

Authenticity and Artifice: Burlesque Dancing in New  
Orleans

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## Introduction

### *Arrival Story*

I bought a blue road bike off Craigslist the first week I got to New Orleans. My friend and I lived on Plum Street, in a pink duplex next to a Magnolia tree. I started my bike treks from Uptown New Orleans. I rode down the quiet streets by my house, past large family houses with yards and trees and large frat houses with red solo cups in the yard and under the trees. I would wind down the unpaved or broken neighborhood streets before meeting up with the smooth pavement of St. Charles. I swung into the new bike lane, with joggers in the green and lush Audobon Park to my left side, and busier traffic to my right. I could glide on the smooth pavement and, wanting to feel the rushing air, would start to pump my legs to pick up speed. I rode past old grand white houses with pillars and covered porches. At the other end of the Garden District, I rode past smaller old grand houses and front porches decorated with Mardi Gras beads and hanging plants. Then I got to I-10. I had to make sure to cross below the entrance of the highway at the Bus Terminal, so I would not accidentally get on the highway—which happened once. At Lee Circle, I took the street car path to follow the traffic patterns and swing my way around the grassy patch with a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in the middle. I followed the path through the big boxy grey and black buildings of downtown, and then crossed Canal Street to enter the French Quarter. By now I had sweat in my hair, and my back was wet. It was hot. I slowed down behind the crowds of people, and rode past the quaint pastel colored buildings and rod iron banisters. Esplanade was waiting at the other end of the Quarter, a large boulevard with palm trees and colorful houses

and front porches jammed side by side. The sidewalks were broken and made my wrists jolt and jump as I rode. Winding into the Marigny, I passed shotgun houses with dirty Mardi Gras beads heaped on the banisters and hip coffee shops with hip people lounging in tables on the sidewalk. Once I got to the Bywater I was at the other end of the Marigny and there were less coffee shops and more empty spaces. Very sweaty and a little early, I arrived to the Who dat Café for my interview with Trixie Minx. Most of the places I would go to would take me on this trek of New Orleans. This maps the area of the city I came to know.

I have come to know New Orleans and burlesque through this project. Really, I came to know burlesque as I came to know New Orleans because I did not know anything about burlesque before I knew I wanted to know about New Orleans. Experiencing burlesque as a way to experience New Orleans in the summer of 2013 perhaps explains how I would come to write the thesis as I did. It was a story I could only see through the research and writing I did back here in Middletown from September to April.

Initially, I planned to do my fieldwork about strip clubs. I wrote a proposal called “Work and Play” and was interested in something along the lines of: how erotic play is commodified as work, and how work could be erotic. Having only visited New Orleans once on a road trip with my mom, Bourbon Street stuck out to me as shiny and blinking place for me to do research. I looked online, and found that most of the strip clubs were located on this street, and imagined it to be the site of my fieldwork.

When the plane hit down in New Orleans I arrived in a city where I did not know anyone. I opened my journal and drew a line under which I wrote “field notes”. I felt a rush and a thrill. Things were starting. My roommate, a friend from Wesleyan, would get there a week and a half later. This would be an important summer for both of us. Her a musician, and me conducting fieldwork, we were going to pay rent, find the grocery store, find places of respite in a new city like an urban farm and a yoga center, and figure out life. We were venturing into adulthood; learning how to live alone in a new city. I had the feeling that this summer would be indicative, a starting point that would make sense ten years from now: she was going to open mics, meeting other musicians, writing her own music and I was figuring out how to contact people to interview them, who to contact, how to present myself and my project, and what I wanted to ask about.

I had a lot of trouble trying to do research on strip clubs at fist. I entered the transaction as a customer, and it did not make sense that I wanted to interview them or what exactly I was trying to do. Dancers would smile, or look really confused, or humor me with a short conversation, and then move on.

I had already met resistance with the project early on, when my father sent an email to both Department Heads of my majors and the President of the University expressing “concern about my safety” over my thesis plans, which overstepped a boundary between our personal relationship and my adult and professional life, inappropriately asserting himself as my protector. This moment helped me to understand the middle class aesthetics of safety and danger that I come from that stigmatize stripping, prostitution and drugs, which he tellingly colluded together.

Even when I would tell friends at school about my thesis proposal, I would get a slightly thrilled and too excited “cool!” If they were male friends they might tell me about the first time they went to a strip club, finally followed by a request for justification, “why are you interested in that?” I was not too sure at first. I really did not know anything about stripping and had not been to a strip club before. My (very supportive) mom drove me to New Orleans the Spring Break of my junior year and hung out in a burger joint while I ventured into a few strip clubs to see what they were like. I was “going into the field,” experiencing and also trying to acknowledge and be aware of relationships ethnographer and other I was performing.

I remember I explained to a stripper at the bar that I was an undergraduate who was thinking about doing research, and asked if she knew anyone who had done that before, how she thought it might work out, and whether or not she thought something like that might work. “So you’re writing a book?” “No, I want to do research...” I stumbled trying to explain which themes I was interested in, which sounded disconnected and I felt like I was explaining, with inexperience and stupidity, what I wanted her to be. I felt that uncomfortable knot in my gut that, I feel now with this thesis and might always feel, when you write about other people and hope they never read it because you used them and you feel awful.

Once I got to New Orleans that summer, I had trouble asking dancers for interviews. Wearing Birkenstocks and sweaty hair from the hour bike ride from my house, I felt awkward and out of place. I entered as a customer, but the straight strip clubs were for men’s sexual entertainment and desires. I was not like the other customers but also not a stripper; a misfit. I went to the gay strip club, whose

audience was mostly groups of friends that were middle aged women or older teenagers, and I was also out of place. Blueberry would stroke my shoulders and ask if I wanted to go upstairs, and I would try to explain that actually I just wanted to interview her. “Are you interested?” I would ask. They weren’t buying it.

I felt frustrated that I was having trouble interviewing the strippers, and increasingly I never wanted to go to Bourbon Street because there were drunk tourists there all the time and it was crowded and loud and dirty. Perhaps the more I got to know New Orleans, Bourbon was feeling out of place, farther away from what New Orleans “really was,” a relationship that I can now see after writing chapter one and I hope is explained to you after you read it.

A fellow Wesleyan Anthropology graduate was visiting New Orleans and I told her how I felt frustrated that I was not doing the fieldwork I wanted to. “You’re already doing it!” she said. She told me to read everything like a text, and asked me to think about what I already knew. To follow my nose, ask myself what I was feeling or what was happening as opposed to what I thought was supposed to, and to trust what I already knew. This was an important step for me, and part of what felt so exciting about doing this project. This was not an assignment to fulfill for a professor. I had to develop independence and trust in myself as ethnographer to do my project. Mostly, I had to develop a way to *see*.

One night a group of friends and I went to the Burlesque Ballroom, a hotel with weekly burlesque shows on Bourbon Street. It is right next door to Temptations, the strip club where I felt like I was having the most luck starting to feel comfortable

and strike up conversations with strippers. I was intrigued by the differences between the two neighbors, and the next morning I looked up the troupe *Fleure de Tease* online, and contacted Trixie Minx the producer. She immediately called me back and we set up an interview, which felt much easier compared to my other failed attempts at strip clubs. Every burlesque dancer except for one agreed to meet with me. The ways that burlesque is imagined to be “passion work”, as creative work and as a historic archive, are reasons why it might have been more apparent why I would want to do a project and why I was able to interview people more easily. The ways that stripping is rendered to not have these qualities, and burlesque is rendered more authentic are central questions of my thesis.

As I got to know New Orleans, I would continue to meet burlesque dancers, attend classes and go to their shows. I found shows exciting, entertaining, erotic, playful, and funny. I still have never been to Mardi Gras, never seen one of the classic burlesque performances at the House of Blues, never been to jazz fest, never been to the Metairie, and never performed in a burlesque show: my experience incomplete. Although two months is very short I came to know a representation of New Orleans, which quickly morphed as soon as I returned to campus, and has morphed through the winding rambling drafts until its here in this thesis. Today it feels foggy, blurry and too close, and I am worried I have become disconnected from whatever happened. But this project is not only about performing “authentic” New Orleans and “authentic” burlesque (which is illusive, imaginary, fiction a production of itself), but also its process has taken me to understand what I have come to know. Each draft, conversation, or wandering thought is a copy that changes the story, feeling

sometimes to click when it circles back to whatever I thought before and the printed thesis is one incomplete stop in what I have come to know.

### *Methodology*

I lived in New Orleans for June and July of the summer of 2013. I attended 7 burlesque shows, mostly at bars on St. Claude and three more touristic shows at hotels on or near Bourbon Street. I attended Bella's burlesque class twice. I interviewed 12 people for my project: an emcee, 3 producers, a belly dancer, a burlesque student and 8 professional dancers. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes to an hour and a half and were usually at coffee shops in the Marigny, like the Who Dat Café or Byrdies. I began each interview by asking "how did you get started doing burlesque?" and then each conversation took very different directions from there. I crafted general guidelines of the questions I wanted to ask depending on the person I was interviewing, but kept most of my questions unplanned. I audio recorded the interviews, and took notes afterwards. After each interview I would ask for names of people they suggest I might contact and was able to expand my web of contacts. I kept a notebook with longer descriptions and thoughts, bullet points of ideas, or a collection of contact names and numbers. I sometimes recorded my field notes into my recorder. I collected post cards, flyers and business cards of the dancers and other material I thought might be useful.

### *The Venues and types of burlesque*

There are three main venues burlesque shows are performed in: hotels, bars, or theatres. The show's style and audience varies greatly. The weekly Friday night

Burlesque Ballroom show at the Irvin Mayfield Jazz Club in the Royal Sonesta Hotel on Bourbon Street brings an older more touristic audience and a lot of couples. The troupe gets a flat fee from the hotel and the hotel garners more patrons who buy drinks and tip at the bar. These shows perform what Trixie tells me is “watered down”, “introductions” to burlesque for people that are probably not accustomed to it. These shows emphasize the live band, the vintage luxurious and glamorous aesthetic (like a long silk robe garters and 1920s style bodice), the strip tease and soliciting audience attention (like Trixie who uses white feather wings that she uses to tickle unsuspecting or uncomfortable patrons of the bar).

Shows in bars and clubs tend to garner more of a local young “hip” crowd. Most of the shows I went to were at these sorts of venues. There are about seven burlesque troupes in New Orleans, and members of the burlesque community might be core performers of a particular troupe but also feature as guests in other troupes. Show tickets cost ten to fifteen dollars, or sometimes just collect tips in a jar afterwards. These shows have more elaborate story lines and narrative arcs, more elaborate costumes, and might feature less conventional acts. “Neo burlesque” is a new name to describe the burlesque revival. For this thesis I just use “burlesque”. I am interested in how performances in all three venues work off of each other to perform “authentic burlesque”. There are a variety of names that could be used to describe the different performances I saw. For example, comic burlesque describes shows that are humorous and cheeky (like those of Trixie Minx and Oops! The Clown), nerdlesque is about comic characters, queerlesque is a new term to describe

some performances where the performers all identify and perform as queer, and boylesque is another new type of burlesque for men.

At the House of Blues, an iconic and historic New Orleans theater, Bustout Burlesque puts on a monthly classic burlesque show with tickets around \$50. They perform to a live band. Rick Delaube, the producer, tells me he is particularly concerned with historical accuracy, and as opposed to shows, “where everyone’s best friend can perform” even if they are out of time, his shows are more “professional”. Classic burlesque as a style is more concerned with historical accuracy, replicating aesthetics from the 1940s with long ball gowns and “classic” choreography and little storyline or narrative plot.

#### *Chapter summaries*

My thesis is about burlesque performances of gender and authenticity in New Orleans. The first chapter is about how “authentic” New Orleans and “authentic” burlesque dancing are staged and produced as a simulacrum of the past, reproducing itself in the present in its image in the past. This chapter gives the history of burlesque to understand which histories are reproduced, or the lineages and roots from which burlesque dancers to nostalgically perform authentic burlesque and authentic New Orleans, and how these narratives are raced and classed. The second chapter is about what burlesque is, and techniques of performance. Here I show how excess and artifice are used to “put on” costume, and perform hyper femininity. Glitter, rhinestones, make up and excessive hyper femininity work off of aesthetics of camp, and work through humor role play and incongruence to perform a wink back on

themselves, parodying performances of femininity and objectification of women. The concluding chapter is about how burlesque dancers use artifice and excess as techniques to craft personas that they take pride in and feel as self-expressive. The creativity and pleasure one finds in burlesque narrates “choice” (in terms of the layers of meaning with which one crafts their persona) as offering “freedom”, which is raced and classed, producing stripping at the strip club as stigmatized and oppressive, while stripping at the burlesque show as sexually empowering.

## Interlude I: “Grit”

*This is Charlotte Treuse’s performance. There is a blue light on the stage. She comes out in a black long dress with rhinestones down the front, studding the strap around her neck, and a big sparkly rhinestone necklace and earrings. Strapped to her arms in thick sparkly arm bands is a big fur stole. She is circling the stage, prancing with an arm outstretched. She has this smirk that she often does on stage, like the beginning of a snarl. Her finger is nonchalantly pointed, displaying and wrapping herself in her fur stole. She blows a kiss to the audience, continues to walk, then raises her hand over her head and seductively traces her finger passed her face. She turns around and shakes her ass with her fur stole under it, then pops up and looks at the audience with her mouth shut, like she is chiding them or surprised. She turns back around and sticks her hand down her stole, like she is pulling something out of her crotch. She looks at her hand like it feels good, and then sticks her hand back down her stole and yanks up and down, like she is masturbating. She does her snarl smile, and then laughingly smiles at the audience, reaching deeper and harder. Then she starts to stroke her stole, smiles at the audience and does a shimmy. She lays her stole on the floor and unstraps it from her arm, leaning over and shaking her ass. Finally she lays her stole on the stage, straddles it, and starts to pump herself up and down. She throws it down unzips her dress with a snarl, but then stops and shakes her head. She wags her finger at the audience, shimmies and mouths “what!” She pulls off a glove with a heave of desire, then helicopters it around and throws it off the stage. Then she starts to gyrate her hips and strokes up and down her leg. Now she unzips her dress, and holds it like a sheet in front of her. Underneath her dress she is*

wearing black sheer stockings that go up to right below her bottom, a G string that has a bow right at the top of her bottom, and the strap to her dress is actually a strap to a rhinestone studded sparkly glittery bra. She pulls off a glittered big heel. She brings it her mouth and licks it, and then traces it down, again bringing it to her crotch opening her mouth and gyrating. Now she is shoeless, and she kind of prances across the stage. She pulls off a long stocking, pulls it taught from her foot and then snaps it off and throws it into the audience, laughing. She keeps prancing and pulls off the other stocking, this time running her hands up and down it like dental floss. She throws it to the audience. Now she is just in her G string and bra. She gets down on the stole, which is on the stage, straddling it, and starts humping it. Her mouth is open and she is pleasuring herself, her hands coursing up and down her thighs. Then she glances at the audience and smiles coyly, pulls the stole closer and keeps on humping. She holds it like it's an animal, her muppet she calls it, and smiles. Then she takes the head pulls it down her body, frowns at it, and pulls it away. Now she unhinges her bra. She has rhinestones tracing underneath her breasts, and glittery dangly pasties. She shimmies, then the lights dim and she turns around coyly, and slips off stage.

## Chapter 1: Performing Authenticity

I had interviewed Charlotte Treuse earlier that day at the Who Dat Café in the Marigny. It is her first Slow Burn show tonight. About a year ago, Charlotte moved from Portland to New Orleans. Already recognized as a national performer in Portland, she packed up her large Absinth fountain and carousel horse props and drove her truck down to New Orleans. Although she had performed for the Bustout Burlesque shows at the House of Blues, it has taken her a little while to get integrated into the scene, but her style is changing. She says, “New Orleans burlesque is a little grittier. I do a lot of classic burlesque...But now people are starting to realize that I can do more dirty too.”

Charlottes references “grittiness” as more New Orleanian, and as an aesthetic that will help her performances to be less of an outsider and belonging to a particular New Orleans burlesque scene. This chapter asks what it means to perform New Orleans authentically and Burlesque authentically. In this chapter I show how burlesque dancers stage authenticity by crafting personas that perform markers of a past, as what it means to *be* New Orleans. Drawing on histories of burlesque dancing, and histories of tourism in New Orleans, I explore the ways that performances of New Orleans and burlesque selectively reference and perform a past in the present as “authentic”. These “authentic” performances are a copy of a copy, where no original exists (Butler, 2003). The circulation of tourist fantasies of New Orleans and their histories, produced from both “inside” and “outside”, historicize what it means to “experience New Orleans” today (Fuqua, Gotham). Through gender class, sexuality

and race, we can understand the power relationships which underlay such productions of authenticity.

Performances of authenticity perform a past in the present, (re)creating a past in the present that is appealing for situated contextual and contemporary desires. Images of New Orleans are actively created. In his work on funeral rites and Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Joseph Roach shows the way that selective memory and history are transmitted through Circum-Atlantic performances. He writes, “New Orleans performs a simulacrum of itself, apparently frozen in time, but in fact busily devoted to the ever-changing task of recreating the illusion that it is frozen in time” (Roach). Similarly, burlesque performs a simulacrum of itself by drawing on and reiterating gestures, costume and music from the past, or restaging and copying specific dances of Burlesque Legends<sup>1</sup> in tribute dances. These reiterative performances recreate itself as apparently frozen in time, by restaging itself as belonging to New Orleans, as if the city is unchanging and unchanged.

The history of burlesque in New Orleans shows themes of 1) raced, classed, and gendered participation in particular kinds of entertainment 2) how tourism both constructs and is informed by notions of “authenticity” and nostalgia 3) relationships between censorship and “low” entertainment, and 4) the ways that middle class aesthetics of cleanliness and purity function to control and maintain racialized, classed, sexualized, and gendered others. I begin with an explanation of burlesque revival, and then give the history of burlesque in the 1880s to today, to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Burlesque Legends are older or deceased performers who are recognized and acclaimed within the burlesque community, have usually won titles at competitions and might be commemorated in the Burlesque Hall of Fame. They can also be paid homage to with commemorative tribute dances.

what “revival” references and how these recuperations produce “authentic” and “fake” copies.

### *Burlesque Revival*

In the late 90s a group of strippers on Bourbon Street decided to start their own burlesque troupe called the ShimShamettes. Performing at the Shim Sham club, up to 20 women would dance, some stripping and some not. When the Shim Sham closed in 2001, they renamed themselves the Southern Jezebellees, and the Howlin’ Wolf took over the spot (which is where Trixie Minx and her troupe Fleur de Tease now perform monthly).

Also in the late 90s, Rick Delaup was interviewing legends for a documentary film about burlesque dancing in New Orleans, and began to approach dancers and strippers to stage historically accurate re-enactments of the dances for footage. This ended up turning into the Bustout Burlesque show he now puts on every month at the House of Blues.

In 2001, Rick produced a re-enactment of Kitty Wests’ *Evangeline the Oyster Girl* dance with Ginger Valentine. Tribute dances are re-enacted popular or signature dances from a legend which pay homage and commemorate her. Ginger Valentine studied Kitty West’s moves to perfect and imitate Evangeline’s moves. To prepare, Ginger spoke on the phone with Kitty West several times, “spent hours studying videos of her explaining the intention behind her bumps and grinds, her hand gestures and her style”. She says, “I took copious notes and listened to the music many times a day. In addition to my normal dance and yoga training, I also spent a lot of time

meditating on the story of the Oyster Girl”. She is trying to “channel” Evangeline, “meditating” on her, trying to embody and be her character. The obsession with precision and accurate embodiment shows a concern with historical accuracy, and also accuracy of persona and personality. Her re-enactment is judged by its evocation of Evangeline, how she is able to recreate and archive a production of the past. These transmissions of knowledge through performance, what Joseph Roach calls performative genealogies, show us how historical pasts are reenacted. Specific movements, music choice, gestures, and costumes appear in Ginger’s performance as dated, but they take on particular meaning in a present context; their reenactments into a present and from Ginger now create new meanings, or come to mean something for us now. Nostalgia for a “lost” past, or desires to recreate that past in the present are not about uncovering, but show how performance, and archive reveal the desires from which people want to recreate those pasts.

For Rick, historical accuracy is an important part of his Bustout Burlesque productions. On Rick’s website, he writes: “After Kitty West, there were a slew of other Oyster Girls to follow through the years. Slowly the act diminished to nothing more than a naked girl coming out of a shell. Although times have changed, Kitty will always be remembered nationwide as the Original *Evangeline the Oyster Girl!*” He expresses nostalgia for the glamour, and the complexity of the act in the time of *Evangeline the Oyster Girl*, and expresses regret by saying the act was “diminished”. The “more” to Rick is what Rick tries to bring in his shows by staging them as “authentic.” His comment shows nostalgia for a past, as opposed to a flattened, modern present, where for example now “just” stripping has *lost* authenticity, or

class, or glamour. He tells me in an interview that a good Burlesque dancer knows how to dance, is classically beautiful (expressing certain conceptions of a beauty which are also relating to nostalgia for the 1950s and feminine ideals or what a “movie star” would have looked like), has charisma and good stage presence to be able to communicate with the audience (also evoking communication in a particular way and as a feminized skill; to be a good “hostess”), and has original and creative choreography (suggesting that one perform authentically, not be a “fake”).

“Authentic” is opposed to “fake”, where “authentic” claims to have historical legitimacy and “fake” is a rip off, incomplete, lacking skills and not well done. A “good” burlesque dancer is in a certain type for Rick, evoking a particular historical moment (1940s) and geographic location (New Orleans) to authenticate them. Rick and his dancers and production crew evoke and create the fantasy, through aesthetics in costume, choreography, lighting, and venue, that feels transporting, and that performs what that femininity is imagined to be. Burlesque revival produces itself as *real* New Orleans entertainment, which has been lost, temporarily forgotten in an “impoverished” present. To do this it performs itself in the image of an imagined past, offering a transporting fantasy experience of another time. This imagines that you could participate in a show as audience or performer and in the space of the theater have access to a frozen past, walk around in it and experience it, and leave after the show (a time-transport machine!). You arrive to the past, where the *real* New Orleans can be recreated and accessed through the transporting performance. Entertainment is imagined to have the possibility of becoming a portal to the past. The reenactment

and restaging through performance carries histories, and re-performs them in the present (Roach, 1947).

The kick-off of burlesque revival in New Orleans is contextualized by the nostalgia that some people might have felt post Katrina and the multiple visions of New Orleanian future that were being imagined and fought for. In review of the new Bustout Show, Times Picayune theater critic, David Cuthbert wrote, “‘Bustout Burlesque’ has authenticity, electricity, and lubricity. It’s a fun night out to savor the lost art of the striptease, lovingly re-created and performed by gloriously good-looking girls who are oh, so naughty, but oh, so nice”. The critic writes “authentic” showing concern with accurate historical representation, or “real” representation from an older time. It is not a rip off, it is *really* New Orleanian. They are “recreated” stressing the re iteration, and the bringing past into present time. he is also nostalgic for a lost New Orleans’ femininity. “Lovingly” femininizes the creative labor of the dancers, and they are depicted as “good looking” “naughty” and “nice”, a jack-of-all-trades of sorts, but also straddling between two opposing poles of depictions of femininity. Their prowess and artistic ability is tied up in looking “good” and performing correctly specific feminine qualities and physical features. In our interview Rick refers to being written up in the newspaper, as well as securing the House of Blues as a venue, as important for legitimating his burlesque productions as entertainment, and *New Orleanian* entertainment. He is performing burlesque, which was “low” and illegitimate entertainment as I show in this chapter, as legitimated and “authentic” entertainment.

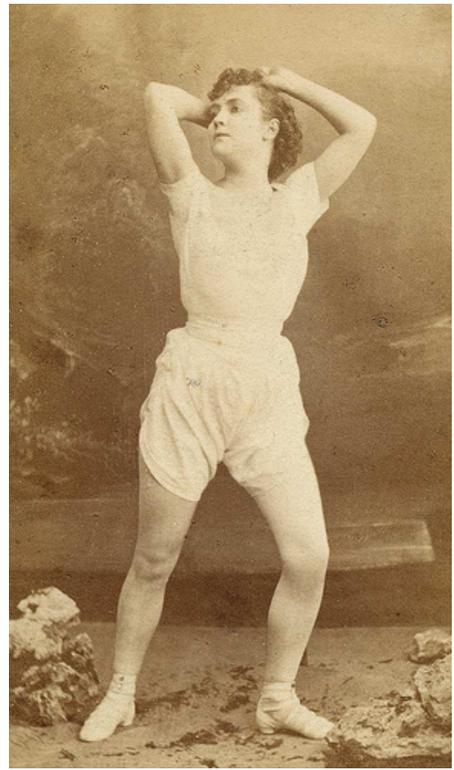
Histories of burlesque and New Orleans show the lineages burlesque dancers today produce to look to copy and mimic themselves as authentic. The following sections trace some of these histories and understand how they are recuperated to legitimate themselves as authentic.

### *Menken and Self-Promotion*

Burlesque revival makes the burlesque stage out to be a sort of time transport machine, where fantasies promise an experience of authentic New Orleanian past. The Shim Shamettes also use the stage to claim opportunities to experience self-expression and feelings of freedom through choosing how to craft persona. The burlesque stage becomes promised as an opportunity for body types of all sizes and for different narratives of femininity and sexuality to perform the strip tease, narratives taken up by the burlesque scene in bars and clubs, both in New Orleans and around the country. Here I trace how this narratives works off of and copies ways that the early vaudeville performers used the burlesque stage as a platform to craft themselves as sexually alluring, destabilized personas and as spectacles. I am interested in why the burlesque stage and performance of the strip tease can lend itself as a performance of destabilization or expressing multiple “collaged” persona. I am also interested in burlesque works to perform authentic New Orleans by promising experiences for audience and performer of masquerade, and carnival through costuming as a character.

The photo I am looking at shows Adah Isaacs Menken around 1860, dressed in men’s white shorts and a white shirt with a forward leaning, strong aggressive stance.

She became famous for her performance in *Mazeppa*, where she played a male soldier, and rode across the stage on a horse naked (although she was actually wearing skin colored tights). She circulated images of herself dressed as a man, performed traditional men's parts, and liked to give multiple and contradictory life histories to publicists and journalists. These are ways that she played with her personhood to destabilizing naturalized femininity.



Ada Isaacs Menken  
(Unknown, circa 1860)

Menken was skilled at mimicry, able to perform multiple characters: “her ability to imitate and quickly change character—sometimes laying over half a dozen character within a one-act frame—suggests that she had a keen awareness of stereotypes and how to evoke them through telling characteristics” (Sentilles, 121). Vaudeville’s mimicry and destabilization was especially tantalizing in a time of empirical knowledge, exact certitude and individuality. In the context of a post-Civil War “crisis of masculinity”, where hyper masculinized images of male soldiers and increased participation of women in the public sphere questioned traditional gender roles, female cross-dressing was an important political commentary and expanded acceptable representations and traits of female performers on the stage (Glenn 1998, Sentilles 2003).

My other favorite picture, from about 1860, is of Strongwoman Charmaine flexing her muscles. She has pale soft white soft skin that, with the quality old photos



render, feels like porcelain. She has an elegant dress that straps over one shoulder and is fastened with a brooch. She wears a smart velvet cap with a huge forward flopping feather. Although again in black and white, I imagine the outfit must be entirely pink. Her delicate presentation is heightened by the big bulging muscle she flexes. Her head is turned to the left and she is looking at her shoulder

Strongwoman Charmaine  
(unknown, circa 1860)

and her arm is flexed, her hand going up above her eye, looking down at her bulging muscle. Her eyes are down cast, you cannot even really see her face. She has a certain steadfastness, or satisfaction in her expression.

Strongwoman Charmaine performed in the circus and variety shows, using masculinity to heighten her femininity and craft herself as sexually alluring spectacle. Early burlesque performers playing men's roles

“literally usurped male power by taking on male roles onstage...[H]owever, female burlesque performers were never trying to present a convincing, realistic portrayal of a man onstage. Instead, they

were utilizing their masculine attire as a sort of fetish object, in fact emphasizing their feminine sexuality by contrasting it with markers of masculinity...these practices, of course, ultimately emphasized the constructed nature of both genders, calling into question accepted gender norms themselves” (Glenum, 29).

I think of Charmaine flexing her muscle; her delicate porcelain skin, or my imagination of her dress as pink, is perhaps heightened by her masculine presenting muscles. Her masculine markers are just enough to make her appear more feminine, but not too much to appear too masculine. She is sexually attractive with the knowledge she is “really” a woman, and her feminine sexuality is emphasized (not replayed as masculine). Glenum’s quote suggests that Menken’s pants, attire and masculine stance is ultimately thrilling or exciting as entertainment because they are juxtaposed to the knowledge that she is actually female. She makes a spectacle of herself, which is alluring, and appealing.

Menken’s self-portrayal as transient, not static through disseminations of multiple narratives of her life displays her as artifice, and makes a spectacle of herself as a fraud. In doing so, she plays with notions of “fake” and “authentic”. She crafts her persona through manipulating gender signifiers and constructing herself as sexually alluring and desirable. She calls into question essentialization of gender, and also uses deception and fantasy to create an image that is self-promotional. Her skill lies in her navigation and understanding of character, and her ability to express them. In her book on Menken, Reneé Sentilles argues that in the late nineteenth century, female vaudeville performers moved away from parodying generic stereotypes and

increasingly parodied individual personalities (121). Her multiple self-representations were strategic public relations tactics. Her creation of an interesting, confusing, and intriguing persona was meant to, and successful did get audiences to her shows that built her fame and popularity.

In her work on the early pin up genre, Maria Elena Buszek argues that cartes des visites expressed a certain “sexual awareness”. Cartes des visites were calling cards for actresses with their photographs. Actresses collapsed or played with a binary between the vilified and virtuous woman, the “idealized domestic ‘true’ woman or the vilified prostitute”. They were sexually aware and glamorous, and self-promoted as worthy of circulation. Cartes de visites also extended the presence of these actresses outside of the stage, and were a self-controlled form or self-publicity that was and presented a new kind of womanhood: “created to represent and promote specifically *sexualized* theatrical identities *outside* of the contained space of the theatre--was constructed, circulated, and made visible in ways that reflect similar feminist modes of self-representation today” (Buszek, 29). The circulation of their images allowed them to have a presence outside of the stage, and be seen and referenced by people who did not go to their shows.

The photos of Lydia Thompson, Menken, and Charmaine Strongwoman are such examples. These images show how early burlesque and vaudeville dancers crafted self-conscious images of themselves that were sexually alluring and destabilized essentialized femininity. Burlesque revival also uses narratives of crafting persona that work to perform different kinds of femininity and make spectacle of one’s self.



For example, experiences of masquerade and costuming in burlesque and festivals like Mardi Gras are performed by both locals and tourists as authentic New Orleans.

*Lydia Thompson and Classed Entertainment*

This is a photo of Lydia Thompson from her popular performance of *Ixion* in 1868 in New York City. In his work on early

Lydia Thompson as Ixion  
(unknown, 1868)

burlesque's relationship to American theater, Robert Allen cites Lydia Thompson's and her troupe the British Blondes' tour of the United States as influential for a turning point in American burlesque to become an increasingly sexualized and feminized spectacle and its rapid growth in popularity at the turn of the century. In the photo, Lydia Thompson is short, small and squat. She firmly rests her hand, clenched in a fist, on her left hip and stares off to the right of the frame. We see her side profile, and her expression is bored, or distant and lost in thought, far from the deliberate posture and stance she holds for us. Behind her is an artificial pastoral scene. The backdrop is a fuzzy depiction of something that is just enough to look

idyllic and romantic. By her knee is a fake rock with some ivy heaped on it. She wears a short tunic with a low wide neck. She is wearing skin colored stockings, which here is pale white like the rest of her exposed skin. Her hair is big thick and wavy, and she wears a wreath on her head.

She represents herself as spectacle, performer, and as sexually aware with a directness and forward posture.

In this section, using Lydia Thompson, I am interested in how early burlesque was represented, and how these representations are both circulated and recuperated. Her publicity campaigns, theater critics, Lydia Thompson herself, and the Shimshamettes 100 years later for example, produce different representations of Lydia Thompson's burlesque. I understand how certain kinds of entertainment are sexualized and classed as "cheap amusements" (Peiss, 1986). Lacking "skill" and "art" are classed ways in which some entertainment is produced as "lower", devoid and delegitimized. These representations are sometimes produced as "fake" copies, inauthentic, and sometimes recuperated as authentic in performances like for example by the Shim Shamettes.

To prepare for her arrival to the United States, Thompson's publicity campaign depicted her as "dangerous", circulating stories of all the duels and suicides her fame and attraction had provoked in Europe. "Danger" is used to scandalize her and make her performances feel alluring and exciting. She is represented as a threat, impending chaos that threatens national order, and men's desires; an outsider and "alien"

arriving to the States, and that spread her contagion as shown by proliferation of more sexualized burlesque after her.

Lydia Thompson's framing and the images circulated about her by theatre critics newspapers and publicists portrayed her as unnatural, alien, and monster. For example, Richard Grant, a theatre critic describes her as monstrous, "And by monstrous I do not mean wicked, disgusting, or hateful, but monstrously incongruous and unnatural. The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance both of the natural and the conventional. Rather, it forces the conventional and the natural together just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity. Its system is a defiance of system." (Allen, 129). His juxtaposition between natural and unnatural, or his denaturalizing of certain kinds of entertainment works to relegate burlesque as "in defiance of the system" and as illegitimate entertainment. Burlesque is rendered as sexually perverse and "unnatural" as opposed to wholesome, good, proper, classic and legitimate theatre. Burlesque as illegitimate theater produces itself as a "fake" copy of "real" entertainment. Thompson's popularity and her "danger" were powerful because they "evoked threat of gender revolution and the fear of working-class contamination" (Allen, 282). Classed interests render burlesque as "fake" because of its sexual perversity, and "threat". Ironically, it is her very disbelonging, the unnaturalness that makes her exciting as spectacle, that gets referenced as authentic burlesque. One of the first Shim Shamette's performances were a group of about 10 dancers wearing long ruffled skirts and swinging their legs in a line, evocative of Thompson and the British Blondes.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century the spread of burlesque, Robert Allen argues, was coupled with classed interests to “institutionalized” burlesque and relegated to the lower class, to not contaminate Bourgeois culture (Allen). Vaudeville began to distance itself from the more sexualized burlesque as higher class more refined entertainment. Dancers who did not make it on the vaudeville circuit might do Burlesque. Critics “constructed [her, and emerging burlesque, in] such a way [as to] become insupportable as an instance of bourgeois culture... [and] drive into less visible and more policeable working class commercial culture”(Allen, 124). For example, burlesque was rendered the illegitimate and sexualized other to ballet, “art”, culture and Bourgeoise entertainment. Burlesque dancers were not seen to have skill; it was simply an “artless jig”. Here these same oppositions can be seen with representations of stripping and burlesque today, where stripping is rendered “artless”, “skill-less”, more sexualized, and not as self-empowering (as chapter three takes up) as burlesque.

### *Storyville 1897-1917*

Authentic New Orleans as a “city of sin”, and the sorts of “freedoms” and pleasures that tourists might hope to find on Bourbon Street or at Mardi Gras are contextualized in the violent histories of how those representations of authenticity have come to be produced. Raced, classed, and sexualized, *people* are produced as images of sin, as illusive fantasy, and to be in the image of New Orleans. The images are for the exploiting tourist, the fantasies promising permission to experience a past in a lawless zone, and nostalgia can obscure the racial construction of those images. For burlesque to be authentic New Orleanian, “gritty” or raucous entertainment is

contextualized within these legacies, and both uses and circulates images of what is authentic New Orleans.

Storyville, a red light district in New Orleans, was created with a city ordinance in 1897, which, after almost 200 years of unchecked prostitution sought to contain prostitution within a specific geographic location. Inside Storyville there were lines of brothels, as well as homes and stores. The Madams of the brothels, who were both African American and white, would sometimes employ pianists or dancers, creating an entertainment that is recognized as the birthplace of jazz. The ordinance named specific street intersections into which “sin” was contained and prohibited “any public prostitute or woman notoriously abandoned to lewdness to occupy, inhabit, live or sleep in any house, room or closet situated without the following limits” (Landau, 6). Through documents like the ordinance, “public women” were produced and given specific physical and geographic delineations, which were organized around private property.

Landau shows us how city ordinances create moral maps of the city, reflecting racial, sexual, and gendered control and containment. The opening of Storyville coincided with *Plessy V. Ferguson*, and was representative of racial and class ordering. Landau notes how a whole racial complexity and history among New Orleanians was wiped away with laws that divided into white and black. City ordinances were motivated to create binaries, clear delineations between African Americans and whites, and between sinful and pious parts of city. She writes,

“the violence of postbellum New Orleans, and the failure of the Creoles of color to secure rights for themselves and for all people of color, in spite of the significant gains during Reconstruction, rendered the historic distinctions between light-and dark-skinned people of color, elite Creoles and former slaves, irrelevant to public life. Then the Plessy decision symbolically erased the Creole of color from the history of New Orleans by naturalizing an absolute racial difference, which supposedly ‘the law was powerless to eradicate’, and approve the creation of a biracial caste system as if it had always existed, everywhere” (Landau, 75).

The Storyville ordinance was a way to control and order the city after the chaos of Reconstruction and the civil war, and a way for middle class white people to establish control through binaries of order to create narratives of reassurance about racial sexual and class privilege. Women prostitutes of color were the objects of this control and order; they were “public women” ordered by political and propertied interests. Storyville created a certain education about sexuality race and gender at the time, where women of color were constructed as sexual objects of white men’s sexual fantasies and desires. Sex, selling sex, and sexual entertainment was, and “also part of the effort by a growing middle class to impose its vision of order on American society. And yet the condemnation of certain sexual practices also nourished the desire for those same practices” (Landau, 6). The illicitness both worked to lure and produce racialized and sexualized prostitutes as illegitimate and outside, improper.

Storyville helped preserve fantasies of the antebellum south, and market them as a tourist attraction, effectively selling fantasies that replayed sexual and racial oppression for traveling white men, “by highlighting the recollection of white male sexual advantage over black women, Storyville fashioned the memory of the exclusive and patriarchal social order of the old south into a new south sexual theme park” (Landau, 9). White men were re-living, nostalgically re-playing out violence that had now been legalized, or contained. Storyville produced itself as a fantasy land, “just” entertainment, and a portal to the past. Storyville was produced to hold illicit pleasures, and give permission for mostly white male tourists to experience prostitution and cross racial boundaries. The exclusion of Storyville from the normal or civic sphere, with literally different laws, renders members of the community unable to make claims to protection from power that has also rendered them as exceptional. Women, mostly black and overly sexualized women, become a tourist attraction, a pawn to attract money, an image of New Orleans to attract tourists.

The history of Storyville is important for contextualizing burlesque today because it shows how representations of women were used to produce iconic images of New Orleans, and their entertainment produced to promise authentic New Orleanian experiences. It might feel and mean something very different for a black women to perform herself as iconic New Orleans than for a white woman, because of their different histories and the different racialized representations of New Orleans they evoke, which I take up in chapter three. Early vaudeville and burlesque performances, although they might have been performed in Storyville, and might have been performed by black women, were experienced as temporarily transporting for the

night, not fixed as fantasy land and dis-belonging from New Orleans. Vaudeville performers could be skilled performers of “legitimate” theater, while prostitutes lived and worked in Storyville, were always there; imagined to *be* Storyville which was New Orleans’ fantasy land. Vaudeville and burlesque dancers could participate as New Orleanians and perform themselves as spectacles of New Orleans. Vaudeville as sexualized spectacle was temporary and performative, while prostitution in Storyville was imagined as fixed.

Vaudeville and variety shows, with comics dancers and live bands began to emerge in the 1860s and 1870s. It took “talent” to perform vaudeville, and a good performer was skilled in the wiles of artifice. The skill with which she entertained you for the night through tricking you into fantasy land, not that she was actually fantasy land herself, helped to produce it as legitimate entertainment. Coming from saloon culture, vaudeville was primarily men’s entertainment. But, with acts like comedians or magicians, it was also entertainment sought after by the growing number of women participating in public leisure and entertainment at the turn of the century. Producers were interested in capitalizing on this growing audience, and scheduled matinees, or giving incentives like free admission on certain nights or giving away prizes like coal, flour or dress patterns to encourage women to come (Peiss, 142). The cheaper price of a burlesque show could also make it more accessible entertainment for women. The patronage for variety and vaudeville was mostly tenement dwellers.

Burlesque shows, with lower ticket prices than revue and vaudeville became “poor man’s musical comedy”. Middle class crowds attended more “proper shows”

that were “cleaned up”, as opposed to what became increasingly sexual entertainment that was suitable as working class entertainment and relegated to “lower” “improper” theatre (Peiss, 1986). By the 1890s, “refined vaudeville”, which was more attractive to middle class crowds who distanced themselves from the more sexualized burlesque shows.

At the turn of the century, the “new woman” participated in public leisure activities, outside of private domestic activities and space, going to dance halls, vaudeville and later film. The “new woman” threatened heterosexual and middle class order and stability, “debasing womanly virtues, segregating youth from the family, and fostering a dangerously expressive culture. Reformers imbued the everyday pleasures of working women with amoral reading that linked cheap amusements to promiscuous sexuality and heterosocial relations. The image of the flashily-dressed working woman, joking and flirting with men, spilling late into the night, enjoying a new-found sense of social freedom, resonated uncomfortably within the middle-class public” (Peiss, 163). The “cheap amusements”, like early vaudeville, were classed, racialized, sexualized, and gendered in ways which used entertainment to divide space.

#### *Strip Clubs on Bourbon and Obscenity Laws, 1960s-1980s*

During the 1960s to 1980s the aesthetics of Bourbon Street reflected a change in the way to manage and promote the space as a tourist location and as representative of New Orleans. Obscenity laws were instrumental in these changes through exerting pressure on clubs to cut costs. In the 1960s District Attorney, Jim Garrison instituted

campaigns to “clean up” Bourbon street. In an interview with Cherry Wild and Trixie Minx by the People Say Project, an initiative to document entertainment arts and tourism in New Orleans, Cherry Wild, a burlesque legend, tells how the same politicians leading the campaigns would be regulars at the strip clubs, and then slip away when police arrived to arrest the dancers for charges of B-drinking and obscenity. Still today, burlesque dancers have to readily adjust to obscenity laws state by state, so as to adjust their dances and how much they strip down to when they travel to perform.

By the 1960s most of the comedy acts, variety shows, live bands and group numbers of the old burlesque shows had been cut. To cut costs club owners used canned music, and usually there was one dancer stripping, with fewer and less clothes, coming to resemble the modern strip club we recognize today. Push back from the anti-pornography movements of the 1960s and 1970s, also put pressure on strip clubs

Words like “cut” “less” and “leaving” picture the strip club as devoid of the value that the “richer”, “fuller” variety shows offered. Entertainment is “diminished” and “debased” through “cutting” costs. This narrative pictures the stripper as the last one standing in a burlesque and vaudeville lineage, the core left of a “lost” art form. Stripping becomes a symptom of depraved flattened modernity, missing and lacking what has been cut. Nostalgia for burlesque can be a desire to re enchant. For example, Trixie Minx feels burlesque does not “turn you on” as much as “put you in the mood”, and that it is suggestive and “sensual”, which people desire as an alternative to seek or from a dissatisfaction with pornography which is “too clinical”. She is

expressing nostalgia for a past that she sees as more full, as imbued with sensuality, and which she also enchants with optimism of what she could find there.

Kitty West, Burlesque legend who used to be a stripper on Bourbon, was quoted in a 2002 Times Picayune article after serving on a panel expressing the “worry that efforts to clean up the French Quarter will destroy its slightly soiled charm”. The panel wanted to defend what they felt was authentic New Orleans; in defense and wishing to assert their version of authenticity amidst competing claims. “Soiled charm” is cute, harmless. The dirt is polite, just charming. It is un kept, slightly tarnished, and vintage. Cleaning up the Quarter involves efforts to control and order; like sound ordinances, crime control, and disputes between the neighborhood association and businesses. Cleaning up proposes dusting off the slightly soiled charm, where the sorts of glamorous strip tease Kitty is nostalgic for does not exist anymore. Mayor Landrieu was the first to institute policies to promote tourism on Bourbon Street in 1970, which promoted a clean neat “fake” tourist theme park look, what some call “disneyfication”.

### *Today*

Today, Bourbon is lined with strip clubs, tiki bars, and T-shirt shops. Most of these shops are all owned by the same couple of families, who are not from New Orleans.

I would ride my bike about 30 minutes from my apartment Uptown to get to Bourbon street. I would ride along St. Charles, and then take a loop at Federal Circle, and catch the smooth pavement street car route till I got to Canal Street. After Canal

Street I would enter the quarter, and have to weave through pedestrians or follow the one way street direction of the little quaint historically preserved quarter streets.

A stripper on Bourbon street told me just how *dirty* Bourbon street was. A man walked by us on the way to the bathroom rubbing his nose. She looked at me and smiled and shook her head, and said “it’s just so dirty on Bourbon Street”. She told me she had recently bought a pair of white flip flops to go to work, and that they barely stayed white for a day. The way she talks about this dirt is more grimy than the sort of soiled charm Kitty missed. This stripper finds the dirt of her work place a menace. I am comparing aesthetics of dirt (grime, soiled charm, grit) to show imaginations of New Orleans. While dirt is referenced, it comes to mean a variety of different things: Kitty wants to defend it, the stripper I quote resents it, Charlotte Treuse wants to perform it, the tiki shops and tourism industry want to clean it. Aesthetics, and types of dirt are used as ways to describe and distinguish between authentic and fake, New Orleans and its impersonation.

In his work on tourism, Dean McCannell shows how authenticity is staged. Tourist sites that make themselves to be off the beaten path, inaccessible, or just inaccessible enough stage themselves as authentic, as offering the “true” or “real” experience of a place that tourists are questing for. He uses Goffman’s back door and front door to show how tourists might feel that authenticity is more “real” and less touristic, if it is harder to get to. These seemingly rugged paths are also experiences of staged authenticity.

The French quarter stages its historical accuracy, with quaint and colonial architecture as nostalgic, reminiscent of a past. Bourbon Street stages itself as a place to experience sin and excess. Almost any time of day or night, Bourbon Street is animated with drunk tourists. It remains in this posture unchanged, predictable and always available.

Genuine experiences are promised “off the beaten path”, and experiences that are too easily accessible are imagined to be ingenuine, just a façade. Bourbon as a “tourist strip mall”, and with tiki bars that Rick tells me are all owned by the couple of families, which he adds, are not from New Orleans, shows how it corporatized, and as a result produced to be flattened, posed, inauthentic, and a creation for tourists. The “gritty” burlesque bar, with old framed paintings, a shoddy stage and vintage bar stools however are *really* New Orleans, staged just for you.

In his work on the development of tourism in New Orleans, Kevin Fox Gotham shows how Hurricane Katrina was a pivotal shift for tourism policy in New Orleans. In the post-Katrina era, people have different and competing ideas of what the resurrected city might look like. “Disneyfication” is one vision of the future that is also useful to describes the way Bourbon Street has developed, where what he terms “tourism from above” renders New Orleans “homogenous”... “sanitized of its past charm”... “an artificial and contrived version of its old urban self” (3). Critics of this direction of tourism express nostalgia for what has been *lost*, in often, a post Katrina context, and desire to re enchant, reclaim and bring back New Orleans. The eccentric grit that burlesque offers promises real experiences of New Orleans, and perhaps for

some feel like a “reclaiming” or a way to reignite and perform the “improvisational impulse”.

Bourbon street dirt is produced as inauthentic by New Orleanians, or resented, sullied dirt, as the stripper I quote shows. I visited a strip club with a friend from Wesleyan who is from New Orleans. At first he texted me, “Bourbon is everything New Orleans is not to me”. I had perhaps exposed my own newbie status: that I would arrive to Bourbon and wish to do research in a too distinguishable place, an un-New Orleanian place.

Strip clubs on Bourbon Street work to both be emblematic of the experience of New Orleans, and to construct themselves to transport you off of the street. Strip clubs construct particular fantasies which are transporting as touristic locations, as Katherine Frank shows in her ethnography *G-Strings and Sympathy*. We did end up going to a strip club on Bourbon Street, and after leaving he told me he had forgotten we were on Bourbon Street.

Lighting choice, music, layout of the club are examples of the ways that particular fantasy experiences are constructed (Frank 2002, Leipe-Levinson 2002). The interaction, and the fiction of role play between stripper and customer is also transporting Frank argues. “Authenticity” constructs illusive fantasy. Tourism tries to sell and produce these fantasies as transporting. Bourbon almost becomes a house of mirrors, tricks and deceptions. Through entertainment you forget where you are and feel transported.

Bourbon Street as *too* touristic is seen as fake. In her work on the construction of San Francisco as a queer homeland, Cymene Howe shows how tourists become visible by wearing too many tourist trappings, and “authentic” locals blend in and don’t need to overstate their belonging to the homeland. The tourist becomes visible through all that they “put on”, while “authentic” is unadorned, just is. Bourbon described as a corridor of strip malls, shows its displacement from the “rest” of New Orleans, and is disowned, un-New Orleanian, as a fake copy for tourist consumption. “Fakes” wear too much, like tourist T-shirts or the ways they might behave in excess on Bourbon Street, while *real* New Orleanians now how to do it just right.

“How to do it just right” or what local should do to “be” New Orleanian is commercially circulated knowledge. Kevin Fox Gotham shows how “insider’s knowledge” was produced and marketed as consumption products, with campaigns to sell New Orleans back to New Orleans. This works to encourage, through branding to its own residents, participation in particular kinds of image being crafted of the city. Especially post Katrina, these campaigns worked to encourage locals to be tourists in their own city. Gotham shows the ways that this image production, through branding, mirrors class interests. Who the branding is marketed to, and who can participate in these images and ways to belong to New Orleans writes out particular groups of people as “inauthentic”.

In her work on the television show *Trémé* as a representation of New Orleans, Joy Fuqua shows how authenticity is produced through circuits of the characters in the show she names the “come-heres” and the “from-heres”. Expert knowledge from

outsiders informs what New Orleans is supposed to be, at the same time that New Orleans constructing itself in that image.

For example, performances on Bourbon Street of alcohol, tiki bars, strip clubs, the famous porch where people flash tourists below, and even the Christian fundamentals that hand out propaganda packets, are performances that copy what New Orleans is. St. Claude is street lined with bars and live music in what has become a hip young and gentrified Marigny. Many burlesque performances are in bars on St. Claude, or I would meet my interviewees in coffee shops they picked in the Marigny. Nightlife performances here are also re-stagings and work off of the sorts of representations of New Orleans as a bacchanalia of sin, alcohol and lust, the “Big Easy”.

Gotham shows the scalar circulations of information and images of what New Orleans is. Performances are on and between local scales and larger global or national flows, grassroots arts organizations, national commissions of tourism, local neighborhood associations and state and government policies and incentives; what Gotham distinguishes as the tourism from above and the tourism from below. Gotham uses these flows to show how tourism in New Orleans is not injecting a touristic image, but that authenticity is constructed from above and below, “[giving] a better sense of how tourism can promote as well as destabilize and undermine local traditions and cultures” (Gotham, 7). Bourbon as a “fake” copy of New Orleans shows how inauthenticity and authenticity work closely off of each other, and mutually co-perform. Bourbon as a fake copy of the real New Orleans is a co-constituting relationship, where we copy Bourbon Street in the image of an “authentic” nightlife experience like St. Claude Street, and copy St. Claude in the

image of Bourbon Street. “Authentic” and “fake” are co-performances, that work off of and produce in the other’s image (Bhabha, 1984).

In this chapter I have shown how performing “authenticity” in New Orleans can be a way to claim what is felt to be a lost past, and perform the “soiled charm” and “grittiness” which some feel is threatened by increased corporatization of the city post Hurricane Katrina. Aesthetics of dirt are used as a way to claim authenticity, where certain dirt, like white “gritty” dirt or “soiled charm”, is acceptable, and certain dirt, like the dirt in Storyville or the strip clubs on Bourbon Street, is produced as both inauthentic and so authentic it is fantasy. Women of color become fantasized and sexualized as epitomizing authentic experience of New Orleans for white male tourists. Burlesque, as skilled and crafted entertainment, can be a way to stage performances of authenticity that are transporting for just the night, and do not hold the stigma of racialized classed and sexualized dirt. Burlesque performances come to be time-, and experience-transport machines, which promise the *real* New Orleans to both the locals and the tourists as staged enactments.

## Chapter 2: Techniques of the Strip Tease

This chapter is about the techniques burlesque dancers use to perform an effective tease. In the first section of this chapter I remember my experience backstage at *the Cat's Meow* show in Austin Texas, and what Sass E. Delure did to get ready. I show how she puts on excessive femininity and I argue that these performances put on markers of femininity as artifice which works to destabilize beauty conventions; excess and artifice are used as tools for campy performances. In the second section I begin with a definition of camp, give an ethnographic description of Oops!'s, a burlesque dancer in New Orleans, *Bird* dance, and then look at how Oops' *Bird* dance uses techniques of camp like incongruence and exaggeration to perform a wink back on itself. The wink parodies sexual objectification of women and mocks the dancers and the audience. Finally, in the third section I show the affective circuits communicated between the audience and performer that help to set up co performances of parody and sexual objectification. I conclude that burlesque is a camp performance that both performs and parodies women-as-object, denaturalizing femininity and sexuality as the domain of men.

### *Exaggerated Femininity*

This is *the Cat's Meow* show. After interviewing Nikki, she said the producers of *the Cat's Meow* burlesque show were looking for a stage kitten, someone who picks up clothing from the stage between sets, and asked me if I wanted to do it. I am excited about this, and go scour my favorite thrift store to find an outfit that fits the 20s glam theme. I get there a little early, and slip through the long black curtains

entering backstage. There are big boxes of makeup around the room. They unfold like scaffolding and have all kinds of different shades of lip stick and eye shadow and glitter in them. There are hair spray bottles, racks of costumes, and bags of props for the show like a banana, boas, toy guns and glittery hats. Some people are wearing only G-strings and pasties, and some are wearing glittery dresses, the bottom furry half of a monkey suit, or other parts of their handmade costumes. There is a buzz and excitement before the show. Sass E. Delure, who recently had a baby, is sitting on the ground pumping her breast milk before the show.

Sass E. wears big red shiny lips and dark black cat eyes that look like they were drawn on with sharpie. Above the cat eyes are arches of gold glittery eye shadow. Fake eyelashes also accentuate her eyes. She has a colorful spiraling flower tattoo up the side of her torso, and another small tattoo that is similar between her two breasts. Now she is just wearing a robe, but she will put on gold glittery pasties and a G-string, and then a long black dress and a cape. Just before her set, she will put on the elaborate head dress she made, with big peacock feathers, and blue and gold jewels that hang on each side of her forehead down over her ears.

With markers like make-up, costume and hair, she puts on excessive femininity. They are tools she uses to craft her look. Her style tends to be evocative of 1920s art deco; it is elegant, severe, and she likes to use dark over done make up, and wear long dresses and capes. She wears the appropriate or valued designations, but in excess, hyper aligning with femininity. She over performs by wearing “too much” make up, using jewels and rhinestones and wearing elaborate costumes. She uses these signifiers ostentatiously. Hand gestures or choreography are also used to draw

attention to parts of the body that are feminized and sexualized, like accentuating long legs and arms, shaking your bottom, or drawing attention to your breasts. She does so in obvious and theatrical ways.

Through hyperbole she reveals the artifice of putting on femininity. She “uses pretty things as tools”, playing with and manipulating feminine aesthetics through hyperbole (Goldwyn, 2006). Her over done make-up is like a mask, and feels artificial, and theatrical. The excess reveals the artifice and putting on of seemingly understated markers of beauty and femininity, revealing these also as tools, and womanliness as masquerade (Riviere, 1929). She uses beauty as a play thing—like playing dress up for adults. Her performance of artifice and her play with those tools works to denaturalize conventional beauty standards.

Excessive hyperbolic beauty, through wigs, make up, glitter and rhinestones are both attractive and repulsive, both beautiful and monstrous, a co-constituting relationship of monster/beauty (Frueh 2001, Sally 2009). The allure and simultaneous repulsion in what is beautiful rendered monstrous, and attraction to the beauty of the monstrous. This pairing, the “horrible prettiness”<sup>2</sup> is used by burlesque dancers to make us “groan” and “laugh”, and what Buszek calls the “bait and switch” model (Sally, 2009).

The tease works off of this repulsion and attraction. The dancer enters the stage and the audience is intrigued, excited and unsettled by her monster/beauty. Writing

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<sup>2</sup> This is the title of Robert Allen’s book on Lydia Thompson and early burlesque in American theater, and also quoted by a theater critic to describe Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes when they first came to the United States in 1868.

this description now, eight months after I met Sass E., I look up a photo of her. Her eyes and her lips are stunning, beautiful, and I want to look at her longer. She is fake and unnatural—bending beauty standards out of shape. She also holds my stare because she catches me by surprise, I want to look longer because I am not quite sure what to do or not do. This allure and repulsion, is unsettling, exciting, and shows how she uses excess to make a spectacle out of herself.

Making a spectacle of oneself is a performance strategy, that has historically been used by women in circus and vaudeville. Early pin up and vaudeville dancers' *cartes de visites* express what Maria Elena Buszek terms "awarishness" through a directness and sexual awarishness which were destabilizing and threatening, and unlike earlier self-representations or circulated representations of femininity and feminine performers. Rowe calls this "unruly woman" who performs excessive, grotesque performances, monster/beauty, to "make a spectacle of herself *for* herself" in public forums. Here, making a spectacle of oneself, "staging monstrosity and extreme beauty" (Sally, 12) work to particular destabilizing or self-expressive effects. Meaning, one's performances have politically destabilizing effects, like challenging conventional beauty standards through the performances, using techniques of excess and artifice. Sass E. uses excess to make a spectacle of herself. She makes a spectacle of beauty, and makes a spectacle of the narrative and character she is performing.

### *Camp*

In the first section of this chapter I show how hyperbole helps to denaturalize conventional beauty standards and reveal them as artifice. Now, in the second section

I explore how these performances are campy, and how this works as a performative technique to parody the sexual objectification of women and women's sexuality as performed for men's desires. Camp helps to explain why excess could be a useful technique for articulating a political message in the performance. I give a definition of camp, an ethnographic description, and then analyze how this ethnographic description is campy. I show how the basic incongruence that camp humor is based on is the wink performed backwards, the simultaneous performance as sexual object and parody of that performance.

In her ethnography on female impersonation *Mothercamp*, Esther Newton finds three definitional qualities of camp: double stance towards role, incongruous juxtapositions, and humor. Camp "signifies a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality. Camp is, in her words, "a philosophy of transformations and incongruity" (Newton, 105)<sup>3</sup>.

For Susan Sontag, in *Notes on Camp*, camp is artifice, epicene, exaggeration, the playing of a role, a wink, a duplicitous act, an esthetic. Camp is not serious but proposes itself seriously; it is generous, enjoyment and appreciation, not judgment, a love for human nature (*Notes on Camp*, 1964). Sontag evacuates her definition of camp from histories in gay male drag, and by posing it as apolitical, ignores the place it plays in very political histories and context. Camp as a way to perform and perform through readings will be used differently, and is historically and contextually contingent, "we nonetheless need to be able to account for how these texts get taken

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<sup>3</sup> Camp as an aesthetics has mostly been used by white gay males. Newton makes a footnote in *Mothercamp* about the important "theoretical problem" the absence of women from these performances poses.

up—not simply to accept any and all appropriations as equally valid, but instead to explore how and why certain texts get taken up in certain ways by certain groups (Robertson, 6). To use camp to perform the incongruence of the opposite gender as opposed to performing the “right” gender has different punitive effects, as Sally notes in her article “‘It is the Ugly that is so Beautiful’: Performing the Monster/Beauty Continuum in American Neo-Burlesque” about the aesthetics of excessive femininity in Neo-Burlesque, and invariably brings up issues of appropriation (Sally 2009, Robertson 1996). For Robertson camp can be a tool, albeit used differently by different groups, because it is a way to express alienation from and critique normative gender roles.

I look at how Oops performs the three characteristics of camp that Newton uses, incongruence, theatricality and being as role playing to find which incongruence burlesque is citing, to explore how and why camp is taken up.

### Interlude II: Oops!

*Oops! comes out in a shimmering gold cape. The cape drapes down her shoulders to the floor. It is attached to her wrists so when she opens her arms it fans into a large pleated shell, like drape. She moves her hands, and the cape flutters. She moves her arms up and down and plays with its glitter and shimmer. Then she starts to circle her arms in big arcs, creating spirals of gold shimmer around her as she twirls inside of them.*

*She is playing inside of the arcs; I admire how beautiful she is. Oah! She moves her arms up and down, then throws off the cape with one hand. She brings her hand*

*to her hip, the other hand in the air, and bumps her hip to the drum beat of the song. The audience cries, "Yeah! Ow!" She pivots around. Underneath the cape she has revealed sequined gold red blue and orange feathers hanging down from her waist, sparkly feathers around her ankles, dangly shiny beads around her bra, and a big tall feather headdress. She shakes a shoulder, shakes a hip, then stops, looks at the audience and traces her hands up her hips. Her head and shoulders are shrugged up as she sensuously traces her contours. "Owow!"*

*When her hands reach her breasts she pauses, smiles at the audience and reaches her arms over her head. The audience gives her some "Woos" back. She brings her arms down and starts shimmying, walking in tight circles. She is looking at audience with her mouth closed a little bit.*

*She traces her hand up her thigh to one of her feathers. She nods her head, letting us know she is about to do it. Then she plucks off her big blue sequined feather and doubles over gracefully in pain. She yelps loudly "Agh"! She throws the feather to the ground and limps a few steps across the stage. She adjusts her hands to her hips, looks up at the audience and smiles. She starts to shake her hips again, and the audience laughs. She turns her back to the audience and looks over her shoulder. She shakes head no, nods yes, shakes no, and then grimaces, puts each hand on a feather and plucks them off with big loud yelps. She throws them down, limps and then turns to the audience and slides her grimace into a smile. She starts to pant like she is getting ready, positions her hands, pauses, and then viciously plucks out a fourth feather. "Ahh!" The audience claps and whoops. She fans her face with her plucked feathers and smiles. She spins around and unhinges her skirt, flinging off the rest of*

*her feathers. A big “Oww!” is released from the audience. She smiles, turns around again, unties the back of her bra, and spins it in the air before flinging it to the ground. The audience shouts, “Yeah!” She brings her hands to her yellow underwear and pulls down the edges, looks back at audience hesitantly, and then pulls them off all the way, revealing her yellow G-string. On her tippy toes she makes little flurry steps up and down, shaking her bottom and fluttering like a bird. With her arms outstretched like wings, she flutters up and down. Still on tippy toes, flying with little quick wrist movements, she turns around to the audience. She has tufts of bright yellow puff for pasties and on the front of her G-String. Still a little bird, she flutters off the stage to a roaring applause.*

Oops’ performance is campy because it capitalizes on the incongruence between the hyper-sexualized role she is playing, and the self-aware wink which undermines, and parodies that role. She runs her hands up her waist to her breasts, and laughs at the audience caught watching her. She laughs at how clever she is to incorporate the feather trick into her strip, and she laughs at our surprise. She laughs as she strips to a yellow G-string and we laugh as she shakes her bottom. She laughs at us for laughing at her and she laughs at herself performing for us. Sequined cardboard wings, the shimmers of her cape when she twirls and arcs, big blue eye shadow, the grand gesture to throw off her bra, and her yelps are overstated, and incite our and her laughter. Her performances is campy because it is too much, a mockery of what it is supposed to be.

Through plucking her feathers in agony and pleasure, Oops performs a counter narrative of sexual objectification as painful and as pleasurable. The humor plays

with and makes mockery of the strip tease through performances of an opulent bird with proud head dress, performances of the little chick flitting around with yellow puff pasties, and performances of pulling off her feathers and relishing it and smiling at us pleasingly. They are campy because she is winking back at us, mocking us and mocking herself.

The basic incongruence of camp for Newton is homosexuality, the “moral dilemma” an audience or performers feels with a man playing a woman. Sontag calls the incongruence “being-as-role-playing”. We are aware of her role playing through her overstated-ness, and obvious theatricality. Of course she it’s a burlesque show, and of course she is not a bird, but we are aware of her playing her role playing, which is campy.

Role playing relies on the assumption of incongruence; to role play one impersonates what one is understood to not really be. The theatricality is in the *play as--it* [in *Mothercamp*] is the knowledge that these are not “really” women but men performing as women that makes it campy and funny and humorous.

Newton proposes camp humor as a strategy to navigate and perform the stigma of homosexuality, “laughing at incongruent position”, where “the camp ideology ministers to the needs for dealing with an identity that is well defined but loaded with contempt” (105). In a footnote she locates this ideology specifically with gay males, but that other oppressed groups might perform other systems of humor.

Here the stigma is around the objectification of women. Newton notes this *transformative* power of laughter, that it is “a system of laughing at one’s own

incongruent position instead of crying. That is, humor does not cover up, it transforms. I saw the reverse transformation—from laughter to pathos—often enough, and it is axiomatic among the impersonators that when the camp cannot laugh, he dissolves into a maudlin bundle of self-pity” (110). She proposes laughter as a technique, a *system* of humor in which one is able to transform self-pity.

Oops makes comedy out of her performance of pain. She turns the self-pity of objectification into humor; she turns it into the show. Oops is both, enacting self-objectification, and relishing, camping and laughing at that image. She is both being objectified and dreaming up her objectification.

Pamela Robertson, in her book about feminist camp from Mae West to Madonna, calls this simultaneous embodiment and distance from representations of women the guilty pleasure of feminist camp:

“I would like to claim camp as a kind of parodic play between subject and object in which the female spectator laughs at and plays with her own image—in other words, to imagine her distancing herself from her own image by making fun of, and out of, that image—without losing sight of the real power that image has over her” (Robertson, 17).

Excess, glitter and artifice provide create imaginary spaces to inhabit. The stage and costume perhaps offers this to Oops. Robertson cites Mary Anne Doane’s term “terrains of fantasy” as a useful tool offered by feminist camp. Fantasy provides a place to create this distanced image. The theatricalized, spectacalized glittery performance provides an opportunity, or perhaps flirts with the fantasy of embodying

and crafting, dreaming up an image. In this performative space, the dancer can both inhabit and distance herself to mock and critique it.

I am interested in the political potential of glitter, which camp, in its excessive overdone glittery theatricality shows as useful as a performance tool. In his work on disidentification, José Muñoz shows how “hackneyed orientalisms” make “treasure troves of possibility with world making potential” (Muñoz, 10). Disidentificatory performances allow for minoritarian subjects to recycle tropes and disidentify in counter public spheres. Excess and illusion, glitter and hyperbole create moments of political potential by enacting as artifice, which can be humorous and campy.

I do not know if Oops reimagines and transforms, so much as parodies the feminized tropes she calls herself by. Her double stance, enacting and mocking, is a reversal but not a disidentification. In running counter parallel performances (performing proud and threatened, sincere and comic, agony and pleasure, sweet and aggressive) she might be catching the audience by surprise, or inciting through comedy moments of self-consciousness in their mutual co performances. To disidentify would be to recycle tropes, to hackney, to construct hybrid performances and identities, as a survival strategy into a counter public sphere (Munoz, 1999). Oops’ crafting is not so much hybrid as conflicting, and not out of a dominant sphere but in it. Other burlesque performances could be read as disidentificatory. You might ask why I am so fixated on this if all I want to say is that Oops does not disidentify. Reading Munoz in my Feminist Theories class was as a starting point for this paper for me, and has stuck with me—it offers a political potential that I want to understand and mull over. Perhaps this shows a selfish desire to read/make these performances as

“world making”. Hesitant to take up a line of questioning I do not directly take up in these pages, I still want to ask, how are these performances complicit? What do they reaffirm?

### *Wink and Parody*

The incongruence performed in burlesque is with a wink. In Oops’ dance it is the incongruence between the multiple roles she is playing. Oops is performing a strip tease at the same time that she is parodying that strip tease. She is performing sexual object and commenting self reflexively on that inscription. Similarly, the use of music, costume, or narrative that evokes another time period can be a way to play with and create anachronistic incongruities as I discuss in the next chapter.

The wink is self-reflexive, knowing, ironic (Dodds, 2011). It is laughing at herself, and laughing at us. The wink is a double articulation that parodies itself. It is the incongruence of the strip and the facial commentary, or gesture that winks back. The wink is: Did you realize I am playing with you? Do you like that? I know you like that. Aren’t I funny? What are you waiting for? Or, I know you are waiting for it. You didn’t expect that did you? These questions are a communication with the audience.

The tease is a withholding, a waiting, and surprising. Humor and laughter are used to propel the tease forward. The performer waits for the applause to “give a little more” and holds back till the audience gives it to her. The obvious sexual metaphors make the strip tease erotic and exciting, all the while making fun of those very dynamics.

Facial expression is one way that dancers communicate with the audience. Oops opens her mouth to yelp, she gasps, she smiles, raises her eyebrows, and she winks. All of this expression within communication is sometimes used in contradictory ways. For example, she plucks off her feathers in agony, but also smiles pleasingly. She performs sincerity and humor; the sincerity of wanting to be a strutting bird and the pain in stripping off her feathers, but also laughs with us at the comedy of her performance. She asks us to laugh in return, through the orchestration of her facial commentary. Her requests and our laughter prolong the tease, and take us on the path of the narrative of her performance.

In her book, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance*, Sherril Dodds calls this a choreography of facial commentary: “Burlesque performers consciously sabotage the passivity of the feminine smile through a ‘choreography of facial commentary’: they wink suggestively, flick their eyes to heaven, pull coy faces, fabricate mock shock, and offer smiles of pleasure and collusion as a self-reflexive performance strategy” (Dodds, 124). In her work on strip shows in the 1990s, Katherine Liepe-Levinson also uses the term facial commentary, and notes it as a tool that strippers use and recognize as useful in getting more tips by “letting the sparks fly”, and enabling “the fiction of a like-seeing sexual subject who offers the pretense of desiring the looker in return” (Leipe-Levinson, 120). The fiction and the illusion of the performance are important in establishing a meaningful connection between performer and audience. Facial commentary is used as a technique to make this interaction feel credible and personally meaningful, which of course is just a skill at the job, a part of the performance. However, it helps create a fiction as personally

meaningful. Connection between audience and performer builds good entertainment value and a “good show” that is transporting.

The dancers’ facial commentary directs the audiences’ attention where they want it to go in order to construct their narrative. Sometimes what is important is where our attention is directed away from. Dodds explains, “The wink distracts attention away from the body as the sole *locus* of erotic attention (Dodds, 124) The wink often provokes laughter which breaks down taboos about women’s sexuality, and work to “efface the performer-audience divide and to break down potential taboos regarding public nudity....opening site for shared exploration of eroticism and sexuality...dissipate embarrassment” (Dodds, 124). Glitter, hand gesture and boas are other ways that Oops directs our attention away from her body as the sole locus of erotic attention, creates narrative, and *plays* with us. We watch and laugh at Oops grimacing, or watch her feathers, or are distracted by her glittery cape, as opposed to fixating on the naked body. Part of the comedy is the play between where our attention gets directed, the function of that attention, and how that advances and distracts from her strip tease.

The wink works as a form of mockery that the performer uses to make fun of themselves, the audience, and their co-implication in a performance of sexual objectification through the strip tease. Oops winks back at her performance and the audience’s performance, mocking them. Mockery is a technique used to create the kind of raucous performance that Trixie, Oops and Ben Wisdom call a “good show”. While feminist critics find sexual burlesque to perpetuate relationships of sexual

objectification, the self-reflexive wink and mockery show how dancers both embrace and mock objectification.

### Techniques of mockery

Now I look at specific techniques of mockery: how performers parody the audience, how the emcees mock the dancers with the epithets they use to introduce them, how choreography mocks men's desire, and ultimately how the performances mock sexual objectification of women.

The wink can work to mock the audience, making them the butt of the joke. This is a technique to implicate all audience members in the show through laughter, and get everyone to perform "well". At the Creole Sweet Tease performance I went to at the Saints Hotel, the emcee picked out a man in the back of the room near the bar. He pointed to him individually, saying he looked very rich and wealthy, and should buy everyone drinks. The man looked visibly uncomfortable, and the audience generally, or at least me and my friend, enjoyed the joke. The emcee was calling attention to the chichi upscale hotel they were in. The man couldn't help but be involved in the performance because he was being made the entertainment. He was performing, whether he wanted to or not. Or, the emcee, by implicating members of the audience into the entertainment called attention to what the man in the back was already performing. Whether he was actually rich didn't matter; what mattered was a particular posture, which was disinterested, removed at the bar, and exhibiting a certain attitude that could be interpreted or made sense of in a joke about wealth that became a part of the entertainment that night. This kind of dialogue and pulling into

exchange made it hard for anyone to escape what was going on in the room, getting everyone to participate and co perform.

The emcee announces the dancers by epithets that parody them as both sex symbols and professionals. Often burlesque dancers are introduced with a recitation of the shows they are in or produce, and competitions they may have won or titles they have. They are also introduced as “exotic” “alluring” “tantalizing”, etc. Roxie le Rouge is introduced as “the biggest bootie south of the Mississippi” and Trixie Minx as “the hardest working woman in New Orleans”. The biggest bootie objectifies her, or praises her bootie as worthy of praise, her talent being a part of her body. They invoke their bodies as skills or talents or characteristics, sexualizing professional skills. The comedy is the juxtaposition of the two, but also to publicly laud someone for their bootie, which feels uncomfortable, and objectifying. Roxie enters smiling and shaking her bootie. She is both embodying and parodying her inscription and her objectified introduction, what Robertson calls the “guilty pleasure” of feminist camp.

The tease also uses phallic gesturing, which is funny and mocking. In her “gritty” dance, Charlotte Treuse pulls a glove out from her crotch, snarls her lips and smiles. She also humps a fur stole, and caresses it like her “pet” between her legs. In another dance she plays large phallic props. For example, in a dance with a bowl of sugar and a spoon prop she plays with a cardboard spoon that is larger than her and caresses it. In another dance she plays with a carousel pony in evocative choreography. Phallic gesturing is a classic element of burlesque routines. Coco tells me it’s a “nod to our roots”, citing the past to make her performances legible as a parody of what it references, and a statement about women’s objectification today. Gestures like

pulling a glove out of your crotch are both re performing gestures that had meaning historically as sexually explicit in particular ways and parodying them. They are not meant to really be provocative, or sexually stimulating, but provocative and sexually suggestive enough to be funny.

Ultimately, the burlesque dancers are parodying the strip tease. They excessively perform femininity through facial gesture, make up, hair, and accentuating body parts like breasts and legs, and phallic gestures which play as objects of men's desire. The strip tease enacts and stages objectification the obvious sexual metaphors of give and take, between laughter and woops and removal of clothing and the tease.

The performances, and the surprise of incongruence and juxtaposition that makes burlesque campy is perhaps a commentary on heterosexuality as dominated by men's desires for women itself. Heterosexuality parodied, and our implications in it as audience members through a performative context in the theater, has implicated ourselves in a staging of heterosexual strip tease. The final reveal and release is heterosexuality as the butt of our joke. We find ourselves implicated in a parody of heterosexuality as dominated by men's desires; we find ourselves making fun of this posturing, and making fun of the strip tease itself. Finally, we find ourselves laughing at objectification and male desire itself.

### Chapter 3: Crafting Persona

In the first chapter, I explored the complex ways “authenticity” was produced in legendary burlesque performances; in the second, I explored the hyperbolic performances of femininity in burlesque as a form of artifice. This chapter brings these two strands – authenticity and artifice – together to analyze the feminist politics of burlesque. Beginning with the seeming contradictions of burlesque dancers feeling like their on-stage persona is a truer version of themselves, I uncover ways that dancers collage and craft personas. Dancers derive pleasure and satisfaction from the skill with which they are able to craft glittery, fantastic, “fake” and excessive femininity. Through citation and artifice, the skill and craft of performing burlesque enables a form of authenticity that dancers tend to describe as self-empowering. Yet, although burlesque provides a stage for self-expression, it also reproduces assumptions of “choice” and “freedom” that can obscure the ways in which the ability to claim authenticity *through* burlesque artifice is raced and classed.

#### *Burlesque school*

Bella’s school of burlesque is at the Crescent Dance Studio on S. Claiborne. Students learn the tricks of the trade at Burlesque schools, led by a headmistress who is usually an established dancer in the community. I enter through a back parking lot, and walk into a small room with shoe racks and benches, and a small table where Bella collects the \$10 class fee. The studio itself is a mirrored wall with a bar running along the opposite side. We line up across the bar. Some people know each other and have been taking the class regularly, while others are here as drop-ins like me. I feel

awkward in front of the big mirror, and I feel even more awkward when we start to have to imagine an other in the mirror, look into our own eyes and seduce ourselves; I don't feel sexy at all. I hope not to feel awkward, and part of being skilled in the class, I think, or one of the "goals" is to "come into yourself" and to not feel awkward. To not feel awkward is to be comfortable in your body, and to have "matured" to feel comfortable expressing yourself sexually, where sexual self-expression is tied up in "confident mature woman".

A photo on Bella's website show her in work out clothes, with her knees bent, tracing her hand down her knee and pursing her lips. We cannot see the top of her head or the mirror that she is obviously looking towards. There are five women behind her, who are also at various angles and levels, paunched forward in sultry knee caresses with gloved hands. This image shows how the classes are instructions, mostly for middle aged women, in how to be sexually aware, seductive, and to find and perform with feelings of confidence that get indexed as "coming into yourself".

Bella's class has different modules on different tricks. The workshops teach the basics of how to perform a tease. Students learn techniques like how to use facial commentary, how to direct audience attention through hand gesture or stroking other body parts, and how to work with specific props like gloves and boas. Glove peels, stocking peels, and playing with boas (like shimmying it under your butt, down your shoulders, or yanking it up from your crotch) are classic moves that are burlesque basics dancers use and elaborate on to tantalize and prolong the strip tease. Bella instructs us how to stroke everything like "it is sooo soft", so audience members

imagine that you are touching them, alluding to the tease as sexual foreplay (Sally, 2009).

At the class I go to we learn how to play with boas. She starts by bringing out a big box of boas, and asking us to pick one out. Another class is on stocking peels, strutting, and towards the end of the session, one about picking a burlesque name. The sessions culminate in a student showcase, where students perform the routines that they have choreographed, to the music they choose, and are announced by their new stage names. Burlesque school teaches students how to perform a tease, and tricks that make that tease exciting. From a repertoire of tricks, a “tool kit”, one constructs a dance for the showcase, their own burlesque persona, and unique individual style, emerging as a burlesque dancer.

Some people who attend classes go in hopes of being able to perform for their partners, or for themselves. One woman I interviewed was a single mother; she said she made room in a busy schedule for the classes, and would practice in front of the mirror while her daughter slept. Seeing the image of herself in the mirror as sexually seductive, and the skills she was learning to express herself and perform a tease, might have been important for her as a way to feel sexually attractive *and* a mother. She had been a stripper, but wanted to *become* a burlesque dancer, or learn burlesque because of the opportunity for community, self expression and self affirmation it promised to offer.

Burlesque schools sell themselves as facilitating self-empowerment. Nikki deVaughn teaches burlesque at the Austin School of Burlesque. This is her instructor bio on the website:

“Realizing how empowering dance can be, she founded Fat Bottom Cabaret for plus size women. As the director and lead choreographer, she creates a body positive space where women can feel beautiful and sexy, while doing what they love. When teaching, Nikki’s goal is to help every woman find her inner diva, and let her shine!”

Words like “shine” and “inner” pictures the self as shrouded, hidden, and in need of discovery. Shine evokes a jewel. One comes to let themselves free through sexual empowerment or stripping. To unfurl one’s self, they are no longer insecure, they are freed from the shrouds of their insecurities, revealing who they really are. Here, empowerment is understood as confidence and comfort in the body.

What does it mean to feel comfortable in one’s body? This implies a comfort in space, and free, or feeling of unhindered movement in space. This calls into question who can feel this comfort of movement, or whose movements are not restricted, who does not feel friction in movement. This asks who has ownership of spaces, or who has privilege and feelings of fluidity, unhindered movement in the spaces like the burlesque bar or club.

Nikki is a plus sized African American woman, who enjoys the self-confidence she feels she has built through burlesque, and looks to burlesque to build her self-confidence, but does not feel comfortable performing a strip tease on the stage. The neo burlesque movement lauds body inclusivity, and does become a place where

different bodies sized bodies are put on the stage as sexually desirable. However, there are limits to the inclusivity, and which bodies feel comfortable and at home.

### *Crafting a Persona*

Burlesque school, or coming into one's self as a burlesque dancer becomes like a ritual, after which one finds purity in their "true" self. One does work on themselves, and even owes it to oneself and society to better the self through discipline, self-control and self-betterment. The "true" self, and also the individuality and expression of individuality of the burlesque dancer delineates the individual, and assigns responsibility to him or her. Through ritual, the self emerges, transformed (Turner, 1969). This uses apocalyptic time, where the before and after are completely separated, and the new emerged self is cut off from the older self, after having gone through a liminal period and then emerged with as the "new me" (Levy-Navarro, 2012). The "new me", apocalyptically cut off from the past, emerges costumed, with music, and ready to strip and be liberated.

One's stage name is an important part of a new burlesque dancer's emergence as the "new me", and entrance onto the burlesque stage. People pick a stage name that is reflective of "who they are", and as Trixie says, "a concentration of herself". This summer I met: Oops!, Trixie Minx, Bella Blue, Sass E. Delure, Charlotte Treuse, Coco Lectric, Cherry Brown, Gogo McGregor, Roxie leRouge. These names are feminine, short, punchy, often have a color or playfully work with alliteration. Other languages like French make them feel sophisticated or exotic. They are sexualized with words like "coconut" "gogo" and "cherry". Dancers choose their names to craft

their own self-image, and certain look that is personally meaningful to them. Oops says she is klutzy, quirky, and funny. Her stage name helped her to celebrate those parts of herself as those qualities, versus them being sources of insecurity or flaws.

Coco Lectric founded a burlesque troupe in the 90s and says, “I liked the name *Jigglewatts* because it was about power. It was about women being empowered. Everyone in the troupe has a last name that has to do with power”. For example, dancers are named Goldie Candela, Jolie Goodnight and Ruby Joule. They are claiming the performances of sexuality and the strip tease as a way to perform themselves as sexy, powerful, and electric. The “jiggle” is cute, non-threatening, and in reference to a burlesque troupe evokes jiggling breasts and butts, sexualized parts of the body. Her first name is “Coco” because as a child she was called coconut, because she was Mexican, and adopted by white parents and did not speak Spanish. Naming herself Coco becomes a way for her to feel empowered. Her name is also used to fashion her self-identity, and her identity as performer.

The names are ways to signify what self-performing, or to communicate *who they are*, and their own individuality to an audience. These personas are felt as “authentic” selves, and reinforce feelings of individuality.

The persona that is created does different things, or performs differently, based on the individual and how they come to craft and find their burlesque persona. Burlesque dancers have different looks.

For example, GoGo McGregor’s look is sexy, sultry, dangerous, exotic, and severe. Her signature dances is on a bed of nails. She wears fishnet tights, and red or

black bodices, and has a grey streak in her hair. She is performing a New Orleans that is “gritty”, eccentric, sullied, and “spectacularly wicked”.

Bella Blue’s look is sleek, polished, and glittery. She has short hair in various Mohawk varieties, a unicorn tattoo on her shoulder, and is muscular and fit. I saw a performance of hers where she wore a black sparkly body suit that went up all the way over her face. She performed acrobatics on the chair, and slowly stripped off the black sparkly suit. Her show is the *Dirty Dime Peep Show* and she likes to do performances that play with taboos around sexuality, like a Catholic school girl that masturbates to a poster of Jesus Christ.

Trixie Minx’ look is cheeky, funny, flirtatious and playful. She does a dance where she plays the piano with her breasts, where she smashes pie in her face and licks the whipped cream off, and where she is a teenager at a sleepover (with Oops’ character) and they start to undress each other.

Burlesque personas and styles are crafted from citations that are personally meaningful to them. One takes pleasure in in being skilled at their craft, and the skill with which they are able to align meaning, and articulate “persona” and narrative through performance.

### *Performing culture*

Burlesque dancers craft their own persona by drawing on autobiography, but also by drawing on culture in dynamic exchange with the audience. While one creates a persona, they also do so in the public setting of performance.

Coco Lectric does a dance where she begins by hiding herself behind large feathered fans, and then after flirting with us by peeking out a leg or a coy eye flick, she emerges and reveals herself behind the feathers as barely clothed, except for gold bands on her arms, dark eye make-up evocative of an Egyptian goddess, and New Orleans Mardi Gras beads around her neck and waist.

Coco's "puts on" an other as artifice, as costume. She appropriates the image of other to as costume craft herself. She produces herself as authentic in the image of the other, through its/her artifice. Her performances are both citing cultural meaning (citing exotic, citing Egyptian goddess, citing new Orleans) and producing cultural meaning. In his work on performance and memory Joseph Roach writes about Circum-Atlantic performances which are characterized by being displaced histories, which "have invented themselves by performing the past in the presence of others" (5). He shows how performances can enact histories which are invisibilized, or selectively forgotten by the dominant sphere. They do not enact only what is performed, but enact what is "incompletely forgotten"; she shadow behind them that they carry; the image of the other that its production relies on. This is an *incomplete forgetting*. He writes, "performances so often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that were rejected and, even more invisibly, those that have succeeded" (Roach, 5).

Coco's performances cites tropes of an Egyptian goddess. Her performance evokes an other and produces an other to perform itself. She produces an other which is imaginary and fictive. We imagine it only from reference to her production, that she is a fake copy of it. She is a fake copy because her eye make up is too

exaggerated, her theatrical role-playing apparent, and because her arm bands are not “authentic”, her modern trappings apparent. Her performance is incomplete forgetting; it carries with it the shadow of the other to produce itself and produces the other through the performance of itself.

Authentic and fake produce “mutual representations from encomiums to caricatures, sometimes in each another’s presence, at other times behind each other’s backs” (Roach, 5). Parody in burlesque does work to craft the self out of the image of the other; to put on the other as artifice. Burlesque becomes perhaps all about appropriation: dancers *steal* to craft their personas, producing an other as authentic and themselves as fakes. They mock and parody a fictive other through exaggeration and excess that produce themselves as fakes in the other’s image.

### *Crafting Message*

While the tease *takes off* clothes, it does so through a narrative arc constructed through *putting on* layers of meaning. Layers of meaning, like song, costume, choreography, and persona are creative choices which, through juxtaposition and collage, and the representations they cite, come to mean something. As Sally Lynn, a burlesque dancer and Professor at New York University also known as Dr. Lucky writes, the “striptease in this context is not solely about “taking off” but about “putting on” layers of meaning through the juxtaposition of what I call the four Cs: *choice of music, costume, choreography and concept*” (Sally, 7). One *chooses* layers of meaning, and one exercises or shows their skill through the compelling narratives and tantalizing tease they perform. Burlesque as creative, self-expressive, and

subsequently self-empowering is often built around the “choice” and creativity of these components, and set up in opposition to stripping, where one does not get to pick their own music, it is canned music, one cycles through moves but does not choreograph dance in a narrative arc, one wears less elaborate and not hand-made costumes, and one often does not have a concept.

Music is used as a tool to craft a message. It could be evocative of a historical time period, or be incongruent to other elements of the dance and funny. These juxtapositions help to articulate meaning. For example, Madame Mystere performs her sincere glove peels and luxurious satin dress to jazzy smooth elevator music which makes her dance cheesy and parodies her performance of women’s sexuality at the disco. Or, Charlotte Treuse’s “gritty” dance was inspired by Erté’s *Symphony in Black*. Her use of a rock n roll song helps to turn Erté’s design of a stylized thin black woman holding a dog on a collar into a performance of an “uncaged” sequined rock and roll star humping her fur stole. In the context of Charlotte wanting to be able to perform not just classic but also “gritty” performances as authentic New Orleans, this music choice is essential for constructing the narrative of the persona she wants to stage.

Costumes are another example of creative choices dancer’s make to craft their personas. Dancers often make hand-made costumes. They take pride in the skill and creativity with which they make headdresses props and costumes, like for example, a Carmen Miranda headdress with plastic fruit, or props like a gigantic Absynth fountain or Carousel Horse. Costumes can creatively and ingeniously craft meaning through layers that are taken off in the strip tease. For example, Trixie Minx and

Oops the clown perform as a man and woman couple dressed like they were from the eighteenth century. Throughout the strip, Trixie, dressed as a man, reveals herself to be a woman, increasingly involved in the love tryst with Oops' character. Their narrative message can be read as exposing the enactment and performance of desire and gender presentation. Costumes help to articulate this message through Trixie role playing a costumed man and then stripping down to a costumed woman and then stripping down to a naked feminized body.

Choreography is another important way that dancer's feel that they exert their own creativity, and the way in which they craft their narrative. Burlesque dancers copy each other's choreography, through Youtube, or the repetition of historical gestures that might be the basic tricks of the trade you learn at burlesque school, but are expected to be "original" and perform something different and creative. Other choreography might be producing itself as more "historically accurate", like Ginger Valentine who studied Evangeline the Oyster Girl's moves and wanted to channel here, or the Shim Shamettes who performed group numbers where they line up on stage and kicked up their legs from long ruffled skirts, evocative of the dances performed by Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes.

Finally, the concept is the inspiration, which can come from a color, a song, a piece of clothing, a political issue or an event. Dances are based on a variety of concepts. For example, Bella Blue performs of a Catholic school girl who starts to masturbate to her poster of Jesus Christ, parodying Catholic chastity and "good girl" who experiences eroticism for her savior and protector. Ruby Joule plays a nurse who carries a shot, playing both feminized nurturer, and threatening femme fatale,

wielding a painful weapon and parodying the double inscription. The lady Lucerne enters the stage with another figure in men's clothes seated with his back turned to us. She strips for him, dancing around and on his chair, stripping off her "skin" (a latex colored tight suit), eventually pushing him off his chair to the ground. This performs the strip tease and parody of objectification of women through performance.

Burlesque is promising of self-empowerment because it accepts different body types and helps people to feel comfortable and feel sexy in their bodies, because it gives creative control which helps people to feel like the "master of my own destiny" (Charlotte Treuse), and because it gives them the feeling like they are making choices about how to construct who they are so they feel autonomous and like a unique individual.

People feel passionate about, and derive pleasure from the skill with which they can exercise their craft. Creative choices help to make people feel self-empowered. "Choice" is equated with freedom, where the choices and creative freedom one has in crafting their persona help them to feel like they are "free" sexually and creatively.

#### *Limits to "choice" and "freedom"*

A feminist politics that articulates sexual freedom and pleasure can rely on the assumption of an expressive, "true" self. This naturalization also produces a partial other, who lacks the self; it is a failed partial copy (Bhabha, 1984). Stripping as "evacuated" or as partial because it is a job and not a passion, as stigmatized versus narrated as empowering, comes to be cast this way through this system of construction. The stripper as sexual object, and the burlesque dancer as sexual subject

speaks to this construction, and ways in which discourses around burlesque that rely on choice as empowerment, can work to oppress stripping work, as opposed to de-stigmatizing stripping.

As opposed to weighing the merits, or hoping to determine whether or not burlesque dancers are empowered or whether strippers are empowered, or weighing the legitimacy of their claims, I want to recognize the multiple ways that people engage in struggle, and not assume that empowerment could even be a locatable delineated place of arrival. What is more important is to understand what is taken for granted or obscured to secure the production of burlesque as empowering. Distinctions between burlesque and stripping show the production of some representations of burlesque as differentiated from some representations of stripping, and the ways that burlesque can come to be read as an avenue to authentic self-expression and as a way to feel empowered while stripping is read as a sexually exploited and stigmatized.

Burlesque as self-empowering relies on a narrative of creative self-expression through which one makes “choices”. Here *choice* is indexed as a quality of “freedom”, and individual self-expression is indexed as a quality of feeling self-empowered. But it is not only through the craft of burlesque that self-empowerment happens—it is also through a contrast with stripping. Strippers do not get to choose their costume, music, choreography, or narrative. Stripping as “not creative”, does not afford those choices, and gets rendered as an impoverished, depraved other to burlesque. The strip in the burlesque show gets termed as a performance of empowerment and the stripper as desiring sexual subject, because of the creativity

and “choice” while the strip in the strip club gets termed as representative of sexual exploitation, and the stripper rendered as sexually objectified, an object of desire.

Who has the privilege to “choose”, or who gets to narrate their performances as “free choice” speaks to the racial and class privilege within burlesque.

Pursing the “passion work” of burlesque, and using it as a way to laud sexual self-expression reveals class and racial privilege behind who has the time to be able to pursue work that makes little to no money and who has access to perform the strip tease this way. The predominantly white burlesque community attests to this. Who can enjoy burlesque for “creative autonomy rather than economic necessity” is raced and classed (Dodds, 117). Additionally, the different meanings that stripping takes on and signifies to different people based on their own histories and identities makes, it used as a tool, and accessible as a tool differently.

For example, Nikki an African American woman says that her sister was shocked when she found out she was stripping, “you better not tell mom” she had told her. This might be the case for other white or families with other racial identities, but stripping can take on different meaning for Nikki’s community and family as an African American woman and the historical usage of the black body as an object for the pleasure of white men. A white (middle class college educated for example) woman might feel she is less closely attached to stripping as stigmatized because of different racialized histories and stereotypes around sex work. Nikki might feel more pressure to *not* be represented this way, whereas a white and middle class woman might find it even thrilling to flirt with stigma around those stereotypes, by performing the strip and feeling like she is rewriting it.

Dodds, writes,

“As predominantly white, educated women, neo-burlesque artists occupy a position of power that offers access to alternative subjectivities. Their social and racial inscription allows them to act out a striptease body that, on one hand, is a site of sexual pleasure and autonomy, but on the other has been stigmatized as disreputable and immoral. Ultimately, their white, educated status gives them temporary license to perform this marginalized body, but with the assurance that they do not retain its abject associations” (Dodds, 117).

“Temporary license” shows the privilege, and even comfort within which they were able to navigate the staging of the strip tease and the citations from which they were able to create and craft their performances.

Burlesque and stripping are closely related. A lot of burlesque dancers are or have been strippers, and a group of strippers started to perform as the Shim Shamettes, a moment which is recognized as the burlesque revival. However, stripping and burlesque are produced as different kinds of work. Strippers usually strip as a job and to make money, and while they might find pleasure from their work, it is usually more of a job than a vocation. On the other hand burlesque dancers make little to no money, if not loose money from buying costumes and props, and usually put in a disproportionate amount of time for the money they do earn, making it more of a passion and more of a vocation than a job for most.

Most of the Burlesque dancers I interviewed aspire to be legends, and hope to keep dancing as long as they can; seeing it as a part of their identity and life as opposed to a short term job (which stripping was for a lot of them). Although individuals might perform burlesque and stripping, it is important here how they relate to them differently and how they come to mean different things. The “passion” works to legitimize it as self-expressive, artistic, and also assert them as active agents. That they find pleasure from their passion also gives narrative of agency. Their own music choice and sometimes a live band, choreography, and (often hand-making) their own costumes build it up as self-expressive, or creative, as opposed to a strip club with canned music, no music choice, non narrative choreography, and don’t make their own elaborate costumes. This gets read as “less than”, evacuated, or diminished of the creative potential for self-expression. Strippers are alienated from their work, which is stigmatized, because it is not seen as an avenue of self-expression, or expression of their “true self”, like burlesque is. While burlesque dancers are portrayed or read as active agents, strippers are objects of male gaze in heterosexual clubs. Restoring agency in popular discourse and recognizing agency of sex workers is a political goal some sex workers fight for.

#### *Cross temporal drag and nostalgia*

In this chapter, I have shown how burlesque dancers craft persona and put on layers of meaning as tool of artifice to impersonate themselves, subsequently feeling they can find themselves as authentic. In this final section of the thesis, I look at how historical references are also used to craft meaning through techniques of “cross-temporal drag” (Freeman, 2001).

Burlesque dancers cite historical references through music choice, costume, choreography or concept to craft their performances. Their looks, as self-expressive, use temporal referents. Burlesque dancers use nostalgia as an aesthetic, although in different ways which recuperate different pasts and symbols of the past depending on their own desires in the present.

I scroll down Facebook and find a picture of Charlotte Treuse. She has on a satin formal ball gown, her hair in a swoop evocative of 1920s on the side of her hair. Her unzipped dress, one which would be worn by glamorous movie stars from the 1940s, reveals her tattoo, markedly contemporary. The next picture I find is of GoGo McGregor. She wears thigh high fish net tights, and a beady dangly bra evocative of the 20s flapper girl style. Her name evokes gogo dancers from the 60s. Her signature grey streak of hair also adds an air of vintage, mature wise, and also sexy vampire. Despite the vintage corset hose and bra, the picture is unmistakably taken in present time. She recuperates the past into her image. Putting on symbols of the past re-signifies what they come to mean in the present. These symbols, like gogo dancers, fishnet tights, or corsets, refer to a past and refer to that meaning or recuperation in the present, produced as particular cultural referents.

These images create collage of temporal referents, and through juxtaposition craft a certain persona, style and look. GoGo uses “set of social coordinates that exceeded her own historical moment” (Freeman, 728) referencing a past to craft herself in the present. She puts on the past like artifice, to claim her own authenticity. To be authentically New Orleans and authentically burlesque (as emblematic of New Orleans) she uses historical referents. She produces these references, through her own

contemporary use, and cultural narration and production of those references as meaningful and authentic.

The past haunts the present. The present actively produces the past, but also relies on those productions to make sense of itself; it comes from somewhere. Although recognizing the *production* of the past, the present is copying the past, “but to reduce all embodied performances to the status of copies without originals is to ignore the interesting threat that the genuine *past-ness* of the past sometimes makes to the political present” (Freeman, 728). Although the present might be trying to depart from the past, the past being what Freeman calls the failed love project of the present, Freeman proposes cross-temporal drag as a way to also think about how those ghosts of the past can be productive and political.

In Neo Burlesque, “recuperation[s] of retro strip tease performances” offers the opportunity “to revisit a non-idealized past or non-idealized identities” (Blanchette, 4). Recuperating the past can be a way to articulate discomfort with the present, and by bringing the past into the present offer new ways to inhabit the present (Blanchette, 2014). Enacting the objectification of women through the strip tease restages past representations of women, and through parody and exaggeration, cites their historical meaning to perform in the present.

For Freeman, the pull back of “drag” is useful as a way to disrupt the present, as a kink in straight smooth rolling time. These are obstacles, and little bumps, through looping backwards, through reference to a past. Cross-temporal drag is the way we

read the body as legible through the pasts it cites, and the pasts it performs for its desires in the present.

This chapter has shown how burlesque dancers craft persona through choice of music, choreography, costume and narrative. These creative choices make particular cultural references that work to set up what the narrative, and how the audience and dancer co perform and participate in these narratives. These “choices” feel like “freedoms” lending themselves to the production of burlesque as an experience of self-empowerment, but which can be produced as opposed to stripping, and which can be accessible to those with certain economic and cultural privileges to perform the strip tease this way. Temporal referents are another layer of meaning. Cross-temporal drag explains how bodies can be read through the pasts they cite, but also as “putting on” pasts for their own political projects. To conclude this thesis I look at the tribute dance to understand the dynamics of performing authenticity through cross-temporal drag.

## Conclusion

For the concluding story, I choose to describe Coco Lectric's tribute dance to Cherry Wild. The show begins with a dark stage and one light shining on a large prop, behind which Coco is crouched. From behind the prop she flutters a blue and feathered fan. Her eyes and our eyes following its arc, and someone in the audience gives an "Ow!" The music is reminiscent of old movies that depicted western versions of oriental music. She continues to wave her feathered fans, and then kicks out her leg. She is wearing glittery ballet point slippers. She emerges and, shielding herself with one fan covering the top half of her body and the other the lower half, she tip toes her way onto the center of the stage. The audience whoops and applauds. She comes to the center of the stage, and peaks her head out from between her two fans, smiling. She throws back her head, and the music abruptly changes to New Orleans jazz. She gives us a smile, and, still on point, moves one feathered fan over her head like a headdress, and the other at her waist like a skirt. Beneath her feathers she is wearing a gold bra, and Mardi Gras beads dangling from her waist to her necklace to gold bracelets on her arms. She moves the feathers, tempting us to see what is under them. With a flair in the music, finally she removes them, smiles, and she is almost completely naked. She moves between being on ballet point in short staccato steps, to and getting down from point to swing her hips in smooth wide circles. Her G-string and Mardi Gras beads do not hide the scar at the bottom of her belly. She looks at the audience directly and seriously, and then smiles pleasingly. She lowers her eyes coyly, she purses her lips seductively, she looks bored, or she closes her eyes tilts her head back and runs her feathers up the side of her body.

Her performance cites multiple temporalities, geographies and types of dance to craft her dance. I show how she performs the exotic other, performs histories of burlesque and performs herself as authentic New Orleans.

Coco Performs herself as authentic New Orleans. Perhaps fittingly, I end up choosing a story that does not end in New Orleans to show performances of artifice and authenticity of New Orleans and burlesque. I interviewed Coco in Austin Texas, but she had been featured in the New Orleans Burlesque Festival, knew the dancers from New Orleans, used to be a regular guest in Rick's *Bustout Burlesque Show*. She performs New Orleans, but I find this video on Youtube, and it is performed in Los Angeles, California. She crafts herself as performing authentic New Orleans through layers of meaning like her music choice, costume, and choreography. She uses Mardi Gras beads to prove and produce claims to authenticity. She begins her dance with music evocative of western interpretation of eastern music in early movies. The switch to New Orleans jazz, and her simultaneous uncovering of herself with her feathers and change in facial expression narrates an arrival to New Orleans, and New Orleans as erotic, sexual and exotic. She moves on and off point once the music choice has changed, and varies her dancing styles. She both performs New Orleans through citation, like jazz, dance style, and Mardi Gras beads, and produces a copy of what New Orleans is.

Coco's dance is a tribute to Cherry Wild's "signature dance". Cherry Wild is a burlesque legend from New Orleans who stripped in the 1960s and still performed until recently. As a "legend" Cherry Wild has legitimated herself and been legitimated in burlesque. Coco also uses the feathered fans which cite burlesque in the

1940s. This creates a double citation—she cites Cherry Wild’s citation of dancers like Kitty West as Evangeline the Oyster Girl. By paying tribute to Cherry Wild, which means evoking her through choreography, concept, music and costume choice, Coco constructs herself as a copy to an image of authentic burlesque. Paradoxically, she constructs herself as a fake copy, an impersonation, to prove and claim authenticity.

Coco exotifies herself, by for example, shrouding herself with feathered fans, European markers, and then uncovering herself to be almost naked except for reduced Middle Eastern tropes like dark eye make-up and gold jewelry. She performs herself as a copy to an other, producing a copy of the other in her image. She is the theatrical artificial fake to the imaginary exotic other. But in so doing performs herself as authentic through the production of an other as a copy.

In this thesis I have shown how burlesque performances work to produce themselves as authentic New Orleans, and in so doing produce the image of a partial other, a “fake”. In the first chapter I gave some of the histories of burlesque and New Orleans that are performed and imagined to legitimate the present as authenticated by the past, and how tourism works to produce seemingly inauthentic experiences as copies of authentic ones, and authentic ones as copies of inauthentic ones. In the second chapter I show how excess and artifice are techniques to parody the objectification of women by performing the wink back on itself. In the third chapter, I take up both of these arguments to show dancers craft themselves by putting on layers of meaning which cite itself and its image, produce itself as a fake exaggerated copy, and imagine an authenticated fantasy other. Finally I conclude that authenticity and artifice are both copies off of each other, and that New Orleans itself is constantly

producing itself as a copy of itself, in iterations that can only be at once “authentic” and “fake”.

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