand that desire for butch femininity be vocalized, even if I could not demand that it be universally *felt* by every spectator. This queering of desire is a reclamation of power within the spotlight of a kaierotic moment.

Reconfiguring and reimagining desire reconfigures and reimagines what and whom can be desired and/or perform as a desirous subject in that space, making a powerful argument for the sexiness of fat women, trans women, women of color, feminists, women with disabilities, queer women, etc. In what is perhaps the queerest of rhetorical moves, the spark between performer and audience, the heat between their bodies, their locked gaze, the breath they share between the stage and the seats, becomes the moment where change is possible. Queer kaierotics emerge into this space where desires shape and persuade.

PERFORMER, SPECTATOR, RESEARCHER: RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

I first learned about the rich rhetorical potential of kaierotic moments during the summer of 2015, when I took part in a burlesque mentorship program with a group of veteran performers in Tucson, AZ from the (now disbanded) troupe Black Cherry Burlesque (BCB). As I created my performance persona Lacy O’Ceans, I quickly learned that my peers and mentors weren’t just captivating performers, but talented storytellers. Consequently, I have spent much of the past few years in their audiences and dressing rooms⁸ — as, by turns, a fan, a fellow performer, a researcher, and the Assistant Producer and Technical Director for the production company Tucson Libertine League (TLL) — learning how and why they tell the stories they do. Being in the unique position to occupy these multiple roles, sometimes simultaneously, and having first asked my research questions during trips between the green room, the bar, and the stage, I have chosen a methodology and methods that allow me to examine burlesque performance from many different angles and to take into account a variety of perspectives, many different from my own.

I bring my own multiply situated subjectivities as a white, middle class, able-bodied, straight-passing, queer, non-trans⁹ woman with me as both a performer and a researcher. Moving through the world carrying these subjectivities has afforded me experiences of privilege and disprivilege alike. I simultaneously benefit from my skin color, able body, education, and thin,

⁸ Due to the nature of this performance ethnography and my status as a member of this community, my use of the term “us/we” throughout this dissertation intends to signify my experience among these performers as performer *and* audience member. Because I have experienced first-hand the queer kaierotic pull participants have on their spectators, I insert myself in the writing to honor and reflect my own reactions, alongside those of other people in the crowd, to the stories performers tell in their acts. Further, in using performance *autoethnography* as well, I am able to elaborate on the experience of telling such stories from on the stage too.

⁹ I describe myself as a “non-trans” woman instead of as a “cisgender” woman in order to trouble the supposed neatness of the binary between cis and trans. While “cisgender” adequately captures my social experience as an assigned-female-at-birth, woman-identified person who is nearly always identified as such by others, I have not experienced my gender as wholly and persistently “in line with” the gender I was assigned at birth or with my embodiment as the term “cisgender” implies.

fairly normative femme presentation in social spaces on and off stage even as I navigate a queer identity in a still-predominantly heterosexual world. With these dynamics in mind, I employ an intersectional feminist methodology in order to fully examine the similarly complex and also distinct lived experiences and performances of the women I interview here. This approach reflects my epistemological beliefs about who counts as knowledge producers, what counts as knowledge, and how knowledge is produced; and my political drive to decenter whiteness, cisheterosexuality, ableism, and normative embodiment from scholarly conversations. By attending first and foremost to these performers' accounts of themselves, their performance practices, and their acts, I am also able to decenter my own perspective, both as a member of this specific community and also more broadly as a white, middle class, able-bodied, straight-passing, queer, non-trans woman. By centering LGBTQ women, women of color, women with disabilities, fat women, burlesque performers, and their community in Tucson, this project forwards the social change made possible by embodied and artistic practices as research products and processes, and values collaborative work with knowledge producers outside of the university within a scholarly environment that tends to value empirical research and individually-produced written findings. These values are also reflected in the citational practices within this dissertation. I rely heavily upon queer of color scholars and women of color feminist scholars as the critical voices guiding my research here.

Because the "research methods we choose are not free of epistemological assumptions [or] taken-for-granted understandings of what counts as data, how the researcher should relate to the subjects of research, [or] what are appropriate products of research study," I use methods that intentionally value the creative processes, performance experiences, and self-expression inherent to the knowledge production of burlesque performers (Naples 5). Like my overall approach to

this, the hybrid ethnographic research methods I employ are interdisciplinary, though some might note that none of these methods — interviews, observation, act analysis, and performance as method — is explicitly endemic to rhetorical studies (e.g. visual rhetorical analysis) and many actually draw from performance studies. Even with that said, however, I enter into a rich tradition of rhetorical scholars “drawn to critical ethnographic practices because we identify with and believe we can learn from those too often relegated to ‘the field.’ For us, such voices, things, and places are not expendable or easily ignored” (Pezzullo 180-1). This rhetorical attention to a range of voices, things, and places is actually echoed by, not in conflict with, performance studies’ research methods. By deploying a hybrid ethnographic research method comprised of interviews, observation, act analysis, and performance as method, this dissertation “stak[es] joint claims to poetics and persuasion, pleasure and power, in the interests of community and critique, solidarity and resistance” (Conquergood, “Ethnography, rhetoric, and performance” 80). These claims allow me to investigate the multifaceted nature of burlesque performance and the performance of intersectional subjectivity/ies — from the inside and the outside, on the stage and in the audience, within the moment of live performance and also in retrospect.

In order to make room for the performers’ voices alongside my own here, I use semi-structured interviews and conversation to explore their experiences with burlesque performance and to learn how they use their performances to re/negotiate meaning around their intersectional subjectivity/ies (Anderson; DeVault; Hesse-Biber). While I am an insider within this community and consider some of the women I interviewed dear friends, my status as a doctoral student at the University of Arizona along with my own subjectivity/ies motivate me to take seriously Linda Alcoff’s aim “to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking *with and to* rather than speaking for others” (23; emphasis mine). In other words, while these

interviews captured conversations between fellow performers, it was critical that I account for the other dynamics at play: a non-trans woman in conversation with a trans woman, a white person with people of color, an able-bodied woman with a disabled woman, a scholar with artists. Approaching these conversations from an intersectional feminist framework, and doing so as a participant observer informed by the goals and practices of performance ethnography, enabled me to attend to these differences and the resulting asymmetrical power relations so that I might better engage in a practice of speaking with and to these artists, as Alcoff puts it, instead of presupposing that I might speak for them. In order to create an environment where interviewees felt invited to speak freely for and about themselves, and to be able to co-participate in the dialogic direction each interview might take, I only asked 6 direct questions of the roughly 30 which were enumerated in my final approved application to the University of Arizona's Institutional Review Board. While those questions did the necessary work of detailing to the IRB any and all avenues of inquiry which I wanted to explore with these women, in practice, going point-by-point through a list of 30 questions with them would have suggested a desire to direct and control our time together.

By narrowing my specific queries to a much more manageable 6 questions and asking them within semi-structured interview sessions, I left space for these women to help shape the conversation so that they might share stories about their lives with me and offer details about their own unique experiences as burlesque performers. I could not presume to know what was most important to them and they were able to tell me themselves. Because this dissertation seeks to understand both burlesque performance *and* experiences of intersectional subjectivity/ies, conversations frequently became quickly very personal and vulnerable. I was able to engage in conversations with these performers which helped me “understand [their] lived experiences”

holistically, allowing me to better discern “the 'subjective' understanding [they] bring” to their performance practices (Hesse-Biber 118). Furthermore, this approach not only made space for the personal connections which previously existed between myself and many of the women I interviewed, but welcomed it and, in many cases, enabled it to grow.

By allowing the interviewees to direct the flow of the conversation in response to my questions, I put myself in the privileged position to *listen* to their stories deeply and actively, without concern for moving to the next question on the list. In “Feminist Qualitative Listening: Experience, Talk, and Knowledge,” sociologists Marjorie L. DeVault and Glenda Gross sketch the contours of active listening and the impact of this practice on feminist interviewing as a method:

Active listening means more than just physically hearing or reading; rather, it is a fully engaged practice that involves not only taking in information via speech, written words, or signs but also actively processing it. It means allowing that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours.

(216)

Indeed, there were many moments in these interviews that affected me deeply as these women shared histories of trauma, illness, and alienation while also showing me the resilience and creativity which bring them to bare themselves on stage.

Participating in this community, from behind-the-scenes performance practices to on stage acts, gave me access to burlesque as “an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis” (Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire* xvi). Performance is a living and breathing thing created anew between performer and audience with each iteration in “epiphanic moments” (Bailey 22). Ethnographic-style immersion and observation has not only enabled me to examine

performance but also to use performance itself as a method to examine Tucson Libertine League's practices, craft, and culture. The close proximity enabled by this method prevents the proclivity to "reduce rhetorical studies to analyzing existing records," which would narrow the scope of my research to recordings of these acts (Pezzullo 184). Reducing analysis of live performance solely to an arrested, archived recording — a "text" — distills such a study to an examination of what performance *is*, versus what it *does*. This sort of "[i]nscription, 'intextuation,' [of live performance] enables the knower to grasp without feeling, to grip without touching" (Conquergood, "Beyond the Text" 31). Approaching performance in this manner would compound what is missed when rhetorical scholars neglect the body as rhetorical, as discussed in the literature above. More than bodies would be erased by analyzing solely taped recordings; the performers themselves become rendered objects of analysis without their own voices or agency. Moreover, the experience of live performance grants me access to live audience reactions, including my own, rounding out a performance beyond accounting for costume, choreography, and facial expressions.

Furthermore, ethnographic-style immersion and observation manifest forms of text and other research products which bend genre and more fully embody the research, allowing this project to enact its argument and subject matter through a multimodal, "multidimensional examination" on the stage as well as on the page (Bailey 21). This multimodality "unsettle[s] comforts within the otherwise rigid and conventional ways of producing scholarship, that is of examining culture that is either material (in the form of objects) or symbolic (in the form of literature or film) but ultimately bound to a certain set of convention of the form" (Gutiérrez 16). In lieu of relying upon the bodies and performances of my interviewees' to challenge such conventions alone, I do as women's, gender, and sexuality studies scholar Marlon Bailey does in

his ethnographic study, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*: I lend my “own body and labor to the process involved in [burlesque], particularly [because] it involves a struggle for social justice” (Bailey 22). I do so via performance as method, in some ways treating my performance persona, Lacy O’Ceans, in a manner similar to the other performers in this project. This choice feels somewhat self-explanatory given that this research originated in my own performance. What better way to explore the rhetorical capacities of burlesque performance than to take the stage myself? The “relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral” (Schechner 1).

Performance as method also represents this project’s closest connection to performance studies as a field. As media scholar Angela Piccini and theater scholar Baz Kershaw note, performance studies is the discipline that has responded most to the promise of performance as method, or practice as research as it is more broadly known (Piccini and Kershaw). This “performance-sensitive way...of knowing hold[s] forth the promise of contributing to” (Conquergood, “Beyond the Text” 26) what Laura Gutiérrez refers to as performance’s capacity to intervene “critically in political, economic, and artistic discourses” so that this project can itself extend the work of politically disruptive burlesque performance instead of simply studying it (Gutiérrez 102). As an audience member, my body is already present in the space, taking part in the exchanges of desire, the “vital acts of transfer” during a burlesque act (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 2). Bringing additional intentionality and attention to my body through participatory performance within the TLL community strengthens too the queer approach of this project by taking for granted my own desire, as a queer woman, as a performer, and as a researcher. These experiences are fundamentally embodied, certainly more so than the cold distance of a taped recording that may potentially cut me “off from richer exploration of the

generative type that can be discovered through politics of embodied proxemics and intersubjectivity” (Pezzullo 184). Conquergood describes performance as “the nexus between the playful and the political” (“Ethnography, rhetoric and performance” 80). By engaging a hybrid ethnographic research method comprised of interviews, observation, act analysis, and performance as method, this dissertation emerges from within this nexus.

The promiscuity of these methods, supported by the intersectionality of my feminist methodology, allows me to touch and feel every nook and cranny of burlesque in the Tucson Libertine League community. With this 360-degree view, I learned that, despite marked differences in experience, subjectivity, and motivation, all of the Tucson Libertine League performers I interviewed engage in burlesque *strategically*. More specifically, whether by virtue of the drive that motivates their performances, the stage personas they craft, and/or the types of acts they produce, the women I interviewed create art that embodies the following five characteristics of burlesque: 1) an intentionally antagonistic relationship to structures of power, 2) resistance to normative and predominating culture/s, 3) a platform for minoritarian groups to express themselves, 4) the use of woman-identified¹⁰ sexuality as the predominant expressive/communicative medium through which to channel these features, and 5) an active and dynamic performer-audience relationship during live performance.

CONCLUSION AND CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter two “Understanding Burlesque’s Rhetorical Possibilities” reviews histories of

¹⁰ I use the phrase “woman-identified sexuality” both because the vast majority of burlesque performers throughout history have been women but also because all of the performers I worked with for this project identify as women despite differences among their other subjectivities. Critically, I choose this phrase over “female sexuality” as not all of these performers identify as female and their performances of womanhood vary greatly by virtue of their gendered, sexualized, racialized, and ableized embodiments and because of their aesthetic, performative, and character choices.

burlesque performance in the US, both broadly speaking and specific to Tucson and the Tucson Libertine League community. First, I sketch brief histories of US burlesque (as defined above) from its arrival in 1868 through today, considering the divide between “classic” burlesque from 1868 through 1996 and the “neo” burlesque revival that began in 1996. Throughout these histories, I examine the impact gendered, sexualized, racialized, and ableized norms had/have on who could be a burlesque performer, in what context/s they could showcase their acts, and how burlesque manifested differently across these contexts. Next, I detail the specific history of burlesque in the community I perform with in Tucson, tracing the founding of Tucson’s first burlesque troupe in 2006, through the establishment of the Burlesque for the Soul mentorship program in 2013, to the creation of the Tucson Libertine League in 2017. I close with thick description of TLL’s performance venue, 191 Toole, where the majority of my ethnographic research has taken place.

Chapters three and four contain case studies of performances, elucidating the different ways in which burlesque can function rhetorically to resist oppressive norms and re/negotiate meaning around intersectional subjectivities. Chapter three, “Resistance Revealed,” focuses on the possibilities for narrative striptease to stage rageful resistance in the face of violence and injustice against people of color, women, LGBTQ people, fat people, and people with disabilities. I examine the punk rock sensibility the interview subjects connect to their burlesque performance and analyze the rhetorical function of anger to name, in community with the audience, the racist, sexist, homophobia, transphobic, fat phobic, and ableist norms the performers seek to resist. Analysis of acts by artists Kitty Catatonic and Jacqueline Boxx exposes the rhetorical possibility of social transformation through punk rock-inflected striptease that narrate rage and protest against injustice.

Chapter four, “Unmasking Alternate Futures,” centers on the possibilities for narrative striptease to offer brief glimpses of utopic future/s free from the oppressive and violent norms that currently silence and police intersectional identities. I elucidate the super(s)hero personas the interview subjects utilize during their burlesque performance and analyze the rhetorical function of utopic world-making to manifest futures without racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism. Analysis of acts by Jacqueline Boxx and The BIG Bang McGillicuddy reveals the rhetorical potential for social transformation when audiences and performers collaborate to manifest alternate futures through narratives about intersectional subjectivities that challenge violent and oppressive norms.

In the concluding chapter, “Conclusion: Future Fantasies on the Stage, the Page, and Beyond,” I discuss the contributions of my dissertation, especially “kaieros,” to as-yet underdeveloped areas within rhetorical studies from sexual rhetorics to rhetorics of seduction to the rhetorics of performance. Not only do I underscore performance’s role in rhetorical efforts to re/negotiate narratives around intersectional subjectivities, but I also demonstrate how burlesque performance, specifically, urges more extended study, within the field of rhetoric, of bodies and desire/s as rhetorical actors. This research extends the (limited) conversations on these topics in the preexisting scholarship to forge new connections between the kairotic and the erotic, encouraging scholars of queer theory, performance studies, and rhetorical studies alike to reconfigure their consideration of Eros/eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction within larger political and social justice movements. Finally, I discuss the ways in which this research reveals the benefits of collaborative projects between artists and academics concerning minoritarian subjects and social transformation

As a long-time eager and enthusiastic audience member at Tucson burlesque shows, I

have felt better connected to larger struggles against and survival in the face of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism as a result of witnessing these performances. Inspired by that space, in the dark corners of bars, dusting glitter off from my shoes and wiping spilled beer from my hands, this project recognizes the Tucson Libertine League performers as knowledge producers making meaningful contributions to movements to resist oppression and to imagine alternate futures. To have been a contributing part of this conversation as Lacy O'Ceans has underscored for me even more the rhetorical savvy required to turn narrative striptease into compelling 3-minute gestures towards social transformation. Though I may have felt breathless waiting backstage before my debut, I was entirely unspooled when I slipped behind the curtain again after my first final reveal. My experiences of a misunderstood queerness had transformed into joy and sex and rhinestones when I got on stage to wink and smile and tease the audience; and when the audience, in turn, cheered and tipped and exclaimed joyfully to see a tux underneath the gown. I will be forever chasing more and new opportunities and possibilities on those stages, chances to change people's minds or blow them away altogether. I offer this dissertation here as a written extension of that quest.

CH. 2: UNDERSTANDING BURLESQUE'S RHETORICAL POSSIBILITIES

While kairos and eros are not unique to burlesque performance, burlesque represents a genre of performance where kairos and eros unite in a distinctly, and potentially powerful, rhetorical way. In this chapter, I expand upon the definition of burlesque offered at the end of the previous chapter in order to highlight this rhetorical potential by focusing on the persistent political nature of burlesque performance, the significance of woman-identified performers within this genre, and the critical role audiences play in an un/successful act. I situate this definition within the context of the histories of burlesque in the US as they were most relevant to the performers I interviewed. While these histories are overwhelmingly (US) American in origin, there are traces of minimal ties to western Europe (mostly England and France). These histories paint a broad picture of burlesque performance and culture, moving from its origins through the neo burlesque movement, ending within the Tucson burlesque community from which the Tucson Libertine League emerged. Critically, the examination of Tucson burlesque identifies how its mentorship and performance culture specifically encourage the exploration and expression of personal narratives framed through an intersectional perspective. With some reflections from my own mentorship and performance experience(s) with TLL, this chapter answers the question “Why burlesque?” given that kairos could be used to study other performance practices, interpersonal interactions, or spaces.

SOME HISTORIES AND DEFINITIONS OF US BURLESQUE

In the written history which inspired her award-winning documentary of the same name, *Behind the Burly Q: The Story of Burlesque in America*, actor, producer, and award-winning documentarian Leslie Zemeckis cuts to the heart of how to define burlesque performance: it's nearly impossible. “It's been called a variety of names: a girlie show, burly show, tab show,

vaudeville, medicine show, strip show, etc..... Some considered it an art form — to others it was second-rate entertainment” (2). Today, depending upon the circles one travels in, burlesque in the US is either a long-forgotten form of low-class entertainment left behind in the mid-20th century or the contemporary revival of a glamorous, raunchy, and clever genre of performance (Allen; Baldwin; Goldwyn; Shteir, *Striptease*; Urish; Willson; Zemeckis). Furthermore, contemporary performers take inspiration from a variety of sources including “drag and club culture; pin-up iconography and Hollywood glamour; clowning, circus, and side show arts; the swing scene and rockabilly; performance art, theatre, dance, and musical theatre; and [commercial strip club] striptease, to name a few” (Sally 7).

Thus, the “definition” I forward here is intentionally broad and capacious so as to simultaneously capture the variety of burlesque performers and performances in the US both across time periods in as well as among the variety of contemporary performances: burlesque as *narrative striptease*. While Ben Urish first used this term in 2004 to distinguish between burlesque performance and other stripteases he characterizes as “rather mundane and straightforward performance[s] of culturally inscribed sex roles and gender stereotypes [that subject the performer to] the male patriarchal gaze objectifying her body,” I offer this broad definition as an intervention into many historical accountings of burlesque that overlook the contributions of performers of color and other groups traditionally excluded from the spotlight; such intervention also serves to acknowledge the dynamic cultural and epistemological contributions burlesque performers make beyond mere entertainment and beyond the patriarchal gaze Urish points to (157). By streamlining and synthesizing this definition, I hope to capture the two most fundamental (and *nearly* universal) elements of burlesque performance: storytelling and stripping. That is to say, within this project, I understand burlesque performers to use

striptease in order to (assist) in telling stories to a live audience from the stage and I also examine burlesque performance as though each act were a story (though this analytical choice can certainly be applied to other types of performance as well).

It is this focus on each story that necessitates attention to individual performers and their narratives, allowing for a continuous expansion of who can do burlesque and how. “Storytelling” and “striptease” are flexibly defined, requiring no specific subjectivity or embodiment in order to achieve both successfully. Common images associated with each of these respective activities can be quite disparate in nature — for example, children’s storytime at the local public library versus Elizabeth Berkley aggressively disrobing in the comically bad movie *Showgirls*. In burlesque, storytelling and stripping comeingle, each adding to and feeding off of the other, resulting in performance art which exceeds the boundaries of each, respectively. The relationship between the stripping and the story varies significantly from largely symbolic to fundamental to the narrative. The stories themselves also range from the somewhat commonplace (ex: hanging wet laundry on the line) to the deeply significant (ex: gender transition). Understanding burlesque as “narrative striptease” allows for this wide range and contradiction of styles, content, and performance choices. I offer a brief description of an act by TLL mentor and performer Lola Torch as an example: set to Cyndi Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun,” the act starts in the audience, as Torch makes her way to the stage. She is dressed in women’s business attire (button down shirt, pencil skirt, sneakers meant to show the audience that she is on her way home from the office); she carries a briefcase and is “listening” to Lauper’s song on a Walkman. As the act progresses, Torch moves to the stage, her home if we understand her journey through the audience to be her commute back from work. She disrobes, revealing sexy black lace lingerie, far racier attire than the uptight, professional outer layer. By the final reveal of the act (when Torch

exposes her pastie-covered breasts), she has covered her eyes with a lace blindfold and tied her hands up above her head with a men's necktie, both of which she pulls from her suitcase. This act's story, then, reveals the double life her character lives — the buttoned-up office worker who likes to be tied up after work. Torch's stripping propels this narrative forward both by allowing her character's sartorial choices to change, telling us more about her, *and* by drawing the audience's attention to that character's sexuality, sexual practices, and desires.

The audience plays a critical role in the "striptease" aspect of narrative striptease. I joke, when defining and describing burlesque for someone who isn't familiar with the genre, that an ecdysiast (one who strips away their clothes, from the scientific term "ecdysis," which describes the process of snakes shedding their skin) performing an act in the woods isn't really doing burlesque because she doesn't have any audience. While I offer this in a tongue-in-cheek way, a stripper's routine *is* incomplete without an audience (Baldwin; Urish; Willson; Weldon; Werner "Deploying Delivery as Critical Method;" Werner "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque"). I offer this distinction here meaning to create stark contrast between a burlesque audience and, for example, the audience attending a traditional Western ballet. Both burlesque and ballet are rehearsed and prepared with the intention of executing a performance in front of an audience. For ballet dancers, however, there is typically no explicit *interaction* with the audience. This is obviously not an absolute statement about every single Western ballet performance, especially as dance forms evolve and blend, but the general accepted and expected behavior of an audience attending this genre of performance. Audience members watch, mostly in silence, as dancers execute precisely rehearsed choreography. For the dancers, show night means perhaps a bigger stage, different costume, and more makeup, but the mere presence of the audience does not alter the performance or complete it when audience-performer interaction isn't

built into the performance itself. While performances like ballet and other traditional Western forms of theater maintain separation between the people on the stage and the people watching the stage, burlesque “collapses the distance between audience and performer” (Willson 33). This is in some ways a result of burlesque’s larger project of inverting, subverting, or otherwise challenging typical and/or traditional power structures (elaborated below): instead of simply performing *for* an audience, subordinating herself to their gaze, her time on stage purchased at the door with their ticket or their tips, the artist expects audience feedback and participation to progress the act forward (Willson 38). The burlesque performer has command of the audience, in some cases *demanding* the types of attention and interaction she wants and refusing to continue until she gets it (Baldwin 133).

I do not propose these characteristics as wholly unique to burlesque performance but highlight the dynamic between audience and performer for two important reasons. First, the performer invites and requires expressions of desire from her audience in order to complete her act. Costume pieces will not continue to hit the stage floor in a silent venue. Second, the stripper’s attention to her audience, during live performance as well as during act conceptualization, planning, and rehearsal, is a central reason why burlesque should be considered fundamentally rhetorical (Mansfield; Werner “Deploying Delivery as Critical Method;” Werner “Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque”). For a burlesque performer, the central focus of an act is the audience. What story does she want to share with her audience? What responses is she hoping to evoke among her spectators? What strategies does she need to employ and deploy in order to get her story and its message across to the people watching her? How can she invite them into her narrative? How will she respond to various audience reactions when the act is finally performed live? While still hoping to

challenge, surprise, or even revolt an audience, the stripper holds them centrally as she creates. After all, these performers are storytellers. They require people to whom to tell their stories.

Next, I offer a broad overview of the histories of burlesque in the US, with attention to notable performers, performances, and sociocultural moments which shaped the neo burlesque movement of which my peers and I are a part. My aim is not to represent this history as exhaustive. Rather, I explore moments and movement with clear connections to today's burlesque and to Tucson burlesque, specifically. In doing so, I seek to draw attention to five defining features of narrative striptease which make it inherently rhetorical as Stephen Olbrys Gencarella and Phaedra C. Pezzullo characterize rhetoric: each performance is a "communication with an audience that deliberately seeks to affect human action and relations," each striptease "an act of power" by the performer (1). The five features that enable this communication with the audience, which have persisted from the late 1800s to today, are: 1) an intentionally antagonistic relationship to structures of power, 2) resistance to normative and predominating culture/s, 3) a platform for minoritarian groups to express themselves, 4) the use of woman-identified sexuality as the predominant expressive/communicative medium through which to channel these features, and 5) an active and dynamic performer-audience relationship during live performance.

US Burlesque from 1868 to 1996

As a broad category of theater and performance, performances called "burlesque," performances that "lampooned contemporary morals and introduced risqué themes into theater," can be traced as far back as Greek satirical comedies and tragedies such as *Lysistrata* (Goldwyn 1). This play, written by Aristophanes in 411 B.C., pokes fun at the sexual politics of the time by depicting the women of Athens, led by Lysistrata, refusing men sexual favors in an effort to force men to stop fighting the Peloponnesian Wars. Most histories of US burlesque (as narrative

striptease), however, identify its origins as The British Blondes' 1868 visit to New York City. Before the Blondes' stateside performance, burlesque shows in the US primarily featured comedic sketches and other satirical acts within a vaudeville-type format. Led by Lydia Thompson, The British Blondes brought with them a style of performance which shifted the focus of burlesque shows to include overt woman-identified sexuality, making Thompson and her peers household names and elevating woman-identified sexuality as a communicative (though still controversial) medium within burlesque performance, in defiance of the sexual standards of the time.

The particular novelty [of The British Blondes' first production, *Ixion*,] was that it showcased its chorus girls and lady principals in tights that revealed their feminine curves, which caused much scandal. For the first time in America, one could see a woman's leg, her anatomy, her form in a public performance. An exposed ankle was considered shocking at the time, so one can only imagine the furor the British Blondes caused with their scanty attire. (Goldwyn 8)

Engaging sexuality as a medium for communication reflects a recognition of what Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes refer to as part "of the dense and complicated ways in which sexuality...constitutes a nexus of power, a conduit through which identities are created, categorized, and rendered as subjects constituted by and subject to power" (*Sexual Rhetorics* 1). In other words, as demonstrated by these boundary-pushing performers, sexuality is "robustly rhetorical – a set of textual, audiovisual, affective, and embodied tools through which bodies and psyches are shaped and cast in particular identity formations and through which such bodies and psyches might potentially be recast and reformed" (Alexander and Rhodes, *Sexual Rhetorics* 1). Given the depth, breadth, and flexibility of the medium, burlesque itself can potentially contain

all such textual, audiovisual, affective, and embodied tools within any given act. For example, TLL performer Kitty Catatonic's act "Beggars," examined in Chapter 3, features written text on her costume, props, clothing, and body; signification via flannel and a shaved head; fierce eye contact, confident swagger, and aggressive body language; and raised fists used together to convey her act's narrative. Like Catatonic, beyond merely presenting woman-identified sexuality on stage, early burlesque performers also pushed back against mainstream norms regarding women's proper behavior and against the male-dominated structures of power which were enacted and imposed as a means of communicating that the display of women's bodies immoral.

Seizing upon what was attention-grabbing, marketable, and, therefore, profitable was as much a part of these ecdysiasts' tool kits as bumping and grinding (Allen; Buszek; Camart; Friedman; Goldwyn; Shteir, *Striptease*; Zemeckis). Burlesque performer and scholar Jackie Willson identifies these early artists as "perhaps the first female performers to realize the influential power of the mass media as a tool for pulling in the crowds" (40-41). At a time when gender norms relegated most women to homemaking and care-taking roles, the business of burlesque threatened men's hold over public space and the business world. Deemed "unladylike" for their "pushy, assertive, sexual and free" behavior, these strippers further redefined womanhood as independent entrepreneurs (80). These transgressions against gender shifted the social and economic classes associated with burlesque over time as popularity waxed and waned. What was initially staged for all-male working-class audiences in concert saloons with seating explicitly reserved for sex workers and their clients eventually shifted to reputable playhouses when it became clear that there was money to be made (Allen; Buszek). The financial success of these shows is largely due to the stardom of the various performers who flouted the norms of the theater by being "always peculiarly and emphatically [themselves] – the woman, that is, whose

name is on the bills in large letters, who considers herself an object of admiration to the spectators” (Logan 135, quoted in Buszek). This type of behavior, characterized by sexual agency, became especially disruptive to gender norms when it crossed class lines (Buszek 147). So it seems that the presence of a “real” person on stage, a woman embodying her own character and story instead of someone else’s, has always been a rhetorically potent, socially and politically disruptive feature of burlesque performance.

One of the stars most famous for “being herself” in US burlesque, amassing great fame and fortune, was Gypsy Rose Lee, whose whiteness, able-body, and heterosexual lifestyle no doubt contributed to her mainstream appeal. In *Gypsy: The Art of the Tease*, biographer Rachel Shteir calls Lee’s life a “first-class rags-to-riches story” (11). Lee “first stripped in 1929, endured vaudeville’s death, [and] burlesque’s death,” becoming so famous and synonymous with “burlesque” that she sparred with the likes of H.L. Mencken about the nature of the business (Shteir, *Gypsy* 11; 103). Lee enjoyed great success as a writer, film star, and public figure, “pleasing the family crowd,” and transitioning into a “legitimate” performer more successfully than any other ecdysiast of the era (*Gypsy* 117). With her need for the spotlight and her chameleon-like creativity across genres, Lee teased US audiences beyond her signature strip. When she retired in 1959, Lee wasn’t just relevant and marketable enough among mainstream audiences to host her own TV show and sell dog food, but that year also saw the debut of the still-popular hit Broadway musical, *Gypsy*, based upon her memoir of the same name (Shteir, *Gypsy* 12).

Of course, the potential commercial success of burlesque performers was and remains impacted by various gendered, sexualized, racialized, and ableized standards, including the hegemonic anatomical standards that cause me to eschew the category “female” in this work. For

example, two performers using the stage name Little Egypt (Fatima Djemille and Fahreda Mazar Spyropoulos) performed what Sol Bloom would term “belly dancing” in his “Street in Cairo” exhibit at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair (Mansbridge 35; ronnie, “History of Burlesque”). Their performances shocked and titillated the crowd, *potentially* decentering whiteness and European performance traditions (originated by the British Blonde’s visit 25 year earlier) as the only acceptable forms of burlesque performance. However, the instant popularity of this dance form resulted largely from the fact that it was taken up predominantly by white early twentieth century female burlesque performers in such large numbers that belly dancing became a “stock striptease routine,” reflecting Orientalism and the commodification of non-Whiteness as much as it did the expansion of the art form (Mansbridge 35; Said).

The division across racial lines, like the previously discussed divisions across socioeconomic class within burlesque performance, was also quite stark at times. While there were many women of color performers, few of these stars are remembered today like Gypsy Rose Lee, Lydia Thompson, or Lily St Cyr are (“Not-So Hidden Histories”). For example, in Rachel Shteir’s book on US burlesque history, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*, the word ‘race’ only appears twice; one of those mentions appears in the title of a citation named in a footnote. However, as the Burlesque Hall of Fame website notes, “Black, Asian, Latina, South Pacific Islander, and Native American dancers were very much a part of burlesque history, and not just as chorus girls for white headlines. They were integral players in the history of burlesque. Among the first to shamelessly bump and grind, performers of color left an indelible mark on burlesque history” (“Not-So Hidden Histories). Chicava HoneyChild, founder of NYC’s Brown Girls Burlesque, has spent almost a decade looking to recuperate some of these lost histories for her documentary *Sister Shake: The Black Burlesque Documentary* (Sister Shake).

Performances were typically segregated, with performers of color having their own shows. Even when so-called “Black and White” burlesque shows began to pop up, Black performers were held to and expected to conform to standards set by white performers (“The history of performers of color”). For example, when interviewed as a part of a *PBS News Hours* segment on HoneyChild, stripper Jean Idelle described her experience as the first African American woman to tour with an all-white burlesque troupe: “In those days, there was a very famous white lady named Sally Rand. They figured that I could copy her act and imitate Sally Rand. So they called me ‘The Sepia Sally Rand’” (“The history of performers of color”).

Another African-American ecdysiast Toni Elling, who performed as “Rosita” or “Lottie the Body,” was asked to do theme acts “ranging from an African-inspired number to an Orientalist act in which she lip-synched to a Japanese song while dressed as a geisha” (“The history of performers of color;” Hartman). Debates still persist over the identity of performer Adah Isaacs Menken, famed for taking over the title role in the Broadway Theatre’s production of Lord Byron’s *Mazeppa* in 1861, and regarded as either a Jewish or African-American artist (Buszek; Sentilles). Thus, while performers of color might have been able to make a living, few, if any, were able to do so with their own identities or subjectivities on display as had been possible for Gypsy Rose Lee. A notable example of a performer negatively impacted by the effects of this racism is Josephine Baker, who was “well known on Broadway for her ability to make her body do almost anything and to keep her eyes crossed at the same time” (P. Rose 4). Baker left the US in 1924 in search of a country where she would not be “afraid to be black” (Gates 597). Calling the US a “suffocating” country made “only...for white people, not black,” Baker went on to enjoy great success as a burlesque performer, dancer, and renowned headliner in revues at the Folies Bergère in Paris, where the French made themselves “sick...trying to get

dark like Josephine Baker” (597).

The booming success of the so-called “Golden Age” of burlesque in the 1920s and 30s would continue to rise and fall through the 1950s due to the push and pull between burlesque’s popularity “as an alternative to the theater of the bourgeoisie” and the various censorship efforts by people like New York City’s Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia (Goldwyn 1). Legendary burlesque producer Morton Minsky accused La Guardia of having “killed burlesque” by “denying the renewal of burlesque theater licenses” in 1937 (Minsky) and then “bann[ing] the word *striptease* from the marquees” (Shteir, *Gypsy* 96). Burlesque would not remain dead for long, however, as it enjoyed further spikes in popularity through the 1950s and evolved to feature flashier costumes and increased nudity (Camart). The surge in commercial strip club stripping in the 1960s and 70s contributed to burlesque’s eventual disappearance for most of the last few decades of the twentieth century (more on the distinction between stripping and burlesque below). It was dancer Dixie Evans’ decision, in 1990, to “transform [Jennie Lee aka The Bazoom Girl’s] personal collection into a public shrine to burlesque” that helped draw the US’s attention back to the art of the tease as stars like Gypsy Rose Lee and Lily St. Cyr had performed it (Baldwin 17). The Exotic World Home of the Movers and Shakers’ Burlesque Museum and Striptease Hall of Fame moved from Helendale, CA to Las Vegas, NV to be reimaged as the Burlesque Hall of Fame in 1996.

Neo Burlesque and Its Politics

During the over 20 years since the opening of the Burlesque Hall of Fame, what is now called neo burlesque emerged out of the slow revival of narrative striptease by people from many different walks of life, performers, artists, and ordinary folks alike, most of whom were too young to have experienced live burlesque in their lifetimes (Baldwin 19). Burlesque performer

and historian Michelle Baldwin describes a “ghost of burlesque floating all around, whispering inspiration into [these performers’] ears, trying to find a way to live on in the new generation” (27). What lives on has expanded beyond burlesque as the old stars of the 40s knew it.

“Burlesque is an alternative to most any performance. It’s the funnier, glitterier, over-the-top sister of performance art, cabaret, legitimate theater, modern dance, comedy, and circus”

(Baldwin 32). But it is also all of those things, depending upon who takes the stage (Blanchette; Camart; Dodds “Embodied Transformations in Neo Burlesque Striptease;” Fargo; Ferreday “Adapting Femininities;” Ferreday “Showing the Girl; Mansfield; Regehr; Sally; Siebler; Weldon).

Because “[t]rying to define burlesque is somewhat fruitless,” I am not going to try to enumerate all of the different ways contemporary performers take up this art form (Sally 7). I do, however, want to draw attention to a critical departure neo burlesque has made from classic burlesque: increased representation of differently racialized, gendered, sexualized, ableized, and embodied performers on stage (Dodds “Embodied Transformation in Neo Burlesque Striptease;” Ferreday “Adapting Femininities;” Ferreday “Showing the Girl; Hartman; Khoo; Sentilles; Sally). While the “purpose of most burlesque numbers [is to get] the audience members thinking about the entire woman and what she’s thinking, feeling, and creating,” the women allowed to think, feel, and create on stages in the US have been predominantly white, thin, and able-bodied, and conformed to both gender embodiment and beauty norms of their time (Baldwin 53). The scandalous sexuality displayed in these acts was predominantly, if not exclusively, heterosexual. Contemporary neo burlesque has improved greatly upon the problem of representation on burlesque stages, though it has by no means solved it completely. US burlesque legend Jo “Boobs” Weldon lauds neo burlesque for its body positivity, claiming that “performers of any

shape, size, and age can find an audience” (224). As Jay Dolmage notes, “to care about the body is to care about how we make meaning, to care about how we persuade and *move* ourselves and others” (4). In caring about more and different types of bodies, neo burlesque acknowledges fundamental truths about rhetoric: by recognizing rhetoric as the “*circulation of discourse through the body*,” “we [can] expand our available means of persuasion. Where we do so[, such as on the burlesque stage,] we...find the conflict and variation that impel any rhetorical endeavor” (*Disability Rhetoric* 4). Such conflict includes the persistent lack of performers of color or performers with disabilities in spite of an increased attention to body positivity and variation. For example, it wasn’t until 2017 that a burlesque performer, Jacqueline Boxx, competed in a wheelchair for a title at the Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender (Boxx, “About”). Boxx continues to break barriers as an openly disabled performer by using various mobility assistive devices on stage and going by the moniker “Miss Disa-Burly-Tease.” In a series of posts called “#DisabilibabeNotes” on her Facebook page, Boxx routinely offers advice to producers on how to make their shows welcoming of folks with disabilities and their venues ADA compliant (a restriction she experiences frequently). With over 300 notes in the series, it’s clear that neo burlesque still has a lot to learn about the many and varied histories and ongoing performance practices of disabled and other non-normative bodies.

While studying contemporary neo burlesque necessitates critical attention to who gets to be on stage, it also requires that a distinction be made between neo burlesque and commercial strip club stripping. Given that burlesque has not attained the status of a mainstream form of entertainment, there are many who struggle to distinguish between burlesque performance and commercial strip club stripping and just as many burlesque performers who vehemently eschew such a comparison. As the brief historical sketch I have offered here notes, strip club stripping

pushed burlesque out of the spotlight in the 1960s and 70s, with some clubs opening in what used to be burlesque theaters (“Minsky’s Hideaway”). The mere existence of a burlesque revival points to a difference between burlesque and commercial stripping: the first neo burlesque performers were seeking something they felt they could not find on the pole or mainstage at a strip club. The distinctions burlesque performers make between what they do and what commercial strippers do vary widely. I have been mentored by performers, predominantly Lola Torch, who are not troubled by being called strippers. For other “performers and burlesque enthusiasts, there is just no art in getting up on a stage to be naked and on display for a song or two” (Baldwin 50). Scaffolding most of these distinctions are perceived differences in two primary features of these performances: the performer’s motivations and the spectators’ expectations (though the latter can never be fully known simply by virtue of observing them in the audience). Weldon, a former strip club stripper of many years, claims that burlesque’s celebration of women’s confidence and a diversity of women’s bodies “doesn’t come up much in the sales-and-service-oriented world of strip joints,” where costumers buy the time of the women they find attractive (Weldon 221). From this perspective, commercial strippers’ performances are strictly commodities and, thus, shaped by the expectations, reactions, and desires of the strip club patrons. To this way of thinking, burlesque performers, on the other hand, play to the “entire house,” not just to one costumer, and are paid by producers or venues (when paid) (Weldon 222). When tips do land on stage, the burlesque act continues as it had been planned; an exchange of money between ecdysiast and audience does not typically alter significantly the prepared and rehearsed performance¹¹ (Baldwin 50). While these distinctions are helpful in discerning

¹¹ While money does not usually or generally motivate the burlesque performer’s relationship with or reaction to her audience, I do not note this here to diminish the importance of the performer-audience relationship to kairos and this project.

burlesque performance from commercial stripping, they offer a black-and-white perspective where there actually is a lot of grey. Though my perspective is not offered here as representative, as a performer whose shows and venues encourage tipping (similar to commercial strip clubs), I am eager to accumulate dollar bills at my feet. Though I strive to tell stories in distinctive ways on stage, as the artists I've interviewed do as well, I also think about ways to please and excite the people who have paid money to come see me perform. The commodification of commercial stripping does not disqualify strip club strippers as expressive artists on stage or deny that they too might tell stories while performing; the expressive artistry associated with paid burlesque performances does not de-commodify those performances or the bodies that enact them.

Because of the blurriness of these distinctions, throughout this dissertation, I occasionally refer to myself and other burlesque performers as 'strippers.' While this language choice might invite the stigma often unfairly associated with sex work and so-called 'exotic' dancers who work in commercial strip clubs, I deliberately deploy this term among the others I use (artist, burlesque performer, performance artist, ecdysiast, etc.) for a couple of reasons. First, I am interested in disrupting the often racist, classist, misogynist, and puritanical attitudes that typically characterize some burlesque performers' strong sense that, in order to 'legitimize' their own acts, they must make severe distinctions and separations between burlesque performance and exotic dance. (These attitudes are *in addition to*, not *instead of*, the distinctions noted above, likely compelling many performers to feel they must make such a distinction to begin with. These attitudes also certainly extend to would-be audiences as well.) Burlesque history, and the history of entertainment in the US more broadly, identify the decline of burlesque's popularity as a mainstream form of entertainment as the result, in part, of the rise of commercial strip club strippers, or so-called exotic dancers. In a 1954 *Newsweek* article exploring this shift, the word

‘exotic’ is used to describe commercial strip club strippers for the very first time:

Most of the country’s burlesque theaters, one hears, have closed their doors — their performers graduated to higher-paid comedy fields — and the audiences now are diverted by movies or TV. In a few parts of the country, however, the defunct burlesque theater is a pretty lively corpse, and one mushrooming by-product of burlesque, at least, seems well-set to stay in the entertainment field. This hardy element is what the 1954 billboards call the *exotic dancer* — a girl once known as an ecdysiast or even, among the lower orders, as a striptease. An estimated 2,000 of these bright-plumaged creatures are now shedding their fine feathers in plush night clubs as well as drafty burlesque houses across the country. (“Minsky’s Hideaway” 95-96; emphasis mine).

In this moment when non-burlesque strippers are being named and identified for the first time, the new term “exotic dancer” is tasked with distinguishing these strippers from burlesque performers. As such, it’s critical to examine the etymological baggage and historical usage that “exotic” brings to the title “exotic dancer” in order to fully understand what it means for (some) burlesque performers to adamantly deny any connection to performers called “exotic dancers” and to reject that title for themselves. With both Latin and Greek roots meaning “outside,” the adjective “exotic” functions primarily to put distance, literally or figuratively, between the noun it modifies and that which might be understood as normative or fitting within the hegemonic. Before “exotic” meant “of or pertaining to strip-tease or a strip-teaser,” it carried the following meanings: “[i]ntroduced from abroad, not indigenous;” “[d]rawn from outside;” [o]f or pertaining to, or characteristic of a foreigner, or what is foreign;” “[o]utlandish, barbarous, strange, uncouth;” “having the attraction of the strange or foreign, glamorous” (“exotic, adj. and n.”). Historically, the term has been used by the white and/or European, cisheterosexual, able-

bodied hegemony to position certain peoples and cultural practices as Other, less than, and/or incongruent with the cultural norms of those in power. Critically, while “exotic” puts *distance* between these powerful groups and other peoples or cultural practices, it does not entirely sever a relationship between the two. The term serves to diminish that which it modifies but does not alienate it so completely from the mainstream as to render it wholly illegible or incomprehensible; as such, those in power are able to form a relationship with the exotic person or practice (attraction, revulsion, etc.) without interpellating said person or practice into their own hegemony. The “exotic” is only ever normalized in order to elevate the status of the non-exotic or normative¹². Subsequently, I do not use the term “exotic dancer” throughout this dissertation, choosing instead the term “commercial stripper” when discussing performers who work in commercial strip clubs.

While both commercial strippers and burlesque performers place their intentionally curated bodies into the spotlight for examination and consumption, eschewing the term “stripper” attempts to ensure that burlesque performance and performers remain within mainstream norms and acceptability. Arguments that suppose that “[m]oral and physical integrity is preserved” within burlesque performance (but not within commercial strip club stripping) attempt to remove desire and explicit sexuality from burlesque (Camart 84). While I understand burlesque performers and commercial strippers’ performances to be *distinct from one another*, I

¹² A prime example of this type of alienated connection that ‘exotic’ enables is the life of Sarah Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus who was held captive and displayed across Europe to audiences to be both desired and revolted. Of course, suggesting that contemporary commercial strip club strippers experience anything close to the abuse Baartman experienced and survived would be disingenuous at best (Gilman; Gordon-Chipemvere; Mckittrick; Willis. What I aim to highlight here, however, are the parallel ways in which both Baartman and strippers are deemed “exotic” so that (predominantly heterosexual white) men can experience desire and attraction while simultaneously rejecting these women as fully human and refusing to integrate them into those men’s social realities

am eager to prevent distinctions from being represented here as hierarchical or conveying moral superiority. Exotic dancers and burlesque performers both receive compensation for removing their clothing in front of other people — we are both literally stripping for an audience and for pay. (It's worth noting that it is the rare burlesque performer who can make a living entirely off of her performance while many strip club strippers enjoy generous earnings). Further, I use the term “stripper” to ensure that sex, sexuality, and erotic desire remain at the forefront of this discussion. Solely using terms like ‘performance artist’ and ‘ecdysiast,’ while accurate, runs the risk of desexualizing the nature of these performances.

The commercialization of bared women's bodies had proven wildly successful long before the neo burlesque movement (such as Gypsy Rose Lee's success and transition across genres) and, while different from commercial stripping, burlesque performance remains, for a rare few, just as fruitful an opportunity to successfully market and sell women like any other commodity within a capitalist system. As a household name and the veritable face of American neo burlesque in the early 2000s, Dita Von Teese offers a great example of this. Her signature act, “The Martini Glass,” in which she splashes around in a giant martini glass and douses herself with soap suds from a plush green olive, has taken her to venues in “London, Paris, Vienna, Lisbon, Hong Kong, Moscow, Ibiza, Belgrade, Frankfurt, Berlin, [Mexico City,] and just about every major city in the United States,” including a residency in Las Vegas (Von Teese 73). She paired with iconic fashion brand Christian Louboutin on a lingerie line in 2014 and with luxury cosmetics company MAC on a signature red lipstick in 2015. With her focus on “[g]lamour above all things,” Von Teese has curated her image (and body) to epitomize the pinnacle of white, middle class, cisheteropatriarchal, able-bodied beauty standards (xi). Von Teese's status as a stripper takes a backseat to her appeal to mainstream norms and audiences as well as to the

nostalgia for Old Hollywood glamour that she intentionally evokes. Of course, Von Teese's commercial success and conformation make her an exception in neo burlesque. After all, before burlesque regained its status as a profitable genre of show business, and for the majority of performers who engage the medium as a hobby or expressive outlet, burlesque is "first an attitude. This burlesque activism takes on the forms of a desired, constructed and accepted rerouting of — or reaction against — socially predetermined convention and imageries" (Camart 81). This impulse to undermine the status quo is inherent to the very word 'burlesque,' which has its roots in the Italian word "burlesco" meaning "ridicule" or "mockery" ("burlesque, adj. and n.").

In his book *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque & American Culture*, historian Robert C. Allen characterizes burlesque as "the low other [that] produces [a] discourse...that threaten[s] to call into question the right of the higher discourses to determine the vertical order of culture to begin with" (Allen 26). As described briefly above, burlesque is one of a "species of... dramatic representation[s]...which aims...at exciting laughter by caricature of the manner or spirit of serious works" ("burlesque, adj. and n."). These dramatic representations are characterized by "[g]rotesque imitation(s) of what is, or is intended to be, dignified...in action, speech, or manner" ("burlesque, adj. and n."). These etymological roots return me to the five defining features of burlesque performance named here. While few, if any, burlesque scholars and historians name it as such, burlesque's potential to speak back to and consistently trouble mainstream culture, means that this genre of performance has always been, and continues to be, inherently rhetorical. Such rhetoricity enables me to "strategic[ally] study the circulation of power through communication" between performer and audience in order to "focus on the central role of the body in rhetoric — as the engine for all communication" (Dolmage, *Disability*

Rhetoric 3; emphasis in original).

Feminist or Post-Feminist? Empowerment or Exploitation?

Exactly what is communicated between performer and audience in neo burlesque has been, and remains, hotly debated. The very fact that Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes' form-fitting costumes represented a radical shift for women entertainers in 1868 underscores the controversial power of women's bodies and sexuality in public spaces. When stripping became a central aspect of burlesque performance for women, with male performers continuing the comedic aspect of the early genre, some felt that "women on the burlesque stage were even further linguistically disempowered" while others celebrated the audacity and confidence of these performers (Allen 259). Conflict over the impact burlesque performance has on women, as individuals as well as a collective, persists, especially among feminists. Emerging from the interviews with TLL performers, this project does not engage in this debate, accepting as a starting point that these strippers approach burlesque performance as a space of rhetorical and political power. Briefly sketching this debate, however, is important here.

For those who consider neo burlesque feminist and empowering, these performers are being given the opportunity to reclaim girliness (Fargo), speak back to hegemonic beauty ideals (Ferreday), reacquaint themselves with their sense of self and confidence (Regehr), and destabilize representations of gender (Dodds, "Embodied Transformations in Neo Burlesque Striptease) and race (Khoo; "The history of burlesque performers of color"). The act of disrobing in public by their own choice imbues these women with control over their audience by virtue of transforming their spectators into passive voyeurs (Dodds, "Dance and Erotica") and, in some cases, allows the performers to flip the script and exploit the men who come to see them (Frank). From this perspective, the erotic labor undertaken by these strippers assists them in destabilizing

the dichotomy of public and private life by bringing sexuality, nudity, and erotic desire/s into shared spaces (Brooks 53).

Some feel, however, that neo-burlesque “needs to do more than incorporate women of various ethnicities and body types to transcend patriarchal scripts of femininity” in order to be considered feminist (Siebler 562) or to challenge what journalism, media, and communications scholar Brian McNair characterizes as an entire “striptease culture” of voyeurs. From this perspective, striptease is perpetually characterized by male dominance (Jeffreys) and sexual ideals remain crystalized within the image of male desire (Regehr; Siebler). In Ariel Levy’s interview with Erica Jong in the former’s iconic book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Jong fully dismisses notions of empowerment or feminism in burlesque: “Let’s not kid ourselves that this is liberation. The women who buy the idea that flaunting your breasts in sequins is power – I mean, I’m for all that stuff – but let’s...not confuse that with real power. I don’t like to see women fooled” (Levy 76). According to some, these women aren’t just fooled but, rather, intentionally antagonistic to the project of feminism, reclaiming sex and femininity from the killjoy feminists of the 1990s (Mansfield).

Of course, there are also those who remain undecided, such as researchers who attend and perform at burlesque shows and report mixed feelings of discomfort, joy, arousal, anger, and overall uncertainty about how they should feel (Roach; Willson). Rachel Shteir characterizes these performers as neither victims nor money-hungry capitalists. As with all things, experiences of individual women vary. The majority of the current scholarly research on neo burlesque is dominated by these debates and conversations. This project, however, seeks to move this conversation beyond debates of empowerment versus exploitation in order to see what else burlesque might do in the world, examining the genre’s impact beyond the performer. Within

conversations with TLL performers, there was a founding assumption that burlesque was something good for them, something which gave them access to a rhetorical platform to do more than merely destabilize gender and sexual politics.

BURLESQUE IN TUCSON

Black Cherry Burlesque and Burlesque for the Soul

The founding of the burlesque community in Tucson of which I am a part epitomizes the emergence of neo burlesque communities more broadly: Black Cherry Burlesque (BCB) “wasn't even really founded. It was Cindi¹³ being like, ‘I want to do this. Does anybody else want to do it?.’ Posting that on her MySpace page. ‘Hey, is anybody interested?’” (Torch). The bar that would host BCB’s shows for over 10 years, Surly Wench, co-owned by Cindi and her partner Dawn, had then recently featured a Canadian burlesque troupe on their small, gritty stage to an eclectic but enraptured crowd. The reactions of predominantly white aging punk rockers and rockabilly women alike inspired Cindi to create a space for a performance art that showcased dynamic women and captivated diverse crowds. In 2006, Lola Torch, my mentor and lead Producer for the Tucson Libertine League (TLL), became a founding member of BCB. When I asked how her burlesque career started, she told me, “Everybody just kind of showed up, it was

¹³ I use pseudonyms here. Despite being a pivotal part of Tucson’s burlesque community and my own introduction to this art form, Cindi was not interviewed for this project due to her retirement from performance and eventual decision to leave the burlesque community entirely. As part of this departure from burlesque, she shut down, removed, and erased all of the websites and social media accounts for Black Cherry Burlesque and their mentorship program. This also included rescinding her consent to be shown in a documentary film about BCB and BFTS, forcing production on the documentary to stop and rendering hours of footage unusable. Because she did this at the earliest stages of this project, I do not have access to any of the “official” text or narrative about BFTS. The history detailed here is compiled from discussions with my interview subjects, one of whom helped create and lead the mentorship program, as well as my own notes from that program and conversations with Cindi. While I cannot avoid mention of her entirely, I have minimized my inclusion of her here as much as possible in recognition of her desire to disassociate herself from this community and her history within it.

very hodgepodge, but look what it turned into” (Torch).

“Hodgepodge” is an accurate descriptor of the years of performance that followed the founding of Tucson’s first burlesque group (BCB). As noted by Baldwin and burlesque performer and biographer Lynn Sally, neo burlesque pulls its influences from across various performance arts and aesthetic movements while glancing over its shoulder to the burlesque of the past. The BCB performers capitalized on this diversity, bringing a variety of acts, stories, characters, and talents to the Surly Wench’s stage. As an avid BCB fan long before I performed alongside the Cherries, I watched performers strip to everything from The J. Geils Band to Nirvana. Flowing gowns were discarded alongside popped balloons; Barbie was personified and Star Trek’s Spock, too. Some nights were themed around decades throughout the 20th century, making those shows a journey through time as well as across different performance choices. Without knowing the way that super(s)heroes and burlesque would later intersect in my life and research¹⁴, I regarded the performers I saw as superwomen; their confidence and bravado was infectious. I have never screamed so loud as I have watching burlesque shows in Tucson. Being in those audiences felt like being a part of something relational as well as magical and important: despite differences in age, gender, sexuality and subculture among the predominantly white crowds, there was a sense of collective subversion, a punk rock¹⁵ “fuck you I’m gonna do it anyway” was in the room as we celebrated women’s bodies and their opportunity to perform their stories on their own terms, without apparent shame or fear (Boxx, Skype interview).

It was this awe and excitement which made me simultaneously thrilled at the possibility that I could be a burlesque performer but certain that I would never be able to harness the confidence, bravery, and chutzpah that I saw these ecdysiasts display. Even though BCB was

¹⁴ See Chapter 4 for more on super(s)heroes and neo burlesque performers.

¹⁵ See Chapter 3 for more on punk rock and its connections to neo burlesque.

offering a performance mentorship program that provided a clear and easy path to the stage, burlesque was far enough removed from my previous dance and performance experience and far enough outside my comfort zone that I was fairly certain it would always be something I *might* do, hypothetically, just out of reach. During this time the director of my graduate program was introducing my cohort to a pilot initiative within the program, a part of the new curriculum: the Comparative Cultural Requirement (CCR). Despite eliminating the program's foreign language requirement some years prior, the faculty still believed "that immersing oneself in languages and cultures not one's own is profoundly edifying" (2013-2014 RCTE Handbook 6). As such, we were tasked with engaging in something radically new for us that would provide us "with the kind of consciousness-changing – perhaps even intellectually disruptive – experiences that meaningful foreign language study often provides" and that might "require [us] to engage in a cultural study experience that is in a non-dominant knowledge domain for [us]" (6). Black Cherry Burlesque's mentorship program, Burlesque for the Soul (BFTS), aligned quite nicely with these expectations. Ever the straight-A student, bolstered by an educational imperative to push myself out of my comfort zone and a small grant from the University of Arizona's Institute for LGBT Studies, I signed up for the 4th session of Burlesque for the Soul which began in June 2015.

Created by Cindi who ran the program alongside Torch and other Cherries, Burlesque for the Soul was a 3-month mentorship program aimed at bringing new burlesque performers to the Surly Wench Stage. While this mentorship program included instruction on most foundational aspects of burlesque performance, including brief history, persona creation, glove removal, boa choreography, costume construction, and basic act creation, the heart of this mentorship, and what made it different from other burlesque schools in Tucson, was the central focus on bringing

personal narratives and histories into burlesque performance. For example, in my session, 3 of the 6 women in my cohort had recently graduated from an introductory burlesque class at (the now-closed) Fanny's Fox Den in Tucson. For them, participating in BFTS meant freedom from learning traditional, one-size-fits-all choreography for group acts and gave them the ability to explore the "weird" and more idiosyncratic ideas that had been unwelcome at the Fox Den. In response to her own past, onstage and off, Cindi believed that burlesque holds the possibility to heal performers, especially women, of the experiences and stories about themselves that hold them back. For Cindi, burlesque was particularly a space with the potential to heal sexual trauma through an intentional, public reclaiming of the body and sexuality. Because of her desire to establish a creative workspace where mentees could uncover their pasts in order to reveal them onstage, Cindi held weekly sessions throughout the mentorship program focused on guided meditation, chakra healing, and astrology.¹⁶

Taken in concert with the other training we received on a weekly basis, these sessions underscored that personal narrative was as integral a part of creating a dynamic burlesque act as learning the tricks our foremothers used, identifying which rhinestones would reflect the most light, or picking the right song. While the Cherries who mentored us were beholden to performing acts guaranteed to satisfy the patrons at their monthly shows, forcing many of them to recycle old acts or create new ones in haste, BFTS shows, featuring debut performances for

¹⁶ Despite the creative potential and prompts that these sessions provided, including what felt like a comfortable space (for some) to discuss personal and intimate experiences, these weekly sessions were also problematic in their own ways. For some, these conversations forced an uncomfortable or uncharacteristic intimacy with new acquaintances and foisted a particular type of *meaning* onto what for some was sought out as just a hobby. For others, guided meditation, chakra work, and astrological readings did not feel useful, generative, or interesting. Furthermore, Cindi is a white woman, who gave instruction on these practices out of her own self-teachings; at the time of my BFTS session, she had just begun her (self-)education on these topics. There was no discussion during these sessions of these practices' home cultures or historical use (by predominantly people of color).

most of the mentees, centered around the performers, their creative storytelling and personal histories. What Cindi's guidance emphasized was the inherently rhetorical potential of burlesque performance as described above: the power of narrative striptease to allow performers to re/negotiate the meanings of particularly defining experiences and subjectivities on stage. The rhetorical nature of this instruction was a revelation to me on both personal and scholarly levels. When I started the mentorship program, I had been researching and writing about the rhetorical and compositional impacts of coming out narratives, focusing on the potential limitations posed by this genre for some LGBTQ folks, specifically queer and trans people. My conceptualization of rhetoric and composition at that time centered on language and writing. Taking up burlesque performance as rhetorical, reimagining it as narrative striptease, offered me a new medium for my own storytelling but also an expanded view of rhetoric which included the body and performance.

My writing-centered conceptualization of rhetoric was not unique to me. In the introduction to their interdisciplinary anthology, *Readings in Rhetoric and Performance*, Gencarella and Pezzullo remind readers that, "historically, *rhetoric* has been understood as the use of language for the purpose of persuading others, or as the art of finding the available means of persuasion within specific contexts, especially civic or public life" (1; emphasis in original). As rhetorical scholar Jack Selzer writes in the introduction to the anthology *Rhetorical Bodies*, the so-called "'rhetorical turn' in the sciences and humanities" beyond the field of rhetoric helped to make fields from anthropology to zoology increasingly self-conscious about their disciplinary practices, particularly about their language practices, and...has consequently deflected scholarly attention from material realities and toward the way those realities are represented in text. (4)

This mattering of words and reduction to written language, historically, have eclipsed the role of embodied and visual forms of communication and persuasion across disciplines but especially in rhetoric. More contemporary understandings of rhetoric “as communication that deliberately seeks to affect human action and relations, [as] an act of power,” reveals, however, a critical expansion of what rhetoric is and how performance offers moments of rhetorical possibilities (Gencarella and Pezzullo 2). “Generally speaking, both rhetoric and performance suggest the ability of all people to shape ideas, feelings, and things with words and actions” (Gencarella and Pezzullo 1).

In reference to the intersection of rhetoric and performance, Gencarella and Pezzullo claim that performance “promises to repeat, transform, contest, or transgress established cultural patterns” (2). It is these promises that Cindi suggested were available to us as burlesque performers. Because narrative striptease was framed as “transmit[ing] memories, mak[ing] political claims, and manifesting a group’s sense of identity,” mentees were encouraged to experiment and play more than we were encouraged to pour ourselves into a pre-existing mold of burlesque performance or performer (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* xvii). This encouragement to bare one’s soul along with one’s body was, whether intentionally or otherwise, a powerful argument against telling stories about compartmentalized pieces of ourselves. I could not tell a story on stage about my queerness that attempted to disarticulate my sexuality from my gender identity, my whiteness, or my able body. Intersectionality, while never explicitly named in our workshops, became inherent to our practice in our efforts to tell stories rooted in lived experience. There could be no single-issue story as there are no single-issue lives (Lorde, “Learning from the 60s” 138). Cindi’s questions and suggestions often asked, directly or otherwise, why a certain part of a performer’s story or subjectivity hadn’t made its way into the

act. For example, Cindi's questions to Jacqueline Boxx about why a wheelchair wasn't sexy enough to be on stage for Boxx's BFTS performance played a large role in Boxx's transformation into a disability rights-centered performer who uses mobility aids in most of her acts. For Rambo Rose, Cindi's invitation to the all-female BFTS at a time when she called herself a cis male¹⁷ supported questions Rose was already grappling with about her gender identity (R. Rose). Both the "what" and the "who" of the acts that could be on stage under the pretense of a burlesque performance were up to us to define for ourselves. Roughly 10 of these mentees have brought this rhetorical imperative and irreverence for burlesque's boundaries with them into subsequent acts on the Tucson Libertine League stage.

Tucson Libertine League

When the Black Cherry Burlesque troupe disbanded after their 11th Anniversary Show in February 2017, Lola Torch kept that troupe's playfulness and genre-bending in mind when she founded a new production company, Tucson Libertine League (TLL). In our interview, barely a month after the debut TLL show, Torch described her goals as a performer and, by extension, a producer and mentor of other performers:

I want to always continue to challenge myself...and therefore also hopefully challenge other people, and vice versa. In challenging other people, having to step up to the plate — I don't want to be boring. That's my biggest thing is wanting to keep pushing the envelope and get[ting] more and more creative, and also just better. Always just better at

¹⁷ In the time since our interview, Rose no longer sees her identity during her BFTS mentorship as cis male because she currently understands that she was never a cis male nor invested in that identity. After more recent discussions with her, I asked Rose if she was still comfortable with her consent to include that quote in this work and she told me that she wants to do justice to what she said in our interview while affirming that her narrative around her own gender identity and transition continue to evolve. This is evident in the evolution of her performances as well and in the conversations we had leading up to the Future Fantasies show.

performing, but I want my concepts to be more interesting... I'm not [interested in] pandering to the audience. (Torch)

This desire to challenge not only herself but also her audience is at the center of the TLL mission statement (which I crafted as a founding-member, Assistant Producer and Technical Director, and the “writer” on TLL’s production team):

The mission of the Tucson Libertine League (TLL) is to stimulate and challenge audiences with bold performances from Tucson’s most audacious artists. TLL is an alternative production company with its roots in burlesque and its reach far beyond the confines of any one performance genre. By honoring burlesque’s history of innovation and boundary bending, TLL aims to be a creative force in the local art scene by drawing from the depth and variety of artistic talent in Tucson. Under the skillful leadership of Lola Torch, former featured performer and producer for Black Cherry Burlesque, we will produce shows that center the provocative, the honest, and the brave through burlesque, dance, drag, singing, aerial, and more. Like the libertines of old, our shows celebrate freedom from limitations and restraint, honoring sensuality, cultivating the diversity of our performers, and enchanting our audiences.

For the performers I’ve interviewed and perform with¹⁸, this mission provides fertile ground for the seeds planted by BFTS to flourish and augments the rhetorical thrust of Cindi’s instruction: TLL performers have been encouraged to use narrative striptease to tell their stories *and* to engage with their audience as partners in their performances, seeking neither to ingratiate

¹⁸ Unfortunately, Jacqueline Boxx moved away from Tucson in the months before we founded TLL. She continues to bring rhetorically powerful burlesque performances to the stage in the Baltimore area, nationally, and internationally; her use of burlesque as a platform for disability activism continues to grow, which I will explore more when I examine her performances in chapters 3 and 4.

themselves to their spectators nor to disregard the audience's viewing pleasures entirely.

The centrality of audience within this performance ethos naturally mimics the importance of audience in studies of both rhetoric and performance.

Both are committed to better understanding *aesthetic expression*, or how something is communicated, especially in terms of political experience. Both studies also explore the relationship between individual agency and social structures and between language and action, emphasizing *collective experience*, events that are shared between people - performers and audiences - and situated in time and space. Since both rhetoric and performance are audience-centered social acts, studying them requires one to consider how people are making choices about how to engage and, ideally, how to move another person or group of people. In this respect rhetoric and performance both entail *praxis*, the productive interweaving of theory and practice, of knowing, doing, and making.

(Gencarella and Pezzullo 2, emphasis in original)

For the performer with a message of political or social transformation, the role and experience of the audience represents the possibility/ies to change the world outside the theater. In *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, Baz Kershaw claims that performers “have tried to change not just the future action of their audiences, but also the structure of the audience's community and the nature of the audience's culture. Paradoxically, the main lever for such changes has been the immediate and ephemeral *effects* of performance —laughter, tears, applause and other active audience responses,” such as the erotic desire/s experienced and performed at a burlesque show (1). These effects of performance “open up spaces of possibilities, imaginaries, and queer futurity. The potentiality of performance holds both pain and pleasure, as we explore yet-to-be-known relations between...performers... and audiences

through critical performative engagement” (Pérez and Goltz 266).

By bringing the importance of the audience to the fore of the company’s mission, TLL reveals the relationships its performers create with their audiences: they are persuasive (engaging them while “challenging” them) *and* seductive (“stimulating” them”). Instead of “pandering” to the audience, as Torch describes it, by reproducing classic scenes of seduction or predictable striptease narratives, these performers build alternate realities¹⁹ into which they draw their spectators and which, by turn, their spectators help to further develop. This “[d]ialogic performance as Co-performative witnessing is ultimately a political act” by “those who do not simply attempt to reflect the world as a mirror but take up the ‘hammer’ to build change” (829; Conquergood, “Performing as a moral act,” “Health Theatre in a Hamong Refugee Camp”). The Tucson Libertine League performers, by acting as such a mirror *and* hammer, invite the audience to join them in challenging mainstream, normative narratives about being a woman of color, LGBTQ woman, woman with a disability, etc. While “[m]any neo-burlesque acts are narrative and the end of a performance is often more about the ‘twist’ than the reveal,” the performers I’ve interviewed intentionally make use of the “subversion of theme or defying of expectations” in service not only to the character they portray in any given act but also to their own intersectional subjectivities as embodied performers engaged in a dynamic erotic exchange with their audience (Sally 7). Experiencing their subjectivities (feminist, queer, lesbian, Black, trans, and disabled among them) as in often-tense relation to the cultural norms around them, the performers in Tucson echo the first burlesque performers in the US who

exceed[ed] the conventions, expectations, legitimacy, decency and regulated divisions
that had been erected to protect those who were in control and to legitimate their access

¹⁹ This world-making project inspired the name of the show I produced for this research: Future Fantasies. More on this world-making project in Chapter 4.

to power and capital. Rather than inverting polarities, however, [these performers] exceeded and pushed through these polarized limits. [Their performances] embraced both low and high culture irreverently, combining the two in a chaotic, disrespectful and nonsensical melting pot. (Willson 26-27)

While Willson calls this mixing of cultures and blurring of boundaries ‘disrespectful’ and ‘nonsensical,’ Tucson’s neo-burlesque performers wield these tools deftly, with an eye towards the potential for social and political transformation on stage. Furthermore, as a result of Lola Torch’s longstanding connections and extensive network in the Tucson arts scene and by performing at one of Tucson’s most reputable venues, TLL has been able to cultivate a large, enthusiastic, and quickly growing audience who has come to expect something different from our performers.

TLL has intentionally marketed itself to this audience in ways that highlight our attempted departure from mainstream standards of embodiment and/or burlesque performance. For example, though a majority of TLL performers are white, narratives around Afro-Latina identity and the beauty of Black skin have unfolded on our stage. While many performers are thin and fit (there are many dance instructors, gymnasts, and personal trainers among us), acts about big butts and stretchmarks are periodically performed at our shows. My intention here is not to hold TLL up as an example of diversity in performance or suggest we are immune to racism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, or ableism. I aim to highlight the effort to center *personal storytelling*, the “narrative” piece of narrative striptease, that results in stories rooted in each individual performer’s experiences and subjectivity/ies. As such, the variety of acts inherently reflects the variety of subjectivity/ies of TLL performers. Responding to this variety, while some of the TLL audience bring white, cisheterosexual, able-bodied expectations to our

shows in line with mainstream narratives, many in the audience enter the venue equally invested in challenging those norms – by virtue of their own subjective positions, their politics, and/or their erotic desire/s for TLL-specific performers/performances.

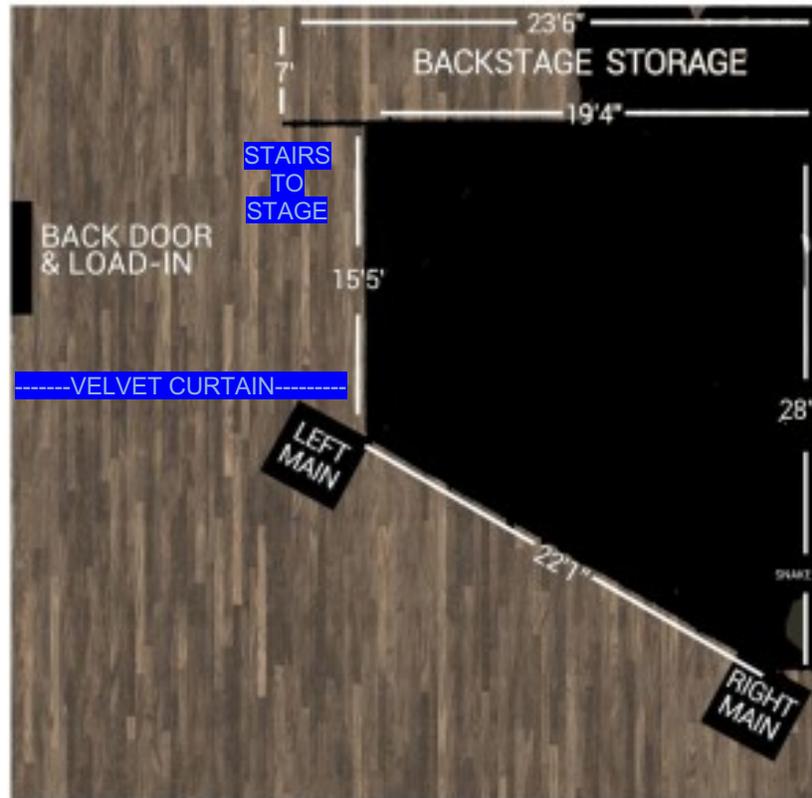


Figure 1: 191 Toole; blue text mine.

191 Toole

The TLL audiences do their cheering within 191 Toole, the exclusive home of Tucson Libertine League shows (see figure 1 for layout of the space, included to demonstrate the size of the stage and space for strippers to perform; image does not include the full audience space, gender-neutral bathrooms, or bar; see figure 2 for an image of the stage). This venue was acquired in 2016 by the Rialto Theater Foundation, owner of the non-profit Rialto Theater in downtown Tucson, a few months before TLL's launch party show in May 2017. Named after its address, 191 Toole (191 Toole Avenue) is a modest performance space, offering all of the

production polish of a high-caliber concert venue with the rough edges of an underground bar. The wooden floors are rough and show their age. The walls are painted cement block and the ceiling is open, giving audiences clear view of the substantive electrical work that makes booming sound and impressive lighting possible. While the management offers to set up folding chairs for some shows and artists, we opt to have spectators stand, maintaining a more casual ambience that encourages a greater degree of performer-audience interaction. For example, free from the restriction of seats, audience members can approach the stage to throw tips at the strippers. A handful of church pews, covered in pea green fabric, line the outer walls of the venue, giving those who need it the ability to sit and adding to the somewhat eclectic aesthetic. With train tracks running behind the building, even the sound within the venue can feel like a chaotic mix; when trains pass, their long, loud whistles blowing regardless of what's happening on stage.

Because of her decade working as a bartender at its parent venue (the Rialto), Lola Torch already had long-standing working relationships with the managers, bartenders, lighting and sound technicians at 191 Toole, which gave TLL a very lucky foot in the door when the venue opened. As Technical Director in charge of coordinating stage hands, performer needs, and communication with venue staff, I have also begun to develop relationships with these folks in the two and a half years since we began performing in the space, helping me grow as a performer and producer and allowing me to deepen my connection to this community. Because this space debuted around the time that we did, we have evolved alongside one another. The location of the bar has shifted within the venue; changes in their licensing have expanded the menu beyond beer and wine to include liquor as well. (While not every show is a 21+ event at 191 Toole, all of the TLL shows are.) The venue's green room (noted as "backstage storage" in figure 1) has been

relocated from the front of the house and significantly expanded since we began performing in the space. This backstage area provides sufficient room for 12+ performers to get dressed, put on makeup, and otherwise prepare to perform. Ultimately, we require very little to put on a successful show – lights, speakers, and a stage of some sort.

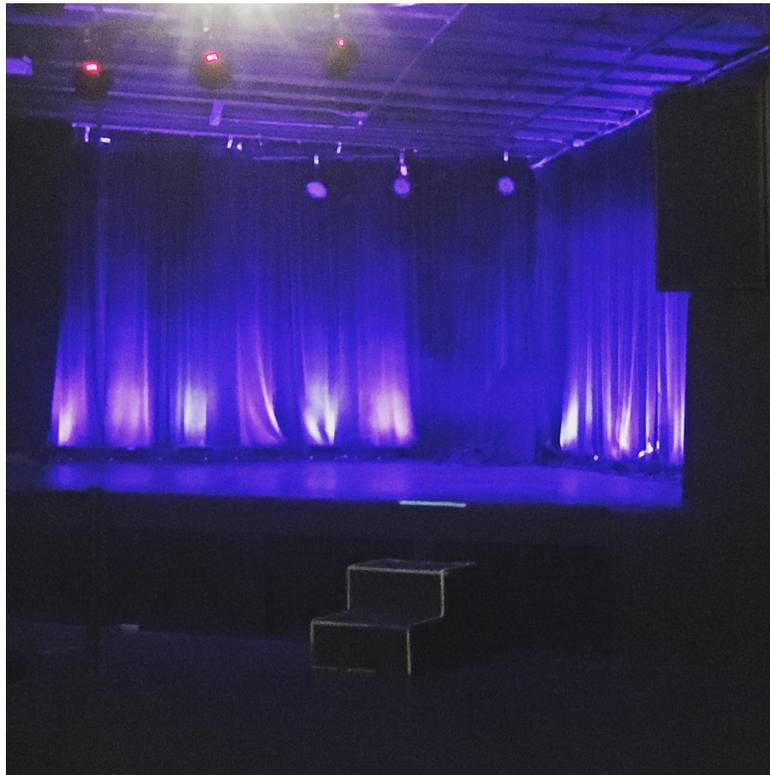


Figure 2: 191 Toole stage lit before a TLL show

What 191 Toole offers us on top of these basic requirements, beyond the sense of kinship that emerges out of long-standing working relationships, is the seemingly impossible combination of professional-level sound and lighting production without an overly formal or stuffy environment. For a period of time during the transition Black Cherry Burlesque made out of the Surly Wench Pub space, before Cindi left this community and TLL was born, this group of strippers performed at 191 Toole's parent venue, the historic Rialto Theater. A significantly larger, more formal space, our shows didn't quite *fit* there, drawing small crowds forced to sit in chairs far below the stage. With the gritty, intimate feel of 191 Toole, we have been able to

cultivate a sense of comfort as performers on a well-trod and familiar stage as well as a substantial audience (consistently more than 150 people per show, far surpassing the average number of ticket buyers for other shows in the venue, according to staff, and exceeding that of other burlesque shows in other Tucson venues). While elevated, the stage is much closer to the audience, which allows them both to tip easily but also to hop up on stage to take pictures with the performers after curtain call; strippers can incorporate direct audience interaction into their performances with ease. This space fosters the type of intimate connection between performer and audience that the women I interviewed describe as a goal for their acts and which I offer as one of five defining features of this performance genre. While a newer character in TLL's story, 191 Toole has come to play a major role in the growth and success of our shows.

CONCLUSION

Examining burlesque, from 1868 to 2019, from New York City to Tucson, Arizona, exposes the persistent rhetorical nature of this performance genre. "Generally speaking, both rhetoric and performance suggest the ability of all people to shape ideas, feelings, and things with words and actions. They point to the human capacity to influence the world we live in, even as the means to influence the world may change over time" (Gencarella & Pezzullo 1). For burlesque, some things do remain stable over time, such as its five defining features: 1) an intentionally antagonistic relationship to structures of power, 2) resistance to normative and predominating culture/s, 3) a platform for minoritarian groups to express themselves, 4) the use of woman-identified sexuality as the predominant expressive/communicative medium through which to channel these features, and 5) an active and dynamic performer-audience relationship during live performance. In 1868, by virtue of putting scantily clad women in the spotlight, burlesque's introduction to the US was instantly political and revolutionary. In other words, from

its infancy, US burlesque has had the capacity to shape ideas, feelings, and audiences through performance. Initially, the changes it sought to make shifted expectations around acceptable types of performance and behavior for women. Examining contemporary neo burlesque performance as a continually rhetorical genre of performance necessitates “looking at how...rhetorics [of sex/uality] move multiply and intersectionally to articulate the complexities of desire and discourse” and “reintroduce[s] into public discourse the imagination of bodies that exceed the normalizations of the juridical, political, medical culture that 'fixes' things” (Alexander and Rhodes, *Sexual Rhetorics* 2). As the bodies that perform burlesque have shifted and multiplied, the desires and politics at burlesque shows have also expanded, allowing for a greater number of issues and intersectional subjectivities to be shaped via narrative striptease.

As it flourishes in the Tucson Libertine League community, burlesque provides multiple complicated and conflicting histories, perspectives, and subjectivities access to the same stage. This shared spotlight provides moments of performance that shift meanings through persuasive striptease, with the heart of burlesque’s capacity for persuasion within the erotic desire/s exchanged between performer and audience. The woman-identified burlesque performer is fully aware of the power of her sexuality, whether one believes it is being used for or against woman-identified people. Engaging audience members through the reliably titillating bared body allows these strippers to convey complex and meaningful stories about intersectional subjectivities. These acts spotlight the critical importance of propitious moments for action as well as the world-changing capacity/ies of desire/s. *Kairos* and *eros* are consistently front and center during narrative striptease. Thus, while live performance is always kairotic and human bodies always potentially erotic, kaierotic moments are especially robust within burlesque performances, offering a rich site of analysis peopled with often-overlooked knowledge producers.

CH. 3: RESISTANCE REVEALED

Within a political project centered around kaieros, punk rock and rage might seem more likely to undermine burlesque's persuasive potential than to enhance it. However, a closer look at burlesque's alignment with (and departures from) punk rock sensibilities and the ways in which the performers connect with their audiences reveals how performances of rage offer moments of potential resistance to racism, sexism, transphobia, fat phobia, homophobia, and ableism. In this chapter, I will examine Jacqueline Boxx and Kitty Catatonic's performance practices and acts in order to elucidate the ways in which kaierotic rage allows performers and spectators alike to reject violence towards, and oppressive narratives about, intersectional subjectivities.

BURLESQUE'S PUNK ROCK SENSIBILITY

Aggressively Subversive

When I asked why performers had chosen burlesque as their medium for self-expression, punk rock emerged as a surprising shared influence throughout the majority of the interviews. Despite my time watching these performers' repertoire of acts and learning, more generally, about the many forms neo burlesque continues to take, I still initially found connections between ecdysiasts and punk rockers to be far-fetched and incongruous. After all, Dita Von Teese continues to enjoy the spotlight as the most famous burlesque performer in the US and, despite Von Teese's 7-year relationship with rocker Marilyn Manson, Willson highlights that "Von Teese's inspiration comes from the glamorous 'stars' of the 1930s, the likes of Gypsy Rose Lee, Lili St Cyr and Sally Rand; it is their 'spirit' she seeks to emulate, but with more gloss" (Willson 34). This gloss and polish are antithetical to the dirty, chaotic, anarchist, and even violent imagery most associated with punk rock. My peers are quick to point out, however, that punk rock is comprised of more than an aesthetic, it is an ethos, an approach to the world, and a

relationship to it. Jacqueline Boxx²⁰, when asked why she does burlesque, recalls a conversation she had with another Tucson performer:

[H]e talks about burlesque as being intrinsically punk rock, and I love that because I do think it is aggressively subversive because we are supposed to be so ashamed of our bodies all of the time and want to hide them and hide away anything that's controversial and don't talk about it, don't show it off[. B]urlesque is very essentially counter-culture in that it pushes back against what we're *supposed* to do and *supposed* to be and *supposed* to say. You're not allowed to be too sexy because then you're a slut, you're not allowed to own your sexuality[. T]here's so many things that you're not supposed to do that burlesque says, "Fuck you, I'm gonna do it anyway." (Boxx, Skype interview)

The resistance to the dominant culture's misogyny, body shaming, and slut shaming that Boxx names here is central to other performers' descriptions of burlesque as well as being central to how they see punk rock as relevant to narrative striptease.

While the histories in Chapter 2 revealed the ways in which narrative striptease has always challenged the dominant culture, throughout most of burlesque's existence, that resistance has emerged almost exclusively from the definitional realities of the genre. Women baring their bodies challenge a society that condemns nudity and precludes women from being in charge of their own sexuality. Strippers marketing themselves in order to attain wealth and stardom challenge a capitalist society dominated by men that devalues women's bodies and sex

²⁰ Though I use both performers' muggle names and stage names in an effort to illustrate the process and purpose of creating and enacting a stage persona, Jacqueline Boxx has requested that only her stage name be used. The term "muggle" is used in this community to describe people's non-stage personas as an evocation of J.K. Rowling's fictional term for humans born into "non-magical" families or without any "wizard blood" in the Harry Potter series. This language choice reflects the ways in which these performers understand their stage personas: as magical beings with powers that their everyday selves don't possess.

work. A punk rock approach to burlesque, as detailed by the strippers I talked to, however, finds resistance in burlesque within the content and performance choices of a specific act itself. By borrowing and learning from the performances of rage on stage at punk rock concerts, burlesque performers are able to engage narrative striptease's kaierotic moment to foment collective resistance to racism, sexism, homophobia transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism.

Performer Rambo Rose (née Rambo Reza) told me that she “always felt that [burlesque] was sort of [the] punk rock of the performance arts. You could do anything. You didn't have to be a dancer, you didn't have to be this or that” (R. Rose). For Rose, this punk rock spirit aligns well with a punk aesthetic identity she had embraced prior to her career as a “performance art stripper,” as she calls herself (R. Rose). In other words, by identifying connections between burlesque and punk rock, Rose is able to step onto the burlesque stage without first changing anything about herself or obtaining particular sets of skills. She is already ‘qualified’ to be on stage, rough edges and all. Certainly, the fact that Rose debuted as a burlesque performer within the Burlesque for the Soul community and its distinct set of values influences her conceptualization of burlesque as a genre of performance peopled more by amateurs than by professionals. However, the lack of polish accepted in burlesque performance also calls back to deep origins of the term “punk,” out of which contemporary usage emerges. In fact, Rose names such an origin when describing the lack of traditional training required to be a burlesque performer.

The Oxford English Dictionary entry for “punk” notes that before the term was used in 1970 to refer to fans, performers, or style associated with punk rock music, some historical uses of “punk” included “amateur,” “apprentice,” and a “person regarded as inexperienced or raw” (“punk, n.1 and adj.2.”). In the US specifically, punks were “despicable” people, “coward[s],” or

“weakling[s]” (“punk, n.1 and adj.2.”). Lastly, the term “punk” has referred to any number of subjects judged to be sexually deviant or more generally distasteful by normative standards, going as far back as the 16th century. For example, “prostitutes,” broadly speaking, were called punks, as were “m[e]n who [were] made use of as a sexual partner by another man, especially by force or coercion” (“punk, n.1 and adj.2.”). Taken together, these meanings sketch an image of a group of sexually adventurous, self-made underdogs.

“Sexually adventurous, self-made underdogs” epitomizes the type of artistic community Lola Torch had in mind when we founded Tucson Libertine League and echoes her own draw to the medium. Torch finds punk rock’s “middle finger to the establishment, and also protection of the arts in times when [they] feel at risk or in danger” generative within the context of narrative striptease. Torch’s long-time obsession with the musical *Cabaret* and the underground Weimar Era cabaret-style of performance led her to reimagine her pre-existing singing career as presenting an opportunity to instead “sing...in times of turmoil and be...a little racy, and raunchy, and edgy, and punk rock” as a burlesque performer (Torch). Bringing punk rock into burlesque, then, is a pulling together of sexual deviance and rawness along with a confrontational attitude. Woven together, these things are helpful to strippers seeking the burlesque stage as a rhetorical platform with the potential to resist oppressive and violent norms about intersectional subjectivities.

Though female-identified sexuality and song lyrics are very different mediums through which to communicate, the strippers I perform with seem to take inspiration from the work punk rockers (and their audiences) do to bring the grievances and reactions to oppressive norms from offstage lives into on-stage performances. In his acclaimed history of the genre, *England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond*, music journalist Jon Savage calls punk

rock “dark, tribal, alienated, alien, full of black humour [sic]” (xvii). Savage claims that punk rock offered “suburban stylists, . . . teenage runaways, hardened sixties radicals, gay men and women, artists, . . . criminals, drug addicts, prostitutes of all persuasions, . . . intellectuals, big beat obsessives, [and] outcasts from every class” an expressive outlet during the cultural shift and economic recession of the mid-1970s (xiv). Large and varied swaths of people were experiencing and reacting to the same social and political forces as the musicians on stage at the time, such as the iconic Sex Pistols; audiences seeking a space to express those feelings as well found the anger circulating at punk shows to be a point of connection between themselves and the artists on stage. Boxx calls this a “public expression of [shared] private feeling,” a phenomena she has experienced at burlesque shows when audiences are given the opportunity to connect with a performer’s story (Boxx, Skype interview). As noted in Chapter 1, the stripper’s work to both invoke *and* address her audience nearly guarantees that there will be spectators in the crowd who share her experiences with oppression and violence and would find catharsis in a rageful response. Understood kairotically, the connection Savage describes punk rockers making with their audience translates directly to burlesque’s performer-audience dynamic. If this connection can be used to forward a sweet striptease about first love why can’t it also be used to advance an act protesting anti-abortion laws? Both punk’s lack of strict boundaries or definitions *and* its investment in social critique model performance choices that can recruit spectators as accomplices in political dissent.

There are, of course, limitations to what punk rock has to offer burlesque performers; it is by no means being held up here as the ideal model for cultural production seeking social transformation. While Savage attempts to paint punk rock as a movement with room for everyone, there were many *outsiders* to this “outside aesthetic.” The prototypical punk rocker

from the peak of the genre's popularity (skinny white men) and their style, foreclosed on the robust inclusion of women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, fat people, and people with disabilities. There was (and still is) a grounding assumption that participation in punk culture implied a rejection of *all* restrictions enforced by mainstream norms, including racism, sexism, and homophobia, within the genre and community built up around it. On the contrary, scholar and zinester Mimi Nguyen, who claims "no desire to redeem punk rock" after persistent experiences with racism and homophobia in punk circles in the early 90s, highlights "how punk as a 'community' selectively welcomes and excludes according to those Western hierarchies of race²¹" (Nguyen, *Evolution of a Race Riot* 6).

These punks represent a second generation, coming of age in a scene perhaps no more racially diverse than the one that came before, but with aspirations and expectations of diversity. At the same time, as inchoate rage and nihilism gave way to more self-consciously progressive and positive ethos, this very ideal of diversity was undermined by the continued insistence that punk was somehow above and beyond all that. One thinks, for instance, of the huge stenciled block letters on the wall in the front entryway of Berkeley's famed punk club, 924 Gilman Street, which read 'No Racism, No Sexism, No Homophobia,' a sign that signifies that upon entry one leaves one's prior identifications at the door and entered into what aspires to be a punk rock Utopia. The problem with such idealism...is that it leaves no room for the questioning of punk's own racism, sexism, and homophobia. (Nguyen, "It's (Not) A White World" 257)

²¹ While acknowledging the importance of Nguyen's *Evolution of a Race Riot* in exposing punk's reproduction of hierarchies and structural exclusions, it's critical to also note that all of the zinesters/punks/riot grrrls publishing in this collection are from the US or Canada. As such, Nguyen's critique reflects the particularities of racism in North America, which differ greatly from racial dynamics in punk rock's birth place, England.

These aspirational-but-invisible attempts at diversity and inclusion in the 90s echo some of the attitudes around iconic punk rockers from the 70s. In describing the impact the Sex Pistols' music had on its fans, pop culture writer Greil Marcus suggests that the songs "gave people who heard them permission to speak...freely" (2). He goes on to describe the band's frontman, Johnny Rotten's role in punk rock: "If an ugly, hunched-over twenty-year-old could stand up, name himself an antichrist, and make you wonder if it wasn't true, then anything was possible" (3). Forty years later, and through an intersectional feminist lens, it's hard to imagine that a young, white, heterosexual man speaking his mind felt terribly revolutionary, especially for those listeners and fans who found the work of identifying with white masculinity difficult or uninteresting. As Nguyen's zines and criticism note,²² the predominating whiteness and cisheterosexuality of mainstream punk rock was in fact very alienating for people of color and LGBTQ folks, precluding the sort of "If he can do it, so can I!" response to Johnny Rotten that Marcus describes above (Nguyen). As Chapter 2 explained, there is a similarly limited history of inclusion in the burlesque spotlight. Savage notes that there was "a great deal of unrecognized hurt and damage in Punk [sic]" (xiii).

Tapping into Collective Rage

Given this hurt and damage, then, how does interpellating punk rock's wild, "anything goes" attitude serve the purposes of the burlesque performers interviewed here? Given burlesque's intentionally antagonistic relationship to structures of power and tendency to "change in response to its social and historical context," burlesque is actually a somewhat logical place for collective resistance (Sally 7). By incorporating stories of resistance to oppression and violence against people of color, women, LGBTQ people, fat people, and disabled people into

²² See Licon's *Zines in Third Space* for additional zines/ters who confront issues of representation and ex/inclusion in punk.

the exchange between performer and audience, strippers engage anger rhetorically. Critically, however, the argument forwarded by that anger is not one that seeks to start the revolution. Burlesque's kaierotic moment, like punk's "insist[ance] on living in a hyper-intense present," eradicates the necessity for forward thinking *past* this exact moment's social problems (Savage xi). Presenting rage in narrative striptease creates a space for anger and resistance *qua* resistance. The aim is not to offer solutions for a better future but to name the current era's injustices, making "a promise that things d[o] not have to be as they seem" by naming those things as unacceptable (Marcus 4). It is less "Wouldn't the world be better if..." and more "Isn't it totally fucked that the world is...?" This refusal to accept the status quo is not performed by some to be watched by others but collectively manifested through the performer-audience interactions that are a hallmark of burlesque performance.

In other words, strippers articulate pain, oppression, and anger in ways that encourage or require their spectators to take part, to join their battle cry. This can take the form of call and response, gestures that invite mimicry (e.g., a raised fist), or props/costumes/narratives which locate the stripper's anger so specifically that those who share the performer's politics, perspectives, or experiences are naturally interpellated into the act (most of these are present in the acts analyzed below). Similar to spectatorship at a punk show, "you don't have to be alone. You *submerge*.... You ha[ve] a good time by having a bad time. You [a]re full of the poison" (Savage xiv, emphasis in original). A particularly gifted ecdysiast will not only use the erotic to fill her audience with the poison but she will, by virtue of the call-and-response nature of burlesque performance (or call-and-undress, as it were), make the poison seem sexy. By eliciting expressions of affirmation, agreement, and attraction from her audience during an act about political resistance, the artist is coding that resistance as sexy. Furthermore, the cheers and tips

can also be understood as expressions of agreement with the stripper's point of view. There is a sense that the performer is not alone in whatever feeling she has or story she's telling: "you're sort of reaching into some internal part of [the audience] that maybe they are scared to let show or thoughts that they are not able to express or feelings that they are unable or unwilling to confront, and kind of communicating with that secret part of people" (Boxx, Skype interview). The erotic, operating on both a superficial sexual level as well as a deeper plane of power and knowledge, imbues particular moment(s) of performance with the possibility for resistance when the "secret part of people" with which the performer is connecting is the part of them raging and hurting in the face of oppression, violence, and prejudice.

By "refusing to keep [their] anger in check, in control;" by rejecting their socialization as minoritarian subjects (especially for women of color) to "resist the raw, confrontational tone that marks expressions of anger" (Espinosa-Aguilar 227); by offering guttural reactions instead of "diplomacy and emotional maturity," the burlesque performers I interviewed are engaging in what rhetorical scholar Amanda Espinosa-Aguilar terms angry rhetoric (228). In her chapter, "Radical Rhetoric: Anger, Activism, and Change," Espinosa-Aguilar identifies such rhetoric in the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, claiming that the latter uses "anger as a rhetorical device, a means of persuasion, expressing revolutionary or radical ideas" (228). Anger and rage, so intentionally expressed, shared, and leveraged, also appear on punk rock and burlesque stages, persuading and recruiting the audience into a specific perspective and resistance, or else tapping into one they already share. This angry rhetoric, whether in the words of Anzaldúa's prose and poetry, a punk rocker's singing, or a burlesque performer's striptease, "is an aesthetic strategy [that] inspire[s] activism by exposing injustice, stimulating moral outrage, and promoting the vision that other possibilities exist besides accepting hegemonic binaries" (228).

Though anger “isn’t held in high regard by the dominant culture” (Espinosa-Aguilar 227), it can be a means of survival (Lorde, “The Uses of Anger” 131) for individuals as well as collective groups. “Survival,” of course, is not a one-size-fits-all practice as a result of differing experiences of precarity that emerge from different lived experiences and subjectivities. For Lorde, for example, anger’s relationship to survival hinges up on her experiences as a Black, lesbian; the subtitle to the essay “The Uses of Anger,” after all, is “Women Responding to Racism.” Lorde’s “response to racism is anger,” though other women, such as the white women she encounters at academic conferences, do not share this response to racism (“The Uses of Anger” 124). The source of women’s anger may vary by virtue of their social location, but, Lorde notes, “[e]very woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (“The Uses of Anger,” Lorde 127). The strippers I interviewed focus their anger into narrative striptease, aiming to change the perspectives of their spectators on issues pertaining to their various/varied subjectivities. Of course, expressing anger on behalf of others’ subjectivities can be challenging in a non-written/spoken medium; I wonder how Lorde would instruct the white women who expressed no anger in response to racism to do so through narrative striptease. I have been able to express my own anger about anti-Black racism on stage by virtue of being asked to take part in a Black Lives Matter-themed burlesque act created and led by fat, Black performer The BIG Bang McGillicuddy. Being able to offer my (white) body in service to her creative and political vision gave me access to a tangible, embodied way to express my desire to be an accomplice to people of color against White supremacy. I fear that attempts to convey the same rage and anti-racist politics in a solo burlesque act would either reproduce problematic racial dynamics by

virtue of the nature of visual signification or would result in a narrative that would read overly self-congratulatory – the nice white lady doing people of color a favor by standing up for them.

Even with the specific limitations noted above, burlesque affords strippers possibilities to resist normative depictions of their subjectivities both by allowing women of color, LGBTQ women, fat women, and women with disabilities to control the narrative but also by virtue of how these narratives are conveyed. Because woman-identified sexuality is the predominant expressive/communicative medium of narrative striptease, burlesque aggressively rejects the “shoulds” and “should nots” of woman-identified sexuality. Burlesque performance not only presents women’s sexuality/ies and bodies, but it forces its audience to take them in. This woman-identified sexuality is performed in resistance to various, though often overlapping, standards, expectations, and prejudices. Each “middle finger to the establishment” is pointed in a slightly different direction based upon the performer’s subjectivity/ies *and* their own personal experiences (Torch). As Jacqueline Boxx notes, however, the performer is unlikely to be the only person in the venue flipping their middle fingers in any given direction. The audience is comprised of people with the same or similar experiences of oppression and violence, as well as with allies and other potential accomplices, who, with the prompting and invitation of the ecdysiast, join a collective resistance to racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, fat phobia, and/or ableism. By drawing the stripper’s spectators’ captive attention not only to her pasties but also to the social problems confronting her offstage, the performer’s aim here, as explored in the three acts examined below, isn’t to fix the world, but to foment a collective scream of rage against, and resistance to, its problems.

DISABILITY’S DEFIANT SEXUALITY: JACQUELINE BOXX

For Jacqueline Boxx, or Miss Disa-Burly-Tease as she is also known, shining a light on

the world's problems is an ever-present part of her life, on and off stage. Specifically, Boxx confronts and names the compulsory invisibility of disability and disabled people in performance spaces and in everyday life. While this has been the focus of her performance and public presence for the past four years, burlesque had long been a space she turned to when she wanted to push back against her other (non-disability related) negative experiences. She began her burlesque career as an undergraduate at Oberlin College "after a traumatic incident that was very disempowering:" "I was feeling very powerless and trying to figure out how to feel like I was in control of both my own destiny and my own body again" (Boxx, Skype interview). While she was already performing some circus arts on campus, Boxx hoped burlesque would help her "work...together with [her] body to create art,...healing [her] to be in touch with a positive form of sensuality after experiencing a kind of traumatic event" (Boxx, Skype interview). The small group of girls who were starting an Oberlin burlesque show brought New York-based performer Rose Wood to lead a workshop on campus. During that workshop, Wood described burlesque as healing and remarked that she felt she'd done a bad job at a show if the only thing that happened to her audience was being turned on by her performance. Even before Boxx began the Burlesque for the Soul (BFTS) mentorship program in Tucson, her framework for being a burlesque performer centered around provoking complex, multi-layered reactions in spectators beyond arousal. "It's not just about being sexy. I can take off my clothes and make you feel more than...something else other than turned on, and that was revolutionary to me. Yeah, it stuck with me really hard and gave me that sense of ownership and connection that I really wanted" (Boxx, Skype interview).

Boxx's use of burlesque to reclaim and reshape her relationship with her body has extended beyond her sexuality as her performance has evolved. When I asked her if she has any

goals as a performer, she told me that she “really want[s] to blend the languages of glamour, sexuality, and disability all together....[T]hat’s very very rare and kind of punk because people don’t think about disabled bodies as either glamorous or sexy. They just don’t” (Boxx, Skype interview). Boxx herself didn’t always pair “disability” with “glamorous” or “sexy.” In fact, she struggled to imagine performing in a body that was no longer functioning as it used to. She met Rambo Rose in 2013 while Rose was taking part in the first BFTS mentorship session and Rose encouraged her to be a part of the next group. Boxx initially resisted:

And I said, "Well, but I can't dance on my legs anymore. How am I going to do that?"
Because every time I danced on my legs I would dislocate something or sublux something and it would cause me extreme pain for like weeks and weeks afterwards and I couldn't move with the same kind of fluidity that I used to be able to while standing, and [Rambo] said..., "I think you'll figure out a way."

After Rose’s “ominous...but in a good way” prophecy, Boxx signed up for BFTS, which she credits with teaching her that “you can bring your authentic self on stage and begin to love it, begin to love that authentic self and that other people would love watching you be your authentic self” (Boxx, Skype interview). For Boxx, that “authentic self” began to include using mobility aids (on stage and off), a transition she resisted “for so long even when people said they would make [her] life better” (Boxx, Skype interview). Boxx planned to use a prop chair in her first act to support her choreographed movement since she could no longer dance on her legs as she used to, but she *did not* want to use a wheelchair. When Cindy, BFTS’s founder and primary mentor, asked Boxx why the chair in her act wasn’t a wheelchair, Boxx “was forced to confront [her] internalized ableism that was saying, ‘You can’t use a wheelchair because that would mean you are broken’” (Boxx, Skype interview). This realization shaped not only Boxx’s day-to-day self

but also her performance persona, Jacqueline Boxx, who predominantly uses mobility aids on stage during performance. Her name, which Boxx picked while she was an undergraduate, was initially inspired by the Dresden Dolls and cabaret-influenced performance styles but “at the same time it implied that there was a hidden surprise, like this kind of Jack-in-the-Box quality, where it's very charming, but it can also be very surprising” (Boxx, Skype interview). She styles Boxx very differently from her muggle persona — transforming the dark hair she typically straightens into wild curls, swapping her glasses for contacts, and adding layers of glitter and shine.

The charm and surprise waiting behind this fierce femme covering manifest in Boxx’s “feeling of freedom” to engage in activism more directly and aggressively on stage than she does offstage (Boxx, Skype interview). This feeling of freedom is also a feeling of bravery to do on stage what she *would* do offstage if she weren’t afraid. “[I]t’s so intrinsic to Jacqueline Boxx as a person that she tries to be an activist and advocate, that is central to her identity” (Boxx, Skype interview). This activism and advocacy consistently center disability, leading to performances that are sexy *because* of her disabled body and subjectivity, not *in spite* of it. The erotic desire/s exchanged between Boxx and her audience are *always* between a group of spectators and a stripper performing an explicitly disabled embodiment. By “giv[ing] the audience [something] they didn’t know they wanted,” Boxx engages in what she calls burlesque’s “public expression of [shared] repressed feeling” while also asking herself what fellow disabled people might think of her acts (Boxx, Skype interview).

I think that every single act you can view...as individual stories or you can view them as creating this overall story of yourself as a performer where the story that you're telling is ... It's not even just about you, but it's also about the world around you and how you view

it and how it views you, and you can become aware of new ways of viewing the world through watching other people's performances....It's like you get to step inside their brain and see the world through their eyes. (Boxx, Skype interview)

Boxx creates this world on stage and off, using her Facebook profile as a platform to share what she calls “Disabilibabe Notes,” short missives “that [are] either a piece of [her] experience as a disabled person or something that [she] think[s] could positively impact the lives of disabled people and performers” (Boxx, Skype interview). Boxx seizes on these notes and the conversation they generate as a way to “push back in...a meaningful way against the giant wave of terror” against disabled bodies, among others (Boxx, Skype interview). These notes, like her acts, help Jacqueline Boxx manifest a world where people living with disabilities are not only valued but also considered desirable. They also make it possible for her to rage against this violence, terror, and erasure.

The force of that violence, terror, and erasure has been hugely amplified and given a national platform by Donald Trump since the beginning of his campaign for president. With displays like his energetic and callous mocking of Pulitzer-prize winning, disabled reporter Serge Kovalski at a campaign speech in South Carolina in November 2015, Trump has given permission to others to engage in similar acts of discursive and physical violence against people with disabilities (Haberman). In the past few years, such permission has also been codified into law by legislation that undermines the Americans With Disabilities Act’s (ADA) capacity to protect people with disabilities by forcing them “to provide businesses with information about the specific legal obligations that they are violating—*after* those individuals have been denied the access rights that Congress gave them decades ago” (Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, et al. 2). While these two examples clarify the nature of the ableism Boxx

encounters in her everyday life, the specifics of the behavior(s) and legislation matter only insofar as they highlight the continued need to advocate fiercely and forcefully for people with disabilities.

Answering this call, Boxx takes her anger to the stage, where she deftly pairs rage and resistance with truly captivating sexuality and performance prowess. Putting disability in the spotlight is “kind of like a power choice,” “taking power back and talking back” to non-disabled people and an often-ableist world which she struggles to access much of the time (Boxx, Skype interview). Indeed, placing her disabled body and subjectivity “outside of its familiar context or frame” (at least outside the limiting contexts and frames imagined by an ableist world), “can be, in itself, an act of intervention” (Taylor, *Performance* 17). Her intervention exceeds merely placing herself in the spotlight but sometimes takes the form of explicitly sharing anger and frustration without offering any solution or relief, manifesting resistance to ableism. The rage in her act “Microaggressions” proves to be just as effective in sharing Boxx’s experiences and perspectives as a woman with a disability as the inviting seduction of her other acts²³. Where the latter highlight the oft-overlooked sexuality of people with disabilities, “Microaggressions” forces audiences to witness the many (micro)aggressions Boxx and other people with disabilities navigate daily in bare, at times uncomfortable, detail and directness. In this act, which won the Judge’s Choice “Glittoris” Award at Boston’s 2016 Alterna-TEASE neo burlesque festival, Boxx performs alongside a slideshow of text quoting microaggressions that people with disabilities hear on a daily basis. These ableist statements and questions, which have all been said either to

²³ Boxx’s two-pronged approach to storytelling, the soft and sexy paired along with the aggressive and angry, mirrors the nature of the both overt and subtle forms of ableism. As literature from feminist psychology and critical race theory suggests, microaggressions are no less detrimental to their recipients than flamboyant violence or hate crimes (Palombi; Platt; Solórzano; Sue).

Boxx herself or to friends of hers with disabilities, range from the intrusively curious to the ignorantly well-meaning to the blatantly rude. In her description of the act on her website, Boxx notes that, “[w]hile these larger-than-life words attempt to steal focus, she battles against them with an aggressive and sexual striptease that defiantly takes power back” (Boxx, “Microaggressions”). Boxx’s embodiment and the way she engages with her audience, both erotically and antagonistically, insist that the audience take in not only the things said to and about people with disabilities, but also confront the audience with the impact of those statements through Boxx’s reactions to them and her resilience against them.

With twenty-six phrases total, the microaggressions flashing across the stage fall into 5 broad categories: garden variety ableism; in/visibility of disability; intrusive questions; unsolicited advice; and social expectations of people with disabilities. Opening the act with “You just don’t look very disabled” and closing it with “I mean, you clearly aren’t actually disabled,” this act largely focuses on the in/visibility of disability. As Boxx noted when she describes her performance persona and motivation to perform, visibility is a goal of hers; “choos[ing] how visible she wants to be,” “gives [her] strength and solidarity” with other disabled people (Boxx, Skype interview). Watching Boxx’s collection of acts, it’s quite obvious that she *could* pass as non-disabled in her performances in, for example, a chair act or an act constituted entirely of floor work.²⁴ As revealed in other acts of hers (see chapter 5 for more), Boxx’s strength and flexibility are impressive (impressive, not “impressive for a disabled person”). “Like racial, gender, and queer passing, the option of passing as nondisabled provides both a certain level of

²⁴ As Boxx has made clear, moving through the world without her wheelchair, braces, or cane is physically exhausting and painful. I do not mean to suggest here that choosing not to use these mobility aids on stage is an easy choice without any consequences for Boxx. My aim is to highlight that, while using these devices on stage may primarily serve to enhance Boxx’s capacity for movement, this choice is also one of performance and persona.

privilege and a profound sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance” (Samuels 239).

Rejecting both that privilege and also the “uneasy” inclusion passing would afford her in the disability community, Boxx uses mobility aids or wears leg braces in all of her acts (Samuels 245). In tension with this choice is the reality of Boxx’s daily passing as a white woman despite her mixed-race heritage. Were Boxx’s Puerto Rican ancestry more visible, it is almost certain that the ableist microaggressions she experiences would be compounded by racism.

Dis/privileges inherent to the in/visibility of intersectional subjectivities are in constant dynamic with one another.

After in/visibility, the other primary focus of this act is the unsolicited advice that Boxx and other people with disabilities receive from people without disabilities. As disability studies scholar Alison Kafer notes, the future of the (visibly) disabled person as written on their bodies and always imagined to be “bleak” (Kafer 1). Such advice presumes that a disabled person’s futures can always be improved upon (until, of course, their disability is eradicated altogether). Though they vary in their approach, overall these pieces of advice are founded on 2 premises: 1) that people with disabilities should always be striving towards some non-disabled “normal,” and 2) that they aren’t properly equipped to know how best to do that for themselves.

These questions and comments also intersect with fat phobia and holier-than-thou moralizing: “Losing weight will fix it.” “Are you sure you’re not taking too many medications?” “I wish you would put the pills away and pray with me instead.” The desire to “normalize” the disabled body is a part of a larger narrative around desired bodies and behavior. While ableism is centered in the microaggressions on display here, people with disabilities are also subjected to the intersecting systems of racism, cisheterosexism, and fat phobia. The pressure of respectability politics further urges people with disabilities to act a *certain way* in order to be deemed an

acceptable exception to the norm. Jay Dolmage additionally notes the ways in which emerging technologies “suggest to us that we are perfectible [and] intensify our dedication to [these] norms” (*Disability Rhetoric 2*). As the pieces of advice slide past Boxx on the screen behind her, it becomes clear how constant the pressure to “be the right kind of disabled person” is. Attempts to improve living conditions associated with disability or chronic illness are judged to be simultaneously too extreme, inadequate, and unnecessary: “Is it really worth giving yourself cancer just to feel better?” “Are you really even trying to get better?” “You just need to go outside and get some sun.” “Just ignore it; it will pass.”

As these phrases begin to scroll slowly on the projector on stage behind her, Boxx, seated in a wheelchair, is being playful, enjoying her body in a series of energetic movements from her waist up. As she notes on her website, the “conflict between screen and performer replicates the dissonance felt by many people with disabilities as they fight to remain self-assured within an ableist world” (Boxx, “Microaggressions”). She moves her red-gloved arms up and down and rolls her neck to display the large red flower in her hair. Boxx moves her hands down her full-length, black sequin gown in a full body shimmy, eventually pulling up the hem of the dress to reveal both her legs and a red mesh petticoat. Simultaneously, she is making disability visible and depicting a positive relationship with her disabled body. She revels in her body, moving around the stage in her wheelchair. “But you don’t look sick” appears on the stage as she tips the chair back and lifts the dress up again, kicking up her long legs to reveal her black thigh-high stockings. Boxx turns her back to the audience, using her fingers to count down with the music (Cake’s “Nugget/Shut the Fuck Up”) and begins unlacing the back of her dress with exaggerated arm and upper body movements.

With her back still to the spectators, she slides out of the chair and onto the floor, almost

instantly rotating to sit parallel to the audience. Boxx pulls down the straps of her gown and lies on her back, pushing the garment the rest of the way off her body. She wears a fringe- and rhinestone-covered bra, underbust corset, and panties underneath. Pulling herself along the floor closer to the audience, she winks and waves, making eye contact with the front row of spectators, ensuring that her disabled body is *seen* and making sure her audience knows that she is seeing them seeing her. Her returned stare subverts the consistent experience disabled people have of receiving this “more emphatic form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing [that] registers the perception of strangeness [in a disabled person’s body] and endows [that strangeness] with meaning” (Garland Thomson, “Dares to Stares” 30). Boxx’s own stare here helps her to maintain more control over what meanings her body makes in this act.

Here she also takes advantage of easily anticipated movement for burlesque performance — flirting coquettishly, engaging her audience in a playful-yet-sexy manner, winking to show she’s in on the joke and there for the audience’s pleasure. “I really appreciate how cheerful you are. You’re not like those other disabled people” appears as she throws one of her legs up in a split, bending and bouncing the raised leg in time to the music. The audience cheers loudly — she has found a way to engage their desires, alongside their discomforts, holding their attention by engaging in stereotypical “sexy” choreography as she deftly navigates her narrative. As Margaret Price notes in “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” “desiring disability involves affirming the ways that disability blurs the boundaries between power and abjection” (“The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain” 275). Punk rock’s relevance to burlesque performance surfaces here where power and abjection blur. Boxx executes this blurring expertly.

After removing a glove and whipping the floor with it, Boxx moves into a middle split,

dragging her hands up her legs into a playful, but demanding gesture for the audience to give her more exuberant reactions. Once her second glove is removed and swung over her head, Boxx moves to lie on her stomach, playfully kicking her feet back and forth — the epitome of flirtatious but innocent femininity — before she moves to a plank position. Once there, she humps the floor, first slowly and then faster, keeping time with the music. From funny to raunchy to coy, Boxx epitomizes a long laundry list of archetypal female sexuality. In so doing, she not only guarantees that she welcomes her audience into familiar, somewhat normative dynamics of erotic desire but also demonstrates that people with disabilities are not one-dimensionally defined by their disability/ies. Her sense of humor is obvious through both her expression and her choreography as “You just need to stay positive” moves onto the screen. Boxx answers “Have you tried yoga?” by shooting her legs straight up into the air, balancing her weight on her upper back and shoulders. She brings her feet back to touch the floor behind her head, giving her access to slap her ass. The audience adores this. Boxx crawls across the stage, dragging her bent legs behind her. She shifts to lie on her back; with her knees bent and feet on the floor, she seductively runs her hands down her body and humps the air. More crawling and stage humping poke fun at the phrase “You obviously have able legs.”

Box moves into one of her final poses with her back to the audience so she can remove her bra, swinging it over head before letting it fly. When she turns back to face the audience, she is holding and covering her breasts with her right arm. At the act’s end, Boxx removes her hands from her breasts after playfully bouncing them up and down, revealing heart-shaped pasties. Suddenly, the mood shifts and she raises both middle fingers, one and then the other, to flip the audience off. The phrase frozen behind her reads, “I mean, you clearly aren’t actually disabled.” Boxx makes what Lola Torch calls punk’s euphemistic “middle finger to the establishment”

(ableism) a literal reality. She holds this pose and continues to stare her audience down, making it impossible to look away from her. In using the customary exchanged gazes of the striptease to compel her audience to take in this tableau — a defiant, topless, disabled woman raging unflinchingly at ableism — she refuses to offer the able-bodied people in the audience a chance to deny their complicity in creating an ableist world. Her anger is not stifled and she doesn't break the tension for the audience. In this moment, Boxx epitomizes what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls “misfitting:”

A misfit...describes an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole. The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together.... Misfits are inherently unstable rather than fixed, yet they are very real because they are material rather than linguistic constructions. The discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is, produces fits and misfits. The utility of the concept of misfit is that it definitively lodges injustice and discrimination in the materiality of the world more than in social attitudes or representational practices, even while it recognizes their mutually constituting entanglement. (592-593)

Throughout “Microaggressions,” and within this final pose specifically, Boxx not only shines a spotlight on the daily experience of the misfitting disabled body (being made to feel out of place when ignored or placed under excessive surveillance, trying and failing to move through a world not made to accommodate their embodied/neurological needs, etc.) but also inserts her own unapologetically disabled body into a performance art that has historically prized able bodies and narrow standards of beauty. In presenting her body and narrative as sexy and rhetorically powerful on stage, Boxx renegotiates the meanings of her own subjectivity as well as what

burlesque is and what it can do. While the experience of a misfitting body is not unique to disabled bodies, but also, especially, experienced by bodies of color and fat bodies, Boxx's passing for white and her slideshow's narrow focus on ableist microaggressions (versus racial microaggressions, gendered, sexualized, etc.) render this act's narrative one about disability and disability only.

But to that end, Boxx makes powerful use of her "bod[y] to challenge regimes of power and social norms [by] placing [her] body front and center in [this] artistic practice" (Taylor, *Performance* 1). The red-sequined hearts on Boxx's breasts highlight her self-love more than any love she has for the audience. "Microaggressions" shines a spotlight on the world in which Boxx and others with disabilities actually live: an often-hostile place which renders them less than human. Boxx does not smile here; her defiant gaze moves across the audience, her chin slightly lifted as a challenge. Here she pushes back against phrases like "You used to be so much fun," "Don't let it affect you so much," and "You just need to stay positive." In direct conflict with the imperative to be "cheerful" like "those other disabled people" (Boxx, "Microaggressions"), Boxx disregards the comfort her audience may find in putting a happy face on disability, refusing to be an "object of inspiration" (Young). She has performed a striptease – and even dressed down (some of) her audience – but she is not inspiration porn.

In "The problem with inspiration porn: a tentative definition and provisional critique," Jan Grue builds off of late disability rights activist Stella Young's definition and defines inspiration porn as "(a) an image of a person with visible signs of impairment who is (b) performing a physical activity, preferably displaying signs of physical prowess, and is (c) accompanied by a caption that directs the viewer to be inspired by the image in question" (839). While purporting to support and celebrate people with disabilities, inspiration porn actually

serves to dehumanize them, diminish the scope of their potential achievements beyond commonplace and mundane acts, and distract from the systemic social, medical, and legal systems which harm people with disabilities by focusing on the “success” of single persons (Grue 840). While Jacqueline Boxx presents disability to her audience as sexy, sensual, and desirous, she *does not* present herself as inspiring, heroic, or an “exceptional case” uniquely worthy of particular forms of desire, attraction, or acceptance (Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics* 108). Her rejection of this framework is clear with the final “fuck you” of “Microaggressions.” It’s evident that this challenge isn’t mere choreography. While Boxx is an accomplished performer, it is obvious that this moment and the feeling behind it are genuine, not an ‘act.’ Disabled is “a power word” for Boxx and she uses that power not only to imagine better futures but also to highlight the unacceptable present without sugarcoating it (Boxx, Skype interview). Notably, this shift to an explicit “fuck you” happens in response to a phrase that attempts to strip her of her identity as woman with a disability. The sparkle of her rhinestones is used to draw her audience in closer to her disability narrative, not to put a pretty sheen on the ugly problem of ableism.

Furthermore, Boxx has not directed the lighting crew in the venue to blackout or dim the lights once she hits her final reveal (which would be a fairly common choice). Thus, once she releases herself from the final pose, her audience cheering wildly, Boxx is clearly visible as she moves herself across the floor back to her wheelchair. She does so by pushing herself along with her arms, scooting on her ass. Like her anger, Boxx’s disability is not a performance. By ensuring that we see her navigate the stage without a mobility aid, Boxx recenters her body — a body with a disability — to bridge her onstage striptease with her offstage reality. The wheelchair is a functional part of Boxx’s everyday day life, not a prop. The final projected

phrase, “I mean, you clearly aren’t actually disabled,” is thrown into even sharper relief, revealed to be harmful and ableist. While we get to remove ourselves from the world of her act once the next stripper takes the stage, Boxx’s movement through the world as a woman with a disability continues. Critically, we are reminded that moving in that body is a complex experience of both debility *and* capacity. Boxx’s strength and flexibility are abundantly clear and she navigates the stage deftly without her chair; the chair “add[s] to [her] freedom,” making it easier for her to fully exit the stage (Boxx, Skype interview). Once she’s back in her chair, Boxx blows the responsive audience a kiss. Their reaction exposes their capability and willingness to hold conflicting responses simultaneously, allowing themselves to be seduced by Boxx even as she performs and imposes discomfort on them by highlighting her experiences with ableism. What’s more, the rise and fall of the audience’s cheering throughout the performance indicate that they don’t feel affection for her *in spite* of her confrontational message, but because of it. Beyond merely holding these contradictory responses simultaneously, there appears to be, at times, a causal relationship between Boxx’s onstage activism and her effect on the audience. The impact is decidedly rhetorical.

MAKING AMERICA GAY AGAIN: KITTY CATATONIC

Kitty Catatonic’s (nee Hannah Wolf) staging of rage and resistance is near-constant in her burlesque acts and exudes, in part, from her confidence as a performer, her comfort holding the attention of a group of people, and her pleasure in using that spotlight to her liking. She has spent her whole life performing. “I grew up as a performer and I started dancing when I was like three and then gradually moved on to theater in High School....I was always that kid that wanted to be the center of attention. Like, look at what I can do. I can do all of these cool things” (Catatonic). For Catatonic, this time in the spotlight on stage was a departure from the shy person

she was off stage. While she almost pursued a performance degree away from her hometown, Catatonic ultimately decided to stay in Tucson, where she knew she could make time to perform without a degree. Similar to my own journey to burlesque from other types of performance, Catatonic was largely inspired to strip by the Black Cherry Burlesque performers.

[W]hen I was like 20 my sister had been going to Black Cherry shows for a while. She would always tell me about them and how awesome they were and how awesome burlesque was, and so until I was 21, I was just dying to go to these shows. And on my 21st birthday, I went to my first show and I was like, holy shit, this is amazing. This is so magical. And then I dreamed about performing burlesque in my shower. (Catatonic)

After attending more BCB shows, continuing to perform in her shower, and saving up the money, Catatonic enrolled in BFTS. What started simply as a path to performing “turned into a whole bigger thing once [she] started Burlesque for the Soul” (Catatonic). Watching the BCB shows left Catatonic with a more mainstream impression of burlesque: “teasy, funny, entertaining” (Catatonic). BFTS shifted Catatonic’s goals and expectations for her burlesque performance “to do something...meaningful[,] pushing the limits[, which] is just not something that I thought about before Burlesque for the Soul” (Catatonic).

When Catatonic started the program, she had a feeding tube inserted near her belly button as a result of gastroparesis, which partially paralyzes her stomach, making eating and digesting food by mouth difficult. The tube made her self-conscious and felt out of sync with how young she was at the time. People “were so critical and weird about it. So I wanted to learn how to be confident sexually with my feeding tube” (Catatonic). Catatonic made good on this goal in 2018 when, in an act about successfully enduring her illness, she rhinestoned her feeding tube scar, intentionally calling her audience’s attention to it. As her time in BFTS passed, however,

Catatonic was “okayed to get [her] feeding tube removed because [her] health had improved so much[:] I was maintaining my weight so well. So as the program went on, I guess it became less about that and more about being comfortable with my sexuality as in being gay” (Catatonic). A heteronormative upbringing discouraged Catatonic from exploring her attraction to women for a long time and influenced everything from her clothing choices (Doc Martens were too gay, naturally) to the way she expressed affection with friends (too much hugging was also...too gay). A year after coming out, Catatonic was “trying to be more confident” about her sexuality and “that was kind of what [her debut] act was about. Defying society’s beauty norms, gender norms, things like that” (Catatonic). Beyond pushing against the norms which she feels externally, Catatonic also uses burlesque to push her own internally-imposed limits, consistently expanding her repertoire of performance choices, like using an angle grinder to produce sparks against a metal plate on her crotch, forcing herself to make eye contact with audience members even though it “gives [her] anxiety,” or creating giant costume pieces despite the fact that she’s “not a very crafty person” (Catatonic).

For Catatonic, her stage persona enables the confidence required to take on new challenges. She told me this persona helps her express parts of her personality that don’t come out in her day-to-day life: “I try overall [to display] my bad-assery because that is not something that comes across in my daily life and I think that that is a large part of my personality that is not seen very often. I look super innocent and I feel like I have a rather innocent voice....I think that everybody just envisions me as this little sweet baby child that would never do something raunchy and rebellious when I am actually the wild child of my family” (Catatonic). After a lot of brainstorming, Catatonic came up with a name that captures both sides of her personality. Kitty is “cute and fun” while Catatonic “nods to [the] part of [her] personality that is a little bit of

a low key stoner [and an aspiration to] leave the audience catatonic” (Catatonic). “Catatonic” is not the only reaction she gets from her audiences, however, especially given the explicitly political nature of many of her acts. Narrative striptease offers Catatonic a generative medium for expressing political beliefs and resistance that she struggles to communicate elsewhere. Of her difficulty communicating these convictions offstage, Catatonic characterized herself as “an extremely opinionated person [who wants] to spew [her] opinions all over everybody [but] when [she] get[s] really passionate about something [she has] a really hard time making words for what [she wants] to say” (Catatonic). Even during our interview, Catatonic gestured energetically, sometimes literally grasping for the right words with her hands.

Her senses act as a bridge between the things she wants to say and finding a way to say them on stage. For example, hearing songs that “amp” her up and “remind [her] of how [she feels] about everything going on” as a white lesbian feminist living under Trump’s administration help her to channel her “passion into actions” (Catatonic). In this way, she can broadcast her rage and other reactions to her audience. Catatonic says she has “always been a person that has been very in tuned to [her] sexuality...sexuality as in seductiveness,” a quality that translates directly to her stripping. This deep rootedness in her body, supplemented no doubt by years of dance training, means that when she is “choreographing [her] acts and performing [her] acts[, she] feel[s] very much like [herself] on stage [but] just a deeper [her that n]ot a whole lot of people get to see” (Catatonic). While Catatonic’s acts offer the audience a chance to know her more deeply, they also work to foment a sense of political unity among her spectators, rallying us together in a collective against sexism and homophobia, as a close look at “Beggars” and “American Idiot” will demonstrate.

In “Beggars,” which she first performed in February 2017 shortly after Donald Trump’s

inauguration and revived for the “Future Fantasies” show I produced in March 2018, Catatonic performs her resistance via confrontation and literal protest. Set to the song “Beggars” by Krewella & Diskord, the red-lit act opens on a stage set with a wooden crate, a blank protest sign, and a can of spray paint. Catatonic enters with rage in her eyes and a baseball bat slung over her shoulder. She looks dressed for a fight: short black shorts, black knee pads, black sneakers, and a black bandana tied to cover the bottom half of her face; her white T-shirt has “I will not be silenced” written on it and her jean jacket says “CATATONIC” across the back. From the first moment we see her, Catatonic is clearly sharing her anger with her audience. Because she feels she lacks the capacity to adequately verbalize and articulate her convictions with language offstage, she brings language into her time on stage via this writing on her costume. Covering her mouth, she puts words on her body, offering the audience a message in a way that leaves little room for ambiguity or mis/interpretation. “I had family members who voted for Trump. It was just like a big slap in the face. To me personally being a gay woman in her early 20's in so many different ways I kind of took it personal [sic] that those family members thought about me and still voted for Trump” (Catatonic). What she knew she could not express adequately in a “passive aggressive” Facebook post became easy to articulate as a stripper when this song “remind[ed] her of how [she]feel[s] about everything going on” (Catatonic). The resulting message is angry and unapologetically Kitty.

Catatonic’s message is further supported by her body’s movements, her costume choices, and the song’s lyrics:

This one is for the fucked up, chewed up, spit out, stepped on

No luck, no fucks, tough love, half blood

Stripped down, beat down, blacked-out, choking

No sound, no crowd, burnt up, broken

We're always eager for so much more

Cause reality is a cancer and we've discovered the cure

They took your money and your freedom and your time

They almost took it all but they'll never take your mind (Krewella and Diskord)

These lyrics underscore the anger and powerlessness Catatonic felt in the wake of a Trump-Pence presidency that has revealed the homophobia some believed the US had transcended after 2015's Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage. During our interview, she reminded me of an experience we shared at the 2017 Slut Walk which had left an impression on her. As we walked in a large, loud group down University Boulevard, a white, blonde University of Arizona student jumped up on a raised ledge at a restaurant we passed, screaming "Fuck you! Trump is awesome!" among other things at the group of women, queers, and people of color protesting on behalf of their (and her) rights. Catatonic's "I will not be silenced" t-shirt allows her the "big fuck you" she wanted to scream at that girl without actually screaming "'Trump sucks' in [her] face" as she'd wanted to (Catatonic). This t-shirt asserts that she is not afraid to give a voice to those feelings and to name these beliefs and political forces as violent; burlesque is that voice for Catatonic. In her first reveal of the act, Catatonic pulls the bandana down from her face, further freeing herself from silence. By offering her bared face before she reveals any other part of her body, Catatonic makes the most of burlesque's kaierotic moment: using striptease to satisfy the audience's desire to see more, to share her body as well as story with them.

The story is delivered aggressively. This aggression is deeply entangled with the sexuality she offers through her choreography. In contrast to the difficulty Wolf experiences with language,

she feels “very in tuned to [her] sexuality....It’s always something that [she’s] wanted to display to people somehow because it [makes her] confident” (Catatonic). Wolf’s transformation into Catatonic allows her to express that sexuality on stage in ways she cannot do in her muggle life. Catatonic’s “no fucks given” attitude oozes through her choreography. Her jacket is thrown off — not merely removed — in order to uncover the flannel beneath it. The flannel, like her shaved head, calls upon well-worn embodied and sartorial choices which mark Catatonic as a lesbian or queer woman for the audience. The back of the flannel is adorned with the following message, in pink: “My pussy my choice,” surrounded by the commonly used icon for female or woman (♀).

It’s here that some of burlesque’s incapacity to capture and communicate the *entirety* of a stripper’s politics during the brief kaierotic moment of live performance is evident. By choosing the phrase “My pussy my choice,” Catatonic hails the movement of predominantly woman-identified people protesting in reaction to revelations around then-candidate Trump’s sexual assault history. However, while “pussy” is the term Trump used to assert his claim to all women’s bodies and is also used by many to describe their genitals (for woman-identified folks and others), “pussy” can also be alienating for some trans women and others. In combination with the color pink and the female symbol, the writing on the back of Catatonic’s flannel potentially suggests a fairly traditional perspective on sex, gender, and gender roles. That is, that women (♀) are female, have vaginas (pussies), and like pink (and/or have pink vaginas). This message is incompatible with Catatonic’s point of view. On and off the stage, she is interested in “defying society’s beauty norms, gender norms;” behind the scenes, Catatonic welcomes and supports all of the women she performs with, including the trans women and women of color who perform with TLL (Catatonic). Of course, conveying an understanding of gender which challenges a prescribed alignment of sex, embodiment, identity, and expression is more complex

than well-trod signifiers. Her performance here, as always, “holds many, at times conflicting, meanings and possibilities” (Taylor, *Performance* 6). In the context of a 3-minute burlesque act, Catatonic’s use of color, symbol, and popular political slogan do quick, clear work to tell the audience that she is pushing back against violence against women and legislation against their rights emerging from the particular political moment she is responding to (Trump’s campaign for president and his winning the election in spite of (because of?) his well-documented violence against women). The audience, predominantly white at Tucson Libertine League shows, seems to connect easily with the message, many of them raising clenched fists in the air during her act and screaming.

Catatonic continues to move with purpose around the stage, stepping on top of the wooden crate, moving to the floor, all the while engaging the audience and inviting them to add their screams of rage, protest, enthusiasm, and delight to her performance. The “I will not be silenced” T-shirt comes off, revealing 2 black “X’s” in place of traditional pasties (Electrical tape? Medical tape? It’s not entirely clear from the audience. Catatonic understands the power of revealing her breasts but makes no effort to adorn them in an especially “pretty,” feminine, or appealing way.) Offering what is typically the final reveal of a burlesque act so early in “Beggars” is an unusual choice, one that underscores that the remainder of the act contains Catatonic’s ultimate message. The erotic captures audience attention in order to redirect attention to her larger goal: protesting the social and political direction of the US under Trump. Clad now only in booty shorts, knee pads, and sneakers, she returns the black bandana to her face. At the beginning of the act, the bandana created a menacing facade; now it additionally protects Catatonic from the spray paint she has picked up at the back of the stage. She shakes the can, looking over her shoulder at the cheering and expectant audience, paints something on her

protest sign, and moves slowly and deliberately with her back to the audience, returning to the center of the stage. Turning around, Catatonic defiantly raises the protest sign, the word “FREEDOM” scrawled upon it in the messy writing of a quick can of spray paint. She travels the stage a bit, inviting more screaming from the audience.

Coming to the end of the act, Catatonic puts the sign down, turns around, and slowly drags her hands up the outsides of her thighs to the bottom of her shorts. Again, she briefly returns to straight forward erotic desire and sexuality, drawing attention to her ass. Swiftly, and almost without warning, Catatonic pulls the left hem of the shorts up and then the right hem, revealing “NASTY” “WOMAN” on each butt cheek, respectively. She strikes a final pose: her right fist defiantly in the air, her back (and NASTY WOMAN ass) still to the audience, who screams wildly. Ending with these now-familiar words of (predominantly white) feminist protest and resignification scrawled across her butt cheeks, Catatonic again uses powerful language, this time directly on her body, instead of struggling to articulate it in a speech or Facebook status. These letters help Catatonic approach her body as a “palimpsest – [an] embodied story-text...and layered, living textualit[y]....The strong lines of black marker [will] eventually fade away, yet [her] ephemerally marked bod[y] resists” limiting, oppressive, and violent homophobic and misogynistic narratives about her subjectivity (Martin and Licona 251). This act is an unapologetic and aggressive display of Catatonic’s personal and political convictions. Though I say that as a bewitched audience member of Catatonic’s, her own reflections support her claim that transforming from Hannah Wolf into Kitty Catatonic helps her “put [her] passion into [her] actions more than [she] can [her] words” (Catatonic). By taking seriously what Diana Taylor would call Catatonic’s “repertoire of embodied practices” as an “important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge,” Catatonic’s “Beggars” act must be understood as more than an

energetic striptease: it is an act of rhetorical resistance against those views of her lesbian feminist subjectivity which have had material and psychic consequences for her offstage and which threaten to harm her further under a Trump-Pence presidency (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 26). As with most real world protest(s), Catatonic is not trying to fix these sexist and homophobic views but simply to name them and engage the collective anger of other queers and women (as well as allies/accomplices) in the audience.

Catatonic has continued to engage her disgust and anger in the face of Trump's presidency and the behavior of his followers through more performances. Her second act to channel these feelings and politics in an explicit way, set to Green Day's "American Idiot," extends that song's political life. The title track off the band's 2004 rock opera album (turned Broadway musical), the song laments the idiocy and easy gullibility of the US public watching news coverage of the still-young post-9/11 Iraq War. In its original context, the song takes aim at then-President George W. Bush whose "redneck agenda" they accuse of playing a role in "the dumbing down of US pop culture" (Duerden 117). Fourteen years later, the song is enjoying a renewed popularity in reaction to Donald Trump's presidency, even rising to the number 1 spot on Amazon's best sellers list and surging into the top 20 on Britain's singles chart in anticipation of Trump's visit in July 2018 (Duerden; Myers; O'Connor). The reemergence of the "American idiot" archetype is epitomized this time by the angry, (predominantly) white jingoistic xenophobe spewing abusive epithets and wearing a red "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) hat in support of Trump. Catatonic steps into this particular American idiot's shoes to poke fun at this character, parroting their anger in order to share her own.

Over the strains of the opening guitar, the lights find Catatonic, bouncing in time to the music with her back to the audience. She is wearing a frayed denim vest with KITTY

emblazoned across her back. The red and black flannel shirt tied at her waist wraps around torn and faded jeans rolled up to reveal brown boots. Catatonic's worn, head-to-toe denim, iconically American, is topped by a bright red baseball cap that she wears backwards. This particular "MAGA" hat says "Make America Gay Again" but it's unclear who, if anyone, in the audience can see that it doesn't say "Make America Great Again." The lights start to come up and Catatonic turns around, revealing that she is wearing only a black bra under her vest. She points to the audience and begins to chug the can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer in her right hand. Her clothing and beverage choices epitomize the working-class American of "our collective imagination" (Silva 9): down-to-earth, wearing denim, drinking cheap American beer, callouses on their hands, a fervent belief in the so-called American dream (Silva 9; Putnam). The white working-class character that Catatonic embodies is standing in for the white voters without college degrees that Trump won by an impressive 39 points (Tyson and Maniam). In the cultural imaginary, if not in real life, the white working class is assumed to resist tolerance and tolerant governance, fighting against the rights of women and lesbians like Kitty (Smith and Hanley 197). From the perspective of the Democratic party and other more liberal voters, however, the true American idiocy of this character and others like her is their choice to vote against their own interest, to tolerate "Trump's affinity for Goldman Sachs bankers and Exxon executives" despite the white working class having been "at the short end of every corporate merger, acquisition, and outsource decision" (Stern). Catatonic captures all of this here in her comportment, continuing to drink and wander the stage in time to the music. Catatonic, her face expressive and her body language aggressive, has the audience in the palm of her hand. Given her well established performance persona and the left-leaning politics of the typical TLL crowd, the laughter and cheering reveal that the audience is enjoying Catatonic's portrayal of this character; they are in

on the joke. Finishing the final gulps of the beer, Catatonic takes a wide stance and raises her left hand above her head, grasping at the air before she adjusts her hat, ensuring it doesn't fall off. She crushes the beer can with her right hand and, bringing her left arm down onto her folded right arm, shoves the crumpled can towards the ceiling in her tightly clenched fingers. By opting for the forearm jerk²⁵ instead of simply flipping the audience off with her middle finger, Catatonic tells us to "fuck off" with the force of her entire body behind it. Her antagonistic attitude continues when she snarls as she tosses the beer can to the side.

Catatonic turns her back to the audience again, throwing the flannel sleeves tied around her waist open and moving the shirt over her swaying hips. She lowers the flannel to show off her denim-clad ass and then pivots to face stage right. After sliding the flannel to rest in her crotch between her legs, she holds a sleeve out in front of her, stroking it like a penis or dildo. Catatonic's hips thrust in time with the music and her strokes, her sexual energy as aggressive as her antagonism. She tosses the flannel aside, throws her vest open and runs her hands across her breasts; the light catches the edges of her pasties poking out of the cups of her bra. While her hands continue down her torso, Catatonic wiggles her hips, moves down to her knees, and slowly rubs her hands down her thighs while staring down the audience. She juxtaposes this slow movement with sudden, energetic shimmying. Shifting tempo again, Catatonic crawls seductively towards us. Eventually, she plants her knees near the edge the stage and abruptly turns her red hat around, displaying its message, "Make America Gay Again," for the audience to see up close. Their reaction highlights, again, that her aggression and anger, paired with her

²⁵ Interestingly, the figure on the cover of Nguyen's "Evolution of a Race Riot" is a woman of color engaged in this same gesture, underscoring the relative universality of this pose. Because it requires more of one's body than simply flipping someone off, the embodiment of the actor is harder to ignore, which would seem to incorporate their embodied subjectivity into the source of their anger.

sensuality, have recruited them to her perspective. Her hands travel down her thighs again until she leans forward towards the audience on her left hand and raises her right hand out in front of her. This is a recurring move in Catatonic's choreography across performances, a sort of demand for the audience to engage with her as she holds them still with her paused movement. Just as we've paused with her movement, Catatonic changes the mood, pulling her extended hand back towards herself, sliding it down her face and licking it. It comes to rest on her chin where she flicks and wags her tongue between her pointer and middle fingers, miming cunnilingus.

This is a complicated gesture here, capturing performance's simultaneous "promises and dangers of resistance and reinscription" (Pérez and Brouwer 317). As a lesbian who previously changed her dress and behavior to avoid being labeled gay, miming this sex act might represent a greater willingness to "be gay" in public, making America gay again like her hat says. This gesture, however, is also employed by childhood bullies and homophobes interested in representing queer sex as something gross and shocking. The potential lack of clarity around the phrase on Catatonic's hat (Is she making American "great" again or "gay" again?) means its plausible for this gesture's message to be unclear. How is Catatonic engaging the figure of the Trump supporter? Is she poking fun at the people who have moved to disenfranchise women and queer people (as they conveniently ignore the presence of both in their own social circles), portraying them as the very things they hate, repurposing the MAGA hat to her own queer, feminist purposes? Or is she revealing a new dimension to this figure, thereby undermining their hatred and highlighting their hypocrisy by depicting a Trump supporter as a drunk lesbian pothead (as will be revealed later in her act)? Does miming cunnilingus here turn Catatonic into a homophobe? Or is she mocking homophobic people for suggesting that lesbian sex could be anything other than sexy and pleasurable? The uproarious laughter and cheering from the

audience suggests that this ambiguity may not matter and might, in fact, be the point. Some of these spectators have walked into the venue already wanting to see the world through perspectives similar to their own (be that queer, feminist, of color, fat, disabled, etc.) while others have been drawn in by Catatonic's sexual display. While some of those who find themselves drawn to something in Kitty's presence on stage are drawn merely to her stage presence, sensuality, and the deft control she has over her body, the possibility remains for some, connecting with Catatonic's explicit appeal to their sexuality, to newly understand the impact of emboldened misogynists and homophobes on queer women in the US. For them, Catatonic's sexiness in the moments of performance here serves as a conduit to their own urge to resist these oppressive forces. After miming cunnilingus, Catatonic slides her now wet hand down her body, bouncing energetically on her knees, and tossing the red hat aside.

Removing the hat seems to unleash Catatonic's pleasure in her own body and sexuality: still on her knees near the end of the stage, she continues bouncing, her left hand holding her crotch and her right hand cupping her neck as she tilts her head back, as if in ecstasy. For Catatonic, there is much joy to be found in making America gay again, inserting her body and sexual practices into a political firestorm. When she shifts position so that her ass bears her weight on the floor instead of her knees, Catatonic changes her energy yet again: she pauses with her right leg bent towards her (as if she were sitting cross-legged) and her left leg up off of the stage, bent at the knee with her foot flat on the floor. She very coyly dangles her hand off of her knee. A genuine smile breaks across her face, which shows us how much fun she is having and begs us to surrender even more to her performance. With the audience in the palm of her hand, she moves closer still, dangling her legs off of the stage and running her hands down her thighs while she makes sexy, defiant eye contact with the spectators closest to her. As she said in our

interview almost a year before this performance, making eye contact and interacting with the audience more has been a goal of hers: “Making eye contact with an audience member or directing myself towards an audience member gives me anxiety and makes me want to giggle. I am really trying to do that and trying to dedicate an act to just eye-fucking the audience and making the audience really uncomfortable rather than me being really uncomfortable”

(Catatonic). Of course, any seasoned performer knows how easy it is to stare past, between, or slightly above audience members in order to give the illusion of eye contact. Even knowing this and having discussed these techniques with Catatonic often at workshops and rehearsals, I experience this moment as direct eye contact. Whether the spectators at the front of the crowd have actually locked eyes with Catatonic or not, the *force* of this moment and her movement has the effect of direct eye contact. By playing on the twin experiences of discomfort and arousal here, Catatonic queers her audience’s desire. The sexuality and sexual behavior she models on stage is equal parts inviting and defiant. By representing her lesbian sexuality in this strong, aggressive, unapologetic manner, Catatonic helps her typically liberal Tucson audience hold the contradictions she is offering: a very gay package that she has wrapped in an exterior meant to signify a hateful, conservative interior. If we can feel simultaneously intimidated by Catatonic *and* drawn to her, what potential incongruences is she also revealing in Trump supporters? Again, the audience’s interpretation of this coupling may be dependent upon how they read (literally) her MAGA hat. Is this unrepentant lesbian sexuality a “fuck you” to MAGA hat-wearing homophobes or a joke about their secret sex lives? Both offer resistance in their own way.

Just as quickly as she gazed defiantly at us, she leans back onto her elbows away from us and flutter kicks her feet as they dangle off the edge of the stage. This move is playful and

innocent, evoking a much younger, more delicate woman than the one who crumpled the beer can at the beginning of the act. Catatonic is playing with us, keeping us slightly unsure of what to expect next. The audience loves these shifts, cheering loudly with each move from quiet sensuality to over-the-top raunch. She crosses her legs and rolls up to her feet, taking a wide-legged stance with her back to the audience, drawing her hands up the outsides of her thighs. Keeping her back to the audience, Catatonic struts to center stage, adjusts her vest, and then whips her head over her left shoulder to fiercely stare us down. Again, her movements slide between quiet and loud, smooth and sharp, subtle and in-your-face. These shifts mean there is *always* something to respond to in this act; there is little to no time to take up residence in any particular reaction as Catatonic is already moving us towards something new. Her hands thrown into the air and her feet firmly planted on the stage, Catatonic moves her legs swiftly to jiggle her denim-clad ass, to the audience's immense pleasure. She wanders the stage again and plays with her vest. In a move that has become a bit of a signature of hers, encapsulating both her toughness as well as the precision of her choreographed movements, Catatonic throws the vest down her arms and bounces it right back up with a quick jut of her shoulders. The assuredness of these movements, the certainty that this costume piece will behave exactly how she wants it to, hints at the rehearsal time and dedication that Catatonic puts into her performances. She strikes a pose again, facing stage left, her right leg perched on the ball of her foot in front of her; this uneven distribution of her weight enhances the hip grinding that follows. After sliding her hands slowly down her right leg, she removes her left boot, and tosses it aside; she pivots and repeats with her left boot.

Catatonic makes use of fierce, focused eye contact yet again, awakening her eye "as an organ of touch:" she stares us down, pulls her vest off, and tosses it carelessly in front of her, off

stage right (Nguyen, “Diasporic Erotic” 70). She bridges the distance from the audience to the stage with ease, fomenting heat and intimacy between herself and her spectators with her gaze. With a slow pace, she walks away from us, dragging her feet. When she stops, she glances over her shoulder quickly as she unbuttons her jeans. Her feet are firmly planted together as she spins her hips and starts to pull down the waist of her jeans. Once fully lowered, the jeans reveal black boyshort-style underwear with the words “FUCK TRUMP” across her ass. The audience goes wild, excited both by Catatonic’s increased nudity and her message. The potential confusion resulting from her MAGA hat becomes somewhat unimportant as her criticism of Donald Trump emerges front and center (back and center?), in the middle of her body, at the center of the stage, spelled out in literal black and white. Her jeans are still around her ankles when she reaches around to slap her ass, throws her hands up, and shuffles her feet in order to make her thighs and ass jiggle. Here, she is again enjoying her body, a body which has shifted in size and shape throughout her 2 years of burlesque performance. Though these shifts have impacted Catatonic’s self-confidence at times, she is persistent in her deployment of her body in her message, whatever shape that body takes in a given act. Here, she embraces the softness of her ass and thighs, shaking them for the audience, celebrating the curves that had emerged in the months before this performance.

Catatonic skims her hands down her body to her hips, still shaking, before she steps fully out of the jeans and kicks them aside. By the time she finally turns around, clad only in her black bra and underwear, Catatonic has pulled a joint out of one cup of her bra and is pulling a lighter out of the other. She lights the joint and tosses the lighter away, puffing strongly to produce a generous amount of smoke. The crowd cheers wildly in what sounds like a mixture of excitement and surprise that Catatonic is openly smoking weed on stage in a state where recreational

marijuana is still illegal. She continues to smoke as she shoves each strap off her shoulder and reaches behind her back to unclasp her bra with one hand. In a brief moment when the meticulously choreographed nature of Catatonic's performance slips away, she slips her other hand behind her back to finish unclasping the bra when she can't do it quickly enough one-handed. Once revealed, we see that the pasties that had been poking out of her bra are in the shape of shiny pot leaves. Catatonic takes a final leisurely stroll around the stage. She pauses to look at the joint as she brings it to her lips again. It almost looks like she pulls her underwear out of her ass as she watches the smoke she blows stage left. With one final inhale, Catatonic strikes a strong, defiant pose with her legs spread, right fist proudly in the air. The audience reacts wildly, offering more enthusiasm for this final pose than they did for any other reveal throughout the act. Her performance of resistance, it seems, is as attractive as her bared breasts or thighs. When Catatonic walked down the stairs off the back of the stage, we passed the joint among us, extending the act's life just a bit while the audience applauded wildly on the other side of the venue's black velvet curtain.

CONCLUSION

Across their acts, while their style and subject matter are very different, similarities emerge among Jacqueline Boxx and Kitty Catatonic's performances. Namely, they deploy rage rhetorically, leverage the medium of narrative striptease to queer erotic desire(s) in service of re/negotiating their subjectivities, and, interestingly, both use text within their acts. In so doing, these strippers not only recognize and thereby compensate for burlesque's limitations as a means of communicating without language, but they also recognize and forward the rhetorical powers of word choice. For Boxx, for whom "disability" is a "power word," the screen's scrolling microaggressions serve as evidence of an ableist world, testimony from her life and the lives of

fellow people living with disabilities (Boxx, Skype interview). The presence of these phrases in such precise detail (the bare text leaves no room for confusion that is always potentially present with non-textual signs) wear away at the audience as they read one microaggression after the other. The starkness of this backdrop provides Boxx with a useful foil against which to perform: she offers the impressive capacity of her body when the screen suggests she be defined by her debilities; she offers humor and joy when the screen promises sadness for her life as a person with a disability; she offers anger and confrontation when the screen urges her to be joyful and inspiring. The words create for the audience the world against which she rages.

Catatonic's uses text differently in her acts, featuring words that resist and rage themselves against homophobia and misogyny. While the blank space of a Word document or Facebook post overwhelm Catatonic, burlesque performance allows her to pull out the words which matter most to her message and incorporate them into her striptease, building her acts around these words, in some ways. Freedom. Pussy. Gay. Choice. Nasty woman. These words are amplified by Catatonic's choreography, lending extra credence to her raised fist or sudden, deliberate eye contact. The clarity of the words in Catatonic's acts are an attempt to invite the audience into very specific resistance and rage. While this has the potential to assist her in creating a collective with a very pointed focus, there are many things necessarily absent from the limited number of words Catatonic uses to name her political convictions. For example, there is no language about race, varied gendered embodiment and expression, body size, or ability.

Despite the imperfection of the text and language in these acts, overall, both performers demonstrate that resistance and erotic desire/s, instead of working against one another, can each amplify the other's performance and provocation(s). Following the reactions of their spectators, it becomes clear that, by connecting the inviting sexuality of their striptease with their message

of resistance to sexism, homophobia, and ableism, Boxx and Catatonic engage their audiences not only with the narrative of their act but also with their narrative emphasis on rage in the face of oppressive and violent forces. We are as drawn to Boxx's final pose, defiantly flipping us off, as we are to her center split. Catatonic's fist raised in protest is as energizing to the audience as her lively shimmying. The angry rhetoric within their performances, helping re/circulate desires in new and unexpected ways, "functions as both an aesthetic and a political strategy" (Espinosa-Aguilar 228). Moments of performance where strippers receive, queer, and return their audience's desires can transform into moments of collective resistance, bringing new life and meaning to the phrase "she's beautiful when she's angry."²⁶

²⁶ Aptly, this is also the title of a 2014 documentary about women pivotal to the US women's movement from 1966-1971.

CH. 4: UNMASKING ALTERNATE FUTURES

Within a project focused on burlesque's kaierotic moment, attempts to imagine alternate futures might seem impossible. However, a closer look at burlesque performers' use of super(s)hero personas reveals the ways in which strippers connect with their audiences in order to perform erotic desire/s and desirability, in spite of the oppressive and violent present moment (in the larger social context outside of the venue). In this chapter, I will examine Jacqueline Boxx and The BIG Bang McGillicuddy's performance practices and acts in order to elucidate the ways utopian performances offer possible alternate futures where intersectional subjects are accepted and understood as desiring and desirable.

SUPER(S)HERO PERSONAS AND UTOPIAN FUTURITY

Armor for Battle

While discussing their performance practices during our interviews, research participants described their burlesque personas in similar ways: as women somewhat (but not wholly) separate from themselves, and as characters with exceptional capabilities and bravado. These personas intervene into what would otherwise be a potential paradox of burlesque as these performers approach it. Burlesque offers a venue to challenge stereotypical and/or prejudiced representations of intersectional subjectivities, but narrative striptease necessitates that these performers present their most bared selves to an audience routinely exposed to and habituated into these very normative representations. Performers navigate this challenge with the use of pseudonyms and stage personas who, like super(s)hero²⁷ alter egos, enable them to eradicate the evils of prejudice from the spotlight by envisioning alternate worlds where bodies and subjects

²⁷ A brief note on language: though the terms "superhero" and "superheroine" are most commonly used in the literature referenced here, I use the term "super(s)hero" to invoke both its use to describe non-fictional feminist leaders as well as its capacity to disarticulate heroism from specific gender/s.

not typically seen, represented, or understood as desiring or desirable in present dominant contexts are reconfigured. While pseudonyms and stage personas function both to provide anonymity to performers in their ‘real’ lives and to create branding opportunities for promotion, these personas primarily exist because “[g]oing onstage as yourself – no matter how great you are – just will not do, as on stage, everything needs to be bigger, bolder” (ronnie, “My Burlesque Character?”). Who we are on stage exceeds the boundaries of who we are in life, whether those boundaries are self-imposed or imposed by other social norms and forces.

Throughout the exploration of super(s)heroes in this chapter, I use the terms “persona” and “alter ego” interchangeably with other terms like “character” and “personality.” Similar to the terms I use to refer to the performers themselves, having this variety of terms at my disposal helps capture the multiple uses and meanings of a performer’s onstage personality. While “persona” and “alter ego” bear the intellectual baggage of Jungian and Freudian psychoanalysis, respectively, I do not engage those literatures here. Jung’s concept of *persona*, with its roots in Greek theater, presupposes that one’s public face or mask is different and disconnected from their deeper *shadow* self, with the persona occasionally becoming oppressive because of the related barriers it creates (Packer 132). This framing necessarily implies that the characters constructed by burlesque performers are entirely separate from their own intersectional subjectivity/ies, perspectives, and/or experiences. As my interviews demonstrate, this is far from the truth. Furthermore, while psychiatrist Sharon Packer argues that the super(s)hero’s “most distinguishing psychological feature” is the superego, I also find this Freudian understanding of the super(s)hero alter ego limiting. As Packer explains, the superego “refers to the [individual’s] sense of morality,” “provides a guiding moral force to the individual,” and “opposes the need to satisfy bodily needs and the urge to act exclusively out of self-interest” (18). While some of the

performance artists I spoke with understand their on stage characters as fighting for social justice and transformation, these personalities also explore their fantasies, kinks, sexuality, anger, and trauma. These arenas surely expand beyond simple issues of morality or right and wrong. In some cases, the strippers are intentionally questioning what is moral, according to whom, for whom, and why. Because this project is less interested in any kind of inquiry into interiority but rather is outward facing and rhetorically inclined toward the multiplicity of timely and erotic appeals, I do not engage academically-framed psychoanalytical understandings of “persona” and “alter ego. Instead, I use these terms for their more colloquial meanings: “an assumed character” and/or “alternative personality” (“persona, n.,” “alter ego, n.”). Combined with “character” and “personality,” these terms collectively encapsulate the various ways and reasons why strippers make use of a super(s)hero-like character on stage.

Burlesque stage personas share many of the “‘identity elements’ of superheroes” as Packer outlines them in *Superheroes and Superegos: Analyzing the Minds Behind the Masks*: “(a) identities, (b) missions, and (c) special (although not ‘super’) powers” (Packer 41). While stage presence, killer eye contact, and tassel twirling may not, on the surface, seem on par with mind control, flying, or super strength, these skills prove themselves powerful in front of a stripper’s audience. Neo burlesque legend Jo “Boobs” Weldon claims that establishing a character through these performance choices helps the audience participate in the stories strippers tell via the spectators’ enthusiastic anticipation of the next reveal, more bared skin, and the subsequently increased erotic desire/s for said character (170). (It’s also worth noting that some block-buster super(s)heroes don’t have “super” or extra-human powers, such as Batman (Coogan).) Like super(s)heroes similarly “propelled by internal, psychodynamic motives and by their personal experiences,” these performers bring their experiences as intersectional subjects

offstage into their acts with the help of their burlesque alter egos (Packer 42). This similarity of motivation further underscores the connection I make here to super(s)heroes, specifically, and not other types of masked personas or characters with secret identities. While characters such as Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel do good deeds in the world under the protection of a mask, those personas do not emerge from any inner truth or characteristic of the “real” person beneath the mask, simply serving as a method of anonymity (Coogan; *National Comics Public, Inc. v. Fawcett Publications, Inc. et al.*). Super(s)heroes and everyday personas, on the other hand, exist as two sides of the same coin, different characters with shared characteristics, emerging out of the same individual; the experiences of the “real” persona motivate the actions of the heroic alter-ego. Though burlesque performers do not have one consistent costume worn for each act, stage personas are “crafted materially through movement, body types, costumes, spaces, and props and also linguistically through the words of emcees, songs, and stage names” (Werner, “Deploying Delivery as Critical Method” 51). This crafting results in the performative construction of the performance persona, who, once present on stage, enables the performer to use that character to deliver the desired message of their act, a task deemed impossible for their street persona. For example, Kitty Catatonic’s persona as an outspoken protestor in her “Beggars” act is manifested, in part, through the perceived aggression of her costuming and props (her covered face and baseball bat) and her use of text throughout (“NASTY WOMAN” on her ass cheeks and “FREEDOM” on her protest sign).

Disability rights activist and disabilibabe performer Jacqueline Boxx claims that transforming from her street persona into Jacqueline Boxx means taking on a “kind of protection, like armor, that [she’s] putting on to go into the world ready to do battle” (Boxx, Skype interview). The instinct to fight these battles originates “in the activis[m] and advoca[cy]...that is

central to [Boxx's] identity" (Boxx, Skype interview). While Boxx is "totally often cowed by all the horribleness [she experiences] in the world" offstage as a woman with a disability using a wheelchair or cane (which mark her disabilities for the world to see), it's "putting on" her burlesque persona that gives her "the strength to fight back against hatred" (Boxx, Skype interview).

Similarly, Adiba Nelson describes her alter ego, The BIG Bang McGillicuddy ("Bang" for short) as someone "unapologetic" who "doesn't take shit" when compared to her "frighteningly awkward" offstage self (McGillicuddy). For Nelson, "taking no shit" reflects her acknowledgement of the white, ableist, cisheteropatriarchal, fat phobic, middle-class standards policing her on a daily basis as a fat Black woman with a disabled daughter. As Bang, however, Nelson harnesses the impact of potent stage presence and the power of striptease's erotic exchange to rewrite what it means to be a fat, black woman with natural hair and a gap between her teeth:

I'll be damned if I don't get as many screams as [performers like Dita Von Teese]. And I'm not saying that in a boastful manner, it's because I love the paradox of ... 'I never thought that I could find a big black girl sexy. I never thought I could find a girl with a gap sexy. I never thought natural hair was a beautiful thing.' But let me tell you...the first time I did [my act to the Janelle Monáe song] "Q.U.E.E.N." and I took that wig off? They fucking lost their mind. (McGillicuddy)

Standing in the spotlight as The BIG Bang McGillicuddy interrupts the restrictive notions of who "belongs" on stage, something her "awkward" street persona couldn't or wouldn't do in quite the same way. For Bang, confidence is a super power.

For queer non-binary trans woman of color Rambo Rose, who started burlesque before

coming out as trans and starting her transition, the performance persona she created had unlikely superpowers: the capacity to engage with femininity and beauty without fear. “I secretly wanted to be beautiful, but I didn't think I could because in my brain you couldn't be beautiful if you were [raised a] cis male” (R. Rose). As explored in the previous chapter, Catatonic’s persona has the capacity to articulate rage and political beliefs in ways that Hannah Wolf can’t (Catatonic). For Piper Madison, a white trans woman, creating Aphrodite Adams meant placing herself in the role of a confident goddess, worthy of both worship and the spotlight (Adams). Wielding confidence so publicly is something Adams struggles with in her day-to-day life as she has self-described “self-esteem issues” and moves through a world where any extra attention drawn to a trans person may result in anti-trans violence (though Adams herself is quick to point out that trans women of color are disproportionately the victims of this violence) (Adams). Following Coogan’s note about the personal characteristics inherent to the super(s)hero persona, the connections between the muggle persona and the alter-ego are clear here. Some characteristics emerge directly out of experiences with violence and oppression, such as Boxx’s disability advocacy and Bang’s joyful love of her fat, Black body. Other personas’ superpowers are the result of experiences *denied* to the performer, such as Rose and Adams’s turn to performance personas to manifest particular trans femininity within the spotlight. The usefulness of these personas, then, is both in attending to the performer’s needs as well as addressing larger systems of violence and oppression that impact many others as well.

By inhabiting super(s)hero-like alter egos, these performers both benefit from and contribute to the ongoing (some would say flourishing) work of reimagining what a super(s)hero is, who gets to be a super(s)hero, and what constitutes “superpowers.” In the past decade, television, film, and print media have offered fresher perspectives on the super(s)hero genre and

its stock characters. Netflix's TV series *Jessica Jones*, for example, transforms "harsh language and cynicism" into helpful tools for fighting super villains and average toxic masculinity alike (Frankel 183). More significantly, however, the titular Jessica Jones offers viewers a character whose experience of past trauma is more than backstory (a la Batman or Spiderman) but a current reality in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, and barely-harnessed rage. By "looking at rape and domestic abuse through the superhero metaphor," the audience comes to understand a woman's anger and survivorship as superpowers capable of fighting evil and advocating for the powerless (Frankel 183).

In the ways that some of the recent super(s)hero media have engaged feminist narratives, like *Jessica Jones*, other media have offered narratives to counter white supremacists' perspectives in the "real world." To this end, Marvel's *Black Panther* is a historically significant moment for super(s)hero narratives on many fronts: it had unprecedented, record-shattering box office success; 7 Academy Award nominations (including the first nomination of a superhero movie for best picture); and 3 Academy Award wins, including the first ever Black winner for Best Production Design by Hannah Beachler (Couch). Furthermore, the film centers Blackness and the continent of Africa itself as sites of ingenuity, strength, and beauty, framing them anew against a backdrop of US cultural artifacts that depict all experiences of Blackness as experiences of criminality and pain, portraying Africa as backwards and destitute. These super(s)hero depictions, and others like them, decenter figures like the (white) preppy, goody goody Clark Kent, the (white) scrawny, nerdy Peter Parker, and the (white) broody, spoiled Bruce Wayne as the standard human(s) with super(s)hero potential. In light of such expansion of the super(s)hero archetype, burlesque performance personas can feasibly be considered super(s)heroes as well.

But to what end? As the performers themselves articulate, these "super sel[ves]" are

deployed “to carry on missions...and do good” under the cover of rhinestones and pasties in order to re/negotiate meaning around intersectional subjects and their desire(s)/desirability (Packer 135). But what does this look like and what form does it take? What does the a super(s)hero-like alter-ego, specifically, enable the stripper to achieve that other features of burlesque performance don’t (including the previously-discussed punk sensibility)? A hopeful look to the future.

The Never-There Promise of Queer Utopia

As scholarship on super(s)heroes elucidates, with their attempts to save the world and right wrongs, super(s)heroes reveal the possibility of a better future (Murphy; Wolf-Meyer; Yockey). What is critical in this depiction of super(s)heroes’ relationship to the future is the lack of guarantee; super(s)heroes do not actually bring the present moment into the future nor is their relationship to the future certain. Even without a guarantee of their arrival, the futures that Tucson Libertine League’s burlesque super(s)hero alter-egos create offer the possibility for (imagining) a world free of racism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, fat phobia, and ableism. Through the queerness of its kairotic moment and the presence of their sexualized subjectivity, burlesque affords these performers the opportunity to “lift everyone [in the venue] slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be if our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” as the moment/s of performance itself (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 5). This opportunity is what performance studies scholar Jill Dolan refers to as a “utopian performative:”

Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this “now” of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The

affective and ideological “doings” we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 7)

The future Dolan describes here in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* is not “perfect” as the most frequent contemporary usage of the term “utopia” suggests but, rather, a sketch of something that *might* be different from the present, has *potential* to be *better*; not a perfect place without a single flaw. Hedging abounds in these descriptions. The literal meaning of the word “utopia” is “no place” (“utopia, n.”), a definition that frees those imagining alternate futures from having to pin down the exact time, place, or composition of “utopia” (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 7).

In light of the kaierotic nature of narrative striptease and the queer understanding of erotic desire/s at play between performer and audience, I understand utopia here as queerness’s ever-constant move towards an unrealized future that José Esteban Muñoz theorizes in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: as a doing and not a place or being. When I claim that an ecdysiast’s super(s)hero powers shape acts that offer alternate futures where fat, Black, LGBTQ, and disabled women’s bodies are desired and understood as desiring subjects, I am arguing that these acts reflect a “longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling of the present” (*Cruising Utopia* 1). The queerness inherent to kaieros, to the opportunity mutable sexuality affords, is “that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (*Cruising Utopia* 1). If burlesque’s punk sensibility functions to (angrily) name those missing somethings, then the super(s)hero personas enable the imagining, and sometime manifestation, of alternate futures that *are* enough for fat, Black, queer, trans, femme, and disabled women...maybe. These performances, these utopian performatives,

don't take the form of action plans for a revolution but, through the use of desire, offer snapshots of alternate futures. As performance scholar Sara Warner puts it, acts impelling spectators and performers towards that which is joyful, “[a]cts of gaiety[,] do not make the world go away; they *make* worlds, albeit illusory and fleeting” (9) Like erotic desire/s themselves, attempts to sketch utopia through narrative striptease rely upon the kairotic nature of performance.

Performance's simultaneity, its present-tenseness, uniquely suits it to probing the possibilities of utopia as a hopeful process that continually writes a different, better future....[This] very present-tenseness of performance lets audiences imagine utopia not as some idea of future perfection that might never arrive, but as brief enactments of the possibilities of a process that starts now, in this moment at the theater. (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 13; 17)

These brief enactments may take the form of the blissful discovery of a stripper's transitioning body or a fat performer's gleeful use of a paddle on her ass while Queen's "Fat Bottomed Girls" plays. I argue that the acts below constitute such enactments of possibility, of sexy joy, of hope.

If audiences are, as Dolan suggests, “compelled to gather with others, to see people perform live, *hoping*, perhaps for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theater,” they will find what they are looking for in burlesque acts that demand reconsiderations of intersectional subjects by presenting fat women, Black women, women in wheelchairs, trans women as desiring and desirable (Dolan, “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performance’” 455; emphasis mine). Furthermore, the seductive rhetorical function of burlesque's tease and reveal parallels what Muñoz describes as hope's affective structure, as both rely upon anticipation for efficacy (*Cruising Utopia* 3). Attempts at persuasion are centered within this constant shifting forward in the act. As Maggie M. Werner notes, the “[s]trategies of

teasing and withdrawal [that are] are central to neo-burlesque's appeal, demonstrate that seductive rhetoric centralizes means over ends because seduction is an ongoing act....Part of the enduring appeal of strip tease is the ongoing play of the moments of pleasure cultivated between audiences and performers" (Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque" 7). This pattern of concealment and exposure creates anticipation for the next article of clothing to be revealed, all the while never promising to fulfill audience erotic desire/s to the fullest (Erickson and Thomson 303). The striptease's narrative itself requires performers to both cover and bare, and relies upon the audience's anticipation for this dynamic to continue. Anticipation is the hook, persuading the audience to participate in desiring these subjects; it is the heart of burlesque's rhetoric of seduction, its "pleasure in the communicative process" instead of in a pre-determined end (Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque" 7). Like the possibility present as we wait for the next silk glove to fall, the "affective contours of hope itself" are also fed by the "anticipatory illumination of certain objects," revealing "a kind of potentiality that is open, indeterminate" when the illuminated objects are intersectional subjects (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 7).

By creating desire for their bodies and for their continued narrative striptease, these burlesque performers gesture at a world where such desires are typical instead of exceptional. The progression of the striptease "focus[es] not on the naked body itself but on the strategic withholding and presenting of it via props or costumes" (Werner, "Deploying Delivery as Critical Method" 51). The audience is invited into a striptease that will never culminate in full nudity. The erotic narratives in these acts both parallel and are themselves offered as possible utopic futures that never quite arrive. The burlesque super(s)hero alter-ego further affirms the non-existence, the "no place," of utopia as a fixed and definite time and/or place separate from the

present moment in the same way that the fictional super(s)hero moves towards a more just world (Wolf-Meyer). As utopian fiction scholar Phillip E. Wegner notes, via Frederic Jameson, “[t]he force of the utopian text...is not to bring into focus the future that is coming to be, but rather to make us conscious precisely of the horizons or outer limits of what can be thought and imagined in our present” (Wegner 61). For Muñoz, and this project, such a horizon is queer, where “new configurations of pleasure...may be invented” in the “future not-yet-here” (Vogel 47). The queer re/configurations of pleasure inherent to kaieros help create, through persuasive performances of the erotic, possibilities for futures not-yet-here for subjects denied access to desire and desirability in the current moment of violence and oppression against women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, people situated in low and working class contexts, people with disabilities, and people with non-normative bodies.

Imagining the queer horizon in the present moment of the performance requires the participation of both performer and audience via improvisational interactions. While improvisation is a survival skill for minoritarian subjects (Rivera-Servera; Buckland), these of-the-moment interactions are also where utopia, “in its connotations, both as liberation from oppression and the constitution of community, resides” (Rivera-Servera 270). A crumpled dollar bill hitting the stage and a spectator’s particularly emphatic holler for a fat Black woman attempt to momentarily undo narratives suggesting that only thinness and whiteness are attractive. A wink and request for more audible audience feedback from a woman in a wheelchair constitute a community where people with disabilities are celebrated as desirable and desiring subjects. Super(s)hero alter-egos are the way that fat Black woman got onto the stage in the first place and the way that disabled woman demonstrates the power to demand a particular kind of attention from her spectators. This joint experience and co-constitution of the performance presents a

“powerful counterweight to the antirelational” thrust of much queer theory, underscoring this project’s investment in women of color feminism, queer feminist and queer of color critiques (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 17); also underscored is an interest in joy and pleasure as much as in the rage depicted in Chapter 3 (S. Warner).

Critically, this role of the audience determines whether or not the alternate futures manifest momentarily within the performance or not. Though Dolan firmly believes that “live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world,” the contours of that world are confined and defined by the vision of the people in the room (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 2). In other words, if the audience isn’t interested in learning more about my narrative, expresses no desire for my act to advance, then any alternate future/s I might offer become more impossibility than possibility. When a spectator is as likely to scream gay slurs at trans women as they are to scream “Thank you” to fat women, the manifestation of alternate futures is only ever a possibility, never a promise. Like the live performer, the potential of the super(s)hero is limited by the imagination of their readers and audience (Wolf-Meyer; Yockey). What utopia looks like and whether it takes shape is a communal effort. Utopia is never guaranteed. Even so, the attempt to imagine the utopic is itself a revolutionary act, moving counter to cynicism in both queer theory and performance studies (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 2; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; S. Warner). So too do utopian performatives embody the queerness that “allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1). Possibility, potentially, malleability — desire and utopia go hand-in-hand on the burlesque stage,

as evidenced in the acts below. In what follows, I will highlight the ways in which Jacqueline Boxx and The BIG Bang McGillicuddy use burlesque's kaierotic moment and their super(s)hero personas to imagine possibilities for alternate futures where fat, Black, and disabled subjects are desired and desiring.

LET ME LIVE THAT FANTASY: JACQUELINE BOXX

As noted in detail in the previous chapter, Jacqueline Boxx is an alter-ego that has evolved alongside shifts in Boxx's performance practice, as well as her mobility. While Boxx always connected with the surprise element of this personality's jack-in-the-box allusion, the character shifted over time to better narrate Boxx's emerging identity as a disabled woman (Boxx, Skype interview). So, while "Jacqueline Boxx" helped a college-aged Boxx regroup and regain her confidence after a traumatic event while she was at Oberlin College, when she found years later that she could no longer dance without dislocating her joints, "Jacqueline Boxx" became a champion for the rights of people with disabilities, their rights to be seen and their rights to move through a world made more accessible to their non-normative embodiments (Boxx, Skype interview). Furthermore, as a super(s)hero alter-ego, "Jacqueline Boxx" takes on life as a disabled woman — and the very word "disabled" — as powerful in and of itself. "I have decided that, for me, 'disabled' is a power word. That word gives me strength" (Boxx, Skype interview). Critically, some of the courage she draws from the word "disabled" emerges from the particular meaning she ascribes to that word. For Boxx, as for many other disability theorists and activists, "disabled" describes a condition she experiences by virtue of living in a world designed to serve one, normative form of embodiment. She is dis-abled by the world: "When I think about the way that I navigate the world, whether I'm in a wheelchair or using my cane, I am disabled because the world is not built for me to access it in the same way as everybody else. I struggle

with it a lot” (Boxx, Skype interview).

Here, Boxx offers an understanding of disability that eschews both individual and medical models of disability, opting instead for a more political/relational model. The individual model posits disability as the experiences of specific individuals and their individual ‘problems’ (Kafer 4). From this perspective, understanding the experiences of a blind person is as simple as moving through the world blindfolded for a day. In *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, disability studies scholar Simi Linton describes the medical model of disability as one which “presupposes that the correct approach to disability is to ‘treat’ the condition and the person with the condition rather than ‘treating’ the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people’s lives” (11). Disability studies scholar Alison Kafer notes that this medical approach to disability is not restricted exclusively to medical spaces (hospitals, doctor’s offices, rehabilitation facilities, etc.) but pervades many people’s everyday language and thinking about disability (5). Both of these models, individual and medical, are used to “legitimat[e] an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment” (Garland Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” 77). Non-normative bodies are themselves evidence enough to explain why resources, status, and power are distributed unequally. This very use of human-made models of disability to shape quotidian existence for disabled people as Rosemarie Garland Thomson describes above belies the socially-constructed nature of disability. In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Garland Thomson “disclos[es] how the ‘physically disabled’ are *produced* by way of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse. Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns

as vulnerability, control, and identity” (Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 6; emphasis mine). To borrow from Simone De Beauvoir, one is not born, but rather becomes disabled.

A political/relational model of disability, as Kafer describes it and as Boxx claims it for herself, moves beyond merely acknowledging the socially-constructed nature of disabled identity but “makes room for activist responses” (Kafer 9). In much the same way experiences of disability are inconsistent, the term “disability” enjoys similar instability (11). There are, of course, both benefits and disadvantages to the capaciousness of this term. As Jay Dolmage notes, “[d]isability is often used rhetorically as a flexible form of stigma to be freely applied to any unknown, threatening, or devalued group. In these ways, the ‘abnormal’ or extraordinary body is highly rhetorical” (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* 4). Disability, then, not as an accounting of a person’s lived experience of the world but as a metaphor for those people and things which are unwanted and don’t fit properly within the confines of the normative. With their movements through the world made difficult by that world’s accommodation of only one singular type of embodied subject, the abnormal body becomes persuasive, arguing that such a body’s struggle is their own fault and responsibility. The flexibility of disability, however, exposes how the meanings ascribed “to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationship in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and its self-identity by systemically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others” (Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 7). The benefit of the term ‘disability’s’ flexibility emerges, then, from the shifting nature of this social relationship.

Claiming ‘disabled’ as a “power word,” for example, illustrates how the term can be reappropriated in order to re/negotiate what it means to be a disabled subject (see also Butler on resignification, *Excitable Speech*). This reflects Dolmage’s claim above that disability is itself

rhetorical, constantly doing work to assert new meanings and to account for embodied experiences as meaningful and meaning-making:

The field of disability studies emphasizes the idea of the social or cultural construction of disability, while *also* insisting on the materiality of disability. Using a disability studies filter to view rhetoric, I recognize the emancipatory potential of new stories in both the “material” and the social sphere. Disability, in this light, is bodily and rhetorical—two concepts that are tightly united. I situate rhetoric as the function of power within language, and I connect it to the body because the body is what has been traditionally defined and (thus) “disciplined” by rhetorics of disability, while at the same time our bodies speak. Creating, as well as uncovering, new stories and alternative traditions—different bodies—is thus a powerful move. (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* 8-9)

For Jacqueline Boxx, this is not just a powerful move, but a superpower-full move that allows her to create rhetorically potent performances creating new — and sexy — stories about women with disabilities. While Boxx’s “Microaggressions” act demonstrates her resistance to a world not built to accommodate her, her “This is My Throne” act studied below allows Boxx to manifest a world in which she is not only accommodated but enabled to thrive as a desiring and desirous disabled subject. This possible alternate future challenges not only an ableist, at times violent, present but also eschews common narratives around disabled futurity/ies. These common narratives frame the future of disability and/or people with disabilities “in curative terms, a time frame that casts disabled people (as) out of time, or as obstacles to the arc of progress. In our disabled state, we [people with disabilities] are not part of the dominant narratives of progress, but once rehabilitated, normalized, and hopefully cured, we play a starring role: the sign of progress, the proof of development, the triumph over the mind or body” (Kafer 28). Given the

assumed-unanimous revulsion and rejection of disability, people with disabilities are condemned to a future-less existence by virtue of their ‘abnormality’ (surely they won’t make it to the future) but are also banished from imagined futures because of disability’s incompatibility with any desirable future (surely we don’t *want* disabilities or disabled people there). In many ways, the futures made briefly possible in burlesque’s kaierotic moment, as analysis of the act below reveals, embody what Kafer terms “crip futures: futures that embrace disabled people, futures that imagine disability differently, futures that support multiple ways of being” (45).

In “This is My Throne,” set to Lorde’s “Royals,” Boxx enacts a journey from immobility to mobility and bashfulness to fierce self-possession, as she moves from the floor to her bejeweled wheelchair. Even this basic narrative arc “[m]anipulat[es] and transform[s] stereotypes [and] available ‘scripts’ of disability,” such as the heroic journey out of disabled living, which would show Boxx moving from the wheelchair to un-assisted mobility (Sandahl and Auslander 3). Here, the wheelchair is not the triumphant climax of common disability narratives that “are frustratingly limited and deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination” (Sandahl and Auslander 3). The act opens with Boxx on the ground, jerking upwards to a seated position with abrupt, contorted movements. Her styling and costume here create the persona who can tell this story, distinct from the woman Boxx is on the street: “[I]t’s kind of a Clark Kent thing actually.... I have super super straight, very goth hair, and giant nerd glasses, and then I make my hair big and curly and I take off my glasses and put on red lipstick and I’m Jacqueline” (Boxx, Skype interview). Indeed, her hair here is big and curly, her makeup classic glam and high femme. The pale blue, gossamer gown she wears flutters as she maneuvers her lower limbs almost like that of a broken doll, using her upper body to pull herself towards the cloth-draped prop behind her. With animated facial expressions and intense eye contact, she brings the audience with her

through a series of emotions: what begins as timid shock at the sight of the shiny object on stage becomes excitement and then arousal as Boxx pulls the silver cover away to reveal a wheelchair beneath it. As Boxx told me in our interview, spray painting her first wheelchair gold was the “image of strength [she] would come back to with the hardest moments of dealing with chronic pain and illness” (Boxx, Skype interview). Embodying this move towards strength, Boxx’s movements become surer. She strokes and licks the handle of the wheelchair; what was once intimidating becomes stimulating. The audience’s cheers indicate they enthusiastically agree.

Suddenly, Boxx shifts from a center split up onto her feet for a brief second before falling back into the chair. Her face initially registers surprise. The hooting and hollering from the crowd demonstrate that a vocal majority of the people seated before her want Boxx to continue. It is precisely as she settles herself fully into the chair that the song lyric “Let me live that fantasy” booms over the venue’s sound system. Following that cue, the once low-level, blue lighting changes instantly to a rich, moody red; Boxx’s expression shifts from shock to confidence. She is ready to seduce her audience and the aggressive, assured, and provocative way she moves her body reflects that. The audience offers vocal expressions of joy and excitement at this shift in the narrative and Boxx’s presence. By participating in the desirous exchange endemic to burlesque performance, Boxx’s spectators affirm her self-presentation as a confident, sexual, disabled woman. The wheelchair, like Wonder Woman’s bracelets or Thor’s hammer, acts as a talisman, giving this stripper power and strength (Frankel 47). While wheelchairs do, most obviously, grant their users increased mobility, Boxx’s chair remains stationary at center stage throughout the duration of her act. The chair “add[s] to [her] freedom;” she is a “wheelchair *user*,” not confined to the chair (Boxx, Skype interview; emphasis mine). Instead of depicting a relationship to the chair that might have her described as “wheelchair bound,” Boxx is imbued with the

power of deeply felt confidence by the chair, a sense of herself as both a woman with a disability *and* an intensely sexy woman. Even among disability advocates and scholars, “sexuality [for people with disabilities] has been an area of distress, and exclusion, and self-doubt for so long” (Shakespeare 160). Here Boxx challenges these alternately negative or silencing accounts of sexuality among those living with disabilities (Boxx, Skype interview) to “become an active maker of meaning” about possible (better) futures for disabled people where they are readily desired (Sandahl and Auslander 3).

Once on her “throne,” Boxx demonstrates that, in spite of her use of this assistive technology, her body is wildly capable despite being what Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls “the object of the stare” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 26). Like the male gaze sexualizing every woman it falls upon, ‘the stare’ “sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle...framing her as an icon of deviance” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 26). Though stigmatizing, this status as deviant is not without its own power. Boxx uses her body to also deviate from this perspective of the non-normative body as grotesque, “challeng[ing] aesthetic conventions” of disability and disabled bodies (Sandahl and Auslander 4). She deftly moves her body in the chair, shifting from her seated position to lay backwards, highlighting the immense core and arm strength she possesses through her continued erotic postures. Her legs spread over the back of the chair to demonstrate her flexibility as she engages the audience through increasingly sexualized choreography. The sound(s) emerging from the seated spectators confirm that the audience is enjoying this shift in her character. While Boxx remained fully clothed on the floor, in the chair, she disrobes from her delicate dress to a black and red corset, inviting us into a possible utopic future in which the desexualization of people with disabilities is eschewed en lieu of affirmations of the demonstrable desire and eroticism disabled bodies possess and express.

The wheelchair “[p]rop...and [shift in] costumes highlight theatricality” in this act and also “construct the rhetorical space for the audience” so that winning over the audience is not merely a mark of a ‘successful’ performance but a momentary shift towards an alternate future free from ableism (Werner, “Deploying Delivery as Critical Method” 51). This world Boxx creates onstage, the “fantasy” she lives, presumes that wheelchairs can be sexy as hell, the people in them not pitiable eunuchs but royalty who ooze sexuality. Boxx herself used to believe that “wheelchairs aren’t sexy;” this act is her challenge to all others who hold that belief (Boxx, Skype interview). Indeed, her stage presence, costuming, and choreography make her sexuality difficult to deny. Boxx’s storytelling dares her audience to reject her seduction or allow her wheelchair to render her body sexless or undesirable. This “uniquely rhetorical” display of her disabled subjectivity “challenge[s] cultural meanings that surround disability” by “situating [her disability] as positively meaningful and meaning-making” (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* 4). The meaning made here is evident: it is impossible to sit in Jacqueline Boxx’s audience and simultaneously exist in a world where people with disabilities aren’t sexy. When she comes down to her final reveal, tossing her bra aside and laying a crown jauntily on her head, the audience overwhelms the video recording with screams of approval. Her fierce gaze is unwavering, responding in kind to the “boldly invit[ed] stare” this act encourages from her spectators, shifting the phenomenon of staring at disability from one of “exploitation or surveillance perpetrated by starers on victimized starees” to “a charged social exchange between active agents” (Garland Thomson, “Dares to Stares” 32). The charge in *this* social exchange is desire. Boxx’s smirk tells us that she doesn’t care if we want to fuck her but she’s pretty sure we all do.

This moment of self-conscious desirability on Boxx’s part integrates a central feature of

Kafer's 'crip future:' desire. Of her deliberate choice to "use the language of desire deliberately" in her description of crip futures, Kafer is worth quoting at length:

I know how my heart can catch when I see a body that moves oddly or bears strange scars. I know how my body shifts, leans forward, when I hear someone speak with atypical pauses or phrasing, or when talk turns to illness and disability. Part of what I am describing is a lust born of recognition, a lust to see bodies like my own or like the bodies of friends and lovers, as well as a hope that the other finds such recognition in me. Perhaps most important to this examination of disability futures, it is a desire born largely of absence. We lack such futures in this present, and my desires are practically inconceivable in the public sphere. There is no recognition that one could desire disability, no move to imagine what such desire could look like. (45)

With her shiny crown and glittering wheelchair, Jacqueline Boxx *does* imagine what desiring disability would look like and engages burlesque's kaierotic exchange with her spectators to momentarily create such a future. As disability scholars Robert McRuer and Abby L Wilkerson articulate it, desiring disability is the "recognition that another world can exist in which an incredible variety of bodies and minds are valued and identities are shaped, where crips and queers have effectively (because repeatedly) displaced the able-bodied/disabled binary" (14). With "disability" as a (super)power word, Boxx's alter-ego approaches "This is My Throne" from the perspective that "new rhetorics" of disability offered within the act make possible an alternate future containing "new social structures and relations," not the "eradication of disability" (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* 2). Boxx performs her disability from the start of this act through the end of it. By moving from the floor to a highly stylized wheelchair, it's clear that the utopian future Boxx imagines here is one where disability enjoys even more recognition. The

collision of Boxx's final smirk with her audience's explosion of applause reveal "This is My Throne" to be "a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world" (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance 2*). The world waiting for Jacqueline Boxx behind the heavy, red velvet curtain may not shine a welcoming spotlight on her glittering wheelchair, but she seems to touch, even briefly, the never-there place of a disabled utopia.

FAT BLACK GIRLS CAN: THE BIG BANG MCGILlicuddy

When The BIG Bang McGillicuddy (whom I will refer to as "Bang" for short following her own self-naming practice; nee Adiba Nelson) sat down for our interview over breakfast, we started bonding over long, similar histories of ballet and jazz performance that preceded our burlesque debuts. "I, too, had danced for a really long time. But then I stopped dancing for a really long [time] due to injury. And [starting burlesque] was kinda to see if I still had [it], partially" (McGillicuddy). After severely injuring her knee at 18, Bang continued to dance against doctors' recommendations for 2 more years before her body told her, "Fuck you, I told you no" (McGillicuddy). Years later, at age 37, Bang wondered if she could still get on stage and move. Burlesque offered a return to movement and performance that would be gentler for her body. Beyond exploring her body's capacity for movement, however, her burlesque debut was "kind of...the final hurdle of my body love journey. Which is always a journey. Like the shit never ends" (McGillicuddy). In August 2014, Bang had taken part in "Expose: Shedding Light on Collective Beauty," a photographic event and collaboration with Tucson-based Liora K Photography and body positive activist Jes Baker that gathered "96 women of all shapes, sizes, shades, and ages" in Tucson to "undress...their glorious bodies" (Baker). The photo project, which features 2 pictures of Bang in underwear and heels, was featured on sites like *Huffington*

Post and went viral. Bang remarked that putting herself and her body out there was a big thing for me. But this was like...I'm not the body that is supposed to be on stage. Like everything about me says "not stage." I'm a big girl, I'm a black girl, I have natural hair and a gap in my teeth. Like everything says, "Nope step aside boo." I would not be a Rockette. So it was kinda like, "F-you, I am a Rockette. And you're gonna love it." (McGillicuddy)

With this claim, Bang rejects "contemporary Western media culture[']s" practice of presenting "only slender bodies...as legitimate objects of...desire" (Wykes 1) as well as the "undervaluing of the Black female body" (Brooks 41). The performance persona that Bang describes here, super(s)hero-like in her bold move to action, wields confidence like a weapon in the face of fat phobic and racist narratives about bodies like hers. This confidence that Bang will make audiences love and desire her is in some ways measured by the very fact that she seeks to tell her stories within a genre of performance that requires "erotic persuasion" as part of the act (Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque" 1). She is confident that the audience will love her *because* of and not *in spite* of the "fleshy materiality" of her body (Asbill 299). Furthermore, Bang's reflections on her super(s)her performance persona above demonstrate her confidence in her ability to gesture at "fleeting intimations of a better world" through "embodied and passionate" performances of her fat, Black subjectivity (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 2).

While, as a friend and fellow performer, I would describe Adiba Nelson (Bang's muggle counterpart) as a confident, extroverted advocate for Black people, fat people, and, especially, children with disabilities (as the mother of a disabled child), she describes herself as "frighteningly awkward[:] At parties, I'm in the corner with my phone....I feel really weird in

[public] spaces” (McGillicuddy). Bang offers Nelson an “unapologetic, sassy, loudmouthed, ‘I’m gonna do what the fuck I want and I don’t care if you like it’” super(s)hero persona to execute self-loving confidence in the spotlight (McGillicuddy). Her name, The BIG Bang McGillicuddy, reflects Bang’s love for her husband and for the 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy*. While being raised in a church led Bang to believe that evolution and creation can exist on the same plane, her husband is “a physics geek...always talking about some Richard Feynman thing, or some other physicist” (McGillicuddy). “The BIG Bang” is an homage to him. Of *I Love Lucy*, Bang told me that it was her favorite show growing up; “McGillicuddy,” Lucy’s maiden name on the show, is a nod to the comedian’s big, over the top silliness. The name is “the perfect blending [of] things that I love. I love humor, I love dance, I love my husband. I love story telling. It’s perfect....And I’m a big girl...I’m not small. So it just worked. And I always capitalize ‘BIG’” (Bang).

When I asked Bang how her professed love of storytelling impacts the acts she performs, she told me that she tries to “tell stories of empowerment. Whichever way they come. Whether I’m [playing the driver in Beyoncé’s song ‘Partition’ about a couple engaging in sexual activity in the back of a taxi so that you think] I’m [just] the cab driver and *you’re* the freak so let me show you [what a freak I am.] Or I’m doing the running man on stage after trying to be a ballerina and taking off ...off my wig. To tell the story of, ‘don’t try to fit into that box that they want to put you in’” (McGillicuddy). Though this section opened with a description of how Bang strives to empower fat women, her drive to get on stage looks beyond her own subjectivities, is fundamentally intersectional. Bang claims to get on stage in order

to solidify for my daughter that society does not get to dictate how you move through this world. And the media does not get to dictate how you move through this world.

Nor...does it have a final say on the amount of self-love or self-worth you’re allowed to

have....[I]t's my job as her mom to not only verbally build her up, but to actually give her a physical living, breathing example of what that looks like. (McGillicuddy)

Like Boxx above, Bang understands that how one understands disability (or fatness, or Blackness, or queerness) in the present determines how one imagines disability in the future (Kafer 2). Bang seeks burlesque because it gives her a place to “take more risks” in her efforts to reimagine fatness, Blackness, and normative embodiment than her writing and advocacy afford her (McGillicuddy). Sexuality, especially, is something she avoids in her writing. As L.H. Stallings notes in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, this sexual “[m]orality remains...an aesthetic of antiblackness knowledge,” precluding Bang’s access to the power and knowledge of the erotic in public social spaces (Stallings 25; Lorde). Burlesque offers an exception to this sexual morality.

I will never discuss [my sexuality in my writing]. But in burlesque, I feel like that's the perfect venue to explore those things. That's the place where it's okay to say, "Yeah, I fucking like to be tied up." “I want to walk all over you in heels.” “I can actually deep throat a banana and that's why my husband married me.” That's the appropriate venue. I feel like I can say it there without judgment, without calling my reputation as a writer into question. (McGillicuddy)

By engaging in “artistic strategies to dismiss...the pathology that is sexual morality,” as depicted in the act examined below, Bang elucidates the possibility for “freedom or whatever exists beyond the colonial projects of solidifying genres of humanity — Man 1 and Man 2” (Stallings 26). As it is rendered in narrative striptease, this possibility embodies some of the core tenants of Afrofuturism. This body of theoretical and creative work described as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation,” attempts to ensure that Blackness and Black

people are not only seen and valued in the present moment but are also empowered “to see themselves and their ideas in the future” in the moments of possibility created by Black cultural production (Womack 9; 191).

These moments of possibility, however, are just that — momentary. Bang is hyper aware of the limitations of her super(s)hero alter-ego, and of which stories she *can't* tell. When I asked her if she felt her stories about an “unapologetic black woman who can deep throat a banana but maybe also like being spanked” were in tension with other representations of Black women in US media, she was quick to highlight what she referred to as “that strong black woman trope,” such as Kerry Washington’s depiction of Olivia Pope in the Shonda Rhymes TV show, *Scandal* (McGillicuddy). Bang claims that such depictions may not leave room for feelings and experiences other than strength and resilience. According to Bang, Olivia Pope “doesn't apologize for what she likes, what she doesn't like. Goes after what she gets. I love that story line. And I am just as guilty [of sticking to that story. But] I also want to see the storyline of the black woman that falls apart....I am guilty of not telling that story....I think it's a form of protection” (McGillicuddy). Indeed, most of Bang’s acts are joyful, full of energy and confidence, reflecting the off stage experiences that underscore that, while Black women can “allow [them]selves that minute to fall apart[, they] know that [they] can't stay broken for long” (McGillicuddy). In this way, the super(s)hero persona both enables and hampers Bang’s desire to tell stories that push her character outside of the box she’s been put in as a fat, Black woman: The BIG Bang McGillicuddy possesses the strength and confidence to perform fat, Black joy, performances that, borrowing language from art curator and Afrofuturist Ingrid LaFleur, “imagin[e] possible futures through a black cultural lens” (LaFleur). For Bang, these alternate futures are spaces and time where/when such positive depictions of fat and/or Black subjects is

typical; on the other hand, this propensity to perform pleasure for her audience might preclude Bang from exploring the realities of fat and/or Black women falling apart sometimes in the face of oppressive narratives that deny them desirability or desirousness.

With an eye towards the kaierotic moment's access to possible utopian futures, however, I turn my attention here, and in the act analysis below, back to that joyful energy. In many of Bang's acts, these expressions seem less an effort to mask or hide her sadness or anger in the face of racism and fat phobia and more a defiant display of self-love in the face of those things. Interestingly, Bang had initially resisted the deeply personal nature of burlesque as it was framed for us in the Burlesque for the Soul mentorship she and I and other interviewees participated in. She was skeptical at first of the "personal, back-rubbing shit" within some of the mentorship's classes and was more interested in dancing again than digging up painful stories from her past (McGillicuddy).

And then one day...Everything was going great and then I was waiting for my daughter to get off the school bus and this guy rode by on his bike and [was] just really ugly to me. Just nasty, racist....And that just really put me into a nasty funk. And I had rehearsal that night...[s]o I went but I was not feeling [it.] They put on some music and I started to dance and I instantly felt that. And I was like, okay. Maybe there's something here. Because I immediately, as soon I started working on my routine, I felt like this huge weight had just lifted off me....Whether people want to admit it or not, when you tell your story through the art of burlesque, it is healing. It is. (McGillicuddy)

In burlesque performance, Bang has a creative outlet into which to channel the "shit" she would carry around with her otherwise so she's "no longer walking around with the shame of whatever it was" (McGillicuddy). She told me she feels "like when you have a platform, it's in your best

interest and responsibility to use it for good” (McGillicuddy). As the act “Freekum Dress” reveals, Bang uses her platform as a stripper to model the type of joy, self-love, and confidence possible in an alternate future where fat women and Black women’s knowledge of their own sexiness is the status quo. As fat studies scholar Jackie Wakes notes in her introduction to the anthology, *Queering Fat Embodiment*, “changing the ways that (fat) people...feel and think about, and act toward, (their own) fat bodies...could be considered a form of activism in and of itself” (1-2). Fat studies scholar D. Lacy Asbill find such activism specifically within fat burlesque:

Fat burlesque dancers use the performance space to present, define, and defend their sexualities, resisting a backdrop of medical and social discourses that inform their everyday lives. Although the fat body commonly represents a burgeoning public health epidemic, burlesque performance redefines the fat body as an object of sexual desire and as home to a desiring sexual subject. (Asbill 299-300)

Thus, these fat performers are doing the work of redefining their bodies and sexualities for themselves but, in doing so in front of an audience, they also redefine fat bodies and sexualities for their spectators while modeling self-love in the face of oppressive and hateful norms for their audience.

The BIG Bang McGillicuddy takes up this call to super(s)hero activism in her “Freekum Dress” act (set to the Beyoncé song of the same title) by taking her audience beyond “fat acceptance” into the celebration of fat bodies. Before the music starts, the following booms into the bar, in a woman’s voice, while the audience takes in the shining tableau of a fat, Black woman (another Tucson performer²⁸), Kit, dressed as a Christmas tree on the dark stage:

²⁸ This performer is not a participant in this project. As such, I am using a pseudonym during my brief mentions of her here.

This is for all the people who have spent their entire life feeling horrible about their bodies. This is for every person with a body who is tired of being shamed and told to shape up or slim down, camouflage, alter against their will or make apologies for their appearance. And *this*...is for all of the fat girls.

The opening voiceover is met with powerful reactions of agreement and affirmation from the audience. One particularly loud woman lets out an enthusiastic “Awwwww” listening to this body-positive speech, as though she were waiting to hear this affirmation about her own body. It doesn’t matter whether or not this audience member considers herself fat, however: her disembodied appreciation highlights the disarticulation of this body positive message from any particular person or type of body, even while the presence of the chubby tree reminds the audience that fat women are at the heart of the body positive movement. As fat studies scholars Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum note in the introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, even “people deeply divided on almost every important topic can so easily and seemingly organically agree [that ‘fat is bad’]” (Solovay and Rothblum 1). Introducing her act with this voiceover helps Bang mold the audience’s expectations and desires for what will follow. While “fat people are widely represented in popular culture...as revolting,” Bang enacts super(s)hero prowess in her fight against evil representations of bodies like hers (LeBesco 75). By turning the venue into a fat-affirming space, she creates room for the audience to love her, to want her body, and to happily anticipate her striptease. The stage lights come up, Beyoncé’s “Freekum Dress” booms over the sound system, and Bang emerges from the curtains, facing the back of the stage and shaking her booty towards the audience. Her joyful movements and the exuberant excitement on her face embody the epitome of a kid on Christmas morning. While for many, due to their own celebration of this holiday and/or their exposure to the abundantly successful mass-marketing of

Christmas, this is a familiar scene, that may not be the case for all in the audience. Certainly, opening a pile of birthday gifts would have a somewhat broader appeal, thereby hoping to communicate successfully with more audience members. What is universally clear, however, is Bang's excitement at seeing the pile of presents.

In direct conflict with famed burlesque performer Dita von Teese's mandate to steer clear of sweatpants and anything overly 'comfortable' on stage, Bang is in a leopard-print robe and slippers (xi). The scarf wrapping her hair further signals to the audience that she is just waking up. Without the robe, this is another moment of potential mis(sed)-communication. While hours reading conversations in natural/curlly hair groups on Facebook (in search of tips for my own wild curls) have taught me common tools and tricks Black women use to keep their own kinks and curls healthy, not everyone in the audience may know that wearing a scarf to bed prevents frizz and breakage. So, like the robe, the headscarf shows us that Bang has not dressed up for us after rolling out of bed and also showcases a form of self-care that emerges specifically out of her Blackness. This decidedly casual attire cannot camouflage how comfortable Bang is in her own skin and, in fact, really highlights it. Excitement finally draws her to the presents on stage. She invites the audience to enjoy the pile of gifts. We begin to share the familiar anticipation that shiny wrapping paper and bows elicit. Bang capitalizes upon this and begins teasing the audience about potentially unwrapping the presents in the same way strippers typically tease about costume removal. She begins unwrapping them one by one, displaying the shiny paper and sparkly bows to the audience as she does. This "seductive strateg[y]" (Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque" 1) of "teasing and withdrawal" with the gifts cultivates moments of pleasure between Bang and the audience (2). By centering the gifts and offering them to the audience as tempting and tantalizing, Bang creates anticipation and

desire for what lies beneath the wrapping paper, paralleling typical moves ecdysiasts make to make the audience desire what's under the pieces of their costumes. Her performance highlights how adeptly she engages the kaierotic moment of burlesque: her capacity to tease, conceal, and reveal, to bring narrative striptease to inanimate objects, succeeds in fomenting audience desire, even if not yet for her body. Bang leverages this spotlight to draw our attention to the self-loving, body-positive signs and slogans she is unwrapping.

The audience reacts enthusiastically, recipients of the messages under the paper as much as Bang herself is. Kit, upstage left from Bang, reacts to these messages as well, prompted to share her own stash of signs with the audience in response. This human Christmas tree's response engages the audience in a call-and-response relationship to Bang's performance. Having a fellow fat, Black performer stand in as an interactive prop is a multi-layered choice here. It's possible to understand Kit's role in this performance as integral: superficially, Christmas celebrations typically center around a Christmas tree and this 'prop' does the majority of the work to visually mark this occasion for the audience. More significantly, by demanding that the audience explicitly and vocally affirm Bang's message(s), Kit plays a critical role in making burlesque's kaierotic moment serve Bang's narrative. With the cue cards in her hands, she is positioned as the expert on the fat-loving, body positive, self-loving message of this act. Subsequently, she has a lot of power in dictating the audience's reaction to Bang and the messages she's unwrapping, helping affirm responses of desire to Bang's actions. However, it is critical to examine the ways in which Bang potentially undermines her own message about the desirability and worth of Black women's bodies by rendering such a body a prop on stage. Kit's role is important, and grows slightly as the act progresses, but her participation is not quite significant enough to call this performance a "duet." For the spectators watching this act in

isolation, the themes around Blackness, fatness, and worthiness can become a bit muddled.

When Bang shows the audience “<3 Yourself,” Kit shows us “duh.” “U are beautiful” is answered with “no shit” and “Fat girls can” is met with “yaaaasssss.” Bang and Kit both invite the audience to call out the response text. Just as the opening voiceover did, this back-and-forth demands and normalizes an affirming, body-positive environment in the venue. Like the spectators in front of her, Bang is aware that thin, white, able-bodied performers set the standards for desirability, in general and in mainstream burlesque, specifically. By countering this, these signs and the audience’s reactions to them manifest both a rhetorical and erotic exchange which diminish these standards and set new standards that include Bang’s subjectivity/ies as a fat, Black woman with natural hair and a gap between her teeth. Having received the gift of self-love and acceptance (presumably from Santa) and then shared them with the audience, Bang opens the last gift under the tree: a fabulous pair of high heels saturated with rhinestones. Like Wonder Woman’s gold bracelets, these shoes complete Bang’s costume and trigger a super(s)hero-like transformation. They catch and reflect the light dizzyingly as she runs to a chair behind Kit to put them on.

From behind the Christmas tree, the audience can see enough of Bang to watch her toss her fluffy robe and hair wrap aside and then kick her high-heel-clad foot out to catch the light. Fully animated, Kit looks behind her and then back at the audience, fanning her face in exaggerated arousal. Having given Bang what she wants (affirmation, love, and support for her fat, Black body), the viewers know this act will continue to unfold in exciting and pleasurable ways, as the seductive rhetoric of this act progresses. They’re in for a treat. Bang does not disappoint, stepping back to the front of the stage wearing her own “freakum dress,” a spectacular gold sequined mini-dress. The tight fabric hugs each of Bang’s curves, highlighting

her large breasts, round stomach, and thick thighs. She struts her stuff for the audience, beaming ecstatically. The uncontrollable excess of Bang's body, troubling and undesirable in most depictions of fat women, is a source of arousal and joy for her (Bordo). She rubs her barely-covered booty and strokes her thighs. The audience loves Bang's every movement and she makes sure they don't miss a single curve. We are not loving her and begging for more *in spite of* the body we see on stage but *because* of it. Each curve is an invitation to linger on this stripper's body, a provocation to desire what we've been taught is undesirable. The "desire, love, and community" (Rivera-Servera 269) fostered between audience and performer throughout this act up until this moment "articulate [the opportunity for] a common future, one that's more just and equitable," where fat, Black women are always validated as desiring and desirable subjects (Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performance'" 455).

With this utopian future made momentarily possible, Bang invites Kit to dance with her and they move across the stage together in a somewhat clumsy, not well-rehearsed dance. Under the stage lights move two fat, Black women enjoying the body-positive, fat-loving space created by the voiceover, the slogans, and the audience's enthusiasm. Bang breaks away to the center of the stage, drawing attention to the zipper along the entire length of the mini-dress. She unbuttons the dress strap on her left shoulder, holding the fabric up to tease just the slightest reveal of skin there. She has only performed this act once and, as the recording of that performance depicts, she struggles when the zipper gets stuck. After some fruitless fighting with the dress, Bang lets the unbuttoned left strap fall and pulls her right strap aside, revealing her breasts with a smirk and a shrug. The importance of the striptease is not decentered by this wardrobe malfunction. She makes good on her part of the exchange: she is happy to strip for an audience that, in her own words, "fucking los[es] their mind" for her fat, Black body (McGillicuddy). "It's literally a

Dream Girls vibe: I am telling you I am not going, you are going to love me. And that's the unapologetic part of Adiba and that's where Adiba crosses over into BIG Bang" (McGillicuddy). When that tenacity meets Bang's self-love, the audience *does* really seem to love her.

CONCLUSION

As the (not-quite) end of The BIG Bang McGillicuddy's act demonstrates, the alternate futures created in burlesque acts are really only ever a possibility, and one that can be disrupted or thwarted by virtue of the "present-tenseness" of performance (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 13). The failure of this final reveal creates more anticipation, "prolonging the *kairotic* moment" (Erickson and Thomson 303), "thereby fulfilling the showbiz axiom to always leave them wanting more" (Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque" 7). This somewhat incomplete performance exceeds striptease's "enduring appeal" of ongoing play between stripper and spectator to fall short even of seduction's mandate *not* to accomplish its goal (sex, seemingly) (7). With anticipation heightened and the climactic final reveal of the act slipping *just* out of the audience's grasp, "Freekum Dress" surreptitiously embodies, with great accuracy, the nature of the utopian future/s the act attempts to make possible. The never-there, no place of utopia is never reached as a concrete time or place. Nonetheless,

[p]erhaps instead of measuring the utopian performative's "success" against some real notion of effectiveness, we need to let it live where it does its work best— at the theater or in [kairotic] moments of consciously constructed performance wherever they take place. The utopian performative, by its very nature, can't translate into a program for social action, because it's most effective as a feeling. (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 19)

The trouble, of course, is the inability of measuring feelings, of making them concrete proof of "real" social change or a "real" embodied future. When Lola Torch and I were

discussing what to call the show I guest produced as a part of this research, I was feeling overwhelmed by my desire and the pressure to come up with something witty and impactful that would succinctly encapsulate all of the possibility discussed within this written work. In an effort to relieve myself of yet another thing to do as the show approached, we agreed that I would ramble at Lola about what I envisioned, what this show meant to me, and what I wanted our audience to anticipate when walking into 191 Toole, and then she would turn my word soup into a good show title and description. Out of this brief exchange emerged the title, “Future Fantasies,” which we described as such on all promotional materials: “The boundary breaking performers of TLL bring you a mesmerizing show of imagined possibilities; a manifestation of new worlds through erotic artistry!” Looking back now, I am struck by how beautifully these words capture what this chapter elaborates upon. The slippery instability of erotic desire/s, their mutability, and the impossibility of recording actual audience affective and erotic experiences makes burlesque performance especially utopic in the no-where-ness of the alternate futures it offers. As L.H. Stallings claims, “sexuality demonstrates one way that imagination and creativity materialize despite our inability to manufacture evidence for such claims” (Stallings 9). Like most super(s)hero narratives reveal, though, alternate futures live in the *possibility* of having the “social scourges that currently plague us” — racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism — “ameliorated, cured, redressed, solved, never to haunt us again;” not in the guarantee that the next striptease will transport the audience into a different time and place (Dolan, “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopia Performance’” 457). In closing this consideration of burlesque’s alternate futures, I turn again to Jill Dolan, at length:

Perhaps burdening such moments with the necessity that they demonstrate their effectiveness after the performance ends can only collapse the fragile, beautiful potential

of what we can hold in our hearts for just a moment. The desire to feel, to be touched, to feel my longing addressed, to share the complexity of hope in the presence of absence and know that those around me, too, are moved, keeps me returning to the theater, keeps me willing to practice a utopian vision for which in some tangible way, no direct real-life analogy exists. The politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere. (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 19-20)

Truly, the politics lie in desire/s.

CH. 5: CONCLUSION: FUTURE FANTASIES ON THE STAGE, THE PAGE, AND BEYOND

Nearly 2 and a half years to the day after my debut performance as Lacy O’Ceans, I again found my ribs straining against the pleats of my tuxedo shirt, compounded by the added resistance of the tight satin dress on top of it. Almost 3 years of subsequent burlesque performances had taught me how to better manage the species of butterfly endemic to stripping; so, in that moment, I instead felt equal parts excitement and anticipation swirling through my stomach. The improvement to my costuming skills was evident in the changes I’d made to the many layers I wear and remove in this act, the number of rhinestones multiplied 3-fold, the sparse feather boa upgraded to lush, voluminous organza. Between 2015 and 2018, I performed this act a number of times and was able to discuss it with various spectators, from fellow strippers to chatty audience members to other sexuality studies scholars. These conversations assuaged the biggest fear I had before my first time on stage: that my act’s narrative *needed* to be communicated exactly and precisely to my audience, with no room left for confusion or mis/interpretation. By listening to audience feedback, when a discarded costume piece hit the stage as well as at the bar during intermission, I learned that the story can never be only my own. The audience isn’t waiting for me to *teach* them about my experiences as a queer woman; they’re waiting to *participate* in shaping what that means, with me offering guidance from the spotlight.

But if this particular concern about my burlesque performance had disappeared, it had been replaced with a whole new set of worries. Because on the night of this show, I was responsible for a lot more than just my time on stage. As a director and producer, my concerns had grown. Is the show running on time? Does the sound and lighting engineer have all the notes he needs to execute each of the 16 acts smoothly? Is the stage crew ready to set up props and

pick up costumes? Most importantly, have I helped the performers feel supported and inspired to bring each of their distinct approaches to narrative striptease to the venue? The time elapsed since my first act had also brought me to new roles as Technical Director and member of the production team for Tucson Libertine League. That night, however, I also layered on the additional responsibility of Guest Producer, having curated and workshopped these acts with the artists performing specifically for the “Future Fantasies” show. These responsibilities, as well as the creative control, granted me the opportunity to bring my multiple roles together — performer, producer, researcher, audience member, director — into even more explicit and intentional harmony than they typically are. While this harmony meant an especially joyful and exciting TLL show for me, I was most excited at the chance for the show to highlight for our audience all of the things burlesque offers beyond mere entertainment — the stories it can tell, the platform it provides for performers with a message to share. In short, guest producing the “Future Fantasies” show allowed me to do, on a larger scale, in a different register, what this dissertation has set out to accomplish: to demonstrate what burlesque can *do* in the world.

This research, timely in its consideration of performance art and sex/uality during a contemporary moment of heightened state-sanctioned discursive and physical violence against people of color, LGBTQ people, women, fat people, and people with disabilities, asks scholars to reconsider the importance of Eros/eros, the erotic, seduction, and desire/s as kairotic sites rich with rhetorical possibility. Studying and performing narrative striptease demonstrates the need for rhetorical studies’ deeper engagement with embodied rhetorics. Furthermore, this research promotes performance as a rhetorical research method that centers typically undervalued and underrepresented literacies, knowledges, and forms of knowledge production. Lastly, this dissertation examines performance as a part of the larger struggle and survival of intersectional

subjects. This examination reveals the benefits of collaborative projects between artists and academics concerning minoritarian subjects and social transformation. Within the context of a political climate increasingly hostile to minoritarian subjects, my research looks to live performance as one place where intersectional subjects are challenging the discourses about their bodies, stories, and lives.

EROS AND DESIRE/S AS RHETORICAL

One major contribution of this dissertation is to advocate for different approaches to Eros/eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction, especially within rhetorical studies. I challenge scholars of rhetoric to reconsider how the field studies Eros/eros and desire/s, and the ways in which seductive rhetoric is examined. Though there are scholars of rhetoric and other closely-related fields such as communication seeking to recuperate seductive rhetoric within the conversation about Eros/eros and desire (Alexander and Rhodes, "Introduction;" Erickson and Thomson; Gil-Gómez; Martinez; Nussbaum and Sihvola; Werner, "Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque;" "Deploying Delivery as Critical Method") by examining the importance of process-driven argumentation (versus outcome-driven argumentation), many rhetorical scholars persist in undermining the role Eros and eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction might play in meaningful persuasion. As my own examination of Eros/eros in Chapter 1 of this dissertation explicated, some confusion or misunderstanding about the role of eros in political and social life may arise from the competing origin stories of the Greek god, Eros (Hesiod; Ludwig). Furthermore, according to rhetorical scholar William G. Kelley, Jr., such ambivalence towards seduction's efficacy as a tool of persuasion is based in Ancient Greek texts, which might be considered (by some) to be foundational to the field of rhetoric as a whole (Kelley). In "Rhetoric as Seduction," Kelley points to Socrates' "admonish[ment] against

rhetoric as a form of seduction” in Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* (Kelley 78). Kelley’s study of the two dialogues offers the following characterization of seduction and seductive rhetoric: “seductive rhetoric is...insidious for it arises from a philosophical stance endorsing deceit or sham; it loves the body and not the soul, it seeks and creates the ephemeral and not that which endures” (78-79). Here, not only is seduction cast aside as negative deception, but so too are those characteristics that imbue live performance with rhetorical possibility (embodiment and ephemerality). Maggie M. Werner, however, claims that a “Platonic view links rhetoric and seduction in the realm of artifice and aesthetics where what excites people sensually *can* be persuasive” (Werner, “Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque” 1; emphasis mine). Werner disallows “artifice” to confer ill intent on the part of the rhetorician, understanding artifice to instead refer to a cleverness and facility with the kairotic moment of sensual interaction.

Even Werner herself seems to waver slightly on her appraisal of seductive rhetoric, however. Of narrative striptease, she asserts that the “performance is a tease, but it does not pretend to be more than the tease itself” (Werner, “Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque” 3). With this claim, Werner renders the tease not only superficial but also impotent in its capacity to foment social transformation. This limited and limiting view of desire/s and the erotic is not specific to rhetorical studies, of course. As previously reviewed, scholars rooted in Black feminism such as Audre Lorde and LH Stallings criticize such dismissals, linking these attitudes to gender-based hierarchies and oppression (and the subsequent ill treatment of women), to anti-blackness and White supremacy, and to colonialist morals and aesthetics (Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic;” Stallings). These racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, fat phobic, and ableist perspectives are deeply embedded within the suppression and

privatization of sexuality in US and Western societies on a larger scale. As Foucault asserts in *The History of Sexuality*, this repression (of sex and sexuality) has been the “fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classic age” (Foucault 5). The impact of this repression is significant and far-reaching, while also asserting itself through specific patterns and systems, most notably heteronormativity. Queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner note that the US’s “[n]ational heterosexuality” (heterosexuality) polices more than just sexual behavior but extends to shape a “core national culture [that] can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship” (549). The “disciplinary regimes that govern erotic desires” are far-reaching in their influence, including into scholarly spaces and conversations, undoubtedly contributing to the dismissal of or ambivalence towards desire as epistemologically meaningful within rhetorical studies as explored briefly above, a dismissal this dissertation challenges (S. Warner 144). This culture further dictates which sexual practices are acceptable and determines those spaces where sex and other social intimacies can be experienced: *not* in public (Berlant and Warner). Foucault notes that freeing ourselves from these attitudes, norms, and social systems is a serious undertaking: “we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. For the least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 5). Surely, though, such a high cost must come with significant benefits.

But what exactly do we gain when we assign Eros/eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction more epistemological value? What shifts when prohibitions against particular sexual behaviors and identities are lifted? What social changes are possible when we bring these experiences out

of the dark, from behind our bedroom doors, and into the light? By highlighting the rhetorical possibility of erotic desire/s, this dissertation highlights the significant impacts made by this shift. Altering, removing, or otherwise disregarding the privatization of desire/s and privileging of the monogamous “heterosexual couple [as] the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” that result in the suppression of sex/uality offers “changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex” (Berlant and Warner 548). This is the project of “queer culture building,” of which greater rhetorical attention to Eros/eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction could be an integral part (548). Communication scholars Keith V. Erickson and Stephanie Thomson claim that using seduction rhetorically allows the rhetorician to “subtly defy and/or challenge oppressive institutions, power structures, and/or sites of authority[,]” enchanting their audience/interlocutor through their “captivating charm, inductive subjectivity, and prudent appeals to the passions” (Erickson and Thomson 302). This claim echoes rhetoric and composition scholars Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes’s description of sexual rhetoric as a “careful tracing of attempts to disrupt and reroute the flows of power, particularly but not exclusively discursive power, as mediated through sex and sexuality (*Sexual Rhetorics* 1).

Through careful analysis of narrative striptease, this dissertation has demonstrated how sex/uality – that is, Eros/eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction – is comprised of a “set of textual, audiovisual, affective, and embodied tools” that enables shifts in power, shifts in embodied experiences of the world, and shifts in narratives about women, LGBTQ people, fat people, people with disabilities, and people of color (Alexander and Rhodes, *Sexual Rhetorics* 1). Using the erotic and desire/s as registers through which to challenge and parody “normative codes of conduct,” this research has contributed to the project of “correct[ing] gross forms of

injustice and revers[ing] conventional moral judgments” (S. Warner 144). Failure to examine desire/s and seduction as rhetorical reveals a failure to clearly recognize the kairotic nature of seduction and, indeed, the seductive nature of every kairotic moment (Ballif, *Seduction, Sophistry and the Woman in the Rhetorical Figure* 79). The reconsideration of rhetoric’s relationship to Eros/eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction offered here expands understandings of kairos, extends the still-growing fields of queer, sexual, and embodied rhetorics, and helps grant rhetorical studies access to “different modes of communication, knowing and being, delivered via strategies that present audiences with multiple meanings and dynamic representations” (Werner, “Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque” 2). Communication studies scholar Lisa Storm Villadsen elucidates the benefits of studying the rhetoric of seduction and desire to which this dissertation has contributed. She is worth quoting at length here:

To study the rhetoric of seduction thus offers us an opportunity to examine a kind of rhetoric that is highly effective but falls far from the usual guidelines for the kind of rhetoric we have learned to accept as useful because of its clear and relevant argumentation, its impressive supply of supporting evidence, the morally inspiring images, etc. Instead, the rhetoric of seduction presents an opportunity to play out the norms of traditional logocentric rhetoric against the “other” rhetoric; the pandering, flattering, sensual rhetoric that sweeps the listener off his or her rational feet and fosters abandon and the celebration of the moment. (Villadsen 38-39)

To be swept off of one’s feet means succumbing fully to the persuasive overtures of our seducer, to fall head-over-heels for the erotic message they offer us.

Is this celebration of the moment, this dreamy losing of one’s self in another, less critical

to our lives than the decisions we make at the polls? The way we respond to the local news? This dissertation argues against that perspective and urges other rhetorical scholars to see Eros/eros, the erotic, desire/s, and seduction as critical kairotic moments of potential social and political transformation. Luckily, as political theorist Paul W. Ludwig notes, “Eros is rooted in the stubbornness of human nature,” making these moments ultimately hard to ignore. (Ludwig 15). This stubbornness can be seen in the resilience of non-heterosexual subjects moving through a hostile, at times violent, heteronormative world. Furthermore, this stubbornness imbues the intentional choice to pursue erotic performance with a rhetorical demand to be seen as desiring and desirous. Undervaluing Eros/eros and the erotic, these desires and seductions, belies the devaluation of the bodies and subjects engaged in such cultural production(s).

PERFORMANCE TO PROMOTE EMBODIED RHETORICS

Another contribution my dissertation makes is to the still-emerging field of embodied rhetorics. Through the hybrid-ethnographic research method I use here, I center both performance and the performing body as rhetorical. As I write this, there is not much in the way of *broad* engagement with embodied rhetoric within the field, with rhetorics of disability leading the way in conversations about rhetoric and the body (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*; “Meti, *Mêtis*, *Mestiza*, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions; “Writing Against Normal;” McRuer, *Crip Theory*; Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain;” Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*). As rhetorical scholars A. Abby Knoblach and Marie Moeller note, at over seventeen years old, James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson’s *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture* (2001) is the only book-length text on embodied rhetorics (Knoblach and Moeller). Drawing from Elizabeth Grosz’s work on corporeal feminisms in their Spring 2018 call for

proposals for the edited collection *Bodies of Knowledge: Embodied Rhetorics in Theory and Practice*, Knoblauch and Moeller argue that embodied rhetorics must move beyond “simply a celebration of bodies (which in themselves do not require academic celebration), [to] an enjoyment of the unsettling effects that rethinking bodies implies for those knowledges that have devoted so much conscious and unconscious effort to sweep away all traces of the specificity, the corporeality, of their own processes of production and self-representation” (Grosz 2).

Such unsettling extends from the individual scholar, respectively, to the field of rhetoric as a whole, disrupting what Michel Foucault refers to as the “mechanics of power” that produce “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” within our field (*Discipline and Punish* 138). For example, one such mechanic of power policing bodies within rhetoric and composition is the style of academic writing required of us as rhetorical scholars (which some of us, in turn, require of our composition students). Rhetoric and composition scholar Kristie Fleckenstein explains that “good [scholarly] writing...imposes on students the bodies of white, heterosexual, middle-class males,” making docile the writing style of those with different subjectivities (49). By moving beyond this restrictive writing in order to recognize the ways that burlesque performers bring their (varied) bodies into rhetorical processes, and by recognizing that bodies themselves (these performers’ bodies, the spectators’ bodies, and my own body) are already performing critical rhetorical work, this dissertation helps to bring brownness into rhetorical scholarship, and queerness, and disability, and femininity, and working class-ness. As Susan Bordo notes, poststructural theory/ies have elucidated the ways in which the body, once thought to be wholly “natural,” is as culturally produced and regulated as writing (Bordo). Bodies carry a “great deal of cultural freight,” including the construction and expression of subjectivities; thus, “cultural evaluations of bodies extend to the subject who inhabit them and with whose limits they are

supposedly coterminous” (Crowley 361).

By taking up sites of analysis *beyond* language and writing, turning to the “persistent material aspect [of rhetoric within burlesque performance] that demands acknowledgment,” this dissertation makes clear how “material realities often (if not always) contain a rhetorical dimension that deserves attention: for language is not the only medium or material that speaks” (Selzer 8). Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor shines a spotlight on the ways in which performance, given its use of the human body as its primary medium of expression, is one such material that speaks and persuades. In the opening to her book *Performance*, Taylor notes that, “artists have used their bodies to challenge regimes of power and social norms, placing the body front and center in artistic practice,” and, by extension, I would argue, highlighting the role of the body in such political movements, moments, and resistance (Taylor, *Performance* 1). By examining the “living flesh and breath of the [burlesque] act itself” (*Performance* 1) (instead of studying bodies as depicted in paintings, and film, etc., or focusing solely on the text/language/speech those bodies produce), this project helps manifest a more “fully elaborated and clearly articulated” relationship of “rhetorical events to the material world that sustains and produces them” (Selzer 9). Critically, considering the body in live performance demonstrates how the “material world that sustains and produces” rhetorical events is, in fact, a rhetorical event of its own (Selzer 9).

In *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*, rhetorical scholar Debra Hawhee’s study of the ways in which athletic practices overlapped with rhetorical ones to form a shared mode of knowledge production, she notes that “[b]oth bodily learning and bodily culture are shot through with desire and knowledge, often connectively transmitted through optical, aural, and tactile exchange” (Hawhee, *Bodily Arts* 191). This exchange is central to live

performance and is, furthermore, a central feature of engaging in performance *as research method* in research projects taking up performance as a site of rhetorical production. Engaging in research in this manner offers rhetorical scholars what performance scholar Marlon M. Bailey refers to as a “multidimensional examination” of both the performances and performers behind them (21). Engaging in performance as a research method for a rhetorical project helps “to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice” (Conquergood, “Performance Studies” 145). The body of the researcher often straddles these lines to begin with. By “perform[ing] and lend[ing] one’s own body and labor to the process involved in the cultural formation under study,” the rhetorical researcher experiences first hand both the embodied epistemology of performance *and also* the rhetorical work and choices required of live performance (Bailey 22). By occupying multiple positions within a performance’s rhetorical situation, the rhetorical researcher more easily appreciates the dynamic role of the body in said performance’s rhetorical message. As a site of analysis, performance fully illuminate the importance of the body to rhetorical studies.

EXIGENCY: PERFORMANCE AS PART OF THE LARGER STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL

Beyond just what performance can do for rhetorical studies, performance can do many things in the world — a central conceit of this project. Though performance is a broad and potentially slippery term to define, whether the performance in question emerges from the context of theatre, visual arts, sports, politics, or daily life, any and all analyses of performance are most fruitful when the question of what performance *is* is put aside in favor of examining what performance *does*, “what it allows us to see, to experience, and to theorize[.] This doing/done lens allows us to understand performance across temporalities — presents and past. Doing captures the now of performance, always and only a living practice in the moment of its

activation” (Taylor, *Performance* 6-7). As this dissertation has demonstrated, when executed and regarded politically, performance can activate the subjects on stage as well as those in the audience, whether to imagine alternate ways of being or to protest present realities.

While this project resists the simplification of performance to one-dimensional “entertainment,” I would be doing readers a disservice should I refuse to acknowledge that performance *does* offer an escape, for both performer and spectator. When I walk into the venue of a burlesque show, I step into low lighting and abandon the noise of the street. I leave my grading at home, along with the pile of laundry that needs to be washed, and the puppy endlessly demanding my attention. The urgent “temporality of performance excites audiences with a slight disorientation,” away from the rest of the day, the rest of their lives, and towards the performer(s) in front of them (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 13). As the case studies in Chapter 4 reveal, performance contributes to larger movements for political and social transformation in part by providing opportunities to escape not only the banal aspects of our lives, but also our encounters with hatred, violence, and oppression. Theater scholar Ramón H. Rivera-Servera likens his theater experiences to his time spent in queer dance clubs: “one of the places where I renew myself, where I am able to witness, in almost religious reverence, the most immediate and affective manifestations of vibrant communities in motion. The club offers me a space to experience what freedom from homophobia, and sometimes racism, feels like” (Rivera-Servera 269). In performance, we form collectives, “embodied and passionate,” in “material...productions of history and ideology” (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 2; 33). Such productions contribute to the fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism by renewing worn and weary spirits.

While moments of escape and joy certainly contribute to the larger fight against

oppression and violence, another important contribution performance makes to the fight for social justice is performance's capacity to issue a call to action (this is especially evident in the case studies in Chapter 4). As performance studies scholar Jill Dolan points out, "theatre and performance create citizens and engage democracy as a participatory forum in which ideas and possibilities for social equity and justice are shared" (Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performance'" 456). Given the contemporary context of increasing violence, bigotry, and oppression against women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities, the call to share our voices in participatory forums is particularly important.

To that end, one of the most significant contributions of this research is modeling fruitful possibilities of artistic-academic collaborations on projects pertaining to social justice and social transformation. While the call to participatory forums may ring loud and clear, forums lacking a variety of subjectivities and perspective are not answering said call. It's clear from above what can be gained by engaging performance as a research method but it is not enough to engage *alongside* a community of performers or from their audiences. Developing sustainable relationships between artists and academics serves to greatly diversify the epistemological perspectives present in conversations about social transformation; redistribution of university funding and support into non-academic spaces supports new voices to be heard; lastly, such collaborations are positioned to reach and impact a greater number of people who, in turn, benefit from the cultural productions emerging from the collaboration, by way of increased support for minoritarian subject or increased education for majoritarian subjects empowered to advance social transformation away from racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, and ableism.

Within the give and take of audience-spectator interactions, performance creates spaces

and moments wherein we might be moved — be it by anger, sadness, desire, or joy — to demand more and better for ourselves and for each other. In the introduction to their anthology *Readings on Rhetoric and Performance*, Stephen Olbrys Gencarella and Phaedra C. Pezzullo claim that “we must seek ways to account for and re-imagine the intersections between persuasion and pleasure, politics and aesthetics, citizenship and entertainment, and activism and art” (Gencarella and Pezzullo 1). Those who find their way into the audience at a Tucson Libertine League show will find themselves dwelling within those intersections. The occupation of such space - if only for a moment - offers the possibility for the change that might free us from oppression and violence so that we might leave 191 Toole and build something better.

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