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# What's so feminist about garters and bustiers? Neo-burlesque as post-feminist sexual liberation

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The performance art of burlesque is gaining popularity in North American culture, but with many 'neo-burlesque' performers, critical reflection or commentary on the politics of female sexuality is glaringly absent or summarily dismissed. Neo-burlesque could be a feminist rewriting and reclaiming of a Western dance form, which showcased women simpering sexily for her audience. However, in order for neo-burlesque to have a feminist tone, it needs to do more than incorporate women of various ethnicities and body types to transcend patriarchal scripts of female sexuality. Some neo-burlesque includes disruptions of traditional scripts regarding female sexuality that demand the audience think about the complexities of desire, sexuality, and identity, often through a feminist lens. However, these critiques often do not go far enough in their interrogation of power structures and the politics of sexuality. This article makes the argument that the popularity of neo-burlesque in mainstream culture serves to oppress female sexuality in very traditional ways instead of what it purports to do: empower women to celebrate their sexuality through performance.

## **Keywords:**

burlesque; feminism; feminist; neo-burlesque; post-feminism; sexual politics

## Introduction

A local covey of young feminists has written the script and staged the performance. The house is packed with women of various ages and demographics (also present are a few men, looking slightly uncomfortable). I am anticipating an edgy, thought-provoking performance piece focusing on female sexuality from a smart feminist perspective. The premise is a rewrite of *Alice in Wonderland*. Corsets, pole dances, dildo jokes, on-stage orgasms, pithy repartee, and double-entendres dominate the small performance space for the 90-minute show. The White Rabbit is played by a woman. Ditto the Mad Hatter. The cast is a delightful mix of ethnicity, age, body size, and body type – all displaying camp amalgamations of porn lingerie. But where is the feminist commentary within this text? Where are the politics of subverting patriarchal definitions of female sexuality? Instead of leaving the performance feeling smarter and satiated, I leave feeling disappointed. The only subversion of the patriarchal script of female sexuality, writ large by the porn industry, seems to be that the script was written and performed by women, and various body types were represented within the context of the corsets, push-up-bras, garter belts, and ‘come-fuck-me’ pumps.

Perhaps, I should be content with that, but I am not. As with all things feminist, it is impossible to address every issue within one show, one performance, one song, and one piece of art. Yet neo-burlesque, a feminist rewriting and reclaiming of a Western dance form that showcased women simpering sexily for their audiences, needs to do more than incorporate women of various ethnicities and body types to transcend patriarchal scripts of female sexuality. As with many things (e.g., art, pedagogy, music, and leadership), something does not automatically become feminist simply because it is delivered, written, and/or performed by a feminist. The heart of the piece must also interrogate, perform, discover, and/or celebrate feminist politics. Feminism disrupts and pushes against hierarchies of oppression; feminism voices strong political positions on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other traditionally marginalized identities. That does not happen simply when a feminist dresses up in garter belts and thigh-high fishnets. The performer can be a feminist in garters, but there needs to be more. The wardrobe of what is ‘sexy’ is defined by men for men, limiting women’s movement and ownership of their bodies. Lingerie is designed and created for the male gaze; it is what

the patriarchy has defined, designed, distributed, and commodified as titillating to heterosexual males. Inherently, there is nothing feminist in neo-burlesque, but there are some feminist neo-burlesque performers who are doing feminist work and that work diverges in smart, interesting ways from most of the neo-burlesque currently being performed and consumed.

For the purposes of this article, I use the term 'neo-burlesque' to refer to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century resurgence of the burlesque art form. I will use the term 'underground burlesque' to refer to burlesque that is performed in ways that offer overt political and/or feminist commentary about female sexuality in the twenty-first century. The terms 'underground burlesque' and 'feminist burlesque' are intended as synonyms and used interchangeably in this article.

### **Previous scholarship on burlesque**

In doing this research, my argument fills a gap of feminist interrogation of neo-burlesque. There is a significant scholarship on the history of American burlesque, but very little on neo-burlesque and the articles and books about neo-burlesque skirt complicated issues of female sexuality, classism, and the commodification of female sexuality. Clyde's book *Horrible Prettiness* (1991) does an excellent job of covering the history of American burlesque. Other historical analyses of American burlesque include *The American burlesque Show* (Zeidman 1967), 'Humor and ethnic stereotypes in Vaudeville and burlesque' (Mintz 1996), "'Representing awareness": burlesque, feminist awareness, and Nineteenth Century pin-up' (Buszek 1993), and *The American burlesque*, scholarship on burlesque in New York City during the depression (Friedman 1996). Ferreday's article on 'new burlesque' (2008) addresses the issues of female performance and how the subculture of burlesque can offer a different definition of female beauty. Ferreday does not so much critique the neo-burlesque she is examining as attempt to see where the parody can exist within the performance. In a response to an article on new burlesque published in 2007, Ferreday draws attention to the communities created by women within the burlesque subculture as well as burlesque's acceptance of varying body types as examples of feminist leanings of the genre. Ferreday argues that the performers gain great pleasure from performing this form of

femininity. She writes, 'Indeed, the labor involved in burlesque performances can be adapted and adopted as feminist theoretical performances that speak back to hegemonic ideals of beauty, to feminism, and to queer theory' (2007, p. 7). Here the reader should note the word 'can' in the quote from Ferreday. The problem, as I argue here, is that most of the time these performances do not reflect feminist theory or practice. Michelle Baldwin's book *burlesque and the New Bump-N-Grind* (self-published by Baldwin in 2004) offers a basic overview of the history of burlesque and one chapter on 'new burlesque,' but it reads as a summary without scholarly interrogation. What is missing is a feminist interrogation of neo-burlesque. Neo-burlesque narratives that create narrow and problematic representations of female sexuality re-inscribe the patriarchal myth that female sexuality can find 'empowerment through commodification.' That is to say, performers and media that promote neo-burlesque claim striptease in the form of burlesque is somehow more empowering for women than other forms of sex work and performance. However, I find these interpretations and explanations thin. It is important to interrogate the more complicated issues of race, sexuality, class, and misogyny that some feminists find problematic within neo-burlesque.

### **History of burlesque/defining the art**

The history of North American burlesque began in New York in the 1860s with a troupe calling themselves the British Blondes (King 2008, p. 2). During the first year of the British Blondes, the suffrage movement in the United States was taking place. Feminists were politically active in the fight for abolition and suffrage. The British Blondes emerged from this cultural moment of women taking more public space and using their voice to advocate for rights. The British Blondes established burlesque as a female-dominated performance (although there were also men in the cast) where an element of stripping was part of the act, but there was also a narrative that accompanied the show (King 2008). During this period, burlesque's popularity may have been focused on the titillating element of women stripping off their Victorian garb, but there was more to the act than that. Burlesque acts also included 'chaotic and nebulous combination of dancing, singing, minstrelsy, witty repartee, political commentary, parodies of plays and scant clothing' (Wilson 2008, p. 18). These elements of parody,

political commentary, and camp are often absent from neo-burlesque. During the era of Vaudeville tours, it was typical to have a burlesque show that was part of the troupe (Briggeman 2009). In Vaudeville shows, there were multiple performance acts which traveled together, creating a variety show of sorts for live audiences in smaller towns where local performance venues were not common (Briggeman 2009). During the 1920s and 1930s, motion pictures became more commonplace and small towns built cinemas or movie houses; the film industry and local movie houses caused Vaudeville troupes to diminish in popularity and many died out (Briggeman 2009). The demise of Vaudeville marked a transitional moment for burlesque.

After Vaudeville days, burlesque performances evolved into sophisticated strip shows with glamorous gowns, gloves, hats, and furbelows. Burlesque was largely confined to clubs in larger cities with a few stars continuing their art from through the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars attribute the post-Vaudeville version of burlesque (one that moved from a narrative-based female-dominated performance to one that was titillating striptease with glamorous costuming) to French influence, specifically Parisian music club culture, where La Moulin Rouge drove the narrative out of burlesque and put the stripping performance as center stage (Steele 2001, King 2008, Briggeman 2009). Yet, even with the French version of burlesque, there were female performers who took control of their act, defining the dance, music, and costume themselves, which could be defined as an empowering move, even if the performance was not politically feminist.

The other element of early burlesque that could be perceived as feminist is the subversion of Victorian female sexuality and morality. Although Victorian women were corseted and covered to avoid titillating men and to preserve their modesty, chastity, and morality, burlesque flew in the face of that, allowing women to publically free themselves from the literal ties that bound them in the form of corsets, while still maintaining power over their bodies and presenting themselves as empowered, confident, and assured. However, the argument that a burlesque performer – or to extend the argument to contemporary times, a stripper – is empowered because she is controlling the use of her body and making money from her performance is a shaky one. Within the patriarchal system, cultural power is typically not afforded to women who take

their clothes off, even if the stripping women perceive the work as financially lucrative and therefore empowering within the economic systems of the time. In addition, most burlesque performers and today's strippers were/are exploited financially by the managers of the clubs. Certainly, women gain empowerment through the ability to earn cash in the capitalist culture. A burlesque (or neo-burlesque) performer, stripper, or porn star is able to generate money from their performances and by doing so increases their agency in a market economy. But the ability to make money hinges on whether there are enough men with money who find her sexually appealing and whether she fits into a generic heterosexual fantasy.

Neo-burlesque emerged around 1995, not coincidentally during the age of Feminist Backlash and Post-Feminist ideologies. One of the first neo-burlesque troupes to make a name for itself was a New York troupe, Velvet Hammer:

Velvet Hammer was founded in 1995, making it one of the earliest neo-burlesque troupes, and featured performers who combined vividly dyed hair, tattoos and other body modifications with pin-up imagery and distinctive satin corsets that instantly identified performers as belonging to the troupe. (Mansfield 2006, p. 7)

Velvet Hammer disrupted ideas of feminine sexuality by including performers who performed with 'punk' rather than 'porn' body markers. During this 1990s resurgence of burlesque, competing philosophies manifested in these re-vamped versions of burlesque. On one end of the continuum, there was a performance that called back to an affection or nostalgia for the original burlesque, a dance form of glamour and coy femininity, generally void of feminist politics. At the other end of the continuum was a decidedly feminist queering of the original art form, making feminist politics and gender/sexuality commentaries central to the performance. Feminist neo-burlesque subverts traditional burlesque and striptease in various ways, typically in body modification, body type, and accompanying narrative. Neo-burlesque that is not feminist is the one celebrated and marketed in the dominant culture; the primary way this version of neo-burlesque is marketed is one of empowering females to reclaim their sexuality by performing striptease for mainstream audiences, taking the sexual performance out of the venues of sex clubs and strip bars to venues that are more comfortable – and allegedly void of exploitation – for both the performer and her

audience. These venues include local theaters, conference centers, and other performance spaces that are not associated with strip/sex clubs.

Historically, burlesque artists from the early 1900s through to the 1970s prided themselves on not stripping to total nudity, performing artful dance, and keeping the performance 'fun,' that is steering clear of feminist politics or statements (Mansfield 2006). Burlesque queen Ann Corio said, in a 1976 interview about her show, *This was burlesque*,

There is no total nudity. The girls (*sic.*) are lovely and artistic, and they're terribly, terribly pretty. What is called burlesque today isn't that at all. Those girls aren't artists. They just take their clothes off, and they don't even do that very well.

Burlesque is exactly what it says it is. It's from the Italian word *burlare*, to satirize, to laugh. That's what we do, and we are not offensive. (as qtd in Mansfield 2006, p. 8)

There seems to be tension between Corio's idea of what she judges as 'not artists' and the idea of 'satire' she calls back to in the word 'burlare.' If her 'girls,' who she deems authentic burlesque performers, are 'lovely and artistic,' and 'terribly, terribly pretty' there is no satire. Who is laughing and at what? There seems to be no political viewpoint being stirred and discussed. In the mainstream neo-burlesque, Corio's version dominates and is billed as empowering, progressive.

One of the most well-known neo-burlesque performers today is Dita Von Teese. Von Teese is most famous for her 'Martini Dance,' where she appears on stage in a sequined robe and full-length cocktail gloves. Von Teese slowly strips down to nipple tassels and a G-string while she submerges herself in a giant martini glass sloshing with clear liquid. Von Teese would have an 'hour glass figure' except for her narrow hips. In other words, her body type is the twenty-first century version of sexy: boyish body structure hung with large breasts and round rump. Her white skin is flawless and her makeup harkens back to Marilyn Monroe. When she speaks (never during her performance) her voice is a cooing whisper of the 1950s sex kitten. Von Teese does not claim feminism. In fact, she may not even know what feminism is. In one interview, when asked if she was a feminist, Von Teese conflated feminism with femininity. 'If you understand feminism the way I do: being as feminine as possible' (qtd in Nally 2009, p.



634). For Von Teese, as for many mainstream burlesque performers, 'being as feminine as possible' translates into being a classical subject of the male gaze: pretty, passive, performing, and sexually alluring in a way that implies she *might* have sex with any given miscellaneous male audience member, but she is not 'easy.'

Both performers and promoters argue that this 'retro' burlesque is elegant and feminine. These performers argue that burlesque allows them to 'reclaim' a lost femininity, that is, a femininity that was destroyed by feminism:

Neo-burlesque performers utilize overt femininity in this way as part of the project of feminism. Burlesque can be framed as part of the larger third-wave feminist interest in the reclaiming of *girliness* – trappings of femininity that are all the more fascinating because they are no longer required. (Fensterstock as qtd by Fargo 2008, p. 33)

The problem with this reclamation of 'girliness' is that when femininity equates to powerlessness, where girls are small children lacking cultural capital and any tangible power, voiceless and posing for heterosexual male titillation, it defies the quiddity of feminist ideology where empowerment is the key objective. Fensterstock suggests that these 'trappings of femininity' (powerless, passive, and submissive) are interesting because they are not part of how females gain power, thanks to the feminist movement. Yet, as Ariel Levy so deftly argues in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2006), in the Raunch Culture these uber-feminine/girly performances touted as liberation are one of the few ways that females can gain access to power, where their power resides almost exclusively in their sexual appeal to heterosexual men. A short-lived and precarious power is easily and arbitrarily denied to most women.

The post-feminist version of neo-burlesque that is often performed purports to empower women by virtue of their dancing in garter belts and push-up bras in public spaces. In this narrative, the woman allegedly controls her body, her sexuality, her desire, and is liberated by performing it for an audience. Pole dancing is sold as fitness. Stripping for an audience is marketed as empowering dance. However, if the heterosexist script of what is 'sexy' is not changed, and if the audience is allowed to gaze without their narrative of patriarchal female sexuality being disrupted, any attempt at empowerment is empty. Recently, in the town where I live, a visiting neo-burlesque

performer was billed as integrating comedy and burlesque. Was it too much to expect funny political commentary about female sexuality, the body, and cultural definitions of femininity within this burlesque performance? Apparently. The performer was an image of a 1950s Playboy pinup, right down to the fish net hose and red corset that matched her lipstick. The 'comedy' part of the show was bad stand up, executed by a woman attempting to strip and wiggle in a comedy club context. From the predominantly male audience, there were more whoops and wolf whistles than laughter.

Contrast this 'sexy burlesque' with 'underground burlesque.' Underground burlesque is a radical off-shoot of neo-burlesque where camp/parody/politics is center stage and the performer subverts narratives of female sexuality, often in shocking ways. These disruptions of traditional scripts demand that the audience think about the complexities of desire, sexuality, and identity, often through a feminist lens. In underground burlesque, the audience is not allowed to consume the performance without disruption. The audience is part of the performance and called upon to respond, and often perform, in ways that disrupt or queer the traditional audience of striptease and sex performance where male sexual arousal is the primary objective. In contrast, neo-burlesque performers replicate the patriarchal images of women, femininity, and female sexuality instead of challenging them; they position themselves as sex objects for the male gaze. The audience members – be they male or female – must adopt the male gaze to enjoy the show, viewing the women as objects of sexual desire, posing, stripping, and performing for the audience's gratification, billed as sexual liberation for women.

In feminist/underground burlesque, the audience is forced to confront the script of female sexuality as performance for male titillation, disrupting patriarchal definitions of female sexuality. An example would be a burlesque performer who begins with the expected burlesque striptease, but, at the very climax of the performance, stops to discuss the trauma of childhood rape, forcing the audience to consider the reality of childhood rape and assault as a prelude to adult sex work. Nally (2009) cites the example of a neo-burlesque performer who is a stripping nun, creating a critique of the church: 'To stage both images of the nun and the stripper simultaneously collapses those binary oppositions women are expected to assume: this figure is neither virgin nor

whore, but both, occupying an interstice or medial territory' (Nally 2009, p. 623).

Some other examples of underground burlesque include Poppy M. Cherry wearing a white bridal gown, casting her eyes demurely down, and then stripping to Tammy Wynette's *D-I-V-O-R-C-E*, finding liberation in divorce; or Doris La Trine's routine 'Birth of a Porn Star,' where she diagrams her body with a permanent black marker as she dances and sings, indicating where to cut for cosmetic surgery, asking the audience to think about how female bodies, especially those who perform in the sex industry, are reduced to surgically constructed body parts to make them 'sexy' for the male gaze. In another performance, La Trine dances in a toilet, a representation of the degradation of female sex workers who strip, that is 'dance' for money. The neo-burlesque troupe Dirty Martini and The World Famous \*BOB\* flaunt their larger, older bodies and turn neo-burlesque into a form of camp or drag, exaggerating what are typically sexual tropes to the point of garish ridicule. Another feminist burlesque performer begins her act with a traditional striptease, but then stops to change her tampon or smears herself with her own blood, disrupting the moment of titillation with the reality of menstruation.

These above examples show how some feminists are taking neo-burlesque and creating feminist performance art, often creating discomfort for the audience. These moments of discomfort are designed to force the audience to think about definitions of female sexuality or oppressive systems of power that deny women ownership of their sexual experiences and identities. Some may argue that there is a feminist message when there are various body types, ethnicities, classes, races, or abilities performing the striptease. Still, without the feminist commentary, these 'other' subject positions run the risk of being fetishized by the audience or falling into a genre of sex work or existing fetish groups where women's bodies falling outside the dominant prescription are the very core of the objectification and degradation. Certainly, deviation from the standard porn script (or 'classic burlesque' script) needs to be present to constitute feminist performance art, but deviation or disruption is not enough. Without the feminist commentary, engaging the audience with complicated questions regarding sex work, female sexuality, female bodies, and issues of power and control, the performance does little to challenge oppressive views of female sexuality as defined by the patriarchy. The audience needs to understand that there is a subversion of patriarchal female sexuality

in the performance and the performer needs to push the audience to interrogate these subversions and representations.

### **Mainstreaming and commodification of burlesque**

Levy, in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2006), writes about how the porn industry has defined female sexuality and what that means for contemporary women. Coining the phrase 'Raunch Culture,' Levy writes that the porn industry has sold itself to women as empowering sexuality. Female sexuality, in a culture where porn is easily accessed (no longer taboo now that the Internet distributes porn anonymously to the consumer) but consumed as a mainstream pass time, becomes a sexuality based on the scripts written and rewritten in pornography. In the Raunch Culture, women are told they can achieve empowerment by exposing their bodies and performing sex acts to gain power over men. Girls and young women strive to be 'one of the guys' by either seeking out porn and sex clubs as entertainment, by engaging in sex work, or mimicking sex workers: the happy, rich, empowered hooker (Levy 2006). Neo-burlesque is a natural extension of this Raunch Culture . . . perhaps even a primary part of it. Burlesque turns 'stripping' – traditionally seen as tawdry, exploitative sex work – into glamorous play, pitched as empowerment and sexual liberation. Whereas sex workers who strip at a club may be considered pathetic or deserving of degradation by the audience, be they male or female, neo-burlesque shows move the performer to a different venue with a more 'up-scale' audience. The script is the same, but the context shifts and therefore the women performers say theirs is an active sexual liberation.

On the Canadian radio show *The f word*, two feminist hosts interviewed a neo-burlesque performer, Chrystal Precious. Even as the hosts attempt to engage Precious in a discussion of feminist issues in burlesque (classism, racism, and privilege), Precious seems unable or unwilling to interrogate her performances through those lenses. Precious defines what she does as very different from a 'stripper' because of intent, venue, and audience. Precious states:

The distinction is made (between stripping and burlesque) when I am booking things with people. It was an easy way to say, 'We are not going to grind against a pole. We are going to do old school Moulin Rouge sort of stuff. There is a

difference from a business side as well. We are not doing private dances. We are self-employed. The way it is structured is different ... I perform 3 – 4 times a week. Sometimes we are doing corporate parties. Sometimes we are doing business people who want a cocktail and relax and enjoy a sexy show.

Sometimes we do shows at raves, underground. The behavior is super different. For burlesque dancers, you better watch us. We are putting on a show. You are not going to get as many women who are interested in the glamorous aspect; they aren't going to go to the strip club. The guys are there because they feel comfortable that we are giving them permission to look at us. (Barer *et al.* 2011)

In this excerpt we can see Precious addressing issues of class and sexuality, but only by pitting herself and her performance as a burlesque dancer in a different (better/higher) category than a stripper at a club. The distinction, for her, is not only that she has control over her bookings, but that she is not 'grinding against a pole,' but doing a 'classier' sexual dance for her audience. She makes a point of further defining this hierarchy between what she does and what strippers do by articulating in various ways that her audience is 'business men': people in suits. Class issues emerge both in how she describes the performance, the socio-economic level of the men in her audience, and the location of the venues (not clubs, but convention centers). For Precious, elevating herself out of the low- class 'stripper' category relies on what she does, where she does it, and who watches. Misogyny is embedded in this classism: those *other* women are strippers; she is a performer. She is in control and a stripper is not.

Burlesque has become a code word for 'high class stripping.' Neo-burlesque is billed as 'edgy' performance art, even as it serves to re-inscribe Raunch Culture. As Precious does, many burlesque performers go to great lengths to disassociate from what they see as 'strippers' or sex workers. They argue that burlesque (unlike pole dancing/ stripping) calls back to 'old school' Moulin Rouge performance (Barer *et al.* 2011). Issues of class permeate such beliefs: a sex worker in a bar or on the street is considered a lower-class woman than the burlesque dancer who is orchestrating 'the performance venue'. However, even as these performers are very aware that they do not want to be associated with the class of 'strippers,' they seem unable or unwilling to interrogate issues of class in what they do. Neither are issues of race, ethnicity, body

type, and ability discussed with any depth. Although some neo-burlesque performers argue that they are subverting the dominant culture's model of female sexuality with their body type/size, the range of variation appears quite small and their discussion of that disruption often ends there.

Neo-burlesque performers tend to see themselves as performers who enjoy the performance as a side-hobby; they segregate themselves from bar strippers or other sex workers by saying they are not performing burlesque in a bar for money. Precious represents this profile. In Fargo's research on neo-burlesque (2008), she establishes a general description of the contemporary burlesque dancer.

The typical burlesque performer of today (if such a formula can be identified) is more likely to be a young, educated, liberal woman, often living in an urban setting and holding down a full-time, professional career in addition to her performing interests. (p. 23)

The term 'liberal' is misleading in this context. Does it mean that the performer is 'cool/hip' about displaying the body? Does it mean that her politics swing to the left? A descriptor that Fargo does not use is 'feminist' to describe these performers. In fact, the performers, when quoted, sound nothing like feminists when asked to reflect upon why they like to perform burlesque. In her article on burlesque, Chernikoff (2007) suggests that neo-burlesque is 'more nerdy than sexy' and that '[b]urlesque has become intellectual.' Yet, there seems to be few performers who are engaged in intellectual interrogation about their performances. Chernikoff posits that the performance is intellectual because it is performed by highly educated women, females with degrees, yet another classist reference to the distinction between 'burlesque' and 'stripping:' people with GED's<sup>2</sup> strip; people with Ph.D.s perform burlesque. Fargo (2008) quips, 'One could argue that burlesque truly has become "the thinking man's stripping"' (p. 25). This distinction, however, is not based on any thoughtful or thought-provoking performance, but the cultural and classist value of the woman performing and her degree/social status.

Many neo-burlesque performers also position themselves above strippers because they believe that their audience is 'higher class' than the strip club audience and that if they are not getting dollar bills tucked into their costume, in turn, they are a

higher class performer. In addition to this overt classist dynamic that operates within the neo-burlesque community, there is the commodification of products, performers, and troupes. The Pussycat Dolls is one example, marketing t-shirts, music videos, CDs, and other merchandise; another is the mainstream film, *burlesque*, starring Christine Aguilera and Cher (2010). These representations of burlesque remove the feminist political commentary for one of female sexuality that peddles empowerment through the consumption of burlesque costumes, films, and music. Nally (2009) writes:

In recent years, with the advent of neo-burlesque, there has been a concerted effort to unite the radicalism of feminism with provocative sexual display . . . . However, with its greater prominence on the world's stage, there is also the concomitant problem of how far burlesque can be an innovative or activist form and how a feminist critique can be employed in such a practice. When chain stores and fashionistas are advising how to dress like a burlesquer, the form most obviously becomes commodity. (p. 621)

Not only does being a neo-burlesque performer become a commodity, but the argument that this version of female sexuality is empowering is problematic.

### **Pro-sex v. uptight feminists**

The debate in the feminist community surrounding porn and sex work has been circulating for decades. Although Andrea Dworkin died in 2005, her voice continues to echo throughout these discussions. Unfortunately, there are many – even some feminists – who want to distill the complicated argument of female sexuality, empowerment, and the porn industry to a 'pro-sex v. anti-sex' binary. This uncomplicated (and erroneous) binary suggests that being 'pro-sex' means that sex work should be seen as a legitimate choice to women, without stigma, moral judgment, or pity. This camp pits themselves against those who argue that sex work is exploitative and demeaning as 'anti-sex,' uptight, old-fashioned, repressed, and even frigid. However, feminists activists and feminist theorists such as Dworkin (1974, 1989) take issue with this false binary, arguing against the 'liberation by stripping,' stating that within the porn and sex work industries, it is impossible to gain individual power as a female. Dworkin writes:

Pornography incarnates male supremacy. It is the DNA of male dominance. Every rule of sexual abuse, every nuance of sexual sadism, every highway and byway of sexual exploitation, is encoded in it. It's what men want us to be, think we are, make us into; how men use us; not because biologically they are men but because this is how their social power is organized. (1989, p. 5)

To argue their perspective, researchers such as Holsopple (1999) site the connection between sex work and sexual abuse. Holsopple (1999) found that 100% of strippers were victims of sexual assault, leading credence to the argument that sex works exploit females who have already been traumatized by sexual assault. Feminist theorists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988), Bart *et al.* (1985), and Beneke (1995) argue that 'pornography cannot be separated from the objectification of the male gaze over the female form and the subsequent degradation of the female form' (King 2008, p. 1). In reflecting on this false binary of 'sex-positive feminists' and 'anti-sex feminists,' Barer *et al.* (2011) state:

The sex-positive v. radical feminist divide ... has sort of been rejuvenated in the Third Wave. I think that divide is the myth. The term 'sex-positive' implies there is a type of feminist that is NOT sex-positive. This argument frustrates me when it supports the male gaze. I dislike that burlesque is 'sex-positive' feminism and if it makes me uncomfortable, I somehow don't like sex. I think, as feminists, we have to constantly present challenges to these images instead of replicating them.

When feminists begin a critique of sex work or burlesque, some hear it as a judgment of an individual woman rather than a commentary on how the work/dance codifies oppressive beliefs about female sexuality and heteronormativity. Barer *et al.* (2011) state:

A lot of these empowerment narratives around burlesque are women feeling empowered 'for themselves' and that is the problem. The other thing is that feminists are not supposed to tell other women that they aren't empowered. 'Who are you to tell me that I am not empowered?' What I think we are being critical of is not individual women, but the dominant male gaze where the way to gain power is to take off their clothes and get male attention and get power by that. Dworkin and MacKinnon argued that anti-porn feminists are not 'anti-sex,' but



rather anti-exploitation, arguing that being anti-porn was a civil rights position (1988). MacKinnon and Dworkin's arguments against porn and sex work refused to simplify the complicated issues of how sexuality, power, and oppression intersect in the porn industry. Some who claim to be feminist performers dodge the politics of power and sexuality with remarks that suggest a liberation in claiming sexuality in front of an audience (Barer *et al.* 2011). These uncomplicated statements reflect a naïve approach to female sexuality within the context of a patriarchal system of oppression. More complicated questions to emerge are 'Why does a woman feel taking off her clothes for an audience empowering? Where does her power come from in that context? If the audience sees her as a sex object, can she claim individual power over the audience?'

Post-feminism and Raunch Culture perpetuate the belief that feminism denies women desire or sexuality. This myth of feminism being anti-sex or anti-sexual expression was articulated by a neo-burlesque performer interviewed by Nally (2009). Stah (the performer) confesses: 'I think that the burlesque revival in contemporary culture has been led by women for women. As far as the female performers are concerned I consider the desire to eroticize themselves as an unconscious backlash against feminist ideology' (Nally 2009, p. 628). Stah implies that feminists work against female erotica or sexual empowerment and that neo-burlesque remedies this. Precious, the burlesque performer interviewed on the feminist radio show, illustrates the uncomplicated position regarding female sexuality and performance. She states that 'If we are all going to be judged by the male gaze, can't we accept it and work with it. It isn't the ideal, but for the women who are heterosexual, I do have this desire to have men to think I am hot' (Barer *et al.* 2011). Precious knows enough feminist theory to recognize the male gaze, but instead of discovering ways to subvert that subject position or to call upon her male audience to question their point of privilege and power over her sexuality, she capitulates to the power dynamic, convincing herself she gains self-worth through her own objectification: she succeeds if men think she is 'hot.' Even in her ability to push her audience to more complicated views of female sexuality, she feels disempowered. Although there is no homogenous audience for any venue, regardless of the demography, politics, and motivation of the audience, the performer can pull and push them in various directions, causing them to think about what they are

viewing. However, most neo-burlesque performers seem to fall pretty to the patriarchy's party line of 'empowerment through objectified female,' as Precious articulates above.

### **Disruptions and revisions of patriarchal definitions of female sexuality**

What would female sexuality, untouched by patriarchal power structures that place women as objects to be consumed and used for pleasure look like? Can we even imagine what female sexuality is outside of patriarchal misogyny? Almost everything embedded in female sexuality comes from skewed patriarchal ideas of women as objects for male pleasure, presenting women as easily available, passive, and orifices to enter and violate: high heels, corsets, push-up bras, vaginal orgasm, anal sex, fellatio, woman-on-woman sex performed for a male audience, dildos in the shape of penises (right down to the glans and bulging veins), and bondage.

The clothing, the trappings of burlesque that define the art form, invariably calls upon traditional costumes of what is considered titillating to heterosexual males: stockings and garter belts, lacey bras that push breasts up and out, corsets, see-through negligees, and rocket-high heel shoes. These costumes are not inherently 'sexy,' but defined to be so by the patriarchal culture. Most of the pieces would imply exposure (a vulnerable subject position), restriction (preventing a female body from moving about in the world as an active agent), and helplessness (infantilizing an adult). The meanings of these furbelows can be reinvented or recast, however, depending on context, intent, and use. In her fascinating book on the history of the corset, Steele (2001) writes about the various ways a corset can be worn or perceived. Although many people would argue that the history of the corset is one which restricted the female body, a way of containing it to be smaller and constricting the waist and hips of the wearer, Steele writes that the corset was also seen as a garment of empowerment for some. In the nineteenth century, it was aligned with decency and keeping female bodies contained/composed (Steele 2001, p. 30). But in the eighteenth century, conservatives argued that the corset would keep women from being able to bear children and hindered their 'maternal function' (Steele 2001, p. 59). In that earlier context, wearing the corset would be an act of owning one's body, rejecting the role of mother, and embracing a

sexuality unrelated to maternity. As Nally (2009) writes in her article on burlesque:

To reclaim such a complicated and loaded symbol as a corset in the current climate is therefore charged with a variety of cultural impositions. Aware of the divergent ways in which historical attire may be understood, women may use various discursive strategies of mimicry, satire, exaggeration and overt theatricality as a method of critique. (p. 629)

The corset can include a feminist commentary, but that message/history/context must be part of the critique or the audience will miss the significance. This type of overt feminist critique is what is largely missing from today's burlesque. The hard work is determining what a female sexuality might look like freed of the patriarchy misogyny. The commentary can continue with neo-burlesque, but only with concerted effort and smart feminist analysis. Feminist neo-burlesque is the hope of subverting, or at least thinking about, patriarchal definitions of female sexuality. Female sexuality as portrayed in neo-burlesque and a feminist analysis of burlesque performances are complicated and they need to continue. There are far too few articles and scholarly works that approach the complexities of this topic. There can be many different critiques and perspectives of any given context or performance. The point, however, is that feminist critique and analysis – both on behalf of the performer and by the audience facilitated by the performer – is essential to making neo-burlesque a transgressive political act. A larger, more voluptuous female body *can be* defying a representation of the Victoria Secret model, therefore causing a disruption in the typical gender script. Yet the act of exposing that female body in front of an ogling audience is not automatically a feminist subversion as it could be fetishized in objectifying ways. Without this feminist critique and conversation, neo-burlesque often lists toward yet another way women sell out to the Raunch Culture and peddle sexual disempowerment under the guise of empowerment and sexual liberation. That is not to say that all neo-burlesque performers are engaged in this type of performance. However (and as always), it is the hard work of feminist performers to disrupt the dominant narrative, in this context, of what it means to be a neo-burlesque performer.

## **Conclusion**

As glossy magazines celebrating neo-burlesque proliferate, displayed next to mainstream 'women's magazines' such as Glamour and Vogue which also directly and indirectly promote the neo-burlesque culture and aesthetic, as pole dancing classes are touted as aerobic exercise, as women boasting Ph.D.s engage in elegant stripping as a way of expressing their empowerment, we need to turn a more critical feminist eye toward neo-burlesque. The complexities and difficult issues of female sexuality, female empowerment, and women's rights to own their bodies are all entwined in the 'art form' of neo-burlesque. It is up to feminist scholars and feminist performers to engage in regular and thoughtful dialog about how burlesque capitulates to female sexual disempowerment even as it purports to do the opposite, and how we can change that to engage in feminist sexual commentary with the audience. We need to celebrate the feminist and underground burlesque that exposes and confronts – both for performer and audience – the objectification, degradation, and disempowerment inherent in a female sexuality defined by the patriarchy. We need to resist and speak out against a female sexuality that relies on commodification of female bodies as opposed to one that acts boldly as a disruption of pornography narratives. We need not condemn neo-burlesque, only ask more of it. We need to celebrate, talk about, and promote the performers who are doing the work that forces us to think in complicated ways about female sexuality and the patriarchal systems of power that bear down on female sexuality. The complicated and fraught issues of female sexuality, as they exist in the performance art that is neo-burlesque, are worthy of much more conversation, interrogation, and work.

## Notes

1. For an excellent historical overview of burlesque, read Jane Briggeman's *burlesque: a living history* (2009).
2. In the United States, a General Education Development is a diploma awarded to people who did not complete high school, but instead studied the objectives for a high school diploma and took an examination to demonstrate that they have met the objectives.

## Notes on contributor

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