

**“Burlesque Female Behemoths”:
Transgressions of Fat, Femme Burlesque**

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

Jessica Giusti

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Co-advisers Dr. Jacquelyn Zita and Dr. Ananya Chatterjea

September 2012

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Acknowledgments

***“We can only be said to be alive
in those moments when our hearts
are conscious of our treasures.”***

-Thornton Wilder

The undertaking of this dissertation was completed with the support of many people, including faculty, colleagues, friends, and family, whose consistent encouragement was its guiding light. I am indebted first and foremost to my two co-advisers, Dr. Jacquelyn N. Zita and Dr. Ananya Chatterjea. Dr. Zita’s unyielding enthusiasm and vision shaped this project from start to finish. She has been a regular advocate for me and for my work. Thank you for your warmth and support; it has never gone unrecognized. Dr. Chatterjea breathed life into my project from the start and instilled in me the skill and nuance it takes to read and write of bodies. Her ongoing advice and support throughout this process has been irreplaceable and I value her continued encouragement and care. Thank you for continually reminding me that this project extends beyond the academy and for working with me to create something of which I am so very proud.

Special thanks goes to the other two members of my committee, Dr. Jigna Desai and Dr. Roderick Ferguson. Dr. Desai has been like an honorary adviser to me and I am forever grateful for her vision and her unyielding support. Thank you for your precious comments. This project is truly strengthened by your

involvement. Dr. Ferguson's feedback on my work and the courses I've taken with him over time have introduced me to new scholarship and ideas that are central to my project today. Thank you for sharing your knowledge with me.

It has been a pleasure working with the faculty, staff, and students of the Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies Department at the University of Minnesota during my tenure as a doctoral student. This work would have never been possible if it were not for the support I was given by the department in the way of the Susan Geiger Fellowship for Feminist Scholarship. I am honored to have been the recipient of the award, to have produced a project worthy of Susan Geiger's memory, and thankful for its enormous impact in allowing me to complete my dissertation. I am grateful for the faculty who all played a hand in shaping me as an academic and future educator over the past seven years. Thank you to Susan Craddock, Zenzele Isoke, Amy Kaminsky, Reg Kunzel, Pashmina Murthy, Richa Nagar, Sara Puotinen, Naomi Scheman and Edén Torres. A huge amount of thanks is also dedicated to Idalia Robles De León for her unequivocal help, patience, and friendship along the way.

I want to also extend thanks to the GLBTA Programs Office for choosing me as a recipient of their Graduate Student Award, which aided in my research travels to conduct fieldwork. I also owe my gratitude to Anne Phibbs, whose kindness and professional guidance have been invaluable. Additionally, I want to extend sincere thanks to the staff at the Center for Writing, particularly Katie Levin, and the participants of the 2011 Dissertation Writing Retreat for such a

fantastic and productive 12 days. The legacy of that retreat extended far beyond our two weeks of work together. A hefty thanks to UMN librarian, Kim Clarke, as well, for her expertise in research and citation styles, as well as her ongoing enthusiasm for my work.

Without the trust and investment of the performers who allowed me into their homes and lives, this project would never be as comprehensive a study – nor would it have been as much fun. I am so thankful for all of the performers who participated in this project and the many friendships that have blossomed as a result. My thanks goes to Krista, stage name: Kentucky Fried Woman; Stephanie LadyMonster; Chavé Alexander, stage name: Alotta Boutté; Debbie Carlsen; Sossity Chiricuzio; Juicy D. Light; Jenny Lowery, stage name: Pidgeon VonTramp; Becky Reitzes; Miz Ginger Snapz; Jukie Sunshine; Kristen Tucker; Cookie Woolner, stage name: Cookie Tuff; and past and present members of both Rubenesque Burlesque and the Queen Bees. Further, my gratitude and respect goes to the late Heather MacAllister and the original members of her Fat Bottom Revue, the first fat burlesque troupe. Heather's memory is alive and well in each performer I spoke with and her impact is so far-reaching in so many of the communities this project engages. I am thankful for having experienced, even second-hand, her beauty, her innovation, and her power.

My communities of friends and colleagues in Minneapolis have made me a better scholar and a better person over the past seven years. I am grateful to my graduate school colleagues who have engaged me in countless hours of

conversation about research, scholarship, social justice, and plain old life. Thank you to my fellow graduate students, both past and present - in the Feminist Studies Program, but particularly to Paporí Bora, Kandace Creel Falcón, Diane Detournay, Mashinda Hedgmon, and Rachel Raimist.

To my departmental colleagues who have also become my dearest friends, I cannot ever thank you enough for your love, your confidence, and the entertainment you have provided over the years. You have been there for tears of joy and sorrow and have always known just what to do or say. Katie Bashore, your knowledge knows no bounds and you have contributed to this project so significantly. Thank you for always talking ideas through with me, for providing invaluable feedback, and for being my forever comrade in the ways of big hair. You brought the East Coast to the Midwest just when I needed it. Charlotte Karem Albrecht, my femme sister, I value your continued influence on this project, but more than anything, your big, strong heart that greets everyone and every day with such loving care. Thank you for being my emotional rock and for that one greatest joke of all time that still has me laughing. To Elakshi Kumar, what words? You have claims on a piece of my heart always and forever. Thank you for challenging me academically and in life to be a better version of myself. You once said that you were a better butch when you were around me and I always wanted to tell you that, for this femme, it goes both ways. Thanks for always “seeing” me.

To my American Studies friends who took my cohort-of-one and made me an honorary member of your own, I owe you my endless thanks and love. Jasmine Kar Tang, Cathryn Merla Watson, and Karissa White, your brilliance and friendships have helped me grow on so many different levels intellectually and emotionally. I am so grateful for all of your knowledge, your support, and your frequent - and unchecked - laughter. No other group throws a potluck like this one, nor do they sing such dang good karaoke! Emily Smith Beitiks, thanks for having the insight to bring me into the AMST fold and for being one of my very dearest friends. Your project has influenced mine in so many ways and your continued guidance and support in talking through my own work has been so enormously helpful. Despite the miles, our friendship will always be family to me. Thanks for your love.

They say it takes a village and the following folks are a part of mine. For the help, friendship, good faith, and networking along the way, thanks to Elizabeth Ault, Molly Bennett, Bevin Branlandingham, Michael David Franklin, Sasha T. Goldberg, Becca Hammond, Doug Jensen, and Alex Mendoza Covarrubias. Your support has come in so many varied forms and I am so thankful for each and every piece. Thanks also to my Femme Conference cheerleaders and dear friends, particularly Damien Luxe, Krista Smith, and Jen Valles. I am routinely inspired by each of you: your ferocity, your power, and your tenderness. You are the kind of femmes I grew up dreaming I'd become. Thank you for acknowledging me as part of your clans.

Lastly, to my family whose unrelenting faith in me I am grateful for each day. Uncle Paul, Uncle Bob, Aunt Vickie, and Uncle David, a girl couldn't ask for better. Your emails, text messages, and phone calls across the miles made the Midwest feel not so far away. As my family, you are always on my mind and in my heart and your support has made the tough times worth it. A piece of this accomplishment belongs to each of you.

To Kelley Cunningham, my chosen sister, you know me better than anyone and manage that responsibility so perfectly. Thank you for knowing how to make me laugh, for your truth-speak, and for always holding my feelings. Your belief in me has driven this project when it has stalled. There's no one I'd rather live across the street from in my old age.

Chris Walker, you have my love and gratitude forever for weathering the storm with me firsthand. Your constant support kept me afloat through the squalls. Thanks for holding everything together - namely, me - and for all of the "dad dinners," that were anything but. You are my true blue, old school, one and only. I love you and can't wait for what comes next.

Hilda Frei, my beloved grandmother whose wisdom and character know no bounds. You have always been so invested in my education and me and I thank you for providing me with the tools - both literally and figuratively - to achieve the goals I've set for myself. Your wit, your humor, and your shoot-from-the-hip way of living is how I aspire to be. I am filled with endless amounts of love and admiration for you.

To my parents, who have never once - within reason - told me I couldn't achieve something. Thank you for indulging my every interest as wild and, sometimes, fleeting as they have been. You are my whole heart. To my mother, Linda L. Giusti, your love is a constant for which I am grateful every day. I routinely marvel at my luck of having you for a parent and for my dearest friend. Thank you for your sacrifices and your support in helping me get here. I love you and am so proud to be your daughter. This accomplishment is all for you and for Daddy, who always believed I could do anything short of flying.

*This dissertation is dedicated to my mother,
Linda L. Giusti,
and to the memory of my father,
Jack R. Giusti.*

***“Two or three things I know for sure,
and one is that I would rather go naked
than wear the coat the world has made for me.”***

- Dorothy Allison

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Introduction

Among the record stores and head shops that remain a part of San Francisco's notorious Haight-Ashbury district stands Club Deluxe, a bar and lounge that seems a second home for the city's aging rockabilly set. The aesthetic is retro, late-1950s American: the bar is composed of a shiny, polished wood grain, the lighting is warm and muted, and the plush, velvet furniture and upholstery makes the space feel seductive. It's late May 2007 in the Bay and the night outside is cool and foggy, but inside Club Deluxe it is anything but. The bar and lounge areas are both filled with people clinking glasses, low, but ample chatter, and the occasional trill of laughter. The crowd has gathered on this Thursday night for Little Minsky's Burlesque and Variety Show, which has been a standing, monthly show at Club Deluxe for the past seven years.

I've attended tonight to see one of San Francisco's most renowned performers, Alotta Boutté who is known for her mastery of the stage in her roles both as a performer and as an emcee. When the lights begin to dim the audience is quick to quiet, evidence that there are many regulars among the crowd. After a brief introduction from the host whose bawdy humor is a nod to burlesque's vaudevillian roots, the lounge darkens even more and the only noise is of the bartender shaking up a batch of martinis at the bar in the back. A low pop and gentle hum prickles the speaker system and the small row of lights atop the stage let out a golden glow illuminating the empty floor and the background of

dark velvet curtains. The rich jade tassels that hang from the plush valances sway gently from the energy in the room. Already, most audience members are anxiously propped on the edges of their seats.

The unaccompanied voice of Nina Simone comes through the sound system, singing the solitary opening bars to "Feelin' Good." When the first stanza is through and the strutting, descending beat of the instrumentals begins, Alotta Boutté emerges from the back right corner of the stage and strides powerfully to its center. Her strong, high-stepped arrival - at contrast with the slow, swaggering beat - is a testament to her assuredness and command of the stage. Immediately, she begins a rhythmic swishing of her wide hips and each bump meets with the steady pulse of the horns. Her confidence is palpable backed up by Simone's lyrics that "it's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life," and as she begins to shed pieces of clothing, she does so with smooth, sweeping grace. With her back turned to the audience, she slowly slinks out of her black satin dress, each drag of it down her skin revealing more skin and causing the audience to yelp and whistle.

When she dons only her elaborately embossed bra, a pair of elbow-length gloves, and pair of panties with a string of fringe affixed to the waistband, I become most fixated. Because while others are appreciating the bounce and jiggle of Boutté's ample bust and derriere, I am honed in on that singular filament of gold frill rippling with the constant movement and gyration of her waist and hips. I watch closely as the delicate edging gets caught in places under the soft

flesh of her belly roll and blush imagining myself in that position; the unease it causes to think of that part of myself exposed. As if sensing my, simultaneous, fear and wonderment, Boutté saunters to the front corner of the stage where I'm sitting and begins an intense, rhythmic shimmy that intensifies along with the audience's reaction, a sound that can only be described as "pure joy." At once, all rolls and ripples of her luminous flesh wriggle in tandem, allowing for loose waves of fat and muscle to quake concurrently - an ocean of supple, pliant skin and sensuality. In this frenzied moment that meets with the climax of Simone's vocal ascent, Boutté's audience is off their seats applauding as she abruptly ceases her quaking to take a flourishing final bow. As she spins on one foot to turn and exit the side of the stage, I notice the golden tassels of her skirt have all been shaken loose, a ribbon of golden, glittering strands spotlighting and adorning her belly's girth. She is magnificent and her audience reflects back to her the appreciation and care it takes to dance, wiggle, and strip publicly as a fat, Black femme.

* * *

The above recap of Alotta Boutté's performance at Club Deluxe is my attempt at taking readers inside the site of this dissertation so that one can proceed with an image and notion of what queer, fat femme-ininity is capable of producing through the medium of neo-burlesque.¹ The re-telling of Boutté's

1 I choose to use the word "fat" to describe particular bodies in this project for several reasons. For one, using "fat," as opposed to words such as "overweight" or "obese" detaches these bodies from medicalization, which indiscriminately strips them of power and agency by proliferating a compulsion to concepts of "health" that exclude fat subjects. The second reason, is to align this project with the fat activist movement, which seeks to reclaim "fat" from its negative associations in hopes of re-conceiving it to be just another adjective for describing some bodies. Additionally, I use "femme-ininity" in this project as a way of distinguishing between conventional notions of

dance is a reminder that this project emerges from the intersections of queer and corporeal studies with performance studies and centers materiality - its tangibility, its motions - first and foremost as a response to the expanse of cultural studies work that obscures a consideration of the flesh. This dissertation relies upon the reading of performance observations like the one above in order to explain how the often-understudied realms of the body, its movements, and its abilities are fertile sites of knowledge production both intellectually and physically. Before embarking on the examination of these rich and tangible studies of specific performances, and engage with the question of “why neo-burlesque?” it is necessary that I contextualize the histories, terms, and rhetoric that shapes the multiple layers of fat, queer performance. Only by first examining this site through the theoretical framings of political movements - such as fat activism - and the neoliberal regimes that attempt to conflate fatness and queerness with risk and shame - i.e., medicalization and moral discourse - can we truly begin to read the complexity of these performances and the magnitude of their impact, both academically and culturally.

Rather, my work theorizes how the popularity of fat, queer femmes performing burlesque reveals possibility in corporeal “failures,” creating a new body politic that celebrates material “excess” and aberrance whilst deriding and dismantling hegemonic structures of normalcy. The trussing of fatness with illness,

femininity and the queered version of femininity, performed by femmes. I will explain more of this distinction and elaborate on what I believe the characteristics of “femme-ininity” are in Chapter 4.

slovenliness, and lack of morality is visually and discursively reproduced *ad nauseum*. In an attempt at disruption, this project engages the emerging field of fat studies and the current, decades-long project of fat activism in order to reclaim fatness (alongside queer femininity) distanced from medicalization and apart from cultural norms that claim it to be repulsive.

In studying fat, queer burlesque, I encourage a reading of fat bodies not in terms of their perceived limitations, but rather suggest a *re*-reading in regards to what these bodies offer creatively and what they can provoke when shifting the paradigms of aestheticism and desirability. This project, however, is not one of “positivity” in that it does not seek to simply state that fat is inherently unsightly in comparison to the “norm” and then suggest a rearticulation of it as acceptable or attractive; i.e. it is not akin to something like the “black is beautiful” campaign of the American 1960’s Civil Rights Movement.² Rather, my work theorizes how the popularity of fat, queer femmes performing burlesque reveals possibility in corporeal “failures,” creating a new body politic that celebrates material “excess” and aberrance whilst deriding and dismantling hegemonic structures of normalcy.³

This dissertation seeks to consider fat, queer burlesque and the femmes who perform it within the intersections of fat, queer, and performance studies in

2 I say this in order to disassociate the project from acceptance narratives whose main goal is to read marginality through positivity in an attempt to normalize that which is considered anomalous.

3 I use the term “excess” here to reference those elements of the body (in the case of this project fatness and queerness) that cause it to fall outside the bounds of “normal.” More so, I attribute a particular feeling of panic or chaos to my use of the term, as excess here refers to bodies that are considered to be “out of control.” Fat bodies, queer bodies, are disobedient bodies; they are the blatant rejection of a collective coercion that both confines and implores subjects to strive for a standard definition of “normalcy.” Additionally, I derive my use of “failures” from the scholarships of Jack Halberstam and Jose Muñoz. I will visit their work in much more depth in Chapter 4.

order to forge ahead with both scholastic and activist work that contemplates the overlap of these domains. In doing so, I pose the site of fat, queer burlesque up against the current trend in queer theory to consider the theoretical notion of “failure” as it has been used most recently by Judith “Jack” Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz.⁴ I focus, particularly, on Halberstam’s application of the phrase “the queer art of failure,” which he applies to a variety of visual and performing arts examples in his book by the same title. Halberstam’s main argument in *The Queer Art of Failure* is that, in their marginality, queers can find alternative forms of liberation in their statuses as failed citizens under western capitalism. Because their non-normativity marks them as “Other,” queers - and, as I will argue, queer, fat femmes - will never have the opportunity to achieve “success” like those who adhere to heteropatriarchal standards of sexuality and gender. But with that “success,” Halberstam suggests, comes the drudgery and “punishing norms” that, as failed subjects, queers wind up avoiding. For Halberstam, “failure” is the equation of failed production; being outside of capitalism as queers are bars them from being fiscally and socially productive to the state. Thus, Halberstam believes that being a failure on account of queerness allows for queers to access a kind of “wondrous anarchy” that offers alternate realities for living outside of capitalism.⁵

But despite its embrace of some of the same academic and cultural domains as this project in considering the nexus of queer and gender studies with art and performance, Halberstam’s “failure” lacks an acknowledgment or

4 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); José Esteban Muñoz, “After Jack: Queer Failure, Queer Virtuosity,” in *Cruising Utopia: The then and there of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) 169-183.

5 Ibid, 71.

engagement in its application to material bodies, especially those at the margin. This kind of interrogation reveals Halberstam's version of "failure" as relying on a version of white, able-bodiedness that, while queer, does not consider how bodies often fail solely as a result of corporeality. Further, Halberstam's theory lacks an examination of failing *a priori*, or inherently, of being considered a failure from birth on account of some difference, as opposed to coming into failure the way one, for example, learns to follow social and cultural cues about gender. For fat queers, then, the understanding of "failure" must expand to consider what it means for the body itself to be the source of failure rather than its actions or desires. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks a recuperation of failure to consider the implications for material bodies in identifying oneself in such terms. It further posits that in considering this new way of theoretically considering the physical renderings of failure through fat, queer neo-burlesque, there is a possibility of creating alternate lived experiences through paradigmatic shifts for marginalized communities by rearticulating failure's very project.

Cultural Significance

My project of centering fat, queer burlesque performance is both culturally and academically significant to this current moment in time for a number of reasons occurring both at-large in western culture, as well as within the western university. Particularly, these instances largely focus on fatness, as it is so presently despised in the United States and yet a growing topic of interest amongst cultural theoreticians and activists. Culturally, the mainstream

discourses around fatness, such as the so-called epidemic of “obesity,” are bolstered by neoliberal regimes that seek to discipline bodies into “normalcy.”⁶ Emblematic of this regulation are the conversations that have occurred in the past few years regarding the reform of the United States’ health care system, for instance. Fat folks, neoliberal subjects in their individual abilities to make “choices” – presumably “bad” or “unhealthy” ones at that – have become the scapegoats of a country seething over increased insurance premiums. Seeking to eliminate the “costly waste” of “obesity,” the proposed reform bill would allow employers to use financial rewards or penalties to encourage “healthy” lifestyle choices, such as weight loss through dieting or gastric bypass surgery.⁷ Through neoliberalism’s acknowledgment of individual subjects, making decisions for oneself regarding eating habits or exercise practices becomes grounds for economic punishment; most often penalties that affect poor and working-class people and people of color.⁸ More so, the rhetoric and imagery surrounding fatness, invoked for neoliberalism’s cause to obliterate bodily difference, casts fat folks as morally vacant gluttons and indolent liabilities (and failures in their ailing due to interruptions to one’s production value), while simultaneously creating a very clear image of slim, “normative” bodies as disciplined and virtuous.

6 I use scare quotes around the words “obesity” and “obese” in order to draw attention to the fact that these words are derived from the health care industry and are, consequently, inscribed with particularly negative meanings about fatness. Because I ascribe to the belief that people can be healthy at every size and that fatness does not automatically assume medical problems, unhealthiness, or death, I find words like “obesity” and “obese” to be grossly problematic in their pathologization of fat bodies and wish my readers to consider these concerns when engaging with my work; Michel Foucault, ‘Governmentality’, in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104.

7 Susan Saulny, “Heavier Americans Push Back on Health Debate.” *NYTimes.com*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/health/policy/08fat.html>.

8 Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control cite that African Americans have the highest rates of “obesity” in the United States (51%) and “Hispanics” have a 21% higher “obesity prevalence compared to whites”; “Obesity and Overweight for Professionals: Data and Statistics: U.S. Obesity Trends.” Centers for Disease Control, <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html#Race>.

Here, neoliberalism's ability to create and maintain "normal" bodies through both material (i.e., financial retribution, employment incentives) and rhetorical modes of discipline (i.e. moral, shaming discourses) is blatant. But neoliberalism does more than contain bodies through ideological state apparatuses, such as that of the health care system.⁹ In its creation of subjects as choice-makers, neoliberalism propels individuals to police themselves in order to fit into the image of the ideal citizen. The latter can be described as, to borrow from disability studies scholar Rosemary Garland-Thompson, "the normate," or, "the complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports."¹⁰ Constituting the quintessential state subject, "the normate" is not only ideally conventional in terms of social location, skills, and lifestyle, but hence, also considered *productive* because of his ability to discipline himself into being an image of perfection: a body not merely contained, but *maintained*.

Thus, fat people, whose bodies either fall outside of the bounds of "normal" or whose physical abilities differ from "the normate," are decidedly determined to be unproductive (read: lazy, "*morbidly obese*," etc.) citizens. Because of the unbridled stigmatization of fat folks and ideological pressures to conform to dominant conceptions of what is an acceptable body, fat people, like many other marginalized subjects, often wind up participating in their own self-

9 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Vintage), 1994.

10 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1997.

policing in hopes of reaching normalcy. For fat people, this panopticism manifests itself in physical and metaphorical invocations, ranging from radical weight-loss surgeries to participation in discourses of self-shame and hate; all “technologies of the self,” that seek to discipline individuals through their own self-understanding.¹¹

Conversations regarding neoliberalism and its policing of body size – both from outside, sociocultural sources as well as from within – and its commentaries on worth and value are applicable to the topic of this dissertation because of the ways in which fat burlesque consciously works to dismantle the messages sent about the neoliberal body. For instance, if fat folks are to participate in self-shaming rituals over eating food outside of a strict dietary regime or enjoying dessert or, really, any kind of highly caloric or “indulgent” food, then a 300lbs., semi-clad woman on-stage pouring half a bottle of honey into her mouth before a crowd is an act of political defiance. Similarly, a performance that simulates a visit to the doctor’s office, often a site of humiliation and chastisement for fat people, is transformed into a critical, thoughtful space for viewers when the scale, or “Yay! Scale,” returns messages of praise – i.e. “Foxy!” or “Ravishing!” – in place of the number.¹² These two examples clearly illustrate how it is that neo-burlesque creates a venue for fatness to dismantle sociocultural conceptions of what fatness means and what fat bodies can do. Through art that reaches

11 Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

12 The “Yay! Scale” is a product and educational tool designed by fat activist and author of the book, *Fat! So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for your Size*, Marilyn Wann.

audiences possibly unfamiliar with the politics of size or sexuality and gender, fat and queer-bodied burlesque casts a critical eye on the ways in which these bodies and lives become scripted by western culture and its particular institutions.

Academic Significance

Bridging the cultural and academic significance of my project is the emergence within the past several years of fat studies as a viable site of academic inquiry within the western university.¹³ Fat studies can exist within the neoliberal academia because of the current political economy, which seeks to acknowledge “identity studies” projects in order to make claims about diversity. Simultaneously, however, these projects also become corralled together under umbrella terms like “multiculturalism,” which efface difference completely. The emergence of fat studies, however, is also significant in that it, along with disability studies and some queer and critical race studies scholarships, poises scholars of different academic domains to begin considering actual, material bodies in their theorizations of how corporealities come to have meaning and how these significations can be rewritten, reclaimed or disrupted. Studying fatness allows scholars and activists to consider how it is that size matters in

13 Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds., *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, eds., *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Don Kulick and Anne Meneley, *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005); J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Marilyn Wann, *Fat!So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1998); Linda Bacon, *Health At Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, Inc., 2008); Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby, *Lessons from the Fat-o-sphere: Quit Dieting and Declare a Truce with Your Body* (New York: Perigree Books, 2009).

terms of identity formation and experience, while simultaneously calling into question the idea of a “normal” body existing at all.

Additionally, this dissertation is unique and makes an important contribution to scholarship in that it considers intersections of fatness and queerness specifically – a largely undertheorized juncture at this point in time. Due to the nascence of the field, it is important to reflect upon, from early on in its development, the ways in which size informs and is informed by other social and cultural identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. Studying, specifically, the work of self-identified fat, queer femmes, some of whom also identify as women of color and disabled, allows me an opportunity to reflect upon the ways that non-normative embodiment enables marginalized peoples to, oftentimes, relate to one another beyond hegemonic narratives of normalcy.¹⁴

Signifying someone as fat is done so based on visual identification of that subject and while this practice can be applied to queer bodies as well, one’s sexuality or gender is not always readable given behavioral clues. This is particularly true in the case of femme-identified queers who present a seemingly “normative” gender, which suggests heterosexual desire. As is the case within queer social life, within academia too, femmes fall into the familiar trap of invisibility; largely, research on queer, feminine-identified people focuses on trans women (specifically those who do not, themselves, identify as “femme”) or some gay men and rarely on femme-identified individuals – “femme’s parallel tale

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

remains untold.”¹⁵ I believe this dearth of inquiry around “femme” reflects the obscuration of femme gender as a queer identity in many ways, mirroring the ways in which queer communities often cast femmes as “straight” women experimenting and not worthy of serious consideration as queer subjects. This is all to say then, that while this project benefits from queer studies in such ways as how it reads gender as performative and queer desire as radical, it makes an attempt at furthering the field by giving scholastic attention to femme identity in hopes of beginning to consider its nuances.¹⁶ It is my hope that, in part, this dissertation will begin a conversation within academia to consider more readily the intricacies of femme gender and, more specifically, that it will encourage an exploration of “femme” autonomously and uncoupled from “butch.”

Additionally, this project uniquely considers the position of fat femmes specifically, investigating not only the ways in which femme is presented, but what it means for fatness to intersect with queer conceptions of femininity. We know that, normatively, in heterosexual, hegemonic culture that fatness is often completely detached from femininity. This dissertation asks how it is that queerness and fatness are articulated through queer femme identity in ways that allow for the comprehension of both as expressions of what I call “femme-ininity.” More so, I center fat, queer femme burlesque in order to forge forward with a

15 Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh, “A Fem(me)inist Manifesto.” in *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, eds. Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 165-170.

16 Not to suggest that there need be “equal” attempts at theorizing butch and femme, but I’m considering here Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* and the conversations it has created intellectually about masculine-identified, female-bodied queers. There has never been an academic text written about femme identity – though Ulrika Dahl and Del LaGrace Volcano’s *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2009) straddles the line between scholarship and photographic tribute - and very few articles have been published in addition. I note this to reify the need for scholarship investigating femme gender and to underscore the significance of my work in contributing to a marginalized segment of the queer studies domain.

conversation about desirability and fatness, ugly and beauty, in order to suggest the potential for shifting toward new ways of looking at, admiring, and eroticizing bodies that live at the margins.

Finally, this project blends the scholarship and theoretical findings of fat studies with dance and performance studies in innovative ways. While there is no shortage of scholarship or literature on the position and abilities of slender bodies to dance a variety of different genres, there is very little scholarship that examines fat performing bodies. What does is largely situated in the field of fat studies, solely, and considers the topic from a more cultural studies perspective than one that looks intricately at materiality – how the body moves, what it looks like when moving, the context of the space and audience, etc.

Methodology – Part 1

The research for this project has taken me on an exciting and informative cross-country journey to conduct ethnographies in the cities of San Francisco, California; Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and New York City, New York. During the course of six research trips I took between 2008 and 2010, I conducted solo and troupe interviews of self-identified fat, queer, femme burlesque dancers, as well as observed over 25 shows and rehearsals.¹⁷ I began my fieldwork at the nexus of the fat, queer burlesque movement in San Francisco, CA over the summer months of 2009, meeting with some of the most renowned fat-identified burlesque performers in the United States. Here, I

¹⁷ I received permission to conduct this research from the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board on April 4, 2009.

interviewed or observed the illustrious Bay Area burlesque artists Kentucky Fried Woman, Alotta Boutté, LadyMonster, as well as the all-fat, all-queer burlesque troupe Rubenesque Burlesque, and past and present members of the performance troupes, The Diamond Daggers and The Chainsaw Chubettes. In Portland, I met and interviewed Sossity Chiricuzio, a current spoken word artist and fat activist who started performing several years ago as a dancer in the first-ever fat burlesque troupe, The Fat Bottom Revue. Seattle, Washington gave me the opportunity to meet with members of the former fat, femme burlesque troupe, The Queen Bees. And in New York City, I observed self-titled “femmecee” and burlesque performer Bevin Branlandingham who markets herself as “The Queer Oprah” through her on-stage work at various events, including her monthly show, Rebel Cupcake.¹⁸

In addition to speaking with performers about their experiences developing and performing various routines and the articulations of their identities and politics through these acts, I also interviewed audience members at a number of shows in order to understand the impact of the performances on the crowd. Speaking with the audience at shows took on different forms depending on the venue, as well as the demographic of the crowd. For instance, some of the shows I attended were at proper nightclubs, while others were at outdoor summer festivals. Additionally, in a number of cases, the audience was composed overwhelmingly of queers, whereas in other situations, the observers

¹⁸ Bevin Branlandingham, “Queer Fat Femme Guide to the Net,” last modified August 11, 2012, <http://queerfatfemme.tumblr.com/>.

were mostly straight identified. Taking these differences into account, I used a variety of tactics in measuring audience response, including direct interviews, anonymous survey cards, and conversations overheard. Ultimately, I decided against incorporating much audience response into the expanse of this dissertation due to the overwhelmingly “liberal” responses of positivity.

Additionally, I worried my own presence as a fat person asking spectators about their impressions regarding performers of size may have caused subjects to not be as forthcoming with their reactions as I would have hoped.

Methodology – Part 2

My dissertation is convergent in many different academic areas, specifically scholastically, but it also requires the conflating of two distinct methodological approaches as well in order to most thoroughly consider my site. While ethnography has created a space for me to consider the juncture of experience with identity and group formations, intergroup dynamics, and the creation of sub-groups and communities, it falls short in its capabilities for understanding the complexity and richness of studying live acts. Dance writer Brenda Dixon-Gottschild suggests in her piece entitled, “Some Thoughts on Choreographing History,” that we must “listen to our materials and let the context suggest a methodology.”¹⁹ I interpret this to mean that it is not enough to merely observe and contemplate the multiple identities my subjects may inhabit; though thorough investigation of what this means for each performer and how this

19 Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, “Some Thoughts on Choreographing History,” in *Meanings in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 169.

influences their thoughts and actions is pivotal. Rather, as Dixon-Gottschild notes, it is necessary to place these particular bodies and identities within the context of actual physical performance.

Because my project deals both with the theoretical readings of lived experience and material, performing bodies, I make use in my dissertation of the interdisciplinary method of performance ethnography, which allows for detailed, close-readings and analyses within the context of the public show itself.

Performance ethnography considers the intricate act and conditions of appearing before others in a display of art. Like any other form of ethnography, it relies upon a set of points of inquiry that examine elements of movement, visuality and visibility, presence, flesh, and ephemerality. In her performance ethnography of the Yoruba deity, Osun, researcher Joni L. Jones writes thoroughly about the intricacies and components of the methodology:

“While [some] may entertain, the aim of the [performance ethnography] is to explore bodily knowing, to stretch the ways in which ethnography might share knowledge of a culture [or group] and to puzzle through the ethnical and political dilemmas of fieldwork and of representation.”²⁰

Jones also specifies what main elements performance ethnography must include for her and which differentiates it from regular ethnography. She identifies context, accountability, subjectivity, multivocality, participation, and ethics all as the suggested points of engagement with the performance site.²¹

20 Joni L. Jones, "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," *Theatre Topics*, 12, no. 1 (2002), 1-15.

21 Ibid.

In the close readings of neo-burlesque routines that I explore in Chapter 4, I attempt to investigate these same points of ethnographical examination. Here, a series of vital questions arise that force a rethinking, or shifting, of methodological construction to consider context. What does performing fat embodiment on-stage look like and what conscious choices in staging, costuming, and music, go into articulating this identity in varying sites of performance space and audience? What considerations come into play for dancers when they think of performing their identities? How are nuances of fat, queer, and femme expressed on the stage and are they done so differently, through one another, etc.? What changes for the performers or the audience when a fat, queer performing body is read also as a body of color or disabled? How is the potential for negative, fatphobic responses engaged with or challenged in an audience outside of queer and fat communities?

Heather McAllister, a burlesque performer and founder of the San Francisco-based dance troupe, The Original Fat Bottom Revue, spoke specifically to the conscious contemplation of what it means to perform publicly in a fat, queer body. She noted, “Any time there is a fat person on-stage as anything besides the butt of a joke, it's political. Add physical movement, then dance, then sexuality and you have a revolutionary act.”²² What McAllister’s quote illustrates is that for bodies considered non-normative, particularly queer bodies and fat bodies in this case, everything from the stage, to the movement, to

²² “Queer Performance Artist and Fat Activist Heather MacAllister Dies at 38,” *Indy Bay Media*.
<http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2007/02/14/18363370.php>.

the theme of the performance requires acknowledgment in order to thoroughly theorize a subject's legibility and to decipher the ways in which they may or may not be perceived by their audiences. By employing both ethnography and performance analysis as my methodologies, I read the performances of fat, queer burlesque dancers in a way that fully acknowledges the theoretical *and* physical complexities of writing about moving bodies.

* * *

Chapter Sequence

This dissertation is arranged in a way that takes the reader first through several chapters of various modes and models in understanding the cultural and theoretical formations of fatness, queerness, and the past and reemergence of burlesque. I lay this foundation first in order to then later engage acute examinations of several specific performances I observed throughout my fieldwork like the one I began this introduction with of Alotta Boutté. The first chapter considers a snapshot in time of the mid-1800s to the 1920s - the most recent period in western history where one can trace a full transition in cultural attitudes about body size. Specifically, during this moment in time, perspectives of the corpulent body shift from being a physique both revered and pursued to the one we know today that equates fat bodies with gluttony, immorality, and loathing. Chapter 1 looks at the historical context of the time period in an attempt at explaining how and why this change in ideas about fatness occurs in order to consider the foundation of fatphobia in the United States, as well as to explain

the significance of fat activist projects like this one. I begin this genealogy by tracing fatness alongside the pathologization of homosexuality during the same time period in order to consider the largely unexplored parallels between the categories of “fat” and “queer.” Additionally, this collocation allows for insight into the cultural response to fatness before its classification as something repellent, in need of control.

My second chapter continues to explore the history of fat (and queer) failure by segueing from its turn-of-the-century as unwanted physical excess to its status as a global “epidemic.”²³ Specifically, I consider the relevance of the past two decades and the present amidst neoliberal discourses of risk, shame and responsibility and their many institutional manifestations for widespread fatphobia, fear mongering and ostracization. Through exploration of several specific political, medical, and sociocultural examples, Chapter 2 traces the rampant fat panic that has aggressively increased in size and scope since the early 1980s. Neoliberal regimes cast fatness as a failure for citizens of the global west both in that fat bodies reject standard norms of aesthetic and space, as well as are believed unhealthy and, thus, not productive enough under capitalism. Chapter 2’s investigation of the recent past and current landscape of fatphobia under neoliberalism, once more, allows for an understanding of the pervasiveness of fat failure that Halberstam overlooks in its materiality, but also

23 Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 75-87.

further emphasizes the importance of and the impact of something like the emergence of fat, queer burlesque.

My third chapter is broken into two sections; the first, explores the inception of burlesque through it's glory days and the second considers the cultural climate and political movements that have allowed for the reemergence of neo-burlesque, while answering why burlesque and neo-burlesque allow for such a rich site to investigate fat, queer, femme performance. Chapter 3 looks at the evolution of burlesque during the same snapshot in time through which I look at the transition of fatness from a desirable to loathed body type. Beginning with its commencement in the mid-1800s, I consider burlesque's roots as an art form produced by and for the poor and working classes, largely as a medium through which to respond to unfair treatment from the affluent and the oppression of stark class stratification. I acknowledge that this foundation in proletarian communities suggests burlesque as being an art form that supports and encourages struggle, dissent, and a history of freaks and boundary-breakers.²⁴ By relying on the work of several historical scholars, I follow burlesque's ebbs and flows through the, mostly American, theater and dance scene to where it drops off in popularity during the early 1960s, replaced by the racier, less theatrical striptease.²⁵ I pick up again with burlesque's reemergence in the early 1990s propelled by the feminist and queer politics of cultural movements such as fat activism, riot grrrls, and do-it-yourself (DIY) culture. In considering these foundational pieces of neo-

²⁴ Jacki Wilson, *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (London: IB Tauris, 2008), 156.

²⁵ Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2004), 173.

burlesque I explain the characteristics of the revival and, particularly, how it allows for “failed” communities to produce art on their own terms. For the scope of this project, I explore how neo-burlesque contributes to feminist, queer, and fat political agendas being able to craft, play, and manipulate notions of beauty, identity, and desire from the movement, choreography, and mere positioning, on stage.

My final chapter relies on all of the theoretical and historical formations of the previous chapters in order to make solid applications of these notions and the interwoven theme of failure and its potential to create new, lived realities for individuals and communities at the margins. I commit to close readings of several performances and interviews I observed and conducted over the course of my fieldwork in order to explore popular iterations of fat, queer burlesque.

Specifically, Chapter 4 considers the intersections of fat, queer, desire, and dance alongside neoliberal regimes and discourses of failure through modes of beauty and health. The work in Chapter 4 considers the political potential of this juncture not in an effort to reclaim beauty or notions of health, but to ask more precisely *why* beauty? And *why* health? What exists at the nexus of these elements and how do they, and their histories, affect the performativity of neo-burlesque? What possibilities emerge for a fat, queer femme body when the performer herself controls its visibility, ability, movements, and transmissions of sexuality and desire? This final chapter considers these questions thoroughly, focused on the theoretical, cultural, and deeply personal effects of being a fat,

queer femme spotlighted on stage and the implications these performances have in sustaining and nurturing communities of similarly “failed” selves.

Because these performances often emphasize the “risqué” or the most vanquished elements or behaviors of what it might mean to be fat and queer – “flab,” girth, eating, sex, BDSM, etc. – they create community and space through which to consider the intersections of these “failures” with the power generated from embodied, on-stage performance. What I will argue throughout this dissertation, however, is that in playing with what is most or least expected of them – a public indulgence in food, for example, or performing desire for a masculine-presenting, but female-bodied butch – repositions “failure” as rupture and “excess” as a rich display of what it means to be differently bodied.

* * *

A note before progressing to Chapter 1 about my own positionality here and its implications for my role as researcher: I, myself, identify as a white, fat, queer femme and these signifiers have provided me with significant insight into the communities I have researched for this project. As I mentioned earlier, many of the performers and troupes I already knew of just by having membership in fat and queer communities and, similarly, knowledge of my existence in these same populations, undoubtedly, encouraged these dancers to let me into their dance studios, performances, and lives. While speaking to audience members from the place of my body served as a setback I had previously unanticipated, my

identities served more in the way of granting access than it did at denying it and I recognize these privileges.²⁶

On a more specific level, my positionality makes this project greatly personal to me. It takes actually stepping onto a stage and performing burlesque to fully comprehend the magnitude of what goes into these performances for fat, queer femmes - something I have experienced only once. Yet, in many ways, every day life is often a stage for me in the way people watch my body out in the world, how they comment and engage with it as a “public body,” and, additionally, my conscious performance of fat femme-ininity, given that I am aware of my hypervisibility.²⁷ While not a dancer myself, I believe the wider scope of this project is in what it can foster in academia, but also what it can provide for outside; beyond concert halls and dance studios, to cause a chasm in how we think about *all* bodies and the ways they are scripted by hegemonic discourses to be shamed, hurt, and modified. In what follows, I map a trajectory for re-reading fat, femme burlesque in a way that chooses to extol the pairing of material “excess” with the notion of “failure” in order to emphasize the potential it has for creating new body politics and ways of being. It is my hope that by doing so, that this dissertation will contribute to the expanding fields of corporeal epistemologies and queer studies to suggest new concepts of what it means to

26 By not mentioning it here directly, I don't mean to overlook the fact that being able to shoot video of these performances without prior permission from the venue, as well as in studio spaces, perhaps, would not have been granted to me or occurred without question if I did was not a white woman. I am also aware of the ways this marker of race additionally has influenced my own performance and is responsible, in part, for a positive reception from spectators.

27 Kathleen LeBesco, “Fat Panic and the New Morality,” in *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, eds. Jonathan M. Metz and Anna Kirkland (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 72.

move, love, and live for all bodies regardless of whether they are considered normal or are, literally, living largely in the fray.

Chapter 1

From Revered to Revolting: A Genealogy of Fatness

While the focus of this chapter is, indeed, on the evolution of the fat body from revered to revolting, its genealogical organization begs the acknowledgment of bodily propensity for accumulating meanings, politics, and pathologies over time.²⁸ The corpulent body being no exception, it is pivotal to recognize how, towards the middle and end of the 1800s, in the midst of a newly industrialized economy and revised class stratifications, that new standards and statistics were formed to study, measure, and organize bodies by their perceived differences.²⁹ What this period of time reveals, and why it remains a fruitful few decades to investigate for this genealogical chapter, are the historical volatility of bodies and the permeability of their meanings across time and space. The “history of the present” Foucault refers to in *Discipline and Punish* operates as a means to understand the metamorphosing of the material body historically and the ways in which genealogy encourages it’s writing across fields of power relations and political struggle.³⁰ If the body, over time, is an inscriptive surface capable of being understood “through a range of disparate discourses” and “representational contexts,” then comprehending how bodies come to be studied, constructed with meaning (often to the point of ostracization, or worse, annihilation), and also find

28 I focus on a timeframe here, as opposed to tracing the entire cultural history of fatness, for two reasons: 1) It is not the intent of this dissertation to attempt to complete a full cultural history of “fat” and 2) This chapter and, really, this whole project is one concerning events and moments across and through time, as opposed to linear histories and a development of one particular narrative. In the case of this chapter, I’m treating history, as Jasbir Puar models in *Terrorist Assemblages*, as “secondary to the enlarged timescape” of this project. That is to say that while what follows maps a period useful in understanding the evolution of both a conceptual normative body and the presence of fatness as a cultural indicator, I don’t rely on the need to extend my study fully through this time period to the present of 2012. More than it is historical, this chapter is, in the Foucauldian sense, genealogical in that it “rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for ‘origins.’”

29 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

30 Michael S. Roth, “Foucault’s ‘History of the Present,’” *History and Theory* 20, no. 1 (Feb. 1981): 43.

the potential to write *back*, are necessary first steps in completing a genealogy of fatness for the sake of this project.³¹

“History,” as noted by disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “bears ample witness to this profound disquiet stirred in the human soul by bodies that stray from what is typical or predictable.”^{32,33} To have a body, then, that digressed from newly strident norms of appearance, behaviors, personality, nationality, or desires, signaled it as anomalous. As I will more closely evaluate later in this chapter, the backlash that emerged over fatness around this time period developed alongside a kind of reform in morality in the midst of economic recession and class re-stratification. Whereas a mere decade earlier fatness symbolized affluence and health, this revived articulation of moderation enforced a moral order of righteousness that aligned fatness with gluttony and gluttony with sin.³⁴ Corpulent bodies were not the only non-normative bodies perceived to be iniquitous though. Alongside this burgeoning fat panic occurring in the late 1800s, was one also being constructed around sexuality – both actions and desires.

Rooted in austere notions of what constituted standard, productive sexuality (read: heterosexual and child-bearing), sexual deviancy, or queerness,

31 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 20.

32 This is certainly not to say that close examination and categorization of bodies did not preexist the time period of the mid-1800s that I will investigate. The project of “othering” had already been established within the United States towards people and communities of color long before the 1880s, which was a critical decade for the denunciation of fatness. All too familiar processes of racialization are cited prior to, but including, the early 1800s as with the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman as “the Hottentot Venus,” for example, as well as demonstrated by the 1854 verdict of *People v. Hall*, which declared that Chinese Americans nor Chinese immigrants had no rights in the United States and were not considered citizens. What is worth noting, though, is that from the mid-1800s through the start of the new century marked a period in U.S. history where an idea of socially constructed “normal” emerged and, with it, a multitude of determined anomalies; Lydie Moudileno, “Returning Remains: Saartjie Baartman, or the ‘Hottentot Venus’ as Transnational Postcolonial Icon,” in *Forum for Modern Language Study Journal* 45, no. 2 (2009): 200-212; Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2003), 59.

33 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 1-3.

34 Kathleen LeBesco, “Quest for a Cause,” in , eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 69.

was believed also to be a failing in morality; a veritable sin against nature. Nefarious as they were considered to be, however, sexual “perversity” and the admission of such desires greatly entranced and fueled interest in these behaviors because of their erotic nature, as well as the threat they were thought to pose to both the individuals inculcated by them, but also for larger society as a whole. With the confession of such desires being perceived as liberatory and western culture’s increased cataloging of people’s sexual pleasures and desires, psychiatrists of the late-19th century came to be the authoritative voice to the horrors of “immoral behavior” or the “aberrations of the genetic senses,” despite the blanket notion that to confess one’s secrets was itself salubrious.³⁵ Queer sex and desire became cogs in, what Foucault called, the “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” that at once propelled and grew a discourse of the sexual mosaic, inspiring the need for a fix from these afflictions simultaneously.³⁶ If confession required a listener (i.e. a doctor) and telling one’s secrets was to be reparative (i.e. therapeutic), then relating one’s queer desires to a physician could only require pathologization as a means of correction. From the hands of a morally righteous public then, to those of the medical profession, a “science of confession” spawned, creating a model of medicalization that haunts sexuality through the present.³⁷

What followed such ideas was the medical community’s intervention in the “making” of the “homosexual,” a term first recorded, and quickly popularized, in

³⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 64.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

1886 when German psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, published the second edition of his book *Psychopathia Sexualis*.³⁸ The very existence of the word acts as not just an organizational term, but also as “evidence” of a condition or illness; medicalizing queer bodies into the health care industry as sites of study and treatment as a result of their “depletion, debility, wasting and disease.”³⁹

Heretofore unidentified by a set word, or later an identity, based on desire or practice, the conceptual homosexual became pervasive in American households as medical consensus expanded. “Lay understandings about what the condition 'is' and what 'kinds of people' the afflicted 'are',” became cemented into western consciousness and the queer condition was born.⁴⁰

What mapping this trajectory of queerness illustrates once more is the mutability surrounding bodies and the vacillation of its meanings. As the context of American society changed over the 19th century in terms of the discourse around sexuality, and also in regards to science, economics and politics, bodies were reconfigured with new understandings, as well as with new questions that spurred this drive for taxonomy and medicalization. While the bulk of this chapter will consider how attitudes about corpulent bodies changed and medicine’s intervention into regulating them prospered, noting how this was occurring across a range of aberrant bodies, including queer bodies, sets a foundation for understanding pathologization of different “perversities,” as well as the production

38 David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 155.

39 Peter Conrad and J. W. Schneider, *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 179.

40 *Ibid*, 184.

of normativity.

Creating “Normal”

With the increased examination and pathologization of certain bodies and behaviors at the turn of the century, what was created was not just marginality and ostracization for a multitude of different lives and experiences. By identifying those who categorically deviated, whether in size, sexuality or otherwise, from cultural expectations, the conception of what was then “normal” in appearance, behavior, and desire, was secured. In studying the semantics of “revolting” and the reimagination of fat bodies, Kathleen LeBesco notes this very process; she writes that:

“The process of gaining the upper hand, or redefining fat identity as palatable, will in turn produce its own subset of unthinkable, unlivable, and abject bodies. Subjects are constituted by the processes of excluding and making abject. [...] While I examine strategies for transforming (widening) the fat body, I also consider the ways in which this transformation constitutes excluded and abjected Others.”⁴¹

If we follow LeBesco’s line of reason, we understand “palatable” subjectivity can be read as a normalization of the fat body; an attempt at rewriting fatness as just another kind of body, with “fat” as a modifier similar to “tall” or “freckled.” In fact, I would argue that “normal” and “deviance” always co-exist in that they mutually constitute one another; disability studies scholar Lennard Davis claims that “the bell curve will always have its extremities.”⁴² But if “Other” and “normal” create

⁴¹ LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 5.

⁴² Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: WW Norton & Co Inc, 1995), 29; An important note to make is that the ideal body image creates pathologization of only certain bodies – usually the ones deemed most valuable, the ones with the most privilege – while turning away from others. For example, the recurrent image of the super model ideal of near-anorexic bodies, which are of course deeply located in a middle-upper class context and are very often white or light-skinned women of color. This image of the young, white, anorexic or bulimic

one another, then what produces our concept of what it is for us to be “normal” or to, socially, follow “norms?”

In her 1996 book, *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland Thomson describes the origin of modern day normalcy as “the normate”: the “veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up it’s boundaries.”⁴³ The normate is the “complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports.”⁴⁴ Bolstered by the enormity of his cultural capital, the normate becomes the ideal for which to strive; he is the epitome of normal and, thus, the vision of “success” to which marginalized “others” will “fail.” The normate’s life is positioned as the coveted, but it is also, because of its sheer alleged perfection, mostly unattainable. Davis notes in *Enforcing Normalcy*, for example, the ways in which the figure of the ideal body is constructed in the image of early art, which often fragmented and rebuilt various women’s bodies to create a “perfect,” normativized image of “woman.” He writes, “When ideal human bodies occur, they do so only in our mythology.”⁴⁵

It is this very concept of the ideal or the “normate,” and its success - both socially and financially - within capitalism, that leads to the construction of norms themselves, concurrently suggesting a pervasive set of acts, identities, and

body – and western culture’s obsession with it as the only kind of body damaged by hegemonic beauty norms – neglects to see its implication within cultures, or contexts, of foodlessness and hunger.

43 Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8.

44 Ibid.

45 Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 25.

behaviors as being standard human practice. They work in being ubiquitous and widely followed because compliance of norms allows individuals to represent themselves as definitive human beings, participating in all that goes along with being a “normal,” functioning person.⁴⁶ It goes without saying then that these objectives are often also hegemonic, assumed universal, and bourgeois. But engaging in them fosters a working economy, amongst other standards of western culture, that encourage adherence to norms and the pursuit of normalcy in order to, ostensibly, thrive.⁴⁷

What norms and the mirage of the normate creates is a dominant expectation of what bodies should look like, how they should move, what they should desire, and how they should behave. Non-normative bodies that can't conform to the expectations of normalcy are marginalized because of the perception that any deviation threatens to cause social or cultural turmoil. Thus, to a body deemed atypical, whether because of size, sexuality, race, etc., norms are always a present violence in that they both marginalize the “Other,” while consistently ceaselessly prodding it to comply. If corporeality is, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests and I agree, volatile based on cultural norms, then it signifies a constant mediation of the body to aspire to the ideal. Adhering to these ideas of normalcy and participating in them creates a symbolically successful body – aesthetically pleasing, reproductive, economically engaged, etc. But for fat

⁴⁶ Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8.

⁴⁷ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 27-30.

bodies, non-white bodies, queer bodies, these anomalies often signify failure and suggest a repugnant body, sometimes atrophied and always contemptible.

If we understand how bodies fail, we can begin a conversation about the possibility of rereading failure in, ironically, productive ways; a central theory this dissertation poses.⁴⁸ Having traced the medicalization of queer bodies and desire, the more general history of white, normative homosexuality in western culture - particularly, in the United States - is well documented, yet the historicity and evolution of cultural attitudes around fatness remains less studied.⁴⁹ In response to this dearth of information, I provide in what follows, a genealogy of fatness in this chapter.⁵⁰ In detailing a snapshot of the time period when fatness transitions from a literal manifestation of success and strength to that of failure and presumed incompetence, I aim to provide a foundation for this dissertation, which reconsiders cultural inscriptions on the fat, queer body and revised understandings of its possibilities through the reemergence of burlesque.

Tracing a Partial Genealogy of Fatness

It is near common knowledge amongst most Americans that at one point in time before there erupted a cultural crusade against corpulence – long before the days of NBC’s *The Biggest Loser* and celebrations of anyone going under the

48 This differs from a reading of failure as always radical, transgressive and without introspection and limitations of who can succeed at failure.

49 George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (Penguin Books, 1992); Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: The Landmark History of Gay Life in America* (Grove Press, 2007); David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Plume Publishers, 1992).

50 I want to acknowledge that what I provide here as evidence of the cultural and social evolution of fatness is not direct historical research, but a borrowing of a realm of work from various historians that I seek to put into conversation with one another throughout this chapter and the larger dissertation.

knife for weight loss surgery – it was more than acceptable to be considered larger-bodied. While this bit of information is hardly lore, it is a limited time period in the United States in which being fat was equated with fortune and good health. From the 1830s through the mid-1880s fatness was very much in vogue, as it spoke well of one's economical and social status to be able to afford regular availability to food and, possibly, more decadent items, before the times of industrialization.⁵¹ For those not of the affluent class, food was available by what you and your geographical neighbors had access to; many times, what was consumable was what one could afford *not* to sell for profit.

It is crucial to note here that the approval (or the success, as it were) of fatness was very much about having wealth and, thus, creating division between the rich and the poor. For example, while corpulence was celebrated and presumed alluring amongst wealthy men and women alike, gauntness was criticized and thought unattractive, according to scholar Anne Bolin.⁵² Fatness, almost unbelievably, was a physical state to strive for. Instead of working to appear slimmer, American women of the mid-1800s frequently padded their clothes to appear larger and strategically wore bustles and corsets that accentuated roundness. Crinolines gained popularity in the mid-1800s as an additional way to widen the fall of a skirt and make women's hips and buttocks appear more voluptuous.⁵³ Sticklers for the "real," though, advertisers in late-

51 Anne Bolin, "Vandalized Vanity: Feminine Physiques Betrayed and Portrayed," in *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, eds. Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 85.

52 Ibid.

53 Alison Gernsheim, *Victorian & Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey* (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), 62.

1800s periodicals posed the thoughtful question: “Why suffer tortures with inferior mechanical devices that artificially fatten?” *Fat-Ten-U Foods* and other food purveyors encouraged women to “Get Plump!” lest they should have to “cover [their] poor thin figure[s] from the gaze of their beloved spouse[s].”⁵⁴

For men, being bigger, literally, had its own social club. In 1866, traveling salesmen away from home in Wells River, Vermont, founded The Fat Men’s Club of Connecticut. The club was composed mostly of businessmen and had a weight minimum of 200lbs. It grew out of the idea that fat people were happy people and those content in life made good company for one another; their motto, perhaps, best summarized this jovial sentiment: “I’ve got to be good natured; I can’t fight and I can’t run.”⁵⁵ Each year at their annual clambake gathering, the first order of business was for members to weigh in, creating a good-natured competition over who would weigh the most.⁵⁶ Nearly every year the club was in existence did the numbers for heaviest member increase; in the event they did not, it was considered a community failure.⁵⁷

While fatness symbolized prosperity and, thus, “better” social standing, it was also considered evidence of good health; an ironic juxtaposition to today’s medical ideas about fatness as supposed evidence of death and disease. The 19th century western world saw a number of pervading contagions, including cholera, diphtheria, small pox, and eventually tuberculosis (TB), also known as

54 Judith Levin, *Obesity and Self-Image* (New York: Rosen Publishing, 2008).

55 Polly Tafate, “The New England Fat Men’s Club,” *Upper Valley Life Magazine*, March-October 2008. <http://www.uppervalleylife.com/pdf/fat.pdf>

56 “Bewailing Lost Pounds: The Fat Men Filled with Clams and Sorrow” *New York Times*, September 18, 1885.

57 Ibid.

consumption because of how it caused the body to waste away.⁵⁸ Keeping robust and an “average” to “increased” size during this time period then was a sign that one hadn’t been stricken with any of these fatal illnesses. To put things into perspective, the TB pandemic was so critical, that “by the late 19th century, 70 to 90% of the urban populations of Europe and North America were infected with the [tuberculosis] bacillus, and about 80% of those individuals who developed active tuberculosis died of it.”⁵⁹ Avoiding these diseases and thus keeping fat were cause for fanfare in such dire times. Additionally, many of these illnesses, TB included, were initially believed to be spreading only amongst the poor and working-class due to presumed uncleanliness; the real reason for this had to do with lower income communities sharing small, cramped living spaces, which allowed for disease to proliferate. Again, “excess” weight and now health, is directly linked here to affluence even if the assumptions about disease transmission were faulty.

While fat folks did enjoy a period of several decades where their girth was regaled, this appreciation of the corpulent did not last long after the late 1880s. To isolate one reason for this shift in ideas about size is impossible, but rather a number of changing factors at the near turn of the century propelled forward a drastic reunderstanding of larger bodies. Colliding forces of a booming, now industrialized economy, the perceived chicness of European lifestyles and

58 J.C. Phelan and Bruce G. Link, “Controlling disease and creating disparities: a fundamental cause perspective,” *The Journals of Gerontology*, 60, no. Special Issue 2 (2005), 29.

59 Harvard University Library Open Collections Program: Contagion - Historical Views of Diseases and Epidemics, “Tuberculosis in Europe and North America, 1800-1922,” <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/tuberculosis.html>.

fashion, and a reemergence of moral panic – namely of actions and behaviors that concerned physical bodies – all contributed to changing ideas about fatness. As this trend in disparaging fatness took hold and the face of modernity metamorphosed into a sleeker, more svelte image, the medicalization of fatness eventually arose as well, mirroring public concerns over “excess” weight and responding to the rash of already popular diet schemes, which threatened to make faddists more wealthy than doctors.

Industrialization of the United States and much of Western Europe is, perhaps, the most predominant factor underlying the shift in attitudes around fatness in the late 1800s. According to scholar Peter Stearns, up until this point in time, corpulence was a symbol of wealth because of the ability to afford wide-ranging amounts and diversities of food, as well as the fact that work was not the physical labor most often associated with the poor and working classes.⁶⁰ To be able to spend money on what you ate, enough so that you would gain weight, was a luxury of the rich. Thus, as a marker of wealth, fatness’ status as being so in vogue was based on its inaccessibility to the larger populations of the economically underprivileged; demonstrating how practices of the rich have informed trends, creating desire in those who cannot afford to access or ascribe to them. The desire for fat, curvy figures in the middle of the 19th century and the reproach of thinness and its suggestion of malnourishment is testament to this.

60 Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 2002) 153-157.

The economic boom of the 1880s creates a shift at this moment in time where poorer communities struggled with food shortage and a need for more affordable, accessible, and diverse food options. The 1880s and early 1890s saw tremendous growth in terms of the railroad transportation industry in the United States. From 1883 to 1893, three major railroads were completed alone in the Northwestern portion of the country – the largest number of main railroads completed in any decade through to the 1940s.⁶¹ The railroads spurred a revolution of mass production for goods, food included, that could be not only shipped further distances, but with more regularity.

In an excerpt from her piece in the *Gastronomica Reader* chronicling the history and present of the fast food industry, historian Rachel Laudan notes that what is unique about this moment in time is that it saw the creation of processed foods that allowed consumables to be made, shipped great distances, and stored for long periods of time without fear of spoiling.⁶² This increase in food production was a benefit to the poor and working classes who could now procure cheaper food much more easily and store it for later use.⁶³ In fact, it closed much of the gap between the rich and the poor in terms of how and what they could now afford to eat. With the rise in food accessibility by the 1890s, the imaginable happened; America's working class gained weight and grew, by medical testament of the time, healthier.⁶⁴ But just as poorer communities increased in

61 Rudolph Daniels, *Trains Across the Continent: North American Railroad History* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

62 Rachel Laudan, "In Praise of Fast Food," *UTNE Reader*, September-October 2010, <http://www.utne.com/Environment/Fast-Food-Culinary-Ethos.aspx>

63 Susan Freidberg, *Fresh: A Perishable History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 11-12.

64 Ibid.

size enough to begin living more comfortably and without as much concern as to whether or not there was enough food available to feed them, the once valued excess of weight began its steady decline in popularity.

There is the notion that once a trend gains in popularity to the point where it is made obtainable across cultural and economic classes, the “elite” groups, which deemed the trend fashionable initially, are the first to decide it newly obsolete; a kind of cultural form of “brand dilution.”⁶⁵ This process occurred around acceptable body sizes for men and women in the 1890s and, undoubtedly, is partially a result of wanting to keep clear distinctions between class, worth, and desire. As the working class and poor increased their corporeal weight thanks to economic expansion and the industrialization of food, the affluent began the practice of admonishing ampleness and commenced regarding a more slender physique as both moral and chic.⁶⁶

Ideas about fatness, especially moral prescriptions, are also undoubtedly linked to the financial situation of the 1890s in the U.S. The first few years of this decade were marked by a toppling economy, resulting from an overbuilt system of railroads the nation couldn’t afford and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which increased the price and the amount of silver bought federally for currency in hopes of stimulating an economy shaken by deflation.⁶⁷ Cited as a main

65 Yann Truong, Rod McColl, and Philip J. Kitchen, “New luxury brand positioning and the emergence of Masstige brands,” *Journal of Brand Management* 15, no. 5/6, (2009), 375-382.

66 In fact, it is the last few years of the 1880s and early 1890s, which see etymological shifts in rhetorics of size, which emphasize a demonization of largesse and a particularly hostile association between “excess” weight and slovenliness. Stearns notes, that the word “slob” emerged “into the English language in the 1860s, transposing an Irish word for a certain kind of goeey mud.” It became attached to its familiar prefix of “fat slob” in the United States during the 1880s. Stearns notes that “the need for additional words to identify and reprove fat thus dates back before the clear incorporation of slenderness into [widespread] practice.” Stearns, 22.

67 George E. Stanley, *The Era of Reconstruction and Expansion: 1865-1900* (Madison, WI: World Almanac Library, 2005), 17-44.

reason for economic instability at the time, the Act was repealed and out of concern over growing fears of a fiscal depression, the public withdrew money from the banks creating The Crisis of 1893. As a result, economic unrest, produced largely by the country's zeal over expansion and consumption, wound up causing a change in the moral order that was newly concerned with disciplining the body and controlling individualized flesh.

Due to the sudden and pervasive economic crisis, participating in any kind of perceived activities of pleasure or indulgence were not tolerated and, in many cases made illegal. For example, it is recognized amongst historians of gender and sexuality – such as Ann L. Stoler, Rebecca Arnold, and Doris Weatherford – that the late-1890s were conceived of as a morally strict time period for women, especially.⁶⁸ Women's sexuality was discouraged; pregnant women were hidden out of site over concerns about respectability, as bodies were to be self-controlled at whatever costs. Similarly, the 1890s saw the beginnings of prohibition, which was yet another effort to create moral semblance in a country rattled by economic decline. With the opulence of the mid-1800s' Gilded Age a mere memory, the U.S. created a culture of biopolitics that encouraged a regulation of the body and of the self.⁶⁹ Corporeality, like sex and alcohol, was "excess" and became a primary target of this biopolitical reform movement. If

68 Specifically, I'm talking about white women here, as their sexuality was considered more endangered by modernity and the lure of urban living; black women's sexuality caused no mainstream concern because of racist notions about promiscuity. Social movements to protect white purity and prevent the mingling of white rural farm girls with, presumed "unkempt and uneducated," European immigrants (mainly Italians) emerged heavily during this time period; Ann L. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 344-373; Doris Weatherford, *Foreign and female: Immigrant women in America, 1840-1930*, (New York: Facts on File Press, 1995); Rebecca Arnold, *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

69 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

thinness was moral and morality was akin to godliness, class, and goodness, then fatness was now pestilence, gauche, and reprehensible.

Aside from its assault by the moral order, fat bodies also fell out of favor because of their newly perceived grotesqueness and lack of style.⁷⁰ This trend of slimming down began in Western Europe during the 1880s amongst aristocrats and royals and gained in popularity in the United States in the 1890s because of the association that European practices and lifestyles were chic. European culture was considered so *au courant* in regards to body size and stylings, that Americans cited some of western Europe's most notorious writers and musicians – The Brontë Sisters, Frederick Chopin, Anton Chekov – as being influential despite the fact their slighter builds (and deaths) were the result of tuberculosis; it “was glamorous to look sickly.”⁷¹ To be thin was to project class and the ability to participate in high fashion, namely for women, which was undergoing a complete revolution in last decade of the 19th century.

The late 1890s saw the emergence of the new model of ideal feminine beauty, the famed Gibson Girl, whose image straddled the line between the previously revered buxom beauty and the evolving figure of the willowy woman. As scholar Allan Mazur notes in his article considering trend in beauty among American women, the Gibson Girl icon was a merger between two distinct moments:

70 I want to make the connection here that while these changes in perceptions of fatness eventually wind up effecting everyone, regardless of gender, by the early 1900s, women are targeted first, along the lines of morality and fashion alike, to begin losing weight.

71 Laura Fraser “The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds., Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 12.

"From the fragile lady, she took a basically slender line and a sense of respectability though not frail delicacy. From the voluptuous woman, she took a large bust and hips but no bawdiness. She was one of the new athletic women who bicycled, exercised, and stood erect. [...] Occasionally she wore swim and sports clothes which showed her slender legs, rounded calves, and gracefully narrow ankles."⁷²

The Gibson Girl represented activity, independence, and modernity; white women were now entering the workforce and contributing to the boom in industry, growing the United States' economy. They were also campaigning for suffrage, for a "purer" (read: white) woman, whose appearance also represented her lack of vices.⁷³

The textile industry during the 1900s, particularly in the forms of factories and mills that produced fabric and materials for clothing, celebrated enormous success in this first decade.⁷⁴ For the first time ever reliable, standardized clothing sizes became available to men and women, furthering the new slender agenda. Dress sizing now became limited to a certain number of sizes, as opposed to earlier custom wardrobes for the more privileged.⁷⁵ Interestingly, the first two decades of the 20th century saw women's break-up with the corset as well. Hardly a strategy aimed at resisting physical modes and manifestations of corporeal control, the abandonment of the corset signaled instead an end to amplifying the bosom, hips or "hourglass" shape and were replaced by

72 Allan Mazur, "U.S. Trends in Feminine Beauty and Overadaptation," in *The Journal of Sex Research* 22, no. 3 (1996), 287.

73 Ann L. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-century Colonial Cultures," in *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 634-660.

74 Nancy L. Green. *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1997), 161.

75 It is important to note here that while the new production of standardized clothing sizes and more slender styles was beginning to boom during this time period, the majority of workers employed in making this clothing during the time period were newly immigrated women whose bodies reflected those of western Europe's and the United States' poor and working-classes – often rounder, more corpulent forms; Ibid; Stearns, 13.

“foundation garments that flattened the silhouette.”⁷⁶ Wearing a corset in and after 1910 proclaimed an obvious struggle with weight and an embarrassingly, bulky figure from consuming too much food and drink, a sure sign of gluttony.

Female performers were, of course, held to the new standards of thinness as well and while many tried to conform to the new rules via dieting, not all were so successful. Lillian Russell began granting interviews to news outlets in 1909 in which questions were first allowed, with her approval, regarding her dieting regimes. Amid conversation about changes in her eating habits, Russell “talk[ed] about how she did 250 roll-overs each morning in a frankly standoff battle against weight. This presaged the series of star diet advice to come in subsequent decades.”⁷⁷ Unfortunately for Russell, the weight that once played a role establishing her as “America’s Beauty” seemed harder to shed than anticipated. Historian Lois Banner reports that by 1912, Russell was no longer considered to be the statue of elegance she once was. She writes:

“In 1912, visiting backstage at the theater where her mother was performing, Miriam Young noticed a life-sized portrait of a large-bosomed woman in a fancy gown and a plumed hat. ‘Who is that fat lady?’ she asked. The actors present looked at her in shocked amazement. ‘Why, baby!’ her mother said in a low voice, ‘that’s Lillian Russell!’”⁷⁸

While Russell’s appeal was long lost to the history books on account of her girth, she was by far not the only performer to be chided and mocked for her weight. Previous stage and screen darlings had become the laughing stock of the

76 Mazur, 287.

77 Stearns, 20.

78 Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty: A Social History through Two Centuries of the American Idea, Ideal, and Image of the Beautiful Woman*. (New York: Knopf, 1983), 153.

audience and they tried desperately to shed pounds, buying into and then advertising newly emerging dieting gimmicks. As fat performers fell from grace, dancers and actresses with thin frames were suddenly heralded as beautiful. Sarah Bernhardt, whose noted thinness had made her unattractive to American audiences on a prior visit was now celebrated for her size and deemed gorgeous. Shortly thereafter, American playwright George Ade wrote and produced his musical comedy *The Slim Princess*, celebrating the demise of the fat showgirl in a final coup de grâce.⁷⁹

Fat men had it little better in the first decade of the 1900s. While they weren't put under as much pressure, initially, to "reduce," they were no longer determined to be men of means, as "fat cats." Nor were they any longer portrayed as jolly businessmen enjoying life. As reported by literary scholar Ann Mikkelsen, fat men became the punch line of jokes and cruel news stories; perhaps no one knew this better than then-President William Howard Taft who, at 275lbs and 6'2" in height, became stuck in a Japanese bathtub in 1900 and endured ongoing public ridicule as a result.⁸⁰ And just as women had The Gibson Girl to style themselves after, men soon had The Gibson Man, as well, "a tall, slim companion who immediately set a male fashion standard with his athletic stance and his clean-shaven face."⁸¹ But it wasn't just the early 20th century's fat man's body that no longer had a place in American culture, it was also his social

79 Stearns, 12.

80 Ann Mikkelsen, "Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!": Wallace Stevens's Figurations of Masculinity," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27, no. 1/2, (Autumn, 2003), 111.

81 Gina Bari Kolata, *Rethinking Thin: The New Science of Weight Loss--and the Myths and Realities of Dieting* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007) 73-74.

circles. 1903 saw the closing of The Fat Men's Club of Connecticut, as well as its brother organization, The Heavyweights of New York. By 1907, actor Fatty Arbuckle's famous line in his then hit play *The Round Up*, rang true: "Nobody loves a fat man."⁸²

Most likely it seems odd to have mapped so many decades in history about the cultural evolution of fatness in the United States without reference to the purported health risks associated with excess weight as we are so presently familiar with today. Before the evolution to thinness occurred prior to the turn of the century and its steadfastness right into World War I and beyond, doctors and medical professionals had only been concerned with patients they had determined as underweight. Again, fatness was a sign of good health in the face of so many diseases. In fact, even as medical concerns did develop and came to be attached to people's "excess" weight, older doctors remained skeptical about telling people that thinness equaled health.

The beginning of the relationship between fatness and health coincided with the changes in fashion and industry. Suddenly, both doctors and faddists were presented with an opportunity to theorize ways to respond to a growing public concern over weight gain. The faddists were quickest to come to the "aid" of those plagued by excess weight and hocked their "obesity belts," dietary regimens, and bizarre practices to the wealthy who could once again afford

⁸² Ibid, 73.

attempts at manipulating their bodies to their most chic potentials.⁸³ Not coincidentally, many of the clinics opened in the early 1900s that were run by weight-loss enthusiasts and not specialists touted diets derived from “European natural food regimens,” which only spurred more interest in trying the diet.⁸⁴ Gimmicks like these also included the now renowned theory put forth by Horace Fletcher who made his money popularizing the theory that if one were to chew each bite of food at least 100 times before swallowing, they too could shed pounds.⁸⁵ Some of the country’s most wealthy businessmen, including John D. Rockefeller, Henry James, Upton Sinclair, and John Harvey Kellogg all profited off of gimmicks, such as recurrent fasting, that proved only to take one’s money and not, actually, produce any results.

Doctors concerns aligned with the publics’ in the very last few years of the 1890s when, for the first time, weight standards were created based on gender and height; prior to this there was no such thing.⁸⁶ Though they were slow to re-evaluate and regularize weight gain initially, the health care community eventually caught up with public’s interest in weight about 15 years into the new century. This occurred alongside the creation of immunization vaccines (e.g., influenza) and antibiotics that forced a shift in focus from mid-life fatalities to end-of-life disease and death. Mirroring the panic around fatness, doctor’s found “excess” weight easy to latch onto as a specimen of study and as a way to

83 Eric J. Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2006), 69.

84 Stearns, 32.

85 Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 69.

86 Stearns, 43.

explain away other, unexplained illnesses. In order to meet the demand and, at points, near hysteria of patients seeking cure-alls from doctors for their corpulent forms, unresearched and hasty options, including the use of arsenic and strychnine as supplements, were provided to people to “reduce.”⁸⁷ The growing, throbbing disdain for fatness resulted in a prejudice that began to steadily inundate the medical community and which, sadly, persists to this day.

This genealogical snapshot of the mid-1800s to the 1920s delivers an understanding of how fatness was metamorphosed in meaning, laying the brick and mortar on which to sustain, decades later, rampant fatphobia on political, economic, cultural, medical, and personal levels. Fatness and queerness underwent analogous transformations that evidence the volatility of bodies and their potential for reinscriptions and cultural rereadings. But how do these failures manifest themselves presently and how do structures of hegemony work collectively to create increasingly hostile environments for fat and queer people to exist, let alone participate in art and community building through burlesque? To answer this question, I will examine the time period of the 1980s through the present in the United States, focusing on the burgeoning and eventual swelling of neoliberalism. Here, steeped in the rhetoric and institutionalization of “productive citizenship,” responsibility, and normativity, live fat bodies and, once more, their experiences within the current moment of governmentality and self-policing have gone unexamined. In the chapter that follows, I investigate the regime of

⁸⁷ Fraser, 13.

neoliberalism and the many sites of failure it predetermines for fat bodies in order to further explain a need for neo-burlesque as a strategy for resistance through the rearticulations of failure, “health,” and desirability.

Chapter 2

Constructing Fatphobia in the Neoliberal Present

With the exception of attitudes proliferating during the time of the Great War that to be fat in the midst of a national, economic and political crisis was “unpatriotic,” government intervention, or even opinion, about body size and “excess” weight wasn’t yet a vigilant part of America’s cultural landscape in the first half of the 20th century.⁸⁸ In today’s current moment, however, that seems difficult to imagine given the persistent policing of our consumption and the amount of space our bodies occupy on a daily basis. In the U.S., fatphobia prevails, propped up by a grossly successful diet industry and the pervasiveness of rhetoric concerned with a perceived uncontrolled “obesity epidemic.”⁸⁹ This climate casts fatness as a scourge and suggests “remedies” in the form of discourses and practices of shame, loathing, and fear. Thus, to consider a rethinking of fat, as this dissertation does through neo-burlesque, to postulate what is born out of this position of fat “failure,” is made almost impossible in the present landscape of western fatphobia.

This chapter explores this current condition of the dialectic between western culture and political economy, focusing almost entirely on the climate in the U.S., as a means for understanding the “moral panic” surrounding health and

88 Michael Carolan, "The Conspicuous Body: Capitalism, Consumerism, Class and Consumption," in *Global Regions, Culture, and Ecology* 9, no. 1 (2005): 87.

89 Pat Lyons, "Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the 'Obesity Epidemic'" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds., Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 75-86.

the implications for fatness within the context of the last three decades of neoliberalism.⁹⁰ This dissertation necessitates a conversation on health as a moral construct and its product, “healthism” for several reasons: 1) It problematizes the assumed fixity of health and the its alleged visual indicators; 2) It reveals health itself, and the compulsion to be “healthy,” as a neoliberal reflex; and 3) It speaks to the subversive power of a site like fat, queer femme burlesque that it not only exists in the current moment, but thrives. All of these points aid in the centering of my argument that considers the possibility of finding strength and community in newer, material rearticulations of “failure.” Additionally, by considering the neoliberal present and the recent past of the last decade, this chapter concludes by asking how and why this neoliberal moment encouraged a reemergence of burlesque at the turn of the 21st century, preparing me to further examine neo-burlesque’s potential in making space for “failed” fat, queer femmes.

* * *

In Chapter 1, I relied upon a genealogical snapshot in time of the mid-1800s to the early 1900s in order to chronicle the most recent period in time in which the cultural attitudes around fatness have shifted from revered to revolting. In nearly a century’s time, conceptions of fat bodies, their value, and their perceived abilities have greatly shifted, following a trend where ideas about health – what constitutes it, what it looks like – and bodily worth are tightly bound

⁹⁰ LeBesco, “Fat Panic and the New Morality,” 72-82.

together. In the past 20 years alone, since neoliberalism has established itself as the prominent ideology for social and economic policies in the western world, fatphobia has evolved and grown significantly amidst neoliberalism's construction of the fat subject.⁹¹ For the scope of this dissertation, I am not as directly interested in neoliberalism's investments in corporate privatization and open markets, but more so the project of neoliberal governmentality, which I read as a phenomena located at the intersection of political economy and Foucault's notion of bio-power.⁹² Specifically, I want to examine how it is that neoliberal governmentality, and its encouragement of the practices and rhetoric of normalization, choice, responsibility, and production sustains a vigilantly fat atmosphere through the use and understanding of "health" as a static entity. By engaging the work of Jonathan M. Metzler and Anna Kirkland's anthology, *Against Health*, and the scholars in it – namely, Lauren Berlant and Kathleen LeBesco – I will reveal the deeply layered productions of fatphobia that exist at the level of government and trickle down to the individual in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of fat panic in order to read fat, queer femme burlesque as a response.⁹³

91 Julie Guthman, "Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary bodies," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 187.

92 Foucault's "bio-power" refers to the discipline of the body as used for production by the nation state - both in terms of spaces like the workplace and the military, as well as in the form of demography and ideology; Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 140-144.

93 This project does not consider the medical effects of fatness, nor does it claim that fatness is a factor in exacerbating particular illnesses and/or conditions. More so, this work contends with the affect of medicalized discourse and considers the ways in which the western frameworks for reading "health" and making conclusions about one's body based on visual or scientific indicators are distorted – either as a result of antiquated methods and statistics, a corrupt pharmaceutical industry, and/or the questions around what masquerades as "science." A perfect example of this might be the western health care community's reliance on the calculation of body mass index (BMI) in order to classify a person as "normal," "overweight," or "obese" in terms of their body fat. The BMI was developed in the early 1800s and has come under significant criticisms for being outdated and also ineffective in its determinations, as it frequently registers muscle mass as adipose and vice versa. Yet, western health care relies on it regularly as an indicator of health; Jeremy Singer-Vine, "Beyond BMI," *Slate Magazine*, July 20, 2009, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2009/07/beyond_bmi.html.

As a means of best illustrating the effects of neoliberal governmentality on fat subjects and the State-and self-sanctioning it contemporaneously creates in its framing of the “productive” American citizen, I consider in this chapter multiple sites where corpulent bodies “fail” medically, politically, culturally, and personally. Further, these domains of failure often overlap or are inextricably linked to one another, bringing literalism to the familiar pairing of the personal with the political. Each of the examples I focus my attention on demonstrates how the double-bind of neoliberalism, which simultaneously generates fertile ground for overproduction whilst warning against the “epidemic” perils of overconsumption, presents no other option for fat bodies than “failed” amidst the current privileging of a culture considered by critics to be “bulimic.”⁹⁴ The instances I detail throughout this chapter all rely upon the volatility of bodies and the changing tropes and attitudes about size and weight that segued at the start of the 20th century, but differ in that they exist within the present system – producing new notions of “health” and greater excess and supposed need, while harshly policing and profiting off the consumption of it. Neoliberal governmentality thus generates a cultivation of bingeing and purging, which holds fat bodies hostage in its cyclicity of literal and metaphorical consumerism.

* * *

94 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

Neoliberalism & The Material Body

In the introduction to *Against Health*, scholar Jonathan Metzl notes that health – as opposed to being a medical or scientific indication of one’s physical status – is “a prescribed state and an ideological position.”⁹⁵ Under neoliberalism there is the existing notion that health can be determined by one’s appearance and is, thus, a breeding ground for “moral assumptions that are allowed to fly stealthily under the radar.”⁹⁶ But all of these features, which are the cultural markers of fatphobia, rely upon neoliberalism as a product of capitalism to continue proliferating. Lauren Berlant’s essay, “Risky Bigness: On Obesity, Eating, and the Ambiguity of Health,” speaks best to this, detailing how “obesity” is born out of relief to capitalism’s constant drive to produce and neoliberalism’s encouragement to be productive. She writes: “People are tired from work, tired from being good, tired from being overwhelmed by the demands of production and the reproduction of life.”⁹⁷ And while it’s not the point of this dissertation to argue the possibilities of causation when it comes to fatness, Berlant and Metzl both raise important points in beginning to detail the links between ideas about health, capitalism and neoliberalism.

Born out of the 1970s in response to war debts from Vietnam, falling rates of profit and increased inflation, neoliberal ideology posed as the fix to a steadily increasing accumulation crisis in the United States. With a “bear market” allowing

95 Jonathan Metzl and Anna Kirkland, eds., *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 2.
96 Ibid.

97 Lauren Belrant, “Risky Bigness: On Obesity, Eating, and the Ambiguity of ‘Health,’” in *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, eds. Jonathan Metzl and Anna Kirkland (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 27.

stock prices to fall and wither successively, an emerging Right – namely in the form of Ronald Reagan and Britain’s Margaret Thatcher – were eager to dismantle what remained of the Keynesian economics; a system which advocated for operational policy responses by the public sector and created the financial assistance service of the welfare program. David Harvey notes in his infamous text, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, that viable solutions to the economic crisis of the 1980s included devaluation and regulation of the Keynesian model, but were proven to be unpopular solutions and threatened to increase debt over time.⁹⁸ Globalization, which provided what Harvey refers to as a “spatial fix” became the remedy for the U.S. in that it allowed for the “geographic spread of full-fledged industrial capitalism.”⁹⁹

But with neoliberalism’s disassemblage of all barriers to capitalist accumulation and the expansion of globalization, escalated supply and a lack of demand, has managed to not only dissolve the “middle class” in much of the western world, but has led additionally to disarticulated accumulation abroad via the exploitation of labor.¹⁰⁰ What this has enabled in the U.S. is a prospering of companies and manufacturers that produce cheap goods made by cheap labor (i.e. Wal-mart), which serves the purpose of buttressing the declining wages of the middle class in order to keep the economy moving. This has, similarly, occurred with food production and procurement in the United States, as the fast

98 David Harvey, “Globalization and the ‘Spatial Fix,’” *Geographische Review* 2, (2001): 23-30; Erica Schoenberger, “The Spatial Fix Revisited,” *Antipode* 36, no. 3 (2004): 429.

99 Guthman, 441.

100 J. Timmons and Amy Hite, *From Modernization to Globalization: Perspectives on Development and Social Change* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), 180-182.

food industry booms shelling out fast, cheap food to those looking for quick and inexpensive meal options; meals made by employees achieving barely minimum wage salaries, at that. From the 1980s through to the economically strapped times of the present, the “bonus” of supersizing a meal, for example, can feel like a bit of a boon. Realistically, the bargain of the pennies upgrade, in fact, is just another literal example of neoliberalism’s disarticulated capital; a careless method for absolving the problem of food overproduction to the detriments of both the laborer and the consumer.¹⁰¹

It is easily understood then how neoliberalism, in part, winds up creating, economically, an environment where overproduction of cheap, processed foods leads to the possibility of overconsumption. Again, Berlant is relevant here for her notion that the weary seek the ease and pleasure of food to combat exhaustion caused by the physical, emotional, and psychological demands of capitalism.¹⁰² While Americans are routinely told “excess” weight and “poor” eating habits are a result solely of their own making and lack of self-discipline, it is necessary to examine how it is that, based on this example of “supersizing,” conditions of neoliberalism wind up contemporaneously creating and sustaining “obesity” and its alleged “epidemic”. What is more relevant to this project than considering the economic “causation” of fatness (though they are undoubtedly linked) is the way in which “health” is upheld as a process which we all should work toward

101 Ibid.

102 Berlant, “Risky Bigness.”

achieving, as well as the social prejudice that is constructed when one rejects this compulsion or fails at its achievement.

Part of the neoliberal turn under the guidance of Reagan was the overhaul of the welfare system, which the President found encumbered by “welfare bums” and “welfare queens” who needed to “get back to work.”¹⁰³ In both his gubernatorial and presidential campaigns, Reagan framed welfare recipients as lazy, impetuous, and deceptive, casting them as social pariahs in order to justify his inexorable slashing of childcare resources for low-income women, as well as drastic revisions of such services as the food stamps program.¹⁰⁴ This rhetoric, which ostracized those in need of financial services, additionally spurred an oppositional discourse, constructing Americans as either “good” or “bad” citizens in the new political economy. The “bad” were those believed to drain the U.S. economy with misuse of social services and the “good” being those who were responsible, self-disciplined in terms of the choices they made, and economically productive; in short, normative folks who currently required nothing of their government. By not “burdening” the system with need-based requests for aid – public health care being a main contender – those who were, to borrow the phrase from disability studies, “temporarily able-bodied,” or “healthy,” were cast as the ideal citizen.¹⁰⁵ These beacons of citizenship were productive in holding jobs and doing their part to keep up their part of the capitalist machine and were also “well” enough to require anything from their government in the way of health

103 Mark J. Stern "The Emergence of the Homeless as a Public Problem," *The Social Science Review* 58, no. 2 (1984): 297.

104 Sonya Michel, "Childcare and Welfare (In)Justice" *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 1 (1998): 48.

105 Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Vogler, "The Critical Limits of Embodiment: Disability's Criticism," *Public Culture*, 13, no. 3 (2001): 349-357.

care or other social services. The ideal western citizen developed into one that worked tirelessly in the system to keep it moving and to keep production high, while requiring nothing of it for personal need.

The “re-asserted self-reliance” that Reaganism propagated through this oppositional discourse, additionally, fueled attitudes on “excess” weight in the 1980s and through to the present, as well.¹⁰⁶ With the emphasis being on one’s individual responsibility to the State, those “good” and “upstanding” were those who could self-manage their bodies and their consumption in the midst of such abundance; after all, as disability studies scholars will confirm, to be a mobile, able body is to be an efficient and productive body in the State’s name. Meaning those who learned to adhere to neoliberal adjustments that encouraged global consumerism alongside a lessened dependency on state fiscal support, whilst *literally* tightening their belts via diet and exercise, were the “successful” ones. The obvious “failures” are those who “give in” and eat what they want, laze about and, thus, cannot produce. Scholars Julie Guthman and Melanie DuPuis note this rather eloquently in their article “Embodying Neoliberalism: Economy, Culture, and the Politics of Fat”:

“In short, neoliberal governmentality produces contradictory impulses such that the neoliberal subject is emotionally compelled to participate in society as both out-of-control consumer and self-controlled subject. The perfect subject citizen is able to achieve both eating and thinness, even if having it both ways entails eating nonfoods of questionable health impact (Splenda) or throwing up the food one does eat (the literal bulimic). Those who can achieve thinness amidst this plenty are imbued with the rationality and self-discipline that those who are fat must logically lack; they then become

¹⁰⁶ Rebecca M. Blank and Ron Haskins, *The New World of Welfare* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2001), 206.

the deserving in a political economy all too geared toward legitimizing such distinctions.”¹⁰⁷

This design sets up fat people to always fail in the traditional sense of the word; trapping corpulent bodies in a double-bind where personal consuming is chastised, but encouraged at-large as part of neoliberalism’s greater project. The “disorderly,” fat body, caught between poles of neoliberal design and entrenched in cyclical discourses of blame, revulsion, and ostracization, is ever-present here, producing multiple new sites of fat failure in its wake across the domains of politics, medicalization, culture, and personal experience. Within neoliberalism, “health” and the compulsion to pursue it are neoliberal projects of control with the end goal being about production for the State. After all, the rhetoric and pursuit of “healthy” eating habits and need for exercise “do not focus on cultivating better health,” [...rather, they’re about] maintaining income and momentum [...] having more energy to be more productive.”¹⁰⁸

* * *

Before moving on to examining some specific instances and events that make evident the neoliberal reflex of “health” and the fatphobia it perpetuates, I want to add a note here about queerness and femme identity. Both of these positions, clearly, live outside the bounds of “normal” alongside corpulence within this moment of neoliberalism, though they do so in different ways. I don’t spend much time discussing how neoliberalism’s projects of pervasive moral discourse

107 Guthman, 444.

108 Berlant, 28.

and implementations of “health” manifest themselves in queer and femme bodies throughout the rest of this chapter. However, it is evident that control and productivity shape citizens in such a way that queer femmes are a marginalized community regardless. The rhetoric of “health” and “wellness,” is particularly relevant to the gay and queer communities – though more so to communities of gay men – especially due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the discourses that grew from it implying that queer sex was risky and “unhealthy.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, “femme-inine” bodies get caught up in these same discourses of “health” and “morality” when “femme-ininity” and queer desire are determined to be misaligned partners, at points believed to be the product of such things as hormonal imbalances.¹¹⁰ Additionally, in terms of both sexuality and gender, evidence of queer desire is frequently believed only and always to be genetic – the quest for the “gay gene,” is ever ongoing; a ripe opportunity to forever fuse queer sexuality and gender with medicalization and aberrance. This is all to say that neoliberalism’s power to police through “concerns” around health, are far-reaching and extend beyond the realm of fat identity. For fat, queer femmes, in particular, the implications are copious and complex.

What follows are a series of instances where fatphobia, and the panic that enables it, is proliferated in the name of neoliberalism and where “health” and the drive to pursue it are compulsory parts of towing the cultural rope of virtue and

109 William N. Eskrdige, Jr., "Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet: Establishing Conditions for Lesbian and Gay Intimacy, Nomos, and Citizenship, 1961-1981," *Hofstra Law Review*. 25, (1997): 817-961.

110 Lorene Gottschalk, "From gender inversion to choice and back: Changing Perceptions of the Aetiology of Lesbianism Over Three Historical Period," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 26, no. 3 (2003): 226.

citizenship. The remainder of this chapter focuses on distinct, events in U.S. history that are the result of pervasive and unrelenting moral discourses on fatness and “health.” By exploring these examples, this chapter acknowledges the present tumultuous climate in which forms of embodied resistance – such as fat, queer femme burlesque – strongly emerge as evidence of the possibilities in considering material “failure.”

* * *

Fatness, Bullying & The Obama Administration’s Campaigns Against Both

Since the untimely and unfortunate suicide of Rutgers University student, Tyler Clementi, in September 2010, it seems the American public has awoken to rampant bullying and its increased rates of suicide and murder occurring at the hands of adolescents, teenagers, and even young adults. With statistics of bullying at an all-time high, the motive for these attacks differ from case to case, but many victims and their families cite unyielding homophobic taunting as a prime example. Such is the case of Clementi who jumped to his death off of the George Washington Bridge after his roommate secretly videotaped Clementi kissing another man and showed it to fellow hall mates.¹¹¹ Bereft over being “outed” and the homophobic slandering that followed, 18-year-old Clementi took his life. His suicide is one of, approximately, 10 others that were reported nationally during the same month, including those of 13-year olds Asher Brown of Texas, who shot himself in the head after classmates repeatedly mocked him

111 "Tyler Clementi," *NYTimes.com*, March 16, 2012, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/tyler_clementi/index.html.

and called him “gay,” and Seth Walsh of California, who endured cruel verbal and physical abuse for being gay and died from complications related to a self-attempted hanging.¹¹² Sadly, similar cases have continued to the present both around homophobic taunting and, additionally, in relation to other differences such as size, class status, and even sexual naïveté.¹¹³

In light of this moment where the messages to American children, particularly, have been that queerness is punishable and that cruel, unrelenting torment on account of difference can occur without consequence, the Obama Administration organized a conference in March 2011 encouraging a nationwide campaign against bullying. In his address to attendees, the President stated that one of the goals of the conference was to “dispel the myth that bullying is just a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up.”¹¹⁴ He went on to note that bullying is “more likely to affect kids that are seen as different, whether it’s because of the color of their skin, the clothes they wear, the disability they may have, or sexual orientation.”¹¹⁵ While this effort is, undoubtedly, useful in raising awareness about the severity of bullying in the United States, President Obama’s speech only works to acknowledge this problem for some groups - people of color, the disabled, the poor and working class - and, in doing so,

112 Jesse McKinley, "Suicides Put Light on Pressures of Gay Teenagers," *NYTimes.com*, October 3, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/04/us/04suicide.html>.

113 Victoria Yancey, "Death, bullying, and statistics," *Examiner.com*, March 1, 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/death-and-bullying-and-statistics>.

114 "Obama Convenes Bullying Conference, 'It's Not Something We Have to Accept,'" *ABCNews.com*, March 10, 2011, <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2011/03/convenes-bullying-conference-its-not-something-we-have-to-accept-.html>.

115 *Ibid.*

lumps these communities together, absolving the differences amongst them generally *and* in terms of the specific issues of bullying and discrimination.¹¹⁶

And yet, despite the naming and juxtaposing of these social positions that frequently serve as the targets for severe bullying, the fat body is, curiously, excluded. Considering that the U.S.-based Council for Size and Weight Discrimination reports that 73% of children determined to be “larger than average,” are regularly harassed at school on a daily basis, it seems downright negligent, never mind puzzling, that children of size were excluded from the President’s national plea to end childhood bullying.¹¹⁷ For sure there is a reason for this and it is as much a neoliberal project as any in its efforts to incite moral panic through discourses and practices of shame, responsibility, and “health” – or in this case, “epidemic” – disguised as care. I’m referring to First Lady Michelle Obama’s self-designed initiative against childhood “obesity” and the fatphobia it promulgates in the name of “health.”

Since her placement in office as the First Lady in January 2008, Michelle Obama has steadily made her national advocacy platform a “fight” against childhood obesity. Beginning efforts to draw attention to her “Let’s Move!” campaign ranged from the rightfully lauded addition of an organic vegetable garden on White House property in 2009 to her and the President’s decision to put their own daughters, Malia and Sasha (ages 9 and 6 at the time), on a diet

116 Here, President Obama’s message of anti-bullying rings familiar to the neoliberal language of multiculturalism, which claims “inclusiveness” of varying cultures, races, and ethnicities, in order to avow an investment in diversity (in the case of the president’s conference, the investment is in anti-bullying). Yet, when put in action, multiculturalism winds up homogenizing difference, silencing individual voices and experiences or, worse, leaving the stories of some groups out completely.

117 “Facts and Figures,” The Center for Size and Weight Discrimination, <http://www.cswd.org/docs/facts.html>.

because of concerns they were “becoming a little chubby.”¹¹⁸ Both of these decisions were justified by two of the “Let’s Move!” campaign’s “5 Simple Steps to Success,” which suggests that increased mobility, eating more vegetables, and increasing water intake guarantees weight loss.¹¹⁹ While each of these recommendations are worthwhile actions, they are not scientifically proven assurances for losing weight. Propping them up as such is not only false advertising to children and instills a possible cycle of life-long yo-yo dieting, but also promotes that fatness is always a cause of poor eating habits and laziness – as opposed to lack of access to fresh, organic meats and produce or genetic predisposition – ideas that further the neoliberal rhetoric of moral failure, personal responsibility and bodily negligence. While the “Let’s Move!” campaign uses the guise of “health” and morality to talk about bodily ability, the evidence is clear that what’s at stake is productivity. For fat children the message is clear: we don’t care enough about you to ensure your safety at the hands of bullies, but we do “care” enough about your physical body to ensure it’s strength and ability to grow into productive adults, model citizens.

Another example of the rhetoric of morality that proliferates under “Let’s Move!,” is in a section of the campaign’s website targeting adult women. Here, the language is about family and leading by moral example, noting that “healthy” children are a result of “healthy moms.”¹²⁰ Here, responsibility to the State is

118 Rachel L. Swarns, “Michelle Obama’s Agenda Includes Healthful Eating,” *NYTimes.com*, March 10, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/dining/11lady.html?pagewanted=1>.

119 “5 Simple Steps to Success,” Let’s Move!, <http://www.letsmove.gov/action>.

120 “Tips for Healthy Moms,” Let’s Move!, <http://www.letsmove.gov/healthy-moms>.

leveled at women whose “job” it is to raise normative, “successful” children, so that they can grow up to be productive citizens. The website even goes so far as to urge children to help their mothers prepare dinner, though the motive is unclear – are we to understand this suggestion as genuine care for encouraging children to learn healthy cooking habits or is it a prompt to monitor their, possibly, delinquent mothers’ cooking methods?¹²¹ Not only is the language here heteropatriarchal in that it assumes women to be the ones stationed home to cook dinner and care for their children, it also determines mothers to be one of the scapegoats for fat children.

Furthering a kind of panopticism, the “Let’s Move!” initiative and its series of steps, fundamentally, encourages children to monitor their own eating habits and those of others in the name of “health,” and social responsibility. Yet, ironically, the message of “Let’s Move!” ultimately winds up erasing fat children and fat adults by suggesting a world without fatness is an inherently better one. With such harsh realities being relayed to young minds it’s easy then to follow the trajectory that thus enables the bullying of fat kids and, as those kids grow to become adults, the fatphobic taunts and stigma that then follows into adult life. A neoliberal project aimed at further emphasizing ideas and images of what productive, responsible citizenship looks like, “Let’s Move!” positions families in the crosshairs of corporeal enforcement, shaming fat children and parents for

121 “5 Simple Steps,” Let’s Move!

their “failures” of size and, simultaneously, encouraging fat people to participate in their own self-shaming through “moral injunctions.”¹²²

North Carolina’s Proposed “Fat Tax” and Health Care Reform

The “Let’s Move!” campaign is an obvious sign of the times; an initiative born out of the Obama Administration’s larger goal to reform the national health care system. This chapter would not be complete without considering some of the events that transpired leading up to President Obama’s signing of the Affordable Care Act into law in March of 2010, namely the unrelenting positing of fat folks as unhealthy leeches on a system only fit for “the healthy,” and productive among us.¹²³ A frighteningly nuanced and intricate example of this came the year prior in the way of a proposed piece of North Carolina legislation that considered placing a “fat tax” on its state employees. Introduced in the fall of 2009, the proposed bill would have required “obese” workers to pay a higher amount of their own health insurance costs. These rates were formerly covered by the state for all employees, regardless of body size and, under the newly nominated plan, would continue to be subsidized by employees with “acceptable,” bodies, or those medically determined to be of “normal” size. This fee hike posited body size and alleged “poor nutrition and inactivity,” as bases for blame by citing the “responsibility” of the individual as evidence, but also for consequence. Understanding “obesity” to be a cause of “*preventable* death,” the proposed “fat tax” determined that if state employees were not invested in living

122 LeBesco, “Fat Panic and the New Morality,” 72.

123 HealthCare.gov, “What’s Changing and When: The Affordable Care Act Becomes Law,” last modified March 23, 2010, <http://www.healthcare.gov/law/timeline/>.

up to a standard of health dictated so by North Carolina's state government, then they were not "fit" or productive enough to complete the caliber of work the state required.¹²⁴ Ann Rogers, the Director of Integrated Health Management plainly noted this in her address to the media: "We need a healthy workforce in this state. We're trying to encourage individuals to adopt healthy lifestyles."¹²⁵

Rogers' cloaking of individual-based rising health care costs in the neoliberal language of "health," morality, and "choice" makes several fatphobic conclusions on which the bill is based: 1) it assumes and enforces a medical definition of "health," which is disseminated as a universal truth applicable to all bodies; 2) it furthers the theory that being fat is a decision one makes and, thus, is a basis for blame; 3) it concludes that fat bodies are ubiquitously unhealthy bodies and that weight is always an indication of one's level of corporeal well-being; and 4) it suggests that thin bodies are the model, productive bodies of good citizenship, demonstrating that to be fat and/or differently able is to be idle; a waste of time and money.

What's most problematic about these conclusions is that they operate under the guise of "concern," hiding behind claims of "health" and social responsibility while proliferating the idea that fat subjects are medical, cultural, and political failures. Acknowledging this very notion, LeBesco writes that: "...the public health discourse surrounding obesity is disciplinary, and its exhortations to individuals to self-monitor and regulate are not always benevolent. It throws a

¹²⁴ Emphasis mine; Mark Johnson, "N.C. to impose 'fat tax,'" *Newsobserver.com*, October 7, 2009, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2009/10/07/129651/nc-to-impose-fat-tax.html>.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

funhouse mirror on the supposedly “healthy body” – the lean, toned body – as a signifier of moral worth.”¹²⁶ Further, each of these neoliberal conclusions made about fat bodies by the “fat tax” are based on the premises that fatness is always medically unsound and, also, is always an acquired, behavioral trait; something that recent scientific studies claims is very often not the case.¹²⁷ These theories set up corporeality to be judged as a kind of moral inferiority suggesting the inability of a fat individual to make the right choices or to control one’s impulses in regards to eating.¹²⁸ The proposed “fat tax” is understood then to be a viable “solution” to obesity in that it offers a small amount of intervention into holding individuals responsible to the risk they take in being “overweight.”

In addition to these more moral manifestations of “health,” it was proposed that the “fat tax” would have been measured by registering peoples’ body mass indexes (BMI) which, after calculating a person’s height and weight only, determines them to fall into one of the following categories – “underweight,” “normal,” “overweight,” or “obese.”¹²⁹ The plan for the ballot measure was to financially penalize those whose BMI registers at a 40 or above, marking them as “obese,” and a “burden” to insure because of the supposed associated illnesses that accompany “high” BMIs. But by adhering to the standard of the BMI, undoubtedly a neoliberal construct in and of itself, the State dictates what

126 LeBesco, “Fat Panic and the New Morality,” 81.

127 Claude Bouchard, “The biological predisposition to obesity: beyond the thrifty genotype scenario.” *International Journal of Obesity*, 31, (2007): 1337-9; Ibid, “Defining the genetic architecture of the predisposition to obesity: a challenging but not insurmountable task.” *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 91, (2010): 5-6.

128 Jeffery Sobal, “The size acceptance movement and the social construction of body weight,” in *Weight Issues: Fatness and thinness as social problems*, eds. J. Sobal, D. Maurer (Aldine de Gruyter, New York), 241.

129 National Heart Lung and Blood Institute - National Institutes of Health, “Calculate Your Body Mass Index,” <http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/>.

“normal” looks like and attempts to regulate those bodies – in this case fiscally – to conform to its numbers and standards. But, we might ask, to what end? What purpose does it serve to use the BMI as a source of measurement to enact legislative changes such as that of the “fat tax?”

The BMI’s ultimate goal is to not just normalize all bodies to look a particular way and adhere to certain corporeal standards, though it certainly does just that, furthering social oppression for those who can’t cut it. It can, additionally, be said though that the BMI acts as a neoliberal mechanism invested in ensuring that capitalist and global production is never interrupted, financially or even physically so, by a, literally, “unfit” worker. In so far as the idea of fat bodies is that they are, concurrently, always inactive, incapable, and prone to illness or degradation, the conclusion is, and spread as such, that fatness is an impediment to capitalist understandings of success and productivity. Thus, as LeBesco notes in her book, *Revolting Bodies*, there is power and “value” in fat stigmatization. That through self-shaming and embarrassment that occurs on account of others socially criticizing those with a “high” BMI, the moral discourse identifies the “framing notions of citizenship,” where fat bodies “fail to register as fully productive.”¹³⁰

What’s further interesting about the timing of North Carolina’s “fat tax” debacle, is that it occurred in tandem with the United States’ embroiled battle over national health care reform; a moment when fatphobia seemed capable of

130 Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 55.

running unusually unabashed and, I would argue, has grown even more unmitigated since. With the question posed of how to reform and universalize the system, there was the seemingly inescapable measuring and ranking of illnesses, behaviors, and lifestyles classified as most encumbering to the nation. “Obesity,” became the “buzz word [of health care reform]” amongst politicians, pundits, and the public almost entirely in regards to the financial strain it is believed to put on the economy – an estimated \$1400 more each year for a person considered “obese.”¹³¹ Seeking to eliminate the “costly waste” of “obesity,” then, the proposed reform bill suggested allowing employers to use financial rewards or penalties to encourage “healthy” lifestyle choices, such as weight loss through dieting or gastric bypass surgery.¹³² Again, this attempt at “bartering” morals-disguised-as-“health” pits people against their bodies, suggesting that corpulence is always a result, a failure, of that person to be responsible to the State.

More so, the journal *Health Affairs*, which published the article producing the “\$1400 statistic,” failed to consider – just like the legislators behind North Carolina’s “fat tax” – that BMI is not a determinant for heart disease, high cholesterol, or type 2 diabetes – the major illnesses associated with “obesity,” nor did U.S. health care opponents consider the ways in which it posited fatness as the scapegoat for a system they determined flawed. And so, in both cases, fat

131 Gary E. Sattler, "Obesity: Is it the new health care reform buzz word," *DailyFinance*, July 28, 2009, <http://www.walletpop.com/2009/07/28/obesity-is-it-the-new-health-care-reform-buzz-word/>.

132 Susan Saulny, "Heavier Americans Push Back on Health Debate," *NYTimes.com*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/health/policy/08fat.html>.

individuals bare the weight of rhetoric and behaviors that locate them as irresponsible in their lifestyle choices and financial risks to the greater good, sending a firm and distinct message that fat bodies are not dependable or valuable bodies.

What is most ironic about North Carolina's proposed "fat tax" and the health care reform act is that cloaked by the moral discourses, fat shaming, and alarm that brewed powerfully around these topics, there remains a lack of public, state-funded health care available for *all bodies*, at all times. In creating moral codes around "health" to stigmatize fat subjects on the grounds that they strain an already lacking system, reveals the real problem of not having a nationalized health care system that covers everyone regardless. More so, what the Affordable Care Act requires of folks who don't receive health insurance through their jobs or through the Medicaid and Medicare systems to buy a health insurance plan with a private entity. What the latter does is what nationalized, *public* health care avoids, which is placing the responsibility of being insured on the individual, not the state as is suggested. Once more, as in the case of the "Let's Move!" campaign, while the threat of the impact of "obesity" is culturally pervasive and the compulsion for "good health" is so great, the ultimate rouse is that the burden is always re-posed onto the individual.

Sociocultural Stigmatization & Violence

The morality that circulates around fatness in both the cases of the "Let's Move!" campaign and the North Carolina "fat tax," runs through a cycle of blame,

threat, control, and, sometimes, violence. Having already traced a lineage of blame and self-policing through “Let’s Move!” and the persecution and regulation of corpulent bodies through the “fat tax,” and health care reform, this section, briefly, focuses on instances where the end result is violence. If the purpose of this dissertation is to reveal the impact and potential of fat, queer femme burlesque by considering its transgressions of “failure,” there is significance in reviewing how these very same bodies are susceptible to danger on account of cultural and social stigmas.

In January 2009, media outlets in Las Vegas, Nevada and Denver, Colorado nationally released information pertaining to two unrelated cases of child abuse which consisted of parents beating and then physically restraining their adolescent daughters to their beds every night for weeks while they slept.¹³³ While these families were unassociated with one another at the time of each incident, both parents responsible for shackling their children responded nearly identically when questioned by police, claiming that their intentions had been to prevent their daughters from eating in the middle of the night and becoming “too fat.” One parent went as far as to say that fettering his daughter to her bed with a padlock and chain was his attempt at acting in her “best interests.”¹³⁴

What makes a person, a parent no less, believe that fat, or the potential to become so, is grounds enough to restrict children from eating and restrain them

133 Antonio Planas, "Police: Dad admits chaining daughter to bed," Las Vegas Review-Journal, January 21, 2009, <http://www.fox5vegas.com/news/18526796/detail.html>; "Why A Mom Allegedly Made Child Sleep While Bound." CBS 4 – Denver, March 4, 2009, <http://cbs4denver.com/video/?id=52219@kcnc.dayport.com>.

134 Ibid.

is, to many, incomprehensible. Yet, the reality stands that to be a fat child, adolescent, or adult in western culture today proves a harrowing experience for most, worsening further depending on differences in size, shape, and in the presence of other marginalities. Instances of unbridled fatphobia are pervasive and the blame and social irresponsibility associated with corpulence is a heavy burden to weather, driving people to violent means toward their children, as in this case, and also toward themselves. While no suicides in the United States have been related to fatphobia, a June 2012 case in the United Kingdom detailed the hanging of a 14-year-old girl in her bedroom after school bullies attacked her unrelentingly about her weight.¹³⁵ While not nearly comparable, video evidence of a recent verbal assault slung at a New York State school bus monitor by four 7th grade boys went viral on YouTube in June the same month. The 68-year-old woman, Karen Klein, was aggressively harassed for her size and appearance with threats of physical violence. One of her attackers can be heard saying in the video captured, “If I stabbed you in the stomach, my knife would go through like fucking butter because it’s all fucking lard.”¹³⁶ Klein’s 10 minutes of increasingly violent, and at one point physical – one boy pokes and nudges her belly repeatedly with a book – harassment is further evidence to the vitriol and hatred that stems from the turning of “good health into a greater moral enterprise.”¹³⁷ As we come full circle by investigating these instances of size-related suicide and

135 Rebecca Adams, "Fiona Geraghty Suicide: Fashion Industry Blamed for Teen's Tragic Death," *Huffington Post*, June 22, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/fiona-geraghty-suicide-eating-disorder_n_1612940.html.

136 Libby Copeland, "The Case of Karen Klein, Bullied Bus Monitor, Proves that Bullying Isn't Personal," *Slate.com*, June 22, 2012, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2012/06/22/karen_klein_bullied_bus_monitor_and_the_nature_of_middle_school_bullying_.html.

137 LeBesco, "Fat Panic and the New Morality," 78.

bullying, it is as clear as ever that on political, economic, and cultural levels being fat is something one must – figuratively and literally – pay for.

* * *

This chapter has provided an explanation of how the present condition of neoliberalism specifically affects and attempts to modify and erase fat bodies out of existence by fostering moral discourses of “good health” and the compulsion toward it. Just as neoliberalism has created a culture of binging and purging, taunting and shaming, and a globalized economy that exploits the labor of workers abroad in order to sell cheap, low quality goods at home, it also spreads the negative cultural messages of fatness that create it as a global scourge. By drawing on key examples from health care, politics, and western media, I have documented here the pervasive landscape of fatphobia, which makes living fat today a frightening, degrading existence in the western world.

With such universal loathing and condemnation of this one bodily state, it is nearly impossible to believe that some whose identities rely upon the acknowledgment of their bodies as “fat” have found individual and communal resistance strategies for survival. In the following chapter of this dissertation, I will consider my site of fat, queer burlesque as a location where working from a location of “failure,” and of “ugly,” allows for alternate realities of lived experience for marginalized Others, despite the context of neoliberal governmentality. Relying on the information provided in this chapter’s snapshot of American neoliberal culture, I will detail how it is that burlesque reemerges as a popular

form of entertainment over 100 years after its advent, as well as evaluate why it is, today, an ideal medium for creating radical fat and queer community out of its performers' corporeal "failings."

Chapter 3

The History of the Tease & the Birth 'n Bump of Neo-Burlesque

This chapter serves as a space to situate the past and present of burlesque in the United States in order to understand its potential as a medium of subversion and dissent for marginalized groups. It is important that I trace this history here not only to pay homage to burlesque's past, but because its roots are grounded in resistance performed by the communities that this project understands as part of its own – both performers of size and people economically and politically “othered.” Burlesque's beginnings, as briefly detailed earlier, align with the same period of time considered in Chapter 1 where curvy, corpulent bodies were not only appreciated, but desirable, too. Thus, when cataloging burlesque's history as I do in this chapter, it is done so while considering, simultaneously, the cultural attitudes about size. As preference developed for thinner bodies and traces of roundness became a symbol of working-class bodies, so did burlesque meet its first (of many) declines in popularity on account of its appeal to the economically underprivileged. Burlesque emerged, during this period as a medium through which these communities were able to garner the attention of the owning classes through spectacted performance. This chapter will address the political infrastructure of burlesque's beginnings, drawing upon its storied past as a method for explaining burlesque's present.

Thus, this chapter is divided into two sections: one that maps the history of

burlesque – from its heyday in the mid-and-late 1800s to its final decline in the 1950s - and the other that considers its reemergence and the cultural projects and influences that allowed for its rebirth, namely the fat activist and riot grrrl movements. It's important to note here that scholarship for either period of study that focuses on burlesque is limited and that while burlesque has, once more, become a cultural site of interest, that what has been written about is both minimal and more journalistic than anything else.

In chronicling burlesque's history, I have culled together a mixture of sources from scholarly texts that are based in history and cultural studies, relying heavily on Robert C. Allen's book, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque an American Culture*. Allen's work is the only one of its kind that considers the entire period of burlesque from the 19th to the 20th century - save for the neo-burlesque movement - and while other scholarly articles and books look at the topic, they do so in passing or as a stepping stone for dance that comes after. Allen's book is unique in focusing solely on this form of dance, but it is also the only text I've come across that offers such a thorough and detailed history of so many performers. While I don't spend a lot of time in this dissertation looking at specific burlesque stars of the past, the attention Allen pays to both renowned and lesser-known performers is insightful and has definitely added to the scope of this project. Because of the newness of neo-burlesque and its recent popularity, there are only a few scholarly articles that examine the site. The examination that, thus, ensues in regards to neo-burlesque and the projects of fat activism and riot grrrl

that I believe shape it - a heretofore uninterrogated possibility - relies on the historical memories of activists and performers alike, news sources, and my own knowledge due to my position in these varying communities. What follows the first section of burlesque's history then, is largely new scholarship that helps to situate an analysis of neo-burlesque in the academy.

* * *

In early February of 1868, New Yorkers awoke to the exciting news that celebrated British burlesque star, Lydia Thompson, was due to arrive in town at the end of summer to debut as the opening act of the newly renovated Banvard's Museum and Theater.¹³⁸ The city was abuzz! As with a number of other cultural and social artifacts, such as men's and women's fashions, art, music, and etiquette, British culture symbolized chicness to wealthy Americans who wished to emulate their level of sophistication; believed evidence of "old money" wealth and "old world" charm. Similarly, major American cities, such as New York, had recently "rescued" the iconic, modern theater from the "boisterous elements of the working class," allowing aristocrats a new claim to more refined entertainment. The word of Thompson's visit had the cultural elite of old New York in a frenzy over the opportunity to see her perform and get a glimpse of what was accessible entertainment to the affluent European set. So much was the proverbial fire of anticipation around her arrival that many a New York City

138 Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 3.

newspaper warned of Thompson's "danger," noting that her appearances across Europe had led smitten male admirers to both suicides and duels!"¹³⁹

Opening night at the Banvard sold out completely for Thompson and her accompanying troupe of "British Blondes," who performed F.C. Burnand's satire of *Ixion*, an 1865 "lampoon of classical culture and mythological allusion composed in punning rhymed pentameter."¹⁴⁰ In the play, Thompson performed the character of a king who cannot maintain and keep his wife due to his gambling debts, while her "Blondes" played a number of mythological gods and goddesses who narrate the king's behavior. The blondes also played the roles of each others' love interests throughout the play, switching easily between deities of different genders. Cultural capital insisted that the New York elite love it and they did for its "brief costumes, portrayals of classical male roles, and integration of witty satire between the lines of respectable text."¹⁴¹ The perfect blend of sex, wit, and shock titillated middle and upper-class American audiences, who showered Thompson and the British Blondes with nightly ovations and cascades of roses.

I read these initial contributions of Thompson to the American burlesque scene as fervently important to this dissertation because of the cultural and social norms they reject in the midst of such normativity and widespread initial acceptance by the New York bourgeoisie. Having been born out of British class

139 Ibid, 7.

140 Ibid, 10.

141 Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*, (Denver, CO: Speck Press, 2004), 1; It's also been suggested that Thompson's debut on American stages were the first instance of "nude" tights appearing within the country. The bareness of these nylons, undoubtedly played a role in the troupe's initial allure.

struggles of the 1840s and 1850s, burlesque began as a strategy employed by poor and working-class communities to comically, and salaciously, chide the wealthy for their lavishness in the face of such national poverty.¹⁴² By the time Thompson brought her craft to America, however, the art form had been co-opted by European elites who found the farce and dance to be entertaining when removed from the theaters and saloons of the “vulgar” proletariat. This revival in English theater influenced Americans who warmly ushered burlesque to its shores after its own remaking of metropolitan theatrical spaces¹⁴³ to reflect similar class stratifications.

Perhaps it was this unrealized tension inherent in burlesque’s history that caused renowned arts critic of the time, Richard Grant White to write that he found burlesque a timely, but “monstrous kind of entertainment equally acceptable to three publics so different as those of Paris, London, and New York.”¹⁴⁴ Astute in his observations, though, White noted that by referring to burlesque as “monstrous” he didn’t quite mean that he found it unappealing or unpleasant, but rather, that it was just inanely “queer” to watch: “The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance of both the natural and the conventional,” he wrote. “It forces the conventional and the natural together just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity.”¹⁴⁵

142 Jon M. Kingsdale, "The 'Poor Man's Club': Social Functions of the Urban working-Class Saloon," in *American Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1973) 478-479; Andrea Friedman, "'The Habitats of Sex-Crazed Perverts': Campaigns against Burlesque in Depression-Era New York City," in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 2 (1996): 203-238.

143 Allen, 70-76.

144 Richard Grant White, "The Age of Burlesque," in *Galaxy* 8 (1869): 256-66.

145 Ibid.

I find that Thompson's and the Blondes' articulations and manipulations of class, body size, gender, and sexuality on-stage *are* "monstrous" and "absurd" in terms of how they challenge cultural and social norms of the time period, even in their ability to reify each performer as a "normal" woman off of the stage. More than just "wit and sex," burlesque's own class history, as well as Thompson and her troupe's bodies and performances (particularly in *Ixion*), immediately aligned the commencement of the American burlesque scene with marginality and spectacle, despite its preliminary identification as an upscale source of entertainment for the bourgeoisie. Aside from the attraction to their British sensibilities, Thompson and the British Blondes appealed to American viewers, largely, because of their physical aesthetic. Thompson herself was short in stature, with long brown hair and a thick, curvy figure, large breasts, and stocky legs, while her troupe was similarly sized.

But while their robust figures were fairly normative for the time period, the way they moved their ample forms certainly was *not* and this caused great chatter amongst American audiences who were not all initially certain they liked this outright display of such coquettishness. While fatness was fashionable for American women so much so at the time that the slim among them padded and bolstered their small frames with pillows to appear larger and more curvaceous, modesty and etiquette were still revered as tenets of white American femininity.¹⁴⁶ Thus, the suggestive nature with which Thompson and the Blondes

146 Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 145.

danced the tales of their large bodies and the ways in which they portrayed sexuality onstage was transgressive for the late 1860s. Scholar Maria Elena Buszek argues this in her book *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality and Popular Culture*, when she writes that female burlesque performers “imbue[d] the genre with the same subversive, expressive sexuality that period feminists would increasingly view as an essential part of modern women’s emancipation.”¹⁴⁷ More so, for one of the very first times on American stages, women were experiencing actual pleasure not only in the reactions their wit and bawdiness accrued, but also in their own physical bodies and how they were encouraged to move and reveal them; that these were fat bodies is of exceptional note. Fat women performing sexuality, desire, and humor which, most importantly, was not at their own expense, is the crucial foundation from which burlesque was born and a largely important fact for this project.

What this means for my conversation about the history of burlesque and the reemergence of neo-burlesque a century and a half after its introduction to the U.S., is that the art form’s origins are rooted in “fat”; burlesque was popularized by fat women, with troupes proudly reporting they didn’t have a dancer weighing less than 200lbs each.¹⁴⁸ Performance studies scholars and historians have yet to acknowledge what I hope to make evident here at the intersection of dance and corporeal epistemology - that burlesque started as a fat project.¹⁴⁹ In reading

147 Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 22.

148 Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32.

149 It is pertinent, then, to realize that in this current moment of revitalization where neo-burlesque has embraced fat performers, but has not necessarily reemerged because of them, that fat bodies have, over time, and in the midst of the neoliberal present, become an example of failure, rather than success.

burlesque then as art that is “of the margins” - grown out of fat *and* working-class bodies - it is also of interest then that the performance of these fat dancing bodies was also often richly layered with varying depictions of queerness.

As with Thompson’s work in *Ixion*, early burlesque before the turn of the century frequently included female-to-male drag, for example, which while initially surprising to American audiences, was found to be entertaining by most. But so much as it was about getting a rise out of spectators in her playful, pathetic depiction of wealthy, wistful men, Thompson’s drag drew from the generation prior’s political theater that saw poor and working-class performers using the stage as a site for “speaking back” to the wealthy about class stratification.¹⁵⁰ So, Thompson’s performance of a pitiful king who can’t win a gambling bet, and thus can’t pay for his wife’s dowry as in *Ixion*, is not just for the sake of making a general mockery of “modern,” aristocratic masculinity and getting a laugh in the meantime. Though it accomplishes humor, beneath the comedic value of Thompson’s king, there is a larger, cultural critique happening, specifically in terms of gender and sexuality that drag reveals in its exploration of masculinity and femininity. And while it can be argued that Thompson was unaware of the challenges her work made to the hegemonic paradigm of sex, sexuality, and gender, the fact that her performances confronted social institutions and norms, such as patriarchy and female subordination, remains true. Thompson’s early incarnations of burlesque and, in this case, her drag performances, specifically,

150 Jacki Wilson, *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2008); Baldwin, 6-7.

disputed the perceived “naturalness” of gender and, further, the compulsion toward heterosexuality. Judith Butler’s theory on drag that she outlines in *Gender Trouble* captures the uncertainty and “defiance” that White uses to refer to burlesque in his exploratory essay, which was quoted earlier in the chapter. She writes: “part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary.”¹⁵¹

Thompson and the Blondes performing drag, masculinely swaggering across the stage, and then swapping costumes and genders to play each others’ lovers in *Ixion* is specifically the rift in, what White refers to as, “the natural and the conventional.” That categories of gender and sexuality are so upset in this performance and so queered is precisely what winds up making American audiences so uncertain about burlesque as time continues. Author and literary critic William Dean Howells had even tougher word for the early burlesque queens who donned gentlemen’s clothes and performed queer spectacle in the spirit of comedy: “Though they were not like men, they were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which put to shame.”¹⁵²

151 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 187.

152 Allen, 25.

What both White and Howell accuse Thompson's performances of is precisely what Butler's theory confirms about gender: that it is "a fabrication [...] a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies."¹⁵³ In her performing drag, Thompson's ease in portraying masculinity points to the reveal that gender is only an imitation of itself; not an indication of an inner essence. Inextricably linked, the cyclical imitation that is gender, devoid of origin, simultaneously makes a conclusion about heterosexuality as well. That it too is a repetitive, parodic loop that is built on no original or truth; that it is, if anything, "compulsory" to use the words of feminist scholar Adrienne Rich. It is precisely these provocations that caused White and Howell's reactions to be what they were and which implored Allen to write in *Horrible Prettiness* that burlesque: "presented a world without limits, a world turned upside down and inside out in which nothing was above being brought down to earth. In [the] world [of burlesque], things that should be kept separate were united in grotesque hybrids. Meanings refused to stay put. Anything might happen."¹⁵⁴

In this inverted and disordered world of early burlesque, elements of what Americans held as truths about themselves - their desires, their bodies, their social stratifications - were lost and given new meanings. This cultivated a kind of panic in the bourgeois whose epistemological understandings of class, corporeality, gender, and sexuality were disrupted within the framework of burlesque. Though initially appealing and exciting, Thompson and her troupe of

¹⁵³ Butler, 186.

¹⁵⁴ Allen, 29.

British Blondes wound up being decidedly too countercultural for the American palate by the start of the 1870s.

Burlesque's Ebbs & Flows

America's first disavowal of burlesque and, specifically, of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, came when Thompson relocated her shows from upscale Manhattan theatrical venues to spaces such as "Niblo's Garden," a spot which sat at "the heart of the middle-class theatrical world."¹⁵⁵ Though burlesque's initial failure is a result of several different factors, they are all married in such a way that prevents the ability to identify which is most responsible for its demise or which even caused the first blow. Rather, as the history is revealed, it is clear that burlesque's quietus is a result of the intersections of misogyny, classism, and the rampant xenophobia that occurred simultaneously toward the start of the 1870s. Pre-Thompsonian burlesque saw the beginnings of the class debates over the space of the theater and its tug-of-war between the wealthy and the poor who identified its uses differently. Those without money saw it as a space of safe, inexpensive assembly and the wealthy deemed it a place of culture to be properly appreciated by the "elite." Of course, the wealthy won this initial round, pushing proletarian folks out of the scene by shutting down their entertainment spaces, namely saloons, claiming that they were places of indecency which bred scandal and crime. Meanwhile, New York City's rich put large amounts of money into rebuilding or opening new, expensive

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 77.

theater spaces that catered to aristocratic dreams of high-brow venues and, simultaneously, kept out the poor and working class because of the financial burden they posed.

This division and reallocation of Manhattan theaters by the wealthy set was what allowed for the invitation and subsequent arrival of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes to the U.S. stage in 1868. But what wealthy American noblemen and women had in mind for this revival of the New York City theater scene and for the integration of European Victorian burlesque into American culture, was quite different than what they wound up occurring. In its refashioning to be a cultural icon of opulent, the theater was also reworked to consider women's roles alongside it. Working-class theater permitted women to the stage in solo acts, as well as those with others and, more so, allowed them to present in acts that were comedic in nature. The presence of women in such roles was considered gauche to wealthy American theatergoers who only saw women on the stage in dramatic roles written *for*, not by, them. Outside of such performances, women were not permitted to perform in the newly revitalized theater scene and were sanctioned to the audience. This transition, specifically, in women's roles was a smaller attempt taken socially that, amongst others, added up to produce a new popular icon of the American woman in the early 1870s, which valued modesty, domesticity, and relied on patriarchy as her guide. Undoubtedly a result of the larger conversations occurring at the same time regarding women's roles in and outside of the home, as well as the impending "threat" of a national suffragist

movement, the question of how women should be depicted onstage was of major concern in shaping a static image of upstanding American femininity.

Robert C. Allen writes of this period, “So long as women portrayed dramatic characters, what a ‘woman onstage’ signified could be more or less controlled through the words written for her by the playwright. But when women appeared in spectacle pieces, their bodies, not someone else’s words, bore the burden of signification.”¹⁵⁶ The “signification” to which Allen refers can be understood, very simply, as power. For whatever was signified in women’s onstage performance, through whatever medium or theme, posed enough threat that their participation in theater was eradicated altogether. It can be understood then that women’s theater before the stage was plutocratically reclaimed, allowed women the opportunity to perform political, ribald, and comedic acts of their own design and that this amount of power, derived from developing and performing one’s own act, was determined problematic, namely because it had the potential to influence gender roles and lifestyles offstage. As Butler pointedly notes in *Gender Trouble*, “signification harbors within itself [...] ‘agency,’” indicating that performance provided an opportunity for women to act out of the confines of femininity, disrupting what were believed to be natural roles and characteristics for women.

This amount of female power exhibited onstage greatly concerned the hegemonic order that had worked so hard to revive theater from what it

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 81.

considered to have been the veritable gutter. Thus, as quickly as she became popular in the United States, Thompson and her Blondes were starting to feel the sneer of the “upper” echelons whose investment in female sexual repression grew, seemingly, by the day. In this newly evolving atmosphere, the use of theatrical elements such as drag and the “peek-a-boo” of a little reveal (and I really do mean quite minimal at this point in time; a wrist or ankle being the very most) eventually created such unease around female sexuality that performers were forced to carefully and consistently redevelop their acts. Those daring women who kept the content of their performances the same over the 1870s, eventually, faced enormous pushback and rejection in the wake of America’s recultivated woman. Perhaps no one learned their lesson about female repression of the decade better than burlesque dancer Mabel Santley, who was arrested in San Francisco in 1879 for indecent exposure after lifting her skirts and showing her ankles onstage.¹⁵⁷ So scandalous was this portion of her routine that a riot erupted over her indecency in the theater causing the police to arrive and haul Santley away to prison!

While burlesque stars were pushing boundaries in displaying the very “wicked” knobs of their ankles, affluent women responded with lengthening their skirts, tightening their corsets, and muting the colors of their wardrobes in order to appear sophisticated as opposed to wanton.¹⁵⁸ By containing and covering the body in such a way, female sexuality was obscured from sight and

¹⁵⁷ Irving Zeidman, *The American Burlesque Show* (New York: Hawthorn Press, 1967) 33-34.

¹⁵⁸ Allen, 84.

contemplation, an obvious attempt to keep women and their desires controlled. With these shifts in contemporary appearance, gender, and cultural attitudes, burlesque hit a major bump in its previously smooth road to winning the heart of American culture and misogyny was a key ingredient. Performers like Thompson and the Blondes, who wanted to continue touring in the U.S., but felt limited by what the new rules of the theater allowed for, determined that the content of their acts was still appealing to working-class audiences and sought out performance spaces that catered to them.

The results of this move, particularly by Thompson who led the parade of performers from upscale, stodgy, theaters to the bowery, was twofold. For one, her suspicion had been correct and she, the British Blondes, and other troupes, all enjoyed enormous success before nightly crowds of the laboring class who found their evolving potent theatrical cocktail of sex and wit to be top-notch entertainment. Here, Thompson and others were able to be visible performers again; capable of being seen for what they were, playful and provocative dancers with their roots in performing farce and emerging stardom committed to the revealing nature of the “legs business.”¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, however, repositioning burlesque in outlets that did not cater solely to the bourgeois drove a stake into the heart of the city’s most affluent. Voluntarily moving one’s show into the entertainment spaces of working-class communities was symbolic

159 Thompson and the performers who followed her lead in growing the definition of burlesque to reveal more of the body were, undoubtedly, inspired by “legs shows,” such as *The Black Crook*, which was very provocative for the nation’s original musical. Similarly, the structure of burlesque shows changed and while wit and farce maintained an important element as it had in Victorian England, American burlesque was informed by the successful structure of the minstrel show, which featured dancing in the first act, comedy and political critique in the second, and a grand finale in the third.

because of its rejection of unyielding female gender norms, its embrace of female sexuality, and its allegiance with working-class and poor communities. Allen writes of this split with aristocratic notions of theater space:

“Just when the voices of class division within the audience had been silenced, Thompson and her sisters spoke in the undignified slang of the marketplace and street. Just when sexuality in the audience had been stifled, the third tier evacuated, and the concert saloon closed, the “leg business” [of burlesque] put the issue of female sexuality on center stage.”¹⁶⁰

Thompson and followers truly resist the prevailing ideologies of the time period in this active rejection of what the wealthy could offer them if they were willing to conform to new, more polished standards. In making an alliance with the proletarian community, burlesque accepts what it should, theoretically, fear. In fact, to mention the “voices of class” division, as Allen does above, is only telling half the story and following suite of what other performance scholars have also ignored in their studies of burlesque. That while burlesque was reemerging as an ally to working-class culture, it was also positioning itself as a partner to immigrant communities who were making new lives for themselves in the United States and who, inevitably, became a part of the working class that frequented burlesque shows for entertainment value. Mainly, the families immigrating during this time period were Irish or German, looking to escape famine or conscription into the Prussian army. Though read as white, the fact that these immigrants, largely young men, were not Americans, nor from the “right” parts of Europe

¹⁶⁰ Allen, 77-78.

deemed au courant enough for New Yorkers to want to imitate, made them another distasteful element added to the burlesque scene.¹⁶¹

It is precisely this amalgam of misogyny, classism and xenophobia that contributed to the rebranding of burlesque culture from chic import to tawdry display throughout the 1870s. But with this, the theater, once more, became an unpredictable locale where women had flexibility and space to play with their image; where the interactions between performers, and between performers and the audience, were unmitigated, unstable, and importantly, direct. Power on the burlesque stage was, largely, level across the playing field, allowing for everything that had been “repressed in the righteous, moral, conservative” class wars to return. Burlesque had, indeed, become the lowest branch of the theater, but it, simultaneously, became the limb nearest to “the people¹⁶².” With the history of burlesque’s birth in the U.S. now told, as well as its first rise and fall, I will use the next part of this chapter to more swiftly move through a time line of burlesque as it has come to fame and obscurity time and time again in order to think through its current reign in the form of neo-burlesque.

As the 19th century began to come to a close, burlesque once more enjoyed a moment in the sun as a revered form of American entertainment. Abreast of a new century and concurrent changing attitudes around women at the turn of the 20th century, burlesque made its comeback at the 1893 Chicago’s World’s Fair.

161 I want to be clear here that while there was allegiance amongst burlesque, the working-class, and immigrants, it exists as it does because the immigrants in question were white. While not ripe with evidence of racist portrayals of non-white groups, such as in other segments of American theater, it is a fact that American burlesque derives itself, in part, from the structure of minstrel shows; Doris Weatherford, *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1996).

162 Ann Corio, *This Was Burlesque* (New York: Madison Square Press, 1968, 9.

Having enjoyed, at this point, a near two decades in the saloons and performance venues of the working class, burlesque had amped up its reliance on “the leg show” portion of its act, though still maintained the slapstick wit it had been initially built upon. At this point, American burlesque had grown up and out of its familiar British ancestral version - incorporating shorter acts and sketches as opposed to a one-length, cohesive show, scant costuming, and sexually suggestive and comedic dialogues.¹⁶³ The satire remained a major tenet, though critics argued that, opposed to its earlier incarnations, the “new” American burlesque had traded some of its complexity for slinkiness. In fact, many noted that the performances at the World’s Fair were unlike ones upper and middle-class America had ever seen, with hip bumps and swivels that brought cheers from men and women alike, securing a major turn in the structure and content of burlesque shows.

This transition in attitudes about burlesque from reviled to enjoyable over the course of mere years is undeniably indebted to the rapidly changing ideas about women’s appearance and roles in society at the end of the 1870s through the early 1890s. As noted in Chapter 1, a booming American economy allowed for a relaxed playfulness that the prior (nor encroaching) decades did not allow for. More so, it was, for the middle and upper classes, a moment in time that celebrated the female form with a particular affinity for larger, fatter bodies because of its presumed evidence of both wealth and health in the midst of the

¹⁶³ Allen, 92.

tuberculosis outbreak. Because of the ways in which the cultural climate regaled these figures and the intrigue and excitement of industrial growth that surrounded them, these two decades provided the ideal climate for an outrageous resurgence of burlesque. Irving Zeidman, perhaps, best summarizes this period as “mania for the grandiose” and elaborates that:

“Then, as now, men yearned for some glamour, however false, some romantic tinsel, however gaudy. And the intimate suggestiveness of the cancan, the lifting of flowered skirts to reveal ruffled drawers, colored fleshings and rounded thighs, the beckoning prettiness of painted, smiling blondes - all were basic to the new burlesque shows which were rough and lusty in the eighties, unbridled and raw in the nineties. Above all, the keynote of the era was size, bulk, magnitude. So that the massivity of the burlesque female behemoths reflected not only the taste of the customer but the pattern of the times. They were years particularized by the hustle and the bustle.”¹⁶⁴

Zeidman’s allusion to a kind of “perfect storm” for burlesque is accurate in that what reemerged in the late 1870s and took off into the following two decades was a veritable boom in burlesque culture. In fact, burlesque enjoyed such success that some tout it as the reason the Chicago’s World Fair did not buckle due to low attendance rates. As word spread about the lascivious burlesque of performers such as “Little Egypt” and her new, “exotic,” shimmy called the “belly dance,” the crowds grew in size, keeping the fair from closing.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Zeidman, 33.

¹⁶⁵ Baldwin, 3; One cannot do a proper history of burlesque without acknowledging its intersections with race and while this dissertation focuses more so on the body politics of being a fat queer performer, it recognizes the inextricability to issues of race and ethnicity. “Little Egypt’s” introduction of fairgoers to belly dance amplified her “exoticness” to white audiences and, in their minds, aligned her with African American “otherness.” Her dancing is responsible for the emergence of the dance phrase, “hoochie-coochie,” which was derived from Southern vernacular - “goochie,” being a slang for “female” genitalia; reducing her to her merely to her body. Her fame was followed by similarly named performers, such as Little Africa, and various other “Oriental” dancers who also endured the racialization processes of being exoticized “others” and hypersexualized women of color; i.e. the iconic Jezebel. While women of color performers, or those alleged to be (there exists skepticism around certain dancers’ claims; occasional white performers believing they could possess more of a following if they were determined to be from particular other parts of the world) participated in burlesque and its revival, they were quite often segregated to venues for people of color or side show and minstrel troupes. Familiar names such as Bessie Smith, Ethyl Waters, and Lizzie Miles all used burlesque in some part of their acts, though they are not often cited as the headliners of the art form, despite their eventual fame as we know it today. This is mainly a result of their racial make-up which prevented them a career headlining major, largely white,

As American burlesque grew more successful into the 1880s, its positioning of female performers shifted in an attempt to make their sexuality and their bump-and-grind more front-and-center, while sidelining their cheeky, spoken roles and interactions with audiences; often considered to be the backbone of original burlesque. These verbal roles were then newly co-opted by male performers, usually emcees, who began organizing and narrating burlesque shows as the art form grew to become more and more popular. While their presence did structure busier shows and schedules, giving dancers more time for costume changes and the like, incorporating male hosts took the role of “knower” away from dancers, attempting to situate them as “mere” bodies to be visually consumed by audiences.

But as any dancer will admit, audibly speaking is not a necessary component in conveying emotions to an audience, nor is it a necessity for speaking back or resisting particular paradigms.¹⁶⁶ Having already endured a silencing based in class stratification throughout its short history in the United States, many of burlesque’s women were not about to allow another to occur because of a privileging of their physical bodies. While male entertainers continued to introduce the acts and engage with the audience betwixt performances, exchanging wisecracks and political commentary as the dancers had formerly done, the women actively resisted the restructuring. Aside from their

circuits. As a result, many of these performers enjoyed their fame as part of the blues scene, which was composed almost entirely of people of color, namely African Americans.

166 Amira Jarmakani, "Belly Dancing for Liberation: A Critical Interpretation of Reclamation Rhetoric in the American Belly Dance Community," in *Arabs in the Americas: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Arab Diaspora*, Ed. Darcy Zabel, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006) 154.

rogue attempts at reclaiming space on stage by verbally responding “out of turn” to viewers or to something the emcee said, performers looked to the design of their acts as way to “talk back.” By manipulating music and movement, dancers were able to load their routines with metaphors and double-entendres that allowed even more space to creatively play with the minds and desires of the audience. By self-designing their routines and what they conveyed to viewers, dancers had more control over the what their dancing bodies “said.”¹⁶⁷ In having to make more clever use of their acts, whether in song selection, the use of props, particular costuming, etc., dancers were able to build up even more of a witty, “peek-a-boo” quality to the various layers of their performance. Their voices and abilities to connect and play with their audiences never went silenced despite the restructuring of American burlesque’s framework.

As the 19th century drew to a close four distinct events occurred which caused another shift to occur in the production of American burlesque. The first was the number of metropolitan-based performers who left their shows to follow crews of American men to Alaska and Canada’s Yukon territory as they dug for newly discovered gold. Here, the performers set up shop as the only form of entertainment and made a fortune off of gold purveyors. Further, because they were able to do so well for themselves, now legendary dancers, such as Diamond-Tooth Gertie, among others, were able to buy their own venues, which drew more girls to the outer territories for longer periods of time. The second

¹⁶⁷ Baldwin, 4.

force that caused a change in American burlesque as it marched into the start of the 20th century was the motion picture. Created in mid-1800s, but popularized in the early 1900s, the first films captivated American audiences.¹⁶⁸ Their novelty outshone other forms of entertainment initially, including burlesque, which did suffer financially after movies became more and more accessible.

The third event that caused a shift in the representation of American burlesque at the turn of the century occurred with the creation of two national circuits of shows - the Columbia Wheel and the Ziegfeld's Follies. In terms of modesty, what the Columbia Wheel insisted upon, the Ziegfeld Follie's rejected, though both circuits appeared to begin catering to middle and upper-class audiences again, detaching themselves from the true form of burlesque and once more throwing the dance into a state of perplexity. The Columbia Wheel circuit, run by "ultraconservative Sam Scribner," found dancers, again chastised for their displays of overt sexuality and bawdiness, buttoned up in full-length costumes in hopes of appealing to a more "wholesome" crowd. While the Ziegfeld Follies had no shortage of half-clad nymphs, burlesque emcees and comedians, now mostly men, were poached from the working class stages to perform back uptown. Though quite different, both moves left burlesque "floundering, looking for a way to draw back it's audiences."¹⁶⁹

The fourth event I identify for qualifying this next shift in American burlesque is the change in beauty norms that happened at the turn of the century. With the

¹⁶⁸ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

new millennium came a transition in ideals of femininity from fleshy curves and rounded bellies to slender figures, which saw evidence of muscle definition in the arms and legs. This icon of the Gibson Girl symbolized a new “feminine ideal of naturalness,” which was plainly antithetical to the type of body it replaced.¹⁷⁰ The peacocked display of the burlesque star: her largesse, her rouged and perfumed skin, and the physical reveal of her corporeal assets, newly symbolized the failure of material excess. Though burlesque stars were not banished from the public, performers were now working in stock burlesque shows that featured “cheap overhead and recycled acts [which] kept ticket prices low” and were housed in working-class and immigrant communities.¹⁷¹ Stock performance companies, the most renowned being the famed Minsky Brothers’ Burlesque, were responsible for pushing the envelope, constantly playing with what could and should be revealed.

After spending time in the burlesque theaters of Europe and recognizing what would be most profitable to their newly immigrated and working-class audiences, as well as returning WWI soldiers who had new, European sensibilities, the Minsky Brothers not only encouraged their dancers to wear less clothing, they went as far as to physically redesign the theater to replicate Paris’ Moulin Rouge.¹⁷² This meant that now, instead of a conventional, horizontal stage, the theater at Minsky’s also featured for the first time in American venues, the “runway design” stage that stimulated the one-woman-centered show we are

170 Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment*, 85

171 Baldwin, 7-8.

172 A.W. Stencell, *Girl Show: Into the Canvas World of Bump and Grind*, (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 1999), 629-630.

familiar with today in exotic dance clubs. It is of little surprise then that Minsky's is the site of the first burlesque striptease, a word that started as journalistic patois for low-rent disrobing that promised more than it ever revealed.¹⁷³ Still, when Mae Dix innocently removed her collar one night at a show at Minsky's, to allegedly keep it clean, the crowd went wild. She returned to the stage in several more intervals to remove the cuffs and bodice making her an overnight sensation amongst the burlesque set, circuits included.¹⁷⁴ Dix's "accidental" stripping inspired the likes of other dancers to lose pieces of clothing throughout their acts; the tease portion of the stripping evolved with the craft where dancers like Ziegfeld's Carrie Finnell worked the audience for cash and publicity by promising each and every night to remove another piece of clothing at her next show.¹⁷⁵ Her gimmick kept the audiences coming and bolstered the growing reputation of burlesque as obscene entertainment.

While the early stripteases prompted police citations and arrests, by the mid-1920s, burlesque eventually had become synonymous with stripping. At this time, dancers were permitted to appear completely topless in acts, something that not even today's burlesque performers can do, so long as they remained still and unmoving. It wasn't long until this rule was violated and ended in a shakedown of the entire industry, later inspiring the novel and movie, *The Night They Raided Minsky's*. For the next decade and a half, burlesque houses

173 Marybeth Hamilton, "Striptease: Disrobed divas and the not-so-naked truth," *The Independent*, last modified, March 10, 2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/striptease-by-rachel-shteir-469244.html>.

174 Jane Briggeman, *Burlesque: Legendary Stars of the Stage*, (Portland, OR: Collectors Press, 2004), 16.

175 Baldwin, 9.

continued to challenge the limits put upon what dancers could expose.

Performers like Gypsy Rose Lee, Mae West, and actress-turned-exotic-dancer Sally Rand, all had numerous run-ins with the police who regularly arrested them and others for so-called “indecentcy” and “lewdness.” The final straw for New York City burlesque houses, though, came in 1937 when it was rumored a performer at a Harlem theater had taken to the stage without wearing a G-string. The city’s moral authority was in an outrage and, led by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, encouraged Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia to suspend the licenses of all burlesque theaters in the city and to, further, disallow the words “burlesque,” “striptease” and “Minsky’s” to appear on future marquees.

Burlesque’s popularity, once more, dwindled.

Before it’s most dormant phase which began in the 1960s and ended in the mid-1990s signaling the start of the present era of neo-burlesque, burlesque once more enjoyed success during WWII when soldiers popularized the image of the pin-up girl and came home expecting to find her onstage as they had abroad. For American burlesque queens who rose to fame in the late 1940s and 1950s the striptease was, by now, an assumed staple of their routines. Thus, performers who wanted to make it big in the spotlight and stay there for a while needed, not only, to develop a character, but a gimmick, as well. As the 1950s progressed, burlesque stages saw the birth of such legendary performers as Lili St. Cyr, whose performances often incorporated elaborate props, such as real bubble baths; Dixie Evans, who performed a racy impersonation of Marilyn

Monroe dancing alongside a Joe DiMaggio dummy. Others, like Gypsy Rose Lee and Sally Rand, took to the road and opened their own all-girl revues, riding out the last few years of success burlesque enjoyed in the US before the striptease took over so completely that gentlemen's clubs were born to cater only to it, killing the elements that made burlesque what it was.

Neo-burlesque: It's Influences & It's Present

The time that elapsed between the end of the 1950s and the 1990s was curiously barren of mere mentions of burlesque considering its tumultuous, but rather constant, presence in American culture for nearly a century. Imaginably, part of this is a result of the turbulent times of the 1960s and 70s, which not only saw the extent of the Vietnam War, but also great political division and change at home on American soil as well. While burlesque had previously experienced revivals during wartimes, American social movements advocating for civil and women's rights most likely contributed to keeping it inactive because of the attention both movements warranted. One suspects that the women's movement if asked to consider the art form of burlesque during this pivotal movement in U.S. Social history, would have considered it an "anti-feminist" display of women's bodies for the sheer pleasure of male viewership.

Similarly, the 1980s proved infertile grounds for burlesque to reemerge again despite it being known as a decade marked by an "excess is best" ethos around wealth, aesthetic, and lifestyle. However, with President Reagan in office, the spread of globalization, and a booming U.S. economy, the cultural climate in

the United States revolved around the quest for the shiny and new, the advanced and cutting edge, not entertainment of decades past. Burlesque's long history most likely made 1980s yuppies think it antiquated art; a far cry from the modern, steely synthesizers of New Wave music, the fervency of Basquiat's neo expressionism, and the new and trendy gentlemen's clubs that replaced "seedy, [working-class] hole-in-the-wall" venues.¹⁷⁶ A decade that privileged the new and futuristic as the 1980s did proved an unfit locale for burlesque to make its first comeback in decades.

The 1990s saw the beginnings of burlesque's most recent reemergence, but while its first new iterations didn't materialize until about halfway through the decade, events that occurred within the first few years are, arguably, responsible in part for burlesque's revival. In the recent scholarship on neo-burlesque there is no engagement with the questions of why or how burlesque has risen into popularity after 30 years of hibernation, nor how it grew to embrace other differently marginalized communities beyond the poor and working classes, yet these are pivotal questions to pose in understanding why fat, queer burlesque has developed in this new epoch.¹⁷⁷ In what follows, I will describe how the riot grrrl movement, do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, and the fat acceptance movement and its neoliberal discontents all contributed to the resurgence of American burlesque in the mid-1990s and its colossal cultural success a solid decade later.

176 Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, (New York: BasicCevitas Books, 2002), 113.
177 Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; D. Lacy Asbill, "I'm Allowed to be a Sexual Being": The Distinctive Social Conditions of the Fat Burlesque Stage," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum, (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 299-304; Wilson, *The Happy Stripper*; Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*.

With the cultural residue of 1970s male-centered punk rock lingering around the start of the 1990s, women who had previously been designated as men's "coat hangers" at punk rock and anarchist cultural and social events, sought out space that could finally belong to them.¹⁷⁸ Craving room from which to respond to their own social locations and myriad of oppressions, women began organizing around one another under the title of "riot grrrl." Inspired by the do-it-yourself (DIY) scene happening simultaneously in the Pacific Northwest, the riot grrrl community worked collectively to skill share musical lessons and to make and distribute homemade personal-political magazines (referred to as 'zines) that considered issues pertinent to women, such as body image, abuse, racism, rape, and sexuality. While a clear part of amalgamated feminist, punk, and queer subcultures, the 'zines were enormously successful in terms of distribution and readership; their titles and messages spurring the creation of, mostly West-Coast-based, all-female punk bands; namely, Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Babes in Toyland, among others.

The Influence of Riot Grrrl

The birth of riot grrrl, marked by frontrunner band Bikini Kill's inspired bellow for "revolution girl style now!," motivated at least two generations of women in their teens and mid-20s, to embrace third wave feminism's resistance of neoliberal governmentality, its homogenization of bodies and experiences, and the continued uprising of conservative values across the country. Riot grrrl

178 The reference to "coat hangers" is based on the idea that women at punk shows were there merely to hold the coats of their male partners and friends, as women were not socially permitted or expected to want to participate in the same physical manner as men; Kerri Koch, *Don't Need You*, (Urban Cowgirl Productions, 2006). DVD.

aesthetic and performance both rejected typical, accepted manifestations of femininity and, instead, insisted upon and celebrated its potential for failure. Performers often donned modest 1950s-style dresses, but resisted the performances of conventional femininity that these clothes assumed. Performers would take to the dresses with scissors and paints, making large rips, stains, and tears on the skirts and bodices. These dresses were met with torn fishnet stockings and steel-toed boots rather than intact pantyhose and demure heels. Makeup, long rejected in feminist circles for its participation in patriarchy was replaced by angry red lipstick that smeared beyond the lines of their lips. Those that ascribed to a more punk rock style wore revealing clothing - crop tops, leather miniskirts - and scrawled words like “slut,” “bitch,” and “property” across their bodies in paint and marker. Both styles of fashion that existed within riot grrrl challenged hegemonic understandings of what being and looking like a girl meant. On the one hand it subverted “typical” images of femininity, i.e. dresses and Mary Jane shoes, by literally soiling them. On the other, it reclaimed negative, but ubiquitous, patriarchal terminology for women by literally presenting them on and against their physical bodies, opening up a public space for feminist recuperation.

Riot grrrl performance was similarly noteworthy for the ways in which the singers portrayed femininity and “womanhood” onstage via their lyrics and songs. While their musical talents varied, the messages perpetuated through their screechy, often off-key, singing, became personal and political mantras. Their

self-written lyrics responded to topics and issues where women, people of color, and queers were typically silenced or oppressed. For example, Bikini Kill's 1993 hit, "Suck My Left One" centered in on the traumatic, yet prevalent, issues of childhood sexual abuse and incest. Not only was producing such a song subversive because of the topics which were being publicly addressed, but also because the song's survivor bites back lyrically to her assailant with the threatening "invitation" to literally suck her left breast. All-lesbian band, Team Dresch, used similarly aggressive lyrics to address issues of homophobia, queer violence, and misogyny when they released their 1994 debut album, *Personal Best*.

Riot Grrrl, like the original manifestation of burlesque, created space for marginalized citizens to perform their oppressions and then respond to them at the cost of hegemonic elites responsible for their ostracization. Pointing fingers at not only the punk rock movement which had left women behind in its efforts to rally against such institutions as capitalism, but to the multitudes of other systemic oppressors, such as the institution of marriage, the judicial system, and the beauty industry, riot grrrl enabled an opportunity for angry and politically motivated women to sing and yell about the need to dismantle patriarchy. The riot grrrl community, similar to the neo-burlesque movement, also considered fatphobia and body image two distinct entities in need of address. Nationally distributed riot grrrl 'zines like *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* and *FaT grrL*, were also early additions to the fat acceptance movement, which was growing steadily

alongside the riot grrrl scene and, eventually, wound up outliving it. By the mid-to-late 1990s, the riot grrrl movement had lost steam due to performers' frustrations with mainstream media's misinterpretations of their message and the trivialization of their songs. Singer Corin Tucker, who was a founding member in riot grrrl bands Heavens to Betsy and Sleater-Kinney, lamented in the documentary, *Riot Grrrl Retrospective*:

"I think it was deliberate that we were made to look like we were just ridiculous girls parading around in our underwear. They refused to do serious interviews with us, they misprinted what we had to say, they would take our articles, and our fanzines, and our essays and take them out of context. We wrote a lot about sexual abuse and sexual assault for teenagers and young women. I think those are really important concepts that the media *never* addressed."¹⁷⁹

While riot grrrl had disintegrated, it caused a revival in feminist consciousness that had been lost during the 1980s and which was a major and necessary component for the coming resurgence of burlesque.

The Rise of Fat Activism

The riot grrrl movement's emergence occurred alongside the similarly focused, also deeply feminist and queer, fat activist movement, furthering a consciousness of material politics that centered physical bodies. While fat activism's roots go back as late as the early 1960s, its national expansion (as opposed to its beginning activist collectives based mostly in San Francisco's Bay Area), began largely in the early 1990s, expanding wider and becoming more active between then and now. Nonetheless, it is important to note for the sake of

¹⁷⁹ Riot Grrrl Retrospective (2008; Experience Music Project), Online.

history and my acknowledgment throughout this dissertation of how burlesque, as a political project, relies upon the examination and experience of its own origins of being on the periphery, that I consider the breadth of this grassroots movement. While I will pay some brief homage in this section to the more mainstream fat acceptance movement that has taken a more traditional, professional route à la the success of the NAACP, I will focus more squarely on the rise

While the fact that fat activism began as an on-the-ground variety of social movement, it seems that those activists, scholars, and journalists who have tracked and published information about the evolution of the fat pride community all cite the early 1963 Central Park Fat-In as the first organized action in fat activist history.¹⁸⁰ The Fat-In took place in the middle of a New York City summer when approximately 500 people of size and allies congregated in Central Park to confront mainstream America's fatphobia and the question of fat acceptance. Attendees of the Fat-In ate ice cream cones whilst burning images of then "It Girl" model, Twiggy, whose fame was largely based on her extremely thin frame and, in contrast, paraded images of the curvaceous Italian actress, Sofia Loren, as evidence of beauty *en largesse*.¹⁸¹ While the Fat-In relied upon an undeniably "fat is beautiful" positivity vibe that was, undoubtedly, gleaned from the popularity of the similar "black is beautiful" slogan of the 1960s, it is inarguably radical in its mobilization of people of size to come together to be *publicly* fat. Meaning, the

180 Of course one can never do a complete history of anything; context, experience, and memory alter individual and collective memories and what gets counted as "worthwhile" to mention can never, ultimately, be agreed upon of be memorable and significant to all members.

181 Dan Fletcher, "The Fat-Acceptance Movement," *Time Online*, July 31, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1913858,00.html>.

consumption of ice cream cones amidst protest is important here for what the display, or performance, of it replies to mainstream critiques of fat people, i.e. I will eat the foods that make me fat - the ones you tell me I cannot or should not eat - right here, right now, and with my army of friends, whose sheer numbers will silence your public admonishment of my body. In the following chapter in which I incorporate detailed examples from fat burlesque performances in order to bolster my theoretical framing of it as political in its participation of failure, one will see that this pattern of public over-consumption reoccurs regularly.

Shortly after the Fat-In protest, interested parties collaborated to form an organization that would aim to raise greater awareness of the unbridled fatphobia in the United States and offer education and activism around fat acceptance. In the late 1969, the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA) signed its bylaws into action and, with start-up groups anchored on both coasts, began to organize themselves as a cohesive unit aimed at promoting fat rights. While there was solidarity in forming the group and the goals of its mission, members differed in their ideas of how to approach the creation of change. Many of NAAFA's members felt the best approach was to grow the organization like other national, identity-based advocacy groups, which, in part, meant developing an image of professionalization and, in part, normativity. Other founding members felt differently, insisting that direct, on-the-ground action in the form of radical protest was the best method. This latter group eventually broke off from NAAFA in 1972 to stage more radical interventions into the fatphobic landscape of America. The

named themselves the Fat Underground and protested such events as Weight Watchers meetings and burned diet books.

Throughout the early 1970s, NAAFA members, who were based largely on the East Coast of the United States, organized letter-writing campaigns to companies and individuals who propagated fat oppression and worked to organize fat community via NAAFA-designed social activities. Meanwhile, the Fat Underground, composed largely of feminist and queer-identified members and based in the San Francisco Bay Area, continued to radicalize the fat rights movement. In 1973, Fat Underground members Judy Freespirit and Sara Aldebaran published under the group's name, the Fat Liberation Manifesto. The Manifesto became a highly successful tool (and remains so today) because of its acknowledgment of intersectional politics; one of the key statements of the Manifesto identifies fat liberation as a "struggle allied with the struggle of other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism, and the like."¹⁸² More than likely, this engagement with intersectionality and its application to early fat rights activism came as a result of the claims that issues concerning women of color and lesbians were omitted by the larger 1960s women's movement. The fact that some contingency of early fat activism made a deliberate point to consider the ways in which fat oppression is systemically linked to other forms of identity-based struggle is a clear testament to its foundation in radical, progressive politics.

182 Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 191.

The history of the fat activist movement is largely undocumented at this point in time, though scholars other than myself have are in the midst of taking on the task of simultaneously organizing and growing a physical archive that can and *is* being written of at present. What I can gather from the conversations I've had with other activists in the movement, as well as from British fat studies scholar and activist, Charlotte Cooper's insightful zine, "A Queer and Trans Activist Timeline" is that while NAAFA continued to organize itself around a professional model focused mostly on creating safe social spaces for fat folks to congregate, it remained fairly quiet through to the early 1980s. In the meantime, the Fat Underground and its various members kept up a solid presence at events in the Bay Area and in New York City where they continued their more on-the-ground demonstrations. This time period of the early and mid-1970s saw body-image-concerned feminists attempting to work alongside fat activists in what would seem like a shared struggle. Susie Orbach's 1978 book *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, is perhaps the best example of this attempted allegiance between body image feminists and fat activists, though their focuses proved vastly different. While Orbach and her book correctly stated that fat and feminism are inextricably tied and that feminists should be encouraged to more carefully consider the dialectic of fat within conversations of power, privilege, and normativity, the latter pathologized fatness and related to it only in terms of the product of an eating disorder.¹⁸³ Orbach's book does, in part, critique standard images of "ideal" body

¹⁸³ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Arrow Books, 1978).

size and beauty, but nonetheless is not the fat activist bible its title suggests. Thus, fat radical like those of the Fat Underground did nothing to align themselves with Orbach's success in the 1970s and 80s and, largely, the fat rights community to date rejects both her past and current work as nothing short of fatphobic.¹⁸⁴

While they weren't making headlines among feminists in the same ways that Orbach's falsely fat feminist tome were, fat activists of the 1980s and 1990s drew attention to, not only, the detriments of fat oppression, but also to pushing the boundaries and expectations of what it was fat bodies were capable of, i.e. movements, actions, even emotions elicited.¹⁸⁵ For example, the early 1980s saw a blossoming movement of fat performance artists whose various crafts all sought to re-center fat bodies as differently able, strong, even sexy bodies. There was a national troupe of fat women trapeze artists and a traveling theatre group, Fat Lip, which garnered their 15 minutes of fame on Phil Donahue's talk show in 1983 and informed millions of American households that fat people were capable of creating art. Fat activists who continued to work in less artistic, but still political mediums, lobbied in 1984 for a section on fat health and acceptance in the feminist self-care guide, *Our Bodies Ourselves* titled, "Being Fat in an Anti-Fat Society."¹⁸⁶ Others provided fitness guides and classes for fat women that were

184 Karen Ross and Sujata Moorti, "Is Fat Still a Feminist Issue?" in *Feminist Media Studies Journal*, 5, no. 1 (2005): 83-104.

185 A conversation emerges around this time period in regards to fatness and its intersections; namely, whether or not fatness can/should be considered a disability. This is a discussion in which the fat activist community seems particularly split. On the one hand, some fat activists do not believe fatness to be a disability and righteously argue against it being considered one. On the other hand, some fat activists believe that distancing the conversations about fat acceptance and disability is ableist, especially when they believe fatness can be viewed as allowing for different abilities than normative bodied people.

186 Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *The New Our Bodies Ourselves* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1984), 8.

aimed at health, not weight and more socially-oriented early fat activists organized fat dance parties in San Francisco's Castro where the theme in 1989 was to "Let it All Hang Out!"¹⁸⁷

It is important to identify here the overlap that occurred as the fat activist movement became more organized and developed in the 1980s. Not only was the more radical fat activist community aligned with women's and civil rights, it also supported and grew alongside the gay rights movement, which was immersed in the grips of the HIV/AIDS crisis and Act Up!-organized protests of the time. Perhaps these two groups, of which their radical arms formed some sort of allegiance, found commonality because at the center of struggle were the same items of focus: the material, living, breathing body and the imminent concerns over health, illness and death. It is not my intention to rank the severity of obstacles each of these groups faced at the time, nor at present, and I certainly do not wish to indicate that fat and queer alliance was neatly and thoroughly integrated into either group's larger constituencies. I do find it important, however, to identify that queer and fat communities did come out of late '80s America somewhat aligned, allowing for burgeoning movements like riot grrrl to come into being and to thrive based on a platform that very heavily advocated for a revision of conventional body politics and queer rights. Without acknowledging this relationship between fat and queer communities at this critical point in time denies a history of fat and queer communities that are integrated

187 Charlotte Cooper, "A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline," April 2011, http://www.charlottecooper.net/downloads/timelinezine/cooper_queertransfatactivisttimeline_zine_0411.pdf.

today in producing current political discourse and activism.¹⁸⁸ In neither queer historical scholarship of this time period, nor within burgeoning fat studies scholarship, is this overlap addressed, thus it warrants further study.

The Rise of Neo-Burlesque

At this moment of fat activism steadily building as a stronger movement, one that had infiltrated “fringe” communities of riot grrrls and punk rockers, neo-burlesque emerged as a site where the politics of feminism, size acceptance, and performance art all congregated. With the first documented uses of the term “neo-burlesque” by Ami Goodheart’s “Dutch Weismann Follies” and Velvet Hammer Burlesque in 1995 New York City and Los Angeles, respectively, the early years of burlesque’s reemergence have eluded much historical record.¹⁸⁹ However, from both the interviews I’ve conducted and in the archive of media sources one can access online, it is safe to say that neo-burlesque – with its ancestry in third wave feminist subcultures – bloomed in response to the backlash against feminism that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S. and offered, if not always politically, an at least aesthetically challenging view of what modern conceptions of femininity were. From its start, neo-burlesque embraced a countercultural aesthetic of heavily tattooed, pierced women, though while normative otherwise in terms of things like size, race, and gender or sexuality, offered a stark contrast to popular imaginings of what a burlesque revival might

188 A few examples of places where the conversation around intersections of fatness and queerness are happening are the 2008 Fat and Queer (F.A.Q.) conference, entitled, “Fat is Contagious: Political Fat Queer Visibility and Action in the Era of the ‘Obesity Epidemic’” and the annual NOLOSE conference, which is committed to “creating vibrant fat queer culture.” <http://www.nolose.org>.

189 Norman Gosney, “Dutch Weismann’s Follies and the Rebirth of Burlesque in New York,” *This is Cabaret*, June 30, 2012, <http://www.thisiscabaret.com/dutch-weismanns-follies-and-the-rebirth-of-burlesque-in-new-york/>.

look like. As one performer Dirty Martini notes, neo-burlesque performers are the daughters of second wave feminists who had burned their bras only for their daughters to “discover that they actually loved their bras and thought they might look lovely covered in sequins, taken off, and tossed into the stage lights.”¹⁹⁰

As the newly evolving art began to gain in popularity, due in large part to increased accessibility of the Internet and the online communities that developed there, so did the expanse and definition of what neo-burlesque covered. With the year 2000 launch of the Tease-O-Rama Yahoo Group, performers from across the globe were put in contact with one another like never before and were able to make connections with each other to understand the breadth of what was being encountered under the term of neo-burlesque. While the large majority of performers – both then and now – incorporate original burlesque tenets into their routines that date back to its inception in the 19th century, neo-burlesque suggested a broader compass of performance art and stylings, i.e. modern dance techniques, widening breadths in musical genres, and of course, the incorporation of more relevant political topics and updated cultural images. Neo-burlesque, as it has reemerged, has also, in many circles embraced its vaudevillian roots of bawdy humor and snark, as well; much more so, even, than the end of burlesque’s first run in the 1950s where focus lied much more on the removal of clothing than anything else. Thus, neo-burlesque encapsulates an older set of characteristics focused more on the tease than the strip,

¹⁹⁰ Baldwin, 47.

incorporating new forms of dance to bring it up to date. It has been described as the “alternative to most any performance. It’s the funnier, glitterier, over-the-top-sister of performance art, cabaret, legitimate theater, modern dance, comedy, and circus. It’s an art form that doesn’t take itself too seriously even when it [is]...”¹⁹¹

While neo-burlesque has continued the element of the striptease in its present incarnation, it tends to, visually, emphasize the retro 1940s-1950s stylings and embrace a sexiness that is very much about the slowness of the reveal, as intended, than it is sexual. When detailing more specific examples of neo-burlesque performance in Chapter 4, evidence of this playfulness and the, often very brief, reveal of flesh at the end of the performance – as opposed to the majority of its length - will demonstrate this presence of desirability and eroticism, but lack of carnality, that something like stripping at gentlemen’s clubs might better demonstrate.¹⁹² Again, the undercurrent in neo-burlesque to stay true to the art’s original form is represented in the continued nod to its roots as a product of comedy and camp. As burlesque performer turned author, Michelle Baldwin notes in her book, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*, “Most neo-burlesque performers studied the history and the traditions of burlesque, and then they have taken it in their own direction. The roots of burlesque, as with any other entertainment, should always be evident in its modern performance. It’s that

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 32.

¹⁹² This is not to suggest a hierarchy at all between burlesque performance and stripping, only to distinguish between the finishing moves of the performance and intentions of each.

structure, that consistent reference to the divine mixture of the sexy and the satirical, that makes it burlesque.”¹⁹³

But as with many other movements or art forms that came before it, neo-burlesque has risen in popularity over the past two decades because it has become, largely, performed and normativized by the mainstream in some venues. To the extent that celebrity burlesque performer, Dita Von Teese – who is also renowned for her marriage to “shock rocker” Marilyn Manson in 2005 – makes a very lucrative living off of her routines, neo-burlesque has worked its way into the western cultural frame of entertainment.¹⁹⁴ In as much as neo-burlesque “might have a point” in certain manifestations of its revival, the majority of neo-burlesque is not inherently political in subject or in terms of performer.¹⁹⁵ On all accounts burlesque’s revival is “booming in small-town American and especially in larger cities [in the U.S.] and abroad.”¹⁹⁶ Quoted in a 2011 article for the entertainment website, Backstage.com, New York producer and emcee, Doc Wasabassco notes, “There is a wider arc today [of where burlesque is happening]. Four or five years ago, there may have been five established shows. Now you have 20 or 30 shows in New York that are bigger and more professional.”¹⁹⁷ With neo-burlesque that is performed by and for the mainstream, there is no shortage of embrace for the aesthetics of the dance, as discussed previously, but the sociopolitical bedrock of the form is sometimes abandoned.

193 Ibid, 38.

194 Wilson, 90.

195 Baldwin, 32.

196 Simi Horowitz, “Neo-burlesque is not just Booty Shaking,” Backstage, May 11, 2011, http://www.backstage.com/bsc/content_display/news-and-features/news/e3i9e3fc926b155d93fdacc9899ce9888ce

197 Ibid.

As many of the performers I spoke with noted, there were more than enough conventionally “beautiful” performers dancing at clubs in San Francisco and New York any night of the week – white, normatively bodied, “pin-up” types are a dime a dozen.

But still, the niche communities that do exist and perform under the umbrella of neo-burlesque hold very dear to burlesque’s early days and to the political beginnings that acknowledge a history of economic. For many of the performers I interviewed, neo-burlesque appealed to their, often, working-class and poor identities, as much as to their corporeal identities due to the art form’s history of curvier, bigger bodied dancers. Neo-burlesque, thus, offers performers who have a history of experiencing classism, in particular, a medium through which to perform and respond to that struggle. One of the performers I spoke with, for example, spoke largely to intersections of her working-class upbringing and her history in sex work – in addition to her fat identity – as reason for neo-burlesque’s appeal and, also, the frustration of normative-bodied performers saturating the scene:

“That’s why it feels so horrible to hear performers say, ‘I am not a stripper!’ This distancing of themselves from the sex worker aspect is upsetting because, in my opinion, it underlies all burlesque in some ways. These are conventional women; the ones who have office jobs during the day and pay out the nose for expensive, elaborate costumes instead of making them themselves or collaborating with their community of performers to turn out a newly bedazzled corset! *That* for me is where [the contrast between normative and historically marginalized performers] really comes out. Where you’re going to find white, skinny, well-to-do women espousing that they’re not strippers...because they’ve never felt like they were outsiders.”¹⁹⁸

198 Anonymous Performer, Interview by Jessica Giusti. Video recording. July 6, 2008. Oakland, CA.

But while there is this tension, certainly, as neo-burlesque has grown in popularity over the 21st century and into the present to fear the infiltration of “model actress types,” there is also unhindered growth from the communities of performers who are marginalized based on various differences.¹⁹⁹ Speaking to this as a “plus size” performer, the World Famous B.O.B. notes that:

“You can stand in the room and get bitter at the people who are going to take advantage of [neo-burlesque’s roots and politics] and make money off of it and tell us every body has to be a size eight, or you can look around the room and see who you can help [...] That’s what the community is about to me.”²⁰⁰

For the dancers whose lives and performances I catalog in the following chapter, the participation in neo-burlesque mirrors Martini’s: to stay true to the form and to push the expectations of the audience. Through elaborate, carefully crafted routines, the performers I have studied for this dissertation all work dubiously to acknowledge their histories, their positions in the world – both their privileges and their oppressions – and the size, shape, and movement of their bodies as they attempt to create visual imagery and political messaging that will offer an opportunity to respond to the preconceived notions and expectations of their audiences. More so, these performers speak to the legacies of feminism, queer history, and fat activism in order to claim neo-burlesque as an art that can and does provide space for marginalized bodies to perform. On-stage, these fat, queer femme performers take on the rhetoric and cultural images that attempt to

199 Baldwin, 44

200 Ibid, 45.

drown them in tired, inaccurate stereotypes about fatness and femininity. In their careful, nuanced choreographies of fat, queer “femme-ininity” on stage, these performers confront the elements of food and consumption, racialized depictions of fatness, and the western constructions of “beauty” and desirability. Through an interrogation of these recurrent themes, these fat femme performers create new alternatives in “failure” that center their material bodies as answers to rearticulating corporeal excesses and for creating community and new understandings of desire and power in being hyper-visible as a fat, queer femme on stage.

Chapter 4

Reading 'Failure' Through Fat Femme-ininity

So far, this project has mapped a trajectory for beginning to understand the present moment of burlesque's reemergence and the historical pasts that have allowed it to reoccur as a popular art form. In order to expose the ways in which neo-burlesque has been harnessed as a vehicle of response and a conveyance of lived experience for fat and queer femmes, I have traced the genealogy of fatness in Chapter 1 alongside the pathologization of homosexuality. This collocation allows not only for the beginning of a much-needed conversation about the ways in which fat and queer lives run parallel to one another and, very often, overlap, but also provides a way of considering fatness before its classification as repulsive as well as its path in becoming so. This snapshot in time of the fat body's transition is a rudimentary example of failing; of materially being beyond the bounds of what is "successful" body normativity.

Chapter 2 continues this exploration of fatness and failure by segueing from its turn-of-the-century transformation as evidence of monstrous excess to the recent history of the last two decades and the present amidst neoliberalism. A major component of neoliberal regimes and institutions, the notion of failure is the inability to achieve success within a capitalist culture; it is the failure to be productive both in the sense of earnings, as well as in terms of citizenship. The

many instances I've explored in chapter 2 confirm this notion that for fat folks the problem lies within; making them personally responsible for the maltreatment, scapegoating, and loss of rights they regularly experience as neoliberalism's "failed" citizens.

Chapter 3 engages failure in two ways in that its application considers 1) the exposed and uncontrolled feminine, female body and 2) its risqué performances which, depending on the level of decided bawdiness, were deemed appropriately entertaining or gauche and salacious spectacles of and for the tastes of the poor and working classes. Class affiliation, coupled with desire-provoking performances and a hefty pinch of morality, made for a recipe ripe with judgment that to, thus, perform on or enjoy the burlesque scene was to be inelegant and indigent; failures of class in both the literal and figurative meanings.

I provide this brief re-telling of my chapters' theses in order to acknowledge the foundation laid for a more thorough conversation about failure: what I mean when I use the term, what is to come of those lives that bear its label, and how it borrows from and differs from other scholars' uses of it as a political position. The chapters that precede this one have built up to this conversation in order to provide examples for identifying the multiple ways in which fat bodies fail *a priori*. I will return to this point repeatedly in order to make claims as to how certain versions of failure are not enough and how fat, queer femme performers play with failure as a strategic invocation of agency for not only speaking back, but also of building sustaining, nurturing communities of

other failed selves. Within the community of neo-burlesque, fat and queer bodies expertly flirt with failure in order to mock it, question its authority, and refashion it for themselves. Failure becomes what performers, often literally, make of it.

Current Conversations in Failing

In June 2010, I attended a lecture at the University of Minnesota given by Judith “Jack” Halberstam on his notion of “the queer art of failure,” which became my jumping off point for thinking about the possibilities and limitations of failure within the context of this dissertation. At this point in time, I was searching for a way of articulating my project up and out of the tired, but tempting, narratives of mere positivity and acceptance. Preparing for the release of his forthcoming book on the topic, Halberstam provided a colorful application of social failure to a number of examples within popular culture, including references to the films *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Finding Nemo*, and *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Through each of these films, as well as with references to the works of visual artist Monica Majoli and pop star Lady Gaga, Halberstam, borrowing from José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, mapped a kind of alternative liberation via failure; an “escape” from the “punishing norms” of capitalism that are inaccessible to queer subjects.²⁰¹ Those on the social margins, according to Halberstam, can be spared the conventional and hegemonic markers that demonstrate modern ideas of success.

201 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 169-173.

Halberstam's lecture proved interesting and his notion that queers might accept failure as a new kind of political position from which to dwell and create art (as opposed to being participant in the standard capitalist success story) remains an exciting consideration and one which I apply somewhat in this project for envisioning alternatives to a positivist project. But Halberstam's talk, as well as his, since published, book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, has also left me with a number of unresolved questions about the theoretical deployments of conceptual "failure," namely in terms of its applicability and its, seemingly overlooked, limitations.

For instance, both Halberstam and Muñoz read "failure" as a transgressive state of being for marginalized others *and* a conscious unfettering of conformity. Halberstam, here, cites Muñoz in claiming failure as a "utopian rejection of pragmatism ... and of social norms."²⁰² Traditional, heteronormative systems and their practices, such as marriage, are what Halberstam refers to in *The Queer Art of Failure* as, the "toxic positivity of contemporary life." It is billed as the most desirable path to travel because it is the route that, allegedly, promises greater access to normative success and acceptance if followed. The toxicity, though, lies in the impracticability of achieving a life of normativity, of constantly aspiring to, but never quite becoming Garland Thompson's normate. This quest of striving for achievement within capitalist culture is, what Halberstam refers to, as "grim scenarios of success" due to their being stuck in a perpetual cycle of trying to

²⁰² Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 89.

reach the apex of normativity - read: responsible and (re)productive – both economically and materially – citizens.

The Queer Art of Failure suggests that for queers and other marginalized subjects and bodies, existing in the peripheries reveals the repressive nature of these very hegemonic regimes - the “barbarism” of western civilization. There is an ease, Halberstam offers, that comes with failure, with being given up on and thus disengaging from the compulsion to participate in the “rat race” of heteronormativity or capitalism. Halberstam juxtaposes failed subjectivity with the unfetteredness of childhood (never acknowledging that, for many, childhood is anything but unencumbered and easy) and the way that the freedom of youth, of failing, allows for a kind of “wondrous anarchy.”²⁰³ For Halberstam, then, to be a failed subject is not without options. On the contrary, he suggests that not only is being labeled a “failure,” in some ways, easier, but that it also has the potential to offer its “wayward” subjects alternate realities of living through a “refusal of mastery” – a “critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism ... and as a counter-hegemonic discourse of losing.”²⁰⁴

What is conveyed, then, is that inheriting failure makes for an unrestrained, even liberatory, alternative to the norm.²⁰⁵ There is an element of roguishness in Halberstam’s implementation of failure here; that in revisioning alternate endings for queer failure, the imaginaries it creates are private, productive enclaves for those who can’t, or won’t, “make it” within the typical western story of success.

203 Ibid, 71.

204 Ibid, 12.

205 Ibid, 22.

This proposes exciting alternatives for those who fail, though I believe Halberstam, like myself, is unwilling to suggest a positivist spin on losing. More so, the queer art of failure he manifests seems to convey different ways of knowing and living that are not, as we typically believe them to be, nihilistic.

Undoubtedly, there is potential in considering failure as a social position, particularly in its application to fat, queer burlesque and the space created in these performances. However, both Halberstam and Muñoz leave major gaps in considering the limitations of failure, so it is both what failure potentially offers, but also what it forgets, or leaves behind, that also informs this project. More specifically, I want to use this chapter, and also the case studies I've completed, to ask the questions that linger from Halberstam and Muñoz's work. Namely, how can those marginalized on account of their physical bodies? What does it mean to be *failing* versus *inherently failed*? And what happens when failure, eventually, fails?

A Priori Failure & Its Discontents

The scholarship that proposes a revisioning of failure constructs it as playful and cunning, "in" on the joke of hegemonic models of success that are so cumbersome and impossible to achieve. Akin to Butler's reading of butch and femme queer identities as those that reveal the truth of heterosexuality - that it is replicable, that there is no original, no universal origin - Halberstam's use of failure exposes the quest for conventional success, the notion of the American Dream, and, rather than its imitability, its implausibility. These are both useful

notions that allow the stretching of failure beyond its conventional use in scholarship. However, using failure in the way that Halberstam does suggests that there is an *outside* to capitalism – as opposed to bendable, subversive qualities, as I would argue. Oppression is systemic precisely because access to evacuation from capitalism and other hegemonic structures is impossible. Halberstam’s “failure” also relies upon a version of white, able-bodiedness that does not consider what it is for one to fail solely as a result of one’s own materiality, or present state of physical being. Nor does it examine the position so many occupy of failing *a priori*, of being considered failures from birth, as opposed to coming into failure the way one comes into their sexuality or learns to perform gender via social and cultural clues. Especially for the sake of conversations about fatness, failure takes on more complexity when one examines what it means, precisely, for the body itself to be the source of failure and not, instead, its actions or desires. For “excess” size, disability, race, and even, in some cases, class, where economic status has the ability to take on physical markers, being a body failed is a different experience. Particularly for fat and disabled folks where each is associated with illness, immobility, and even death, failure is not nearly as cavalier a position as Halberstam alludes.

For one, the corporeal body is, once more, neglected from theoretical imaginings and the immaterial is privileged as a site from which to study failure, as failed production. As a result, readings like Halberstam’s are capable of carving out space for potential and agency in this, otherwise, somber position of

marginality. Whereas for failed material bodies, particularly fat bodies, failure is presumed to equal death; a definite game-changer in terms of how and if one can still envision the possibility of inhabiting a space free of the intensity of trying to achieve success. When a fat body is marginalized because it is assumed atrophic - welcoming death between bites of food - as we're led to believe, I would argue that failure transforms from being a position assigned to an action believed of one's body; i.e., the fat body is believed to be *failing* at the corporeal level, rather than being affixed failure as loss of social capital. The questions then remain whether or not fat folks can imagine themselves participants in practicing failure as a new location of, albeit passive, resistance as Halberstam suggests, when the mood around failure for the corpulent is that their bodies are ticking time bombs based on their literal, day-to-day consumption. And, when juxtaposed with the art of failing as a result of queerness or non-conforming gender identity, what is different for physical, failing bodies of size? Along with what I believe are more useful applications of Halberstam's postulations on failure, I will explore these questions in the case studies that follow this section and call for a version of the art of failure that incorporates materiality and its complexities among its more psychical applications to things like sexuality and gender.

I also find limitations to Halberstam's playfulness around neoliberalism and the model it suggests that propels certain people and groups into failure, which he deems so versatile and fertile with possibility. While Halberstam accurately

acknowledges our present models of neoliberal success and failure as a “zero-sum model against which we can judge our achievements in life,” he suggests that being understood as a lazy, unproductive, and thus, failed citizen within the present moral order offers “bountiful,” alternative ways of living within capitalism. And while this may be true for some - that being “dedicated to organic farming,” “playing in a punk band,” or, one might imagine, being a rogue academic - are all lifestyles choices that may fall outside traditional models of success and cast one into the “failure” pile, stones remain unturned.²⁰⁶ For Halberstam, failure is about failed production, not about physicality or the performativity of materiality. Thus, this project prioritizes the question: what if the elements that determine one’s success or failure in the first place are ones tied directly to the material body? So that before one even has the potential to make such spurned life decisions as living off the grid of typical, normative life, they are designated failures because of their perceived inability to keep a body that, literally, fits into having a conventional, “successful” life? What does it mean to be ostracized to failure before one even has the chance to be considered for success? And if failure offers the alternatives that queers, allegedly, can find community in its margins, as well as the materials with which to build better, more comprehensible lives, can it provide the same for those whose bodies are never eligible for the capitalist success story from the start? That Halberstam attempts to speak from the nexus of queer, gender, and performance studies in *The Queer Art of Failure*,

206 Sinclair Sexsmith, *Lambda Literary*, “Jack Halberstam: Queers Create Better Models of Success,” last modified February 1, 2012, <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/02/01/jack-halberstam-queers-create-better-models-of-success>.

but lacks material interrogations and engagements with domains such as fat and disability studies, is grossly problematic and negligent.²⁰⁷

Those who are believed to be actively failing based on irresponsible choice-making in terms of their literal consumption, whether that of their own or as a result of poor parenting (i.e. Michelle Obama's, "Let's Move!" campaign being a relevant application) do not start with the same options as those whose physical bodies fail *a priori*. When we consider this specifically in regards to body size and fatness, it is worth questioning how these experiences of being told one is actively participating in their own ostracization, but also their own death, affect the accessibility of Halberstam's model of "failure." Additionally, it asks whether the "better models of success" that Halberstam posits look differently through a fat lens.²⁰⁸ If the art of failure is not a potentially transgressive model for inherently failed, fat bodies as it is for queer ones, does it have the potential to be so? If so, who is left behind, assuming that some other subject position is excluded or "othered" when another's abjection is reworked?²⁰⁹ And, if fat subjects can't access these possibilities in failure, then are there no alternatives for the materially failed? What does the, literal, on-stage, performance of failure look like and how can it attend to failed, fat bodies?

In what follows, I will rely upon the months of cumulative fieldwork I have completed intermittently over the past four years, resulting in over 60 hours of

207 Halberstam is careful to extend his application of failure to consider some versions of some material bodies, i.e. his examination of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (Penguin Books, 2006).

208 Sexsmith.

209 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21-22.

interviews, rehearsals, and performances either facilitated or observed by me. My fieldwork has taken me to both to the East and West Coasts of the United States, namely, Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon, San Francisco & Oakland, California; and New York City, New York. I have spoken with 23 performers in total; most of who perform as individuals and some as members of queer- or fat-identified burlesque troupes. The majority of the dancers I interviewed were active performers at the time of our interviews and, as a result, I was able to attend a number of rehearsals and performances that my subjects participated in.

I came into contact with all of the individuals I interviewed through the extent of my queer communities. Many of the performers I contacted outright and several I was introduced to by other performers and, in one case, an ex-sister-in-law of an acquaintance in Minneapolis. All of the performers I spoke to or observed were both fat and queer-identified and, many of them, understood their gender as “femme,” and felt these identities were intrinsically linked to one another. As the performer Kentucky Fried Woman described it to me: “I can’t speak to what it is to be any of these identities without the other. My experiences in each one are so informed by the other. I can’t speak to what it is to be any other queer than a fat, femme queer.” Still more, the majority of the performers I observed also identified as white, while about a third identified as women of color or “mixed,” and approximately half of the performers I interviewed noted having grown-up in poor or working-class families across the United States. All of these experiences and identities, undoubtedly, shaped the performers’ relationships to

their bodies and sexualities and are cited as having contributed to their burlesque pursuits.

The following three explorations of themes offer insight into the complex subjectivities of these performers, relying either on a mixture of interview and performance or strictly observance of performance and the nuances thereof. It is through these explorations that I hope to further examine the ways in which fat, queer burlesque can utilize tenets of Halberstam's queer art of failure, but push beyond it to consider failed materiality better through a politics of what activist and writer Mia Mingus refers to as "moving toward ugly."²¹⁰ From her keynote address at the Femmes of Color Symposium in August of 2011, I understand Mingus' use of "ugly" as the elements of bodies that people most fear - the visceral, dimpled excess of flesh that is so despised that people will do anything to distance themselves from it figuratively and even, at times, literally. "Ugly" differs from failure in that the latter is steeped in the idea that aberrance interferes with production, with responsibility, and thus, success. Whereas "ugly" is for this project the *a priori* failing of aesthetics – the being and acting - that I believe is absent from Halberstam's consideration.

Each of the following sections considers the intersections of fat, queer, desire, and dance and the political potential this juncture has not for reclaiming beauty or notions of health, but asking why beauty? And why health? What exists at the site of failure, at "ugly," at "unhealthy?" What is their potential for creating

210 Mia Mingus, "Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), August 22, 2011, <http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/>.

alternate realities and ways of living and knowing for those performing fat, queer burlesque, as well as for the living majority, whose bodies fall out of bounds in, often, multiple ways? What is at the center of revolting and how does its histories and experiences housed within the body inform and affect the emotional labor of performing burlesque?

* * *

Playing With Her Food & The Politics of “Ugly”

When the makeshift curtain comes up and the backlighting illuminates the first glimpse of the dancer’s silhouette on stage, the audience responds with the appropriate round of applause and whistles. She has long legs perched on stilettos and a tightly corseted figure that displays a covetable hourglass shape. When she starts her slow slinking and bobbing to the beginning beats of Big Mama Thornton’s “Bumble Bee Blues,” she is shadowed seduction. The tease of the burlesque, of her concealment, is what has the audience in a state somewhere between twitching and salivating, eager for the reveal. When from behind the screen a delicate ankle peaks out, they respond vociferously. And when that ankle gives way to a wider, more ample calf and, eventually, a thick stockinged thigh, they are nearly frenzied by the expose not just here of flesh, but of flesh beyond their expectations. When the dancer, stage name Jukie Sunshine, winds her body around the screen to the front of the stage, she is all that we were promised as an audience and so much more - physically and visually. Her corset gives way to a large, soft belly that sways in time with her

rhythmic undulations. Flesh shimmies and sways on the delicate underside of her arm, her wide hips knock out the strongest notes in the song's beat. She is clad in ruffles and glitz a take on a bumble bee costume that is outrageous in its shimmer and its volume - a short, black taffeta tutu, edged in sequins, which amplifies her lower body's girth, cloaking it in the literal fabrics of performative femininity. Wings fashioned out of lush black and yellow feathers provide the backdrop for the display of the performer's corseted décolletage which itself taunts the audience with its bounty and movement. Atop her head is fashioned a foot and a half tall black beehive hairstyle arbitrarily clad with large, bright flowers and blooms and tiny butterflies.

It is at the climax of Big Mama Thornton's wails for her stray lover to return home that the dancer's performance gives way to the apex of her own act. Amidst the guttural pleads of the songstress, Jukie lowers her eyelids to the audience whose attention is trussed tightly to her, a sly, crooked smile on her lips, and swishes and sways the bumble bee stinger affixed to her behind. She dips her dainty, black satin glove into her cleavage and every pair of eyes hangs on her wrist waiting for the reemergence of her hand. When it does reappear, it feels as if an eternity has lapsed when it is just a few seconds and there are noisy exhales, breathy chuckles, and other sounds of surprise when it surfaces clutching a plastic honey bear. The moment that has me immobilized by her performance, though, is when she lifts the honey bear a dramatic 12 inches above her, tilts back her head and opens her mouth in time to catch the first

drops of honey. The stream is thick and steady and Jukie does not relent in squeezing it onto her tongue for a solid 20 seconds, or eons, as an observer all time stands still.

Observing Jukie Sunshine was my first experience in viewing fat, queer burlesque and the origin for this entire project. As an academic having heard of neo-burlesque's emergence and its proclivity to include non-normative bodies, I found the site to be ripe for investigation and analysis. But on a personal note, the idea of fat and queer-identified performers being scantily clad on stage and challenging - whether they believed their work to be political or not - cultural norms about bodies and desires tested my own level of fat acceptance and comfort in my own corporeality. Investing in and undertaking this project is scholastic in its presentation, but remains personal at its nexus in my examination of what fat and queer look like performing desirability and mobility on stage. Further, despite this project's origins within the academy, it is my hope that this project has influence beyond the application to scholarship in queer, corporeal, and performance studies. The expectation within the performing arts world, and certainly within the dance community, is that performing bodies must be slender to evoke desire, to be mobile and flexible in the ways that they require. Fat, queer burlesque causes a paradigmatic shift in these assumptions so that questions of size, movement, and competency are newly challenged, causing ruptures in the fabric of classical dance aesthetics. As a fat, queer femme scholar, and aspiring performer, I am intricately connected to the rewiring

that occurs here in emphasizing the space made by bodies like mine working to change the image of “dancer.”

I choose Jukie’s “Bumble Bee Blues” performance as a starting point not only because it is, chronologically, the first act I wound up encountering in my fieldwork for this dissertation, but because it includes the material use of food and allows for a trope to develop around fat performance and the notion of playing with food. Jukie’s performance is only the first of many I observed over the course of my ethnographic research that incorporates food into erotic performance. While for Jukie it is honey that makes an appearance, it has been cupcakes in NYC, malt balls in Oakland, and fried chicken in Portland, Oregon. Fat performance can’t seem to shake a connection and use of food in its acts and it seemed an obvious route to follow because of the multiple questions it posed: How were these performers considering their use of food on stage? What did it mean to them as fat-identified dancers to share the stage with something that is integral to their marginalization? What was their process in being able to take the stage knowing that not only would be appearing fat and nearly naked, but fat, naked, and *eating*, literally consuming, on-stage?

While the scholarship on public bodies, or those so considered non-normative they compel the public to personally respond to that body verbally (mostly in the form of unsolicited “advice” and commentary) or even physically (in the act of uninvited touching), rarely considers fat bodies, I perceive them as

precisely this.²¹¹ And because the notion of fatness is so trussed to eating and, perceived, overindulgence, I acknowledge alongside fat studies scholars Samantha Murray and Amy Farrell, that for fat people, public eating is always under scrutiny and is frequently an exercise in fat shaming.²¹² For Jukie Sunshine to stand in what ends up being merely pasties and a tutu, unabashedly drinking sweet honey in front of a crowd of 100+ onlookers makes me, initially, nervous on her behalf.

As a fat woman, I am all too familiar with the hypervisibility of eating in public, the unsolicited stares, the gall of others to make judgments about my body and what I consume. I worried her audience would turn. What was their perception of this zealous act of over-consumption? What of the thickness, the cloying sweetness of honey which is not only physically hard to imagine imbibing in a large quantity because of its cloying sweetness, but because of honey's notoriety for being a highly caloric, naturally occurring sweet. And the guzzling of this viscous sweet which dripped from her lips, onto her chin, and chest; what to make of the eroticism of this "honey shot!" For the actual live audience, present that day in front of the stage, this was precisely the kind of spectacle they had come to see and, being composed of mostly queers and queers of color, the excess of Jukie's performance is what they both expected and desired. As one

211 Largely, the scholarship focused on "public bodies" does so in terms of disability and race. For example, RG Thomson, cites both Sartje Baartman and Julia Pastrana as sideshow acts that create the notion and space for "public bodies." The concept also has roots around the history of pregnant bodies and the attention paid to women's changing physical state during and post-pregnancy and is referenced briefly in Kathleen LeBesco's "Fat Panic and the New Morality"; Rebecca L. Upton and Sallie S. Han, "Maternity and Its Discontents: 'Getting the Body Back' After Pregnancy," in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32, no. 6 (2003): 670-692; LeBesco, "Fat Panic and the New Morality," 72.

212 Samantha Murray, "Normative Imperatives vs. Pathological Bodies: Constructing 'The Fat Woman,'" in *Australian Feminist Studies*, 23, no.56 (2008): 213-224; Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, New York: NYU Press, 2011.

audience member said to me after the show, “You never know what Jukie will do, but you know you’re always promised a show, something that will surprise you, maybe even provoke you to be a little bit uncomfortable or judgy, but at the end it’s just off-beat and exhilarating to watch!”²¹³

Jukie’s consumption of the honey bear, however, furthers her as a failed subject in the eyes of a neoliberal public. In her *choice* to indulge in such decadence, she is creating, or furthering, her corpulence, which limits her responsibility to western capitalism and nationhood. Yet, Jukie is also a failed subject in the reclaimed way that Halberstam poses; though again, his investigation of queer failure’s potential stops before it considers material bodies, let alone fat ones. If the regimes of neoliberalism have already conceded Jukie as failed, then it is precisely the failure Halberstam argues favorably for, given the possibility it lends to creating alternate realities beyond the capitalist success stories. Similar to his earlier work concerning queer space and time, Halberstam asserts that failure allows for “the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment.”²¹⁴

To her audience, Jukie possesses exactly these things. She is endlessly referred to by audience members and admirers alike as a “fat femme hero,” an inspiration. Women flock to her after shows remarking on what her visibility means to them and their relationships to their own bodies, which are all over the map in terms of size, shape, and even gender. Jukie responds in noting that:

213 Interview 1. Interview by Jessica Giusti. Video recording. San Francisco, CA, May 22, 2009.

214 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York: New York University, 2005, 96.

“I definitely have found that my performances aren’t just inspirational to fat women, but it helps everyone feel better about...eating ice cream! About their bodies. That they can be a real human being and take the pressure of hating themselves off of them every once in a while. And to have that self-esteem in a sexy way and be positive and hopeful enough about their own bodies to have open and hot sex without thinking negatively... Everybody wants that! That’s the place where I feel like my performances are for everybody, they reach beyond me to the bodies that look like mine and further still to those that don’t.”²¹⁵

Jukie’s performance of fat sexuality is, then, in the crosshairs of “failure,” and its multiple meanings to this project. While on the one hand an indication of her participation in material excess - the honey itself being so tangible, so weighted - Jukie’s public drinking of honey, with her nearly naked fat body on display, is itself a deeply political act. Not only does her performance give pause to critiques of her publicly eating (for she voluntarily does so on a public stage, literally, spotlighted), but also in that she does so while suggesting that her fat, consuming form can, in fact, create and be the focus of sexual desire.

When I ask Jukie about her inception into performing burlesque and, particularly, her choreographing “Big Bumble Bee Blues,” she responds that her work has always been about growing confidently in her own skin and learning how to create and manage desire as a fat and queer-identified person. Jukie’s performance history, which began during childhood, abruptly stopped at age 10 when she was told she was “too big for ballet,” an experience frequently cited by the performers I interviewed.²¹⁶ After a brief foray into pornography in her early 20s as a cast member in a “plus-size” adult film entitled, *Voluptuous Vixens*,

215 Jukie Sunshine. Interview by Jessica Giusti. Video recording. San Francisco, CA, July 14, 2009.

216 Ibid.

Jukie was discovered by Heather MacAllister, a local performer who was organizing the nation's first burlesque troupe of size. MacAllister convinced Jukie to audition, which is where she believes she learned how to be confident in her body and in awe of what it was capable of: "Burlesque gave me an opportunity to dance again after being told I couldn't or shouldn't. So to perform on stage and be pretty and to be graceful and still political and tough or bruised up let me straddle those two parts of myself of being big and queer and 'wrong.'"²¹⁷

Jukie's acknowledgment of her body as outside of the confines of normativity - as "wrong" - both for its size and sexuality and, also, for its status as failed, is important in considering what is produced here in the periphery. Despite the negative associations of her fat and queer body, Jukie speaks to her "wrong"-ness as being something capable of being claimed as her own, as another part of herself in the journey to body acceptance. If the queer art of failure is, as Halberstam suggests, an opportunity for the aberrant to possess a "new kind of wisdom [and] new manifestations of pleasure and knowledge," then Jukie is a failed, queer artist. Expanding on Halberstam, however, the production of knowledge for Jukie, and for many of the other performers comes from the material body itself - what its abilities are and how its movements come to have meaning - and the social and political significance assigned to what this very body consumes and desires. Despite considering queer art and its many different manifestations, Halberstam's work falls short of considering the ontology of the

²¹⁷ Ibid.

body and the affect of performing from a place of failure that occurs *a priori*. What of the guts and glory it takes to walk onto the stage as is, as “ugly” from the start?

Another dancer who negotiates the playfulness of food, desire, and fatness on stage is Oakland-based performer, Kentucky Fried Woman (KFW). Having grown up, as she describes, “poor, in the rural [southern United States], with fat parents,” her childhood home of Kentucky inspired her stage persona to develop out of her tenuous relationship to the culture there and her decision to, eventually, relocate to the West coast.

“My love for Kentucky is a complicated thing. It can be a lonely place to be progressive. To be in a place where slavery is still so real and alive; where the remnants of racism are so overt. Misogyny, homophobia, these things run so rampant there. My soul couldn’t take it. I felt guilty for years that my story wasn’t to stay and fight that fight. But still, my family, and my blood, and food and fat and those things still resonated in this whole idea for me of ‘Kentucky Fried’ and I wanted to honor that in some way.”²¹⁸

KFW speaks to her family’s history and to her upbringing and alludes to “failure” that Halberstam, nor Muñoz, identify or expound upon. She is born into a family that is, pre-determinately, failed in the traditional sense; they are poor, outside of the capitalist success story, and while white and granted some privilege on account of that whiteness, are culturally determined, in her words, to be “white trash.” Further, before her own body can even begin to be considered physically excessive and failed on both social and corporeal levels, the material bodies of KFW’s parents are first marked as “other” as a result of *their* size. This kind of “second-hand” failure also goes unexamined by Halberstam’s work, but remains

218 Krista, Kentucky Fried Woman. Interview by Jessica Giusti. Video recording. San Francisco, CA, July 6, 2009; Kentucky Fried Woman also performs as Kentucky Fried Man, as well as part of the drag troupe, Butch Tap.

an important site because of the perceived “lineage” of fatness that is such a regular part of the rhetoric surrounding the “obesity epidemic.” Neoliberal regimes of power nearly write the narratives here themselves of the fat parents that teach their children to make the same “choices” as them in regards to “unhealthy” eating habits.

KFW plays with food in the way that Jukie Sunshine does by hiding it throughout the performance until a timed, climactic reveal. When I first observe her signature act, it is at Portland, Oregon’s Pride Festival. As part of the day’s activities, a show entitled “Queer Burlesque of the Northwest” has been scheduled for the main stage area:

Surrounding the stage on beach chairs, blankets worn thin with age, and towels faded from the summer sun, approximately 300 Pride Festival attendees gather to take in the show which promises the Northwest’s brightest queer burlesque stars. After the first act, performed by the Seattle-based troupe, the Von Foxies, - a half strip-tease, half farcical demonstration on safer sex practices between cisgender women set to the tune of “Feel Like Makin’ Love” by British super group, Bad Company - the stage is cleared with the exception of a single, cane-back chair, facing the audience and set center stage. Soon, the mellow notes of the classic Bee-Gees and Barbara Streisand duet, “Guilty,” begin over the speaker and the audience’s chatter transitions to a quiet hum. From the left stage wing, Kentucky Fried Woman strolls toward the middle, clad in a cherry red trench coat, fishnet tights, and furry black leg warmers that obscure the tops of

her shoes. She is a picture of calm, carefree glamour in what could be a, literal, walk in the park for her on any Sunday; big, black Onassis-style sunglasses perch on her nose, a red and black floral kerchief tied under her chin.

When she pauses center stage, it is to put down the shopping bag she's been carrying atop the chair in order to free her hands up and begin the routine of her tease. KFW lip synchs the opening lines to the 1980 Barry Gibb and Barbra Streisand duet, "Guilty," - a song that encapsulates the almost guilty feeling of being "so much" in love - as she slowly removes her trench coat. Revealing a black, silk strapless bra, a matching corset, and ruffled boy short panties, the audience applauds the reveal of her lingerie and of more flesh. While she maintains their eye contact during her slow strip of the trench coat, her eyes and body, intermittently, return to the brown paper bag and linger, wantonly, demonstrating an eagerness for its contents. After removing her last glove, she makes her way to the spot behind the chair, her body always at least swaying in beat with the song. As the song builds to begin the first chorus, KFW stares down into the paper sack, a sly smile on her lips as her eyes move from the bag, back up to the audience, and to the bag again. Slowly, as if she's peeling off another layer of her own clothing, she steadily pulls from the bag the familiar red and white packaging of a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket. As the audience cheers, KFW grasps the bucket to her chest and a look of pure pleasure comes over her face. Timed to the music perfectly, the chicken's reveal comes just as the song reaches the first chorus of, "And we've got nothing to be guilty of. Our love can

climb any mountain near or far.” The connection between KFW and her desire for the chicken is made explicitly clear. Her whole body visibly lusts after it and she gives into her desire for it by removing a drumstick from the bucket and sensuously rubbing it over her bare skin. Again, the way she slowly caresses her skin with the chicken mimics the speed and technique of burlesque, but is an application of chicken to flesh instead. In her massaging of the chicken over her fat body, KFW removes more and more clothes, allowing for more contact of chicken to flesh, driving the audience wilder with the unabashedness of the performance. The performance culminates with KFW setting aside her beloved drumstick, pulling the corner of her kerchief’s tie quickly, removing it, and revealing a yellow skull cap with a red rooster’s comb atop. The audience applauds their loudest yet, approving fully of KFW’s transformation.

There’s a lot to be said about KFW’s signature act and the way in which she plays with the chicken to politicize her body, food, the pleasure that comes with eating, and all of these things within a public space. When I interview KFW and ask about the act specifically, beginning with her choice to use “Guilty” as the song to set the performance to, she, again, recalls upon her Kentucky culture to explain the many layers at play for her in designing the piece.

“I love the Kentucky, and the fried, and all that means in inhabiting a fat body. And in the notion of frying and how that’s supposed to be bad for you, but is also so good. The saltiness of it. The hot crispiness. The want. ‘Guilty’ just makes sense. Fried chicken is exactly that which you crave, but that you’re supposed to feel guilty for wanting and I refuse to feel that.

As a woman, as a fat woman, I won't feel guilty for loving that Kentucky fried."²¹⁹

KFW acknowledges the multiple layers of failure that her signature performance addresses. Most notable, however, for this project, is that she also alludes to the affect of guilt and wrongness that neoliberal regimes of irresponsibility and failure force her to wade in. As she rhetorically poses: "What does it mean to be a fat person just being like, 'Hell yeah, I love some fried chicken and what are you going to do about it?'"²²⁰ The blameworthiness is so pervasive an idea that she identifies not only her body as culpable, but even the chicken itself is, within the rhetoric and realm of neoliberalism. She describes the food through the lens of choice and responsibility that suggest it as hot and crispy, captivating in its promise to be delicious, but also a knowing *threat*. Eating the chicken is clearly the wrong decision here - as KFW mentions, one is supposed to feel guilty in the wanting, an acknowledgment of the rampant moral discourses surrounding the intersections of food, eating, and pleasure. While individual choice is, theoretically, encouraged under neoliberalism, that choice only really exists for bodies already deemed normative. Fat bodies, bodies determined to already be marginal and failed, are making a grave and irresponsible decision by consuming it. To rub it all over one's body then, to desire so much so that the performance for it becomes erotic goes beyond choice and threat to, also, reveal a conversation about the grotesque.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

KFW is aware that, on its own, her body fails in the normative concept of what is considered desirable. In a moment of reflection on what her family's and normative society's perception of her is she notes, "I take off the glitter and I'm not the fabulous KFW who has 1600 Facebook fans. I'm Krista, the fat spinster, and I am a failure."²²¹ But in her continued process of undressing publicly on stage and in her incorporation of food into the act that she massages over her bare skin, KFW engages head-on the concept of her supposed lack of desirability and willfully occupies and challenges a space of even greater, purposeful, "grotesqueness." This position is exactly what Mingus refers to as "moving toward the ugly," an attempt at centering the "undesirable" as producers of knowledge. In her keynote address at the Femmes of Color Symposium, Mingus encouraged an embracing of the politics of "ugly," of "mov[ing] us closer to bodies and movements that disrupt, dismantle, disturb. [...] A shift from a politic of desirability and beauty to a politic of ugly and magnificence."²²²

Mingus' "politics of ugly," which KFW so well articulates through her choreography and movement is an acknowledgment of failure, like Halberstam's, that bodies outside of the norm are determined to be incompetent, but on a much more material level. She notes, specifically, that bodies of varying abilities, that have different ways of moving and living in the world, are considered

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid; It can easily be said that the way I read Mingus' work and use it in this dissertation reinforces the binary of beauty/ugly, but I see it not as a privileging of one over the other or relying on only one at a time for understanding fat, queer burlesque. Rather, I read Mingus' piece as a call to recognize the compulsion toward beauty, the difficulty of achieving it, and the agency available in finding an inbetweenness that queers our expectations. There is extraordinary power in the "moving toward the ugly," as she suggests in the title of her keynote. It is, I believe, this movement and fluidity of using beauty thoughtfully, of not fearing ugly, of recognizing its potentiality that fat, queer burlesque embraces. What Mingus, ultimately, suggests is a kind of solidarity in undesirability and that solidarity, to me, is magnificence.

“disposable’ in a capitalist an exploitative culture because [they] are not seen as productive.”²²³ Her notion of “the ugly” and the politics of desirability, while similar in this admission about capitalist modes of “success” to Halberstam, is a better lens through which to read KFW’s performances because Mingus centers corporeality. Understanding the complexities of KFW’s performance as a failed, fat body requires a theoretical framework that acknowledges what it means for failure to be so visceral, to be of the living form.

KFW and Jukie’s pieces, both engage the preconceived ideas about their bodies as aberrant and use food to further play with these notions of “ugly”; it is not by chance that they both choose to incorporate foods that are so material and residual themselves. Masterfully, both performers orchestrate these multiple layers of what is said or thought about their bodies versus what images and dialogues they want to convey. Further combining the use of eroticism and humor, in true burlesque fashion, both KFW and Jukie’s performances encourage a conscious shift to “ugly” as a method for moving past positivist notions of “fat is beautiful” and “real women have curves” in order to encourage a dialogue about the intersections of desire, consumption and “health.” As KFW reflects:

“And then the added component of playing with [the chicken] on my body. It’s so disgusting, but so sexy at the same time. And that I’d dare eat it too, in all its greasiness and calories! But then here I am still being sexy, still dancing up a storm, displaying strength and flexibility that they’re not expecting. ...People don’t know what to do with it, but they know that they like it, but it’s freaking them out! There’s something telling them they’re not supposed to be enjoying it or applauding it. It plays with all those things of

223 Ibid.

being fat, of fried food, of grease. I love that I'm able to push people into that place of uncertainty...to make them realize it's not all about some fat girl on stage shaking it. That there's something learn here and to take away about how we think about bodies. I want them to laugh and have fun, but I want them to take something away from seeing me perform and I think they do just that."²²⁴

As I considered my fieldwork over time and the feedback I received from audiences, it did seem that the performances had challenged viewers in terms of their prior ideas about desire and fatness. On numerous occasions, both overheard and in informal, post-performance, interviews I conducted with random audience members, there was a consensus among men and women, queer and straight, that fatness - or at least the variety of white, feminine fatness that Jukie and KFW present - was sexy. Straight-identified men, especially, seemed to find themselves surprised, sometimes shy, to admit this after lifetimes of ignoring the possibility. These were the reactions I, somewhat, expected to receive and, thus, they felt stale and inconclusive to me. Further, I found no way to gauge the long-term effects of these performances or that the audience reactions, which were overwhelmingly positive, weren't just the "proper" liberal response to my questions. I, additionally, had to also consider my own positionality here as a researcher who is visibly fat and observably queer in many of these venues and the impact those details had on the responses I received. It was obvious at times that interviewees chose the words they used to describe their reactions carefully, leading me to imagine that my positionality might be interfering with truthful

224 Ibid.

responses. At the end of the day, what felt the most worthy of further interrogation was not so much whether the audiences responded positively (though had they not, it would make for a richer segment of the project), but more so how that positivity was regulate and challenged by the performers themselves.

My solution has been to rely little on the informal interviews I conducted with audience members and, instead, focus on what the performers themselves feel is created for them, by them, through their performance of fat, queer burlesque. Mingus' keynote encourages a shift and examination of "magnificence," which for her is about "respecting Ugly for how it has shaped us and been exiled. Seeing its power and magic, seeing the reasons it has been feared. Seeing it for what it is: some of our greatest strength."²²⁵ Both Jukie and KFW also speak to what their performances allow them as artists and, also, individuals so invested in the politics of their performance and in, as Mingus describes as the shift to "respecting ugly for how it has shaped us and been exiled" and examining its "magnificence." Both KFW and Jukie's performances create space for them to consciously occupy this space of "ugly" in order to create "magnificence" in community building. For KFW, community looks like similarly minded, and additionally, similarly-*bodied*, folks around her.

"My performances connect me to the people I want to make community with - whether its other performers I meet along the way and who share my ideas and my politics and my vision of what community is. These people are "weird" or "ugly" or "perverse" 'cause they're fatties, queers, disabled, even bearded femmes...San Francisco just loves freaks and my burlesque troupe, Titland, is composed of all kinds of freaks. We perform

²²⁵ Mingus.

the identities that marginalize us every single day because being up there on stage is powerful.”²²⁶

With its roots tied up in social and economic class struggles at the turn of the 19th century, neo-burlesque is the perfect vehicle through which to KFW, Jukie, and other fat and queer identified people can utilize dance to center “ugly.” Instead of merely creating performances whose message starts and ends with one-note campaigns of positivism - ones that reemphasizes hegemonic binaries of beautiful and not, healthy and unhealthy - KFW and Jukie both choose to loiter in the space of “ugly” and form communities of support here. In this space of alternate realities to hegemonic notions of success, inhabiting and building chosen family from the ugly *is* the queer art of failure realized, but with the important caveat of centering material bodies. As Mingus so purposefully notes in her address, “There is only the illusion of solace in beauty.” Fat, queer burlesque reveals this and imagines new ways of living and learning from “ugly,” of moving us toward always being certain to incorporate the material body as a site of analysis and, more so, reading bodies as capable of disrupting, dismantling, and disturbing normative institutions of power. Centering “ugly” in the way that fat, queer burlesque does allow for thinking about bodies, health, and movement for *all bodies*, not just some.

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226 Krista, Kentucky Fried Woman, Interview.

Race, Reappropriation & Regulation

All of the performers I had the privilege of interviewing for this project occupy multiple subject positions in terms of size, sexuality, and gender presentation, but in addition to these identifiers, several of my subjects identified as women of color as well. For this section of my research, I'm going to focus on the performances by two self-identified fat femmes of color - Juicy D. Light and Alotta Boutté - in order to discuss the ways in which each dancer reappropriates racial stigmas and stereotypes. While I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to both observe and interview Alotta Boutté, I was only able to attend performances by Juicy D. Light. Still, both women's performances made poignant critiques of ways in which women of color and their bodies are seen and used by hegemonic culture and offer enormous contributions in considering the intersections of race with fatness and sexuality.

When I arrive at Annie's Social Club to see Juicy D. Light perform, I am immediately surprised by the crowd that has gathered for the show on a random Thursday night in July. My research up unto this point has had me traveling up and down the West Coast to summer Pride festivals, to queer and lesbian clubs and performance art venues in Oakland, CA and in Brooklyn. But here I am for the first time in the sake of this project at a non-queer bar, surrounded by a much more straight crowd than usual for my time spent in San Francisco. More so, the audience that fills up the room so much that people are standing on top of the

radiator covers to see, is overwhelmingly white in comparison to the other venues I've been to. I believe this to be a result of the rampant gentrification of this part of the city and my prior nights' research taking place in the outskirts of Oakland where more communities of color have their homes.

I've been in communication with Juicy D. Light via email only at this point and our correspondence has only scratched the service of her performances which she hopes makes people "think twice" about painting fat Black women as lacking a sexuality. Juicy performs, mainly, with a troupe of fat-identified performers known as Rubenesque Burlesque, but tonight, she's invited me to come see a solo performance that she occasionally performs with this monthly show. A half hour into the night's events, though, and I'm flipping through my notes between acts making sure I have the correct date written down. Prior to this point, each performer that has taken the stage has been normative in terms of body size, white, and performing very traditional, apolitical burlesque. It is, undoubtedly, beautiful to watch, but by this point in my research, I've become accustomed to non-normative displays of desire and excess; visceral acts with substantive voices.

Juicy D. Light winds up being the lone performer to make this happen this evening at Annie's Social Club and when she finally takes the stage I, feeling completely out of my element in terms of size and sexuality, am desperate for her presence. When Juicy parts the curtain with her hands and steps into the spotlight, the speakers begin an old vaudevillian song about a young boy and his

beloved “mammy” and she is costumed to project a stereotypical representation of her. With a shapeless dress, an apron, and broom in hand, Juicy portrays an exaggeratedly happy woman. She sweeps up debris across the stage with a big grin on her face, stopping every once in a while to mimic a hearty belly laugh. She stops, occasionally, to do a small dance and then returns to her jubilation in cleaning. This continues for a solid two minutes, of which the crowd applauds, but hesitantly. They are aware that Juicy’s performance of the happy “mammy” figure is making a cultural critique and it is clear they are uncomfortable and, most likely, fearful of where it will go next.

They don’t have to wait long. There is sudden record skipping on the “mammy” track and the song is replaced by a hard rock song whose first lines begin, “I hit him with a piece of his philosophy / Anglo-Saxon much in his type of greed. / What did he do to deserve such hate? / He tried to intellectualize my blackness.” The remaining two minutes of Juicy’s performance sees her angrily shedding her “mammy” costume - gloves, apron, dress, and kerchief - to reveal a black leather bra and mini skirt. The audience excitedly applauds the reveal, but Juicy greets their cheers with a reveal of her own: a cat o’ nine tails - a multi-tailed leather flogger used in kink and BDSM communities as a whip. She angrily paces the stage, twirling the whip and when audience members close to the stage get particularly loud in their applause or cheers, she slams the cat o’ nine tails down hard on the stage in front of them. Juicy removes her leather skirt and begins to remove her bra, taunting the audience, but instead of eventually

removing it and revealing her pasty-covered breasts underneath, as most others do, Juicy drops her bra while still managing to cover her breasts with her forearm. The audience increases their applause in hopes of encouraging her to move her arm and give them the show they've come to see, but instead she extends a middle finger with her other hand and saunters off the stage.

Juicy's performance at Annie's Social Club offers a rich site for considering the intersections of fatness, sexuality, and race in her performance. Juicy's reappropriation of the "mammy" character in the first part of her choreography is, undoubtedly, in response to performing as a fat, black woman in front of an overwhelmingly white audience and the significance of that history. Black women's bodies have long been the focus of study and scrutiny by white "audiences," of both the scientific and medical variety, as well as in the standard spaces of performance and visual culture.²²⁷ That Juicy addresses this through the "mammy" figure - playing up the stereotype of "mammy" as a jovial, spirited caretaker - speaks to the colonization of black women's bodies by white, western audiences over time.

Juicy recognizes that "mammy" is a representation of "failed" black femininity in the sense that hegemonic culture has cast her outside of the model of perceived, normative, "success." As Halberstam notes, failure is the loss of idealism and hope to achieve wealth and "passable" normalcy.²²⁸ For the figure of "mammy," these achievements are impossibilities in that she is, iconically,

227 Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 58.

228 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 1-4.

rooted to ensuring the success and capitalist comforts of others; notably, white slave owners. “The mammy of the Old South mythology,” writes historian M.M. Manning, “was a reassuring figure who, despite her breeding, comforted her white betters, offered advice, kept black males in line, and put hot food on the table.”²²⁹ “Mammy” also “fails” corporeally as well. Her Blackness, along with her fatness, mark her as asexual, the purposeful contrast to the concept of white, affluent, southern femininity in the antebellum south. In terms of corporeal failings, Halberstam’s application is limited here in that the sexless icon of “mammy” is one inherently failed on account of race and size. She does not come into failure over time, but fails outright at least in terms of her Blackness.

Juicy’s performance takes these multiple layers and levels of failure into account. Her portrayal of “mammy” is interrupted to reveal herself as the direct opposite of all things her fat, Black body suggests to a normative, white audience - a powerful, aggressive woman whose sexuality and desire is expressed on her terms. That she angrily discards the affable presentation of the “mammy” character for a whip-wielding dominatrix is significant. Her transition marks a moment of rupture in the performance where she literally refuses to produce a comforting, pleasurable performance for her audience in the way that the mythological concept of “mammy” might go to great lengths to please. Her refusal to allow her spectators an opportunity to express much joy or pleasure at her performance - lest she silence them with a crack of her cat o’ nine tails - allows

²²⁹ Maurice M. Manning, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 23.

Juicy to seize control over her audiences' reaction, and pleasure, to her critique of Black femininity. Her act engages the idea of her failed self as spectacle - something it is inherently because of race and size - and makes it so on her terms. Anne Beatrice Scott discusses the need to reappropriate icons such as the "mammy" in order to hold and shift the concept of spectacle for herself and the audience. In her piece "Spectacle and Dancing Bodies That Matter: Or, If It Don't Fit, Don't Force It," she writes:

"Placing in plain view my desire to become every black 'other' in order to reclaim my pre-middle-passage self, my race-specific appropriations dissimulate through their apparent appropriateness the restrictions/regulations on my dancing black body. Spectacle, spectator, and specter, I precede myself as always and already racialized."²³⁰

Juicy's performance does exactly this and plays with the "every black 'other'" that Scott describes both in her depiction of the "mammy" figure, but also in the way she, potentially, toys with the figure of Sapphire that is so often also linked to representations and ideas of black womanhood. bell hooks describes the Sapphire image as "evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful, in short all that the mammy figure was not. ...[Sapphire] designated black women the epitome of female evil and sinfulness."²³¹

That Juicy plays these two figures off of one another allows her to critique her spectators' preconceived ideas about black femininity, while also centering her physical body - her fat and black body - to provoke desire (in her near nakedness), but to also control and regulate that desire. Much like performance

230 Anna Beatrice Scott, "Spectacle and Dancing Bodies That Matter: Or, If It Don't Fit, Don't Force It," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 259.

231 bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1981), 85.

artist Tracey Moffatt's film, *Lip*, which uses 56 clips from American "classical" cinema to "stage a battle of wills between the black maid [or "mammy" figure] and her white mistress, in which it is the black woman who gets the last word," Juicy gets the final say in if and how her spectators can desire her.²³² Through this regulation, Juicy and Moffatt's "mammies" both decode the audience's gaze and are able to "talk" back through the "vacillating masks of deference and tempered hostility" in "a kind of tactical, performance, a role-playing."²³³ Juicy's reappropriation of both the "mammy" and Sapphire figures is Mingus' embrace of "the ugly" realized, as she shifts between these two negative stereotypes and claims them as her own in order to produce her own cultural images. Mingus implores that we "build new understandings of bodies and gender that can reflect our histories and our resiliency."²³⁴ In incorporating the histories and present of "mammy" and Sapphire in her performance that seizes control from her spectators, Juicy acknowledges "ugly" in an effort to recreate her body as magnificently "othered."

Juicy plays with perceptions of what black femininity can and should produce on stage and I saw this pushing of boundaries and expectations with all of my performers in terms of size and sexuality, but also in terms of ideas about race. As San Francisco-based performer Alotta Boutté eloquently identified in an interview with me:

²³² Sarah Smith, "Lip and Love: subversive repetition in the pastiche films of Tracey Moffatt," in *Screen*, 49 (no. 2), 213.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Mingus.

“Burlesque allows me a place where I can live out my vision for myself as a performer. In the performance world, things are still very type-casted. There are expectations of what you can and cannot do successfully based on your appearance. If I’m auditioning for a troupe or for a theater piece, whatever role I will get as a large black woman is long ago and still very narrow. Burlesque is my chance to get to do the stuff I’m not expected to. I can be a dainty flower or I can be big and mean and tough and rock out. I can do something that’s out of other people’s perceptions of what a big black woman can do on stage and I challenge them on it.”²³⁵

Alotta Boutté’s performances do often defy what her audiences expect of her abilities. Because she, frequently, performs routines that combine burlesque and tap dance, spectators are, visually, startled at her skill when it comes to latter. When I spoke with audience members after an act that included a complicated and fast-paced tap sequence, one woman noted that she was “surprised” by Boutté’s “ease at moving like that...so fast and so skilled.”²³⁶ When I mentioned the performer has been studying tap for over 15 years, the spectator replied, “Well, it shows. You just wouldn’t think upon first glance that someone who is...larger in size could do that.”²³⁷ The expectation being here that because of her size, she should be limited in terms of movement. Similar conversations exist at the intersections of dance and disability theory where scholars such as Petra Cuppers, Ann Cooper Albright, and Sarah Whatley, among others, write about the perception of difference between spectator and performer and the notion of able-bodiedness and movement. Boutté challenges her audience’s expectations of her body in the way that Juicy’s performance exposes larger perceptions of black women’s cultural representations. Both center the body not in an effort to

235 Alotta Boutté. Interview by Jessica Giusti. Video recording. San Francisco, CA, August 3, 2009.

236 Anonymous Audience Member. Interview by Jessica Giusti. Tape recording. San Francisco, CA, May 2007.

237 Ibid.

“move toward beauty and desirability,” but to force critiques and conversations that focus on corporeal knowledge learned from bodies deemed the most aberrant.²³⁸

* * *

Beauty, “Femme-ininity,” & Desire

For me, this section is very personal in that, much like many of my performers, I feel my identities as fat and femme are so intrinsically linked to one another. While I have identified as queer for over a decade, coming to femme and to fatness came as a second leg of the journey and informed one another as I grew to call them my own. For me, fat acceptance has come easily in that I have never felt I needed to justify why my size should be a statement or indication about anything other than my physical dimensions. But femme came with second-guessing and doubt. That it wasn't mine, it wasn't accessible to me because, culturally, femininity and fatness are insoluble. Coupled with the privileging of female masculinity in queer women's spaces femme felt unattainable for me and undesired by all.

Despite the copious reasons and pressures to shy away from it, though, the pleasure I got in performing femme, in the trickery of it, the politicization of what I put on my body, of who I went to bed with, and the way it allowed me to feel in my skin was too good to let go of. Femme is in my fat as much as it's in my bones. My heart hangs femme. It is the aesthetic of queering femininity, of

²³⁸ Mingus.

reappropriating social cues and markers for the adoring eyes of my butch partner or peacocking for one another with my very best femme sisters. But it's also about the way it forces me to recognize the privilege, or as Mingus says, "the solace" in beauty - who can claim it, who cannot. Femme is about accessibility - physically, intellectually, and emotionally - and is about acknowledging histories and structures of oppression that marginalize some and divide us all.

* * *

When Mingus speaks about the embracing of "ugly," as physical, aesthetic failure, and the challenge it poses to conceptions and categories of "success," she does so with a clear understanding of what she also means by "beauty." It is more than the normate; it is also a reminder of what is acceptable and what is not.²³⁹ It is power wielded in its perceived greatness, in its believed insurmountability. It is something that, culturally, we place gratuitous amounts of value upon and go to great, painful lengths to achieve. For queers especially, Mingus notes that there is an obsession "with being beautiful and gorgeous and hot."²⁴⁰ Marginalized communities of all kinds strive to adhere to beauty norms in an attempt at acceptance, working to achieve a piece of normalcy. This is especially true in positivity campaigns of both the past and present that advocate for "reclaiming" versions of marginalized "beauty" by relying on heteronormative notions of what that looks like and who that includes, i.e. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* being an acute application of this. In positivist movements of both

239 Bernadette Wegenstein, *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2012), 61.

240 Mingus.

the past and present, we often see this in campaigns that advocate for “reclaiming” beauty, attempting to claim what is considered marginal or excessive.

In their essay “The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World,” Erica Reischer and Kathryn Koo argue that the “Blacks is beautiful” campaign of the American 1960s, was “less about the attractiveness of a particular skin color than about the advancement of black consciousness and pride central to the civil rights movement.”²⁴¹ Undoubtedly, “black is beautiful” served this purpose, but the re-use of the hegemonic language of “beauty” manages to still reinforce a certain level of standard that encourages a “positive” read of the black body, as opposed to one which forces a move beyond this discourse altogether. Moving beyond beauty, as Mingus’ piece suggests, reveals what bodies are left behind when focusing solely on positivity and a re-reading of “beauty.” Embracing a body politic of “ugly and magnificence,” allows for a more nuanced consideration of what bodies can take foot and gain agency in considering alternate iterations of physical aestheticism such as “ugly.”²⁴²

Within communities of size, this distinction occurs between the co-existing, but differently centered, fat *positivity/acceptance* and fat *activism* arms. The latter attempts to move beyond positivist re-readings of fatness and, instead, attempts to center corporeality and its move beyond standards such as “beauty” to be a site of knowledge production for all kinds of bodies. Failure applies here in the

241 Erica Reischer and Kathryn Koo, “The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, 2004: 12.

242 Mingus.

marginalization of the fat body, but once more, never considers what it is to fail ontologically or *a priori*. Considering “ugly” in relation to “beauty” confronts these possibilities of material or inherent failures and what it means to use as “ugly” as a framework and “magnificence” as the goal. Here, the latter, “magnificence” is about exaltedness, about grandeur in excess. Magnificence is the result of a true acknowledgment and exercising of “ugly,” and difference. It is a position from which to hold and work from “beyond beauty” to create new possibilities for living within bodies whose powers are outside of the physical notion of “beauty.” For fat, queer, disabled, and bodies of color, working through and from an identification with “ugly” - namely, one that is an inherent component of a particular body - is challenging. Specifically, when enacted through something like neo-burlesque, which allows for revealing both the artifice and labor of beauty, working from a framework of “ugly” causes a paradigmatic shift to occur around how we think about affects such as desirability and femininity.

Because the majority of performers I interviewed for this dissertation identify as queer femmes and very much acknowledge how their femininity contributes to their burlesque personas and routines (and because femininity is so trussed to ideas that what is beautiful is feminine) my project necessitates this conversation around “beauty.” For the fat-identified women I interviewed or observed for this project, as well as from my own experience navigating the world as a fat femme - femininity is so often denied us on account of our bodies failing at what is to be considered “beautiful.” Thus the notion of femininity, in its most conventional

forms, can feel inaccessible in that it refuses to create space that occupies a variety of different bodies and, instead, only promotes a very strict, hegemonic notion of what femininity looks like and how it behaves.²⁴³ Queerness, too, has its own stigma against femininity: that for cisgender women to perform femininity arouses suspicion about the “truth” of their queerness, marking them as not “queer enough.”²⁴⁴ Queer femme icon, activist and author, Amber Hollibaugh writes of this distrust of femmes in the afterword of Ulrika Dahl and Del LaGrace Volcano’s book, *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities*. Hollibaugh writes:

“It still seems that a femme identity is assumed to be a sort of default - not something forged in the fire of its own complex, unresolved human possibilities and hungers. In fact, the real suspicion is that we are just faux straight people sleeping over at the LGBTIQ campground. [...] Femmes are read as imposters, betrayers of the authentic queer self.”²⁴⁵

Along with this idea that femininity is not to be trusted and not a genuine indication of gender or sexuality - a notion that is, in my opinion, very rooted in misogyny - there is the subsequent hyper-privileging of genderqueer and transmasculine identities occurring in ciswomen’s communities, as well. Here, femme gets pushed to the margins, denying it any designation as a transgressive gender identity. Again, Hollibaugh is particularly eloquent here:

“I have always believed that the identity, the essence, the distinction that is Femme mattered - that an erotic, self-configured femme person was as

243 There is a whole conversation here possible for discussing the ways in which femininity is not just about aesthetic, but also about behavior. There is the idea that to be “feminine,” in a very traditional sense, is to be virtuous also. Again, here fat bodies are not only marginalized then for not appearing feminine enough, but also because the association again between fatness and badness, laziness and, the grotesque, is once again emphasized here.

244 Undoubtedly, this kind of stigma is leftover from U.S. second wave lesbian feminism’s notion that femininity was a tool of the patriarchy; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).

245 Dahl and Volcano, *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities*, 185.

intriguing, complex, gender-defying, and deliciously abnormal as all the other strangely configured, self-created, lived-inside-of-whether-you-like-it-or-not-mother-fucker identities occupying our queer universe. Because - like the rest of the clan - in order to survive we have imagined ourselves: we have made ourselves up.”²⁴⁶

For queer, fat femmes then who are refused access to the norms that are femininity and beauty on account of their size, shape, and, as noted above, sexuality, they are well-served in conceptualizing new categories and frameworks to work within, such as the “ugly” and “magnificence” that Mingus utilizes. In the way that Halberstam cites failure as a location from which to grow alternate realities for queer subjects and Mingus encourages a rewiring of “ugly” in order to grasp agency for non-normative bodies, I consider the production and distinction of “femme-ininity” from conventional notions of femininity within the queer space of neo-burlesque. Few pieces of scholarship at this point in time have used the term “femme-ininity” and with the exception of Dahl’s recent publication, “Turning Like a Femme: Figuring Critical Femininity Studies,” those that do invoke it, engage it limitedly.²⁴⁷ For the purposes of this project, I found scholar Jayne Caudwell’s definition of “femme-ininity” from her 2007 article, “Queering the Field: The complexities of sexuality within a lesbian-identified football team in England,” to be the most in line with my use of the term. Caudwell’s definition of “femme-

246 Ibid.

247 Ulrika Dahl, “Turning Like a Femme: Figuring Critical Femininity Studies,” in *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 20, no. 1, (2012): 57-64.

inity” “denote[s] femininity as detached from heterosexual relations [...and] claims “a femininity that is chosen and asserted.”²⁴⁸

The mention of choice here is critical in my understanding and use of “femme-inity” in this project and the way it provokes and enables the emergence of desire from these performers. Each of the dancers I observed in my fieldwork embodies “femme-inity” by making the decision to center their differences - the “ugly” - in the way they perform their identities on and off the stage. For those denied access to traits such as femininity and desire on account of appearance and identity, centering ones “failure” and seeking to create new frameworks for performing and living them is bold work indeed. Fatness, queerness, and now “femme,” all operate simultaneously here within the use of “femme-inity” to disrupt various neoliberal regimes and allow for the production of desire created by fat, queer burlesque. As a “betrayer of legibility itself,” “femme” turns heterosexist femininity on its head by revealing that the look and desire of what I’m referring to as “femme-inity” is not, in fact, for the presumed attention of cisgender men. Femme-inity is a conscious effort in rejecting heteronormativity knowing fully that it denies femmes access to capitalist notions of “success.” It “shift[s], invert[s], and *create[s]* erotic *havoc*” allowing for explorations in fat, queer, femme magnificence as an alternate experience to pursuing hegemonic partnerships and futures.

248 Jayne Caudwell, “Queering the Field? The complexities of sexuality within a lesbian-identified football team in England,” in *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 14, no. 2, (2007): 13.

In that femme-ininity exists at the juncture of queer, fat, and femme, it came then as no surprise that for each of the performers I observed and spoke with in my research it was impossible for them to think of these identities singularly. As a fat, queer femme myself I understand this interwovenness of fat, queerness, and femme-ininity to inspire and be inspired by each another in considering new ways to view and perform their bodies as capable of producing and having desire. This way of doing femme-ininity takes into account the deeply rooted corporeal histories each performer has experienced over the course of their lives as people whose bodies have always failed. KFW so eloquently noted in our interview that:

“All three of these identities - fat, queer, and femme - converge on me. I can’t speak to what it is to be any of these identities without the others. My experiences in each one are so informed by the other. I’m never one of the three and I can’t be one without the others and I can’t speak to what it is to be any other queer than a fat, femme queer.”²⁴⁹

Femme-ininity acknowledges the multiple subject positions occupied by each performer and is the undercurrent that drives the presentation of “femme” on stage. Burlesque has always been about the feminine, about the wink, the smile, the coquettishness, and its reemergence in the form of neo-burlesque has been no exception. But as much as neo-burlesque has blown open the idea that learning and performing the act of burlesque can be done by any (corporeal) body, it is still largely composed of cisgender women performers who do fit fairly normative standards of beauty in terms of size and appearance - just with the

²⁴⁹ Krista, Kentucky Fried Woman, Interview.

addition of a lot more tattoos! Thus, femme-ininity becomes an important and distinctive marker of how desire and confidence get articulated on stage through the fat, queer femme performer and projects to the audience that this persona is a result of, rather than in spite of, the culmination of the “ugly.” Identifying as femme and using “femme-ininity” on stage winds up being about acknowledging differences and parodying normativity. The aesthetic enactment of this often plays out on femme bodies via styling choices that encourage visibility - bold clothing, sequins, the highest of high heels, daring necklines. Femmes are “knights in glitter armor.”²⁵⁰

For many of us, learning to think through size oppression, coming to identify, politically, as fat, and even coming out as queer, is very much dependent upon embracing “femme” for ourselves. At the same Portland Pride Festival where I first observed KFW’s signature performance, I also had the opportunity to watch fellow academic and burlesque siren, Miz Ginger Snapz. Snapz bills herself as “Seattle’s Premier Queer Black Burlesque Starlet” and her accomplishments are plentiful both on stage and in academia where she is a current doctoral candidate at the University of Washington. While Snapz and I were unable to find a suitable interview time, I was fortunate enough to be directed to some of her written work that engages with gender, size, race, and sexuality. One of the pieces, “Everything I know about being femme I learned from *Sula*” begins with a quote from a more personal piece of writing that Snapz

250 Sydney Fonteyn Lewis, “Everything I know about being femme I learned from *Sula*” or Toward a Black Femme-inist Criticism” in *Trans-Scripts 2* (2012): 100-125.

submitted to a fat positive anthology. In it she reveals the ways in which her identities as a fat, Black, queer femme are responsible for each being such powerful positions for her. She writes:

“I came to Femme as defiance through a big booty that declined to be tucked under, bountiful breasts that refused to hide, insolent hair that can kink, and curl, and bead up, and lay straight all in one day, through my golden skin, against her caramel skin, against her chocolate skin, against her creamy skin. Through rainbows of sweaters, dresses, and shoes. Through my insubordinate body, defying subordination, incapable of assimilation, and tired, so tired of degradation.”²⁵¹

Given her choice in language, it's evident that through “Femme,” Snapz has come to understand her “insubordinate body” as something more powerful. Anti-assimilationist and defiant, in her own words, Snapz's version of femme-ininity mirrors Mingus' in that femme remains deeply political. “Moving toward the ugly” is about identifying “femme” -and all its excesses and challenges to traditional femininity - beyond conversations about beauty and aesthetics to ones about personal and community agency. And through something like fat, queer burlesque, agency plays out through ideas and constructions around desirability.

As noted earlier in this section, all of these performers come from histories and experiences where they have continually, materially, failed in terms of beauty and, in turn, desirability. But through femme and coming into one's femme-ininity, desire is dismantled and rebuilt with a different set of wires. Watching fat, queer femmes perform burlesque throughout the course of this project has been, for me, a lesson in transition. In taking preconceived notions of self and changing

²⁵¹ *ibid.*

them to create a version that is gutsy, visceral, and stage-ready. To welcome an audience's gaze, but in way that centers the boisterous language of her body's movements in order to create desires on her terms. In our interview, KFW spoke directly to this:

"Fat burlesque pushes people around their desires, especially queers who have had to defend their desires for so long. My work forces them to ask themselves why they maybe haven't ever been attracted to or fucked a fat person. Someone might say I'm asking to be objectified and to that I say 'They're right! I went into burlesque intentionally wanting to create vignettes and moments where I am objectified. I have spent a lifetime of never being objectified and now I get to experience that on my own terms from my position on the stage? I'm going to enjoy this for a few minutes.'²⁵²

KFW and each of the other performers I've observed welcome the opportunity to craft fat and queer desire through this rendering of neo-burlesque. As mentioned earlier, the truth is, that \within the larger realm of neo-burlesque performance - and obviously such is the convention with most forms of dance in general - the expectation is for the performer's bodies to be slender, even gaunt. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more obvious than in the familiar images and rhetoric of classic ballerinas whose, often emaciated, forms set a standard that equates the physical act of dancing and notions of grace and ability with underfed and withering bodies.

There is an element of demand that seems to occur in a lot of fat burlesque both in the surprise and the attention, or tuning in, that accompanies the size of the performer who steps onto the stage, but also in the politics and the

²⁵² Krista, Kentucky Friend Woman, Interview.

playfulness of the act itself. As New York City based performer Cookie Tuff mentioned in our picnic-turned-interview in San Francisco's Delores Park, "Getting up on the stage just instills you with a type of power where you can really command the audience to see you."²⁵³ Juicy D. Light's switch up from "mammy" to leather Top is a perfect example of this demanding the audience's attention to get a message across. As New York-based burlesque queen, Dirty Martini, notes: "Today you can't be a [size 16] naked lady without saying something."²⁵⁴ The performance I witnessed by Miz Ginger Snapz in Portland, Oregon, is yet one more example where the act is surprising in a way that demands you pay attention. Forty seconds into Snapz's routine, the music changed from a classic burlesque and striptease number to, lounge singer, Richard Cheese's cover of Sir Mix-a-Lot's, "Baby Got Back." The transition to this familiar song that emphasizes the size (and appreciation of) a woman's backside, accompanied by a quick, unexpected reveal of Snapz's g-stringed derriere is a surprise to audience members. All of the elements add up, along with the incredulity that a woman of size would acknowledge that, in fact, she has a lot of "back," whilst exposing it simultaneously. Here, demand is agency. Snapz demands her audience's attention and, with it, desirability that comes on her terms. For each of these performers the desire provoked in the audience does not surface, solely, because of the reveal of the body, but because they demand

253 Cookie Woolner, Cookie Tuff. Interview by Jessica Giusti. Video recording. San Francisco, CA, July 19, 2009.

254 Horowitz, "Neo-burlesque is not just Booty Shaking."

it in their choreography, their costume and music choices, and in the message they convey in commanding the stage.

As I concluded the majority of my interviews, I often asked performers what they saw as the future of neo-burlesque and how they would like to see it evolve. Several performers identified that the scene itself, especially in the larger cities where I conducted research - San Francisco, New York - was completely over-saturated with performers and shows already. As one performer discreetly noted, "There's no shortage of pretty, slender, white girls wanting to get in on burlesque." Particularly, several performers critiqued the ways in which many, normative-bodied performers rush into getting on stage, not learning the classical techniques of burlesque and, thus, marring its reputation. Former member of the Chainsaw Chubettes and current Ph.D. Candidate in History and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Cookie Tuff, spoke to this in terms of performers who will pay exorbitant amounts on costumes, as opposed to creating their own pieces and staying true to the working class history of the tease. She duly notes that with this contingent of normative performers who fail to acknowledge the plebeian roots of burlesque, there is also a disassociation with its history of sex work:

"There's this romanticization around women in the past [by the current generation of performers] that think of burlesque as their postmodern hobby when this was a tradition that women survived on. These are the same conventional-looking women who are espousing such a distancing from sex work because they've never felt like they were outsiders."²⁵⁵

255 Cookie Tuff Interview.

This frustration among the fat and queer performers I interviewed was nearly universal; there was a clear understanding that the privilege of being normatively bodied allowed many to “get by” without any kind of knowledge of, or investment in, the history of burlesque. Several suggested that for fat and queer performers, the bar felt twice as high to be taken seriously and that there was a kind of obligation among their set to perform well in order to pay homage to burlesque’s proletarian beginnings and big-bodied former starlets.

But in addition to these critiques were the hopes and suggestions made by a number of performers who wanted to see future burlesque performers continue to challenge and widen the scope of who performs burlesque and what it can look like and include. Particularly, there was a resounding sentiment that desire and attraction be continually questioned, pushed, and created by the different kinds of performers who take the stage. Jukie Sunshine, specifically, noted that for her, burlesque’s evolution needed to continually embrace sex positivity for a wide variety of different bodies and abilities. And for KFW, there is the acknowledgment that “there’s a strong component of the queer performance community who are extremely politically conscious and recognize the power they have when they’re on stage,” but that she’d like to see them become more pervasive both within queer and non-queer communities.²⁵⁶ In many ways, the imagined future of neo-burlesque by the fat, queer femmes I observed runs parallel to Mingus’ rewired notions of femme and femme-ininity. The change she

256 Molly Freedenberg, “Shake, Shimmy, Subvert,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian Online*, June 24, 2009, <http://www.sfbg.com/2009/06/24/shake-shimmy-subvert>.

suggests continues to advocate for seeking out versions of desirability that center loving the ugly - “Respecting ugly for how it has shaped us and been exiled. Seeing its power and magic, seeing the reasons it has been feared. Seeing it for what it is: some of our greatest strength.”²⁵⁷

In Mingus’ and queer, fat burlesque’s future, desirability undergoes a kind of renovation that dismantles the easy, innate power of beauty and refocuses to ask: “What would it take for us to be able to risk being ugly, in whatever that means for us. What would it mean to acknowledge our ugliness for all it has given us, how it has shaped our brilliance, and taught us about how we never want to make anyone else feel?”²⁵⁸ The queering of burlesque that occurs in these communities attempts to answer these questions, creating paradigmatic shifts away from failure without materiality, away from standard notions of beauty, and away from hegemonic versions of femininity. In the space made by fat, queer femme performers, challenges are poised by performers whose bodies and presences demand attention. The push desirability to be political and intentional in holding all of the “ugly”: our inherently failed bodies, us magnificent “freaks and monsters.”²⁵⁹

257 Mingus.

258 Ibid.

259 Ibid.

Conclusion

Neo-burlesque has reemerged out of a rich cultural and political history of class stratification and protest of the mid-to-late 1800s poor and working classes only to allow for present day performers to use its integration of wit, humor, and allure to produce modern commentaries. This dissertation maps a trajectory for considering this revival of burlesque in the past, more than, ten years to examine its embrace and deployment by marginalized communities of performers. While it serves this project to once more note that all iterations of neo-burlesque do not embrace and incorporate its rich history of social and political critique, for those that do, it serves as a medium for response. Particularly, when performed by bodies that fall outside of the bounds of “normal,” neo-burlesque acts as a vehicle for dancing protest and dissent at the institutions and deployments of hegemony that strive to contain them.

In order to successfully conclude that which has been a robust topic in its wide scope of considering the academic domains and material implications of fat and queer studies with performance analysis, I want to read a more recent performance I learned of and observed online in order to rearticulate the application of this project and to restate what I believe it offers to evolving conversations in academia, as well as its potential to create paradigmatic shifts culturally in our understandings and compulsions toward “health” and “beauty.” Furthermore, in order to acknowledge the performers who have given their time

to me, detailing similar histories of being kicked out of dance classes and discouraged from performing on account of their size, I want to spend these remaining pages noting the importance of this work for its application to lived experience. If the goal of this project has been to read “failure” through materiality and examine its application to fat, queer femme-ininity, then the following piece of performance analysis is an ideal culmination.

* * *

On July 21st, 2012 at Toronto’s Mod Club, 30 acts of varying performers took the stage for the Toronto Burlesque Festival; an event which showcased performers and troupes from around the globe to a standing room only crowd for over 4 hours.²⁶⁰ Among the performances, which demonstrated the wide breadth of neo-burlesque’s scope, the San Francisco-based troupe, Rubenesque Burlesque, performed a routine that can only be categorized as fat, queer neo-burlesque. A recent article written by Anthony Marcusa for the online multimedia news source, Lithium Magazine, briefly detailed the performance that Rubenesque Burlesque refers to as “Fat Camp”:

“The absolute showstopper and a performance that earned the second standing ovation of the evening (Stein being the first, of course), was done by the troupe Rubenesque Burlesque, which as one should infer from the allusion to the famed artist, features a group of curvy ladies. The act featured the women donning ‘Fat Camp’ tee shirts, led by a very cheerful aerobics instructor. The group’s frustration grew until it exploded, overtaking their leader and replacing the upbeat workout music with Marilyn Manson’s ‘Beautiful People.’ That was the first time the audience erupted. They did so again when the foursome grabbed the young woman,

260 Lithium Magazine, "Toronto Burlesque Festival: Burlesque Ball - The Virgin Mobile Mod Club, Toronto - July 21, 2012," last modified July 25, 2012, <http://lithiummagazine.com/toronto-burlesque-festival-burlesque-ball-virgin-mobile-mod-club-toronto-%E2%80%93-july-21-2012>.

threw her behind a table, and emerged gnawing on her various body parts. And as the dancing continued and the strip show progressed, the roar from the crowd never ceased until the group, wearing the bare minimum, finally excited the stage, strutting through the theatre and exiting.²⁶¹

“Fat Camp” is a representation of the many complex and intersecting identities, modalities, and politics that this dissertation contains in making space in performance studies and communities for considering fat bodies, queer desires, and their multiple “failings.” In its various displays of excess, the performers of Rubenesque Burlesque craft a wildly entertaining response to the pervasiveness of western fatphobia and its manifestations through neoliberal regimes and institutions of health care, the diet industry, and conceptions of beauty and desire.

As the piece begins with the troupe enlisted as participants in a fat camp-themed work out session, the stage is set to display the trials of being fat women in western culture. Dismal, and literally wearing the evidence of their ostracization (quarantine, even if we really consider the model of fat camps) by having “Fat Camp,” emblazoned on their oversized t-shirts, the campers are led by the perky, slender fitness instructor whose own ensemble is composed of tiny shorts and a fitted tank top. When juxtaposed against the campers especially, the instructor’s body, undoubtedly, inspires desirability in the audience and upholds current conventions about beauty. She is forefront and centered on the stage and her body and its movements commands attention in its idealness. But she is also the

261 Ibid.

model western citizen on multiple levels that go beyond her appearance and size. The fat camp itself being a neoliberal mechanism of the larger diet industry, the fitness instructor's employment by it further serves western culture's attitude that fatness can never be healthy and that body and size diversity are not qualities desired, or deemed worthy, by the state. At this point in the routine, these fat bodies are exactly where western cultural and political attitudes dictate they should be: within an institution that profits off a specific notion of bodily standards and the compulsion toward "health."

It isn't long into the routine, however, when signs of the fat campers' discontent begin to show through. Looks range from boredom to annoyance to fatigue and, eventually, culminate in a collective expression of scorn and anger. As the instructor tries to keep the group focused on their exercises, the performers stop one by one and as the peppy music screeches to a halt, descend on the instructor in an angry mob. The rupture that occurs at this moment of dissent and rebellion is obviously important for what it means to the plot of the routine, but is also, again, a testament to neo-burlesque's root in performance as protest. That the piece builds by relying on a system that first oppresses the fat campers, only to then, literally, dismantle it publicly is important work and one that certainly challenges expectations of where the performance is going.

Perhaps the most interesting part of "Fat Camp" is what comes after the rebellion by the campers. As the music segues into, as described, Marilyn

Manson's hard rock anthem "The Beautiful People," the performers tear the fitness director from limb-to-limb and cannibalize upon her flesh. This routine is such a rich site of analysis for the culmination of this very moment, which relies heavily on so many of fat, queer burlesque's most transformative elements. For one, the musical choice of using "The Beautiful People" does two things: 1) it makes a critique of modern, western beauty norms by juxtaposing the non-normative, fat bodies of the performers up against the notion of "beautiful" – both through the instructor's body and through the song lyrics – and, perhaps most importantly, 2) because of the song's association with Marilyn Manson, it centers bodies in the margins.²⁶² As the song's volume and tempo builds, the fat campers seem to gain energy and power from its angry electric guitar riffs and Manson's creepy, gravelly voice, at times, whispering, "The beautiful people, the beautiful people."²⁶³ Informed by their own frustrations at being contained and the swell of the song, the performers growl at the crowd in equal displays of ferocity and sexuality as they tear at their clothing, foregoing the boxy t-shirts to reveal pasties, g-strings, and thick, round curves.

As they dance across the stage, shedding clothes, they caress their own bodies and one another's, attempting to amplify the shake and jiggle of each other's flesh. In between the bump and the grind, the performers each emerge from the back of the stage with a piece of the aerobics instructor's body; they

²⁶² Marilyn Manson is widely known in western, especially American, culture for his embrace of non-normativity and, one might say, "freak show" culture. His aesthetic is gothic in nature and his performances and videos rely upon images largely associated with the grotesque; i.e. monsters, blood, gruesomeness, differently bodied individuals, etc.

²⁶³ Marilyn Manson, "The Beautiful People," *Antichrist Superstar*, 1996, Interscope Records.

gnaw upon her legs, arms, and feet before the exhilarated crowd, demonstrating that they are powerful in their fatness – both in their literal and figurative overtaking of the counselor and the camp. That they, like Jukie and KFW, publicly eat and feed on stage – though the element of disgust here is much more than in swallowing mouthfuls of honey or, even, rubbing greasy chicken all over oneself – is significant in its defiance of what fat bodies are criticized for when eating publicly.

The performers run amuck and in their choreography, make clear that desirability – something previously allotted only to the slim, toned body of the fitness instructor – can be refigured through their bodies and actions on stage. They create desire in their magnificence, in their strength and insurgence, and in their physical displays of affection and solidarity with one another. It's important to note, as this dissertation has claimed based on Mingus' work, that re-centering "beauty" is not the goal here; the performers begin the routine occupying the space of "ugly" based on conventional cultural markers, but they remain embracing this as they snarl at the audience and feed on the remains of their counselor. They are "ugly" epitomized, failed bodies in their fatness and their desires toward one another. But from these positions, they are able to break out from the camp (signified here by the space of the stage), escaping, at least for now, the conventions and institutions that seek to control and confine them as they exit down through the audience.

* * *

The performance of “Fat Camp” serves this project well in stringing together the major tenets of its foundation – the consideration of fat and queer experience with the theoretical concept of failure; the neoliberal manifestations of failure through “health” and “beauty;” and the intersections of domains in fat studies, gender and queer studies, with performance analysis. Due to frequent oversights in examining materiality – particularly corpulent versions – across these areas of study, my project seeks to provide an application for the position of fat femme-ininity. Furthermore, while there is scholarship available that speaks to the junctures of queerness and performance, there has been little produced that considers fat bodies that dance; a site that allows for a rearticulation of the aesthetic, abilities, and politics that get created here at the site of fat, queer burlesque.

Through the mediums of performance and dance, these fat, queer bodies progress a paradigmatic shift away from the bodies one expects to see on a stage – i.e., the “proper” subjects of ballerinas, for example – and offers new recordings of expectations and desires. In “Fat Camp,” it is the fitness instructor’s body we expect to see on stage, that a standard audience finds most familiar within the realm of performance. Meanwhile, the majority of the routine sees large, fat women who, by BMI standards would be considered “morbidly obese,” dancing, expressing flexibility, and creating desire and power out of “ugly.” These bodies are so very unexpected on stage in the role of dancer, but especially in

terms of the desirability and cultural commentary they produce here from the position as bodies culturally determined as “failed.”

Because the fat body, in particular, is so understudied in the academic realms I’ve named, as well as in the space of actual performance, it is my hope that this dissertation will become part of a larger oeuvre that reads corpulence, queerness, and dance as fruitful and exciting sites of inquiry. Specifically, I imagine future performance studies scholarship that centers a wider breadth of all bodies, that does not only pay brief moments of attention at temporary curiosity (i.e. *America’s Got Talent’s* “plus-size” dance troupe, The Glamazons or Russia’s “Big Ballet” troupe), and that engages the practice of fat performance and encourages the necessity of an application to dance studios and recital halls at large.²⁶⁴ Further, I want to continue to see more work that acknowledges, as I have tried to do, the performer’s self-exposition as a failed body, as a spectacle, and the courage it takes to be able to own this confidence on stage, barely clothed, especially in the current cultural moment of fatphobia as I have examined it. When dancing bodies so greatly trespass norms in the ways that fat, queer femmes do, the significance of the performance and the emotional investment has the potential to be of a great magnitude. The performer’s multiple levels of marginality intensify the emotional labor of producing a performance piece, preparing it for public, and then the psychical energy of stepping onto the stage. These are the nuances of performance studies and analysis that require

²⁶⁴ "About," The Glamazons, <http://www.theglamazon.com>; Laura Roberts, "Big Ballet needs bigger dancers," *The Telegraph*, February 6, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8307463/Big-Ballet-needs-bigger-dancers.html>.

more consideration in academia and that I hope this project has paid homage to.

This dissertation has been an exploration of the theoretical expanse and overlaps in considering the articulations of fatness, queer desire, and femininity on-stage through various lenses, contexts, and histories. But, as I ended the introduction to this project, I want to acknowledge here in the final words of my conclusion, that this project has a large personal component to it as well. In studying the site of fat, queer femme burlesque for the past several years, engaging this topic and considering it through my own body and experience has been invaluable to myself as an academic, as an organizer, and as a fat femme, myself. Out of this work, my own sense of bodies, abilities, and movement in the world has developed over its course, transforming, for me, the point of this project from striving for expanded definitions of living in failure to *all* bodies. While it is my hope that this work encourages further investigation and participation into fat and femme bodies as sites rich with knowledge and possibility for the future of dance, I also envision its application to other versions of material failure and performance. I am encouraged by the work, for example, of Sins Invalid, a performance project on disability and sexuality that “incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized from social discourse.”²⁶⁵ Sins Invalid’s work contributes to, and relies upon, the scope of scholarship that gets created here at the nexus of fat, queer femme burlesque

²⁶⁵ Sins Invalid, "About Us," <http://www.sinsinvalid.org>.

and is a perfect addition to growing the breadth of work and performance for bodies out of bounds. Through their shared efforts in finding magnificence in failure and dancing desire from and for all bodies, Sins Invalid and fat, queer neo-burlesque create possibility for alternative materialities to express sensuality and agency in difference.

Merely six months before her untimely death from cancer, Fat Bottom Revue founder, Heather MacAllister, delivered a keynote address at the 2006 NOLOSE conference noting that “existing as a self-actualized fat woman is a politically and culturally radical act.” “We have agency and autonomy,” she said. “It’s like in my burlesque troupe, it is my dancers, not the audience, who decide what they will or won’t show or share; and when a person is truly at home sexually in their own body, they manifest that same autonomy and power.”²⁶⁶ MacAllister’s words are a legacy to segments of the fat and queer communities already, but serve a greater purpose in how they extend to performance studies and the application to dance culture, as well. In the currently hostile climate for fat, differently-abled, and other non-normative bodies, MacAllister’s sentiments and the work of this dissertation work to create new possibilities for understanding how these bodies are ranked and valued, in order to simultaneously account for the magnificence of their dissent. The art of neo-burlesque, here, provides the ideal medium for these figures, creating strategies

²⁶⁶ "Heather MacAllister: Keynote Addressh," NOLOSE 2006 Conference, September 2, 2006, http://www.nolose.org/06/hm_keynote.php.

for queer, femme bodies of size to find pleasure, grace, and power in corporeal diversity.

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