LEAVING SOMETHING TO THE IMAGINATION:
NEO-BURLESQUE, GENDERED SPECTACLE AND NEW SUBCULTURAL FORMS

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Abstract

Portrayed as a space for adolescent rebellion, dominated largely by boys and men, subcultures are consistently depicted as spaces for the construction of masculinity and youth. This focus on adolescent, male rebellion fails to recognize the purposes subcultural involvement might serve for adults, women, or other groups whose subcultural formations are often obscured or ignored. The subculture surrounding neoburlesque performance speaks to the increased involvement of women within subcultural formations and to the prevalent, though often ignored, subcultural involvement of adults. Exploring neo-burlesque as a female-dominated subculture, this paper suggests that neo-burlesque performance, and the subcultural allegiance that accompanies it, provides a way for performers to navigate gender norms and codes, parodying norms of femininity, while embracing markers of femininity often deemed excessive. At the same time, the emergence of neo-burlesque and its surrounding social formation disrupts the connection between subcultures, youth and masculinity, providing insights into the social functions served by new subcultural forms.
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Table of Contents
Chapter 1. Introduction and Literature Review 1
The Burlesque Revival: An Introduction 3
Neo-Burlesque and the Historical Burlesque Tradition 10
Other Influences on Neo-Burlesque 15
Theoretical Frameworks: Evolving Views of Power and Resistance 20

Chapter 2. Neo-Burlesque Performance: Self-Reflexivity and Feminine Excess 41
Method 42
"Not entirely of her own choosing": Burlesque as system 43
Burlesque and Self-Reflexivity 47
Audiences and Venues: Constructing the neo-burlesque spectator 49
Burlesque as a system for bodily display 57
Pasties and Tassles: Costume as technology of the body 63
Neo-burlesque and the Abject Body: Classical Meets the Grotesque 69
Conclusion 72

Chapter 3. Lived Identities and 'DIY': Neo-Burlesque and Subcultural Authenticity 73
Method 75
Subcultural Authenticity: Neo-Burlesque and DIY 78
Neo-Burlesque and Lived Identities 83
Neo-Burlesque as Situated Resistance 89
Burlesque and ‘Natural Bodies’ 93
Good for Business: Neo-Burlesque and Mainstream Visibility 96
Conclusion 102

Chapter 4. ‘Your Grandpa’s Porn’: Neo-burlesque in Popular Culture and the Press 104
Method 108
‘Retro Innocence’ Press Coverage of Neo-Burlesque 111
‘What man wouldn’t’: Neo-burlesque spectators as heterosexual 116
'The ant-Scores Strippers': Neo-burlesque as performance art 119
‘Just an old-fashioned variety show’: Accounts of legal issues 122
Conclusion 126

Chapter Five: Conclusion 127
Works Cited 128
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Emerging in the mid-1990’s, in major urban centers in the United States, the neo-burlesque movement centers on the creation of performances that draw on the style of classic burlesque, combining it with influences from drag culture and popular culture to create a new theatrical genre. Given burlesque’s historical association with audiences made up largely of heterosexual, male, working-class spectators, this artistic tradition might seem an unlikely one to experience a reemergence at the hands of adult women. Drawing on work from subcultural studies and queer theory, this project focuses on neo-burlesque as a genre of performance that provides space for participants to engage with and subvert normative frameworks for understanding gendered identities, while embracing trappings of femininity often deemed excessive.

This project brings together two questions, attempting to focus on the intersections between the problems each question addresses. The first asks how the existence of an adult, female-dominated subculture troubles existing research on subcultures. To this end, I address how neo-burlesque is constituted as a subculture, both by participants and in relation to both dominant culture, focusing on the role of an ethic of ‘do-it-yourself’ as a marker of subcultural authenticity and the pragmatic but skeptical attitude subcultural participants display towards the increased visibility of their subculture. This perspective on the subculture by participants themselves is augmented by an analysis of representations of the subculture within press accounts and popular
As might be predicted from existing work within subcultural studies, the increased visibility of neo-burlesque within popular culture often takes forms that downplay the genre’s subversive potential, re-instating a heteronormative dynamic of looking as the primary framework for understanding the spectator/performer relationship at work in the genre.

This presentation of neo-burlesque within press and popular culture texts constitutes a flattening out of the subversive possibilities displayed within neo-burlesque practice. The neo-burlesque performance is characterized by an active relationship between performers and spectator, a relationship encouraged by the emphasis within neo-burlesque of highlighting the performance as a performance. This self-reflexivity exists side by side with an embrace of over the top costuming and bodily presentation that reaffirms a tension between ironic detachment to and earnest pleasure from the gendered spectacle on display. Participants describe their onstage personas as caricatures of hyperfemininity, while also acknowledging overlaps and intersections between their lived identities and their interest in neo-burlesque.

Drawing these two lines of inquiry together, I acknowledge shifts in thinking about power in both subcultural studies and queer and feminist theory over the last several decades. Rather than imagining neo-burlesque as a space of complete opposition, the performances and surrounding subculture can be seen as offering moments of situated resistance, through a performance practice that foregrounds the conditions of its own presentation, creating an active relationship between spectator and performer and
emphasizing the genre itself as a codified system of meaning. The awareness among both spectators and performers, of neo-burlesque's norms and codes becomes especially visible during performances that overturn the genre’s own conventions or rely on the audience's internalization of neo-burlesque norms. Reversing the expected sequence of events, re-purposing common costume items and gestures meant to invoke an audience reaction rely on the spectators' understanding of neo-burlesque norms for their meaning.

While self-awareness often reads as irony, the expression within neo-burlesque of a pleasurable attachment to the trappings of femininity troubles any explanation that would understand the pleasures offered by the genre as primarily ironic. Rather, the tension between lived identities and their role as performers suggested by interviews with performers suggests that neo-burlesque provides performers with a way of approaching normative gender identities that offers the potential both for critical distance and for the celebration of those trappings of femininity often deemed ‘excessive’.

**The Burlesque Revival: An Introduction**

The current burlesque revival draws on the history of burlesque as a theatrical genre, while also incorporating aspects of contemporary popular culture, performance art and drag culture. Given the dispersed, organic beginnings of many subcultural movements, narrating a coherent history of any particular subculture presents challenges. At the same time, attempts to locate a movement’s origins risks reifying that subculture, holding up the initial subcultural stirrings as a more "pure" incarnation than the form the
subculture takes later on. While avoiding this potential interpretation, it is important here to review the revival's short history and provide a brief overview of the account of the movement's beginnings as depicted by the subculture's own participants.

Recounting the narratives that are told to explain the movement's emergence provides a framework for understanding how participants within the subculture understand themselves as part of a larger movement. Sociologist Peter Martin describes a subculture as a "symbolic representation of certain sets of social relationships and practices, which emphasize some aspects at the expense of others" (Martin, 33). To describe neo-burlesque as a "subculture" is to highlight a group of participants who are engaged as neo-burlesque performers and identify with a social network related to their role as performers or potential performers. The neo-burlesque subculture is bordered and at times overlaps with other related subcultural groups, including the fetish community, the belly dance community as it exists in the United States and subcultures surrounding drag queen and drag king performance. While I do not consider neo-burlesque spectators as a part of the neo-burlesque subculture they can be thought of as another group that borders and overlaps with the subculture of neo-burlesque performers.

Particular cities, troupes and performers are consistently referenced within accounts of the movement's beginnings, although no one performer or troupe is credited with starting the movement. This shared understanding of the subculture's emergence transforms geographically dispersed performers from a wide variety of backgrounds into
self-identified subcultural participants. As the movement has coalesced as a self-identified community, a hierarchy has emerged as a handful of performers are acknowledged as especially talented and influential. One performer I spoke with referred to these figures as the “top tier performers” that "everyone has heard of and agrees are really good". Knowledge of these performers becomes a marker of subcultural authenticity, proof that one is a truly a subcultural participant. Indeed, interview subjects consistently mentioned performers that I "had" to see in order to properly conduct research. To the interview subjects, my legitimacy as a researcher - much like their legitimacy as a subcultural participant - depended on my knowledge of these same top tier performers.

Often discussed as the first full-fledged neo-burlesque troupe, the Velvet Hammer Burlesque put on their first show in Los Angeles in 1995. The Velvet Hammer is known for elaborate, highly produced shows that draw heavily on classic burlesque style. In her account of the recent revival, *Burlesque and the New Bump and Grind*, neo-burlesque performer and author Michelle Baldwin ties the emergence of the Velvet Hammer to earlier revival movements, including the swing revival of the 1990's. Though they began performing one or two shows a year, the Velvet Hammer eventually toured, inspiring and influencing burgeoning neo-burlesque troupes around the country. The troupe's shows

1 Rebecca, Interview with the Author, written notes, 3 March 2009.
often featured visiting performers from New York City, including Julie Atlas Muz and Dirty Martini, both considered "top tier" performers. Press coverage of the Velvet Hammer often mentions co-founder Michelle Carr's insistence on recruiting performers who haven't been strippers, appeared in pornography or had plastic surgery. By emphasizing this particular boundary, the Velvet Hammer constructs itself in opposition to the conventional sex industry and contributes to the claim that neo-burlesque welcomes "natural" bodies.

While Los Angeles's Velvet Hammer constructs itself in opposition to the city's sex industry, the development of neo-burlesque in New York City is framed as a reaction against Mayor Rudy Guiliani's crackdown on strip club and sex shops in New York. The Blue Angel, originally a strip club that held performance nights welcoming experimental fare influenced by burlesque and performance art, typifies the direct impact Guiliani's restrictions had on the development of neo-burlesque in New York. The new restrictions placed on strip clubs led the Blue Angel to forgo lap dances and more explicit stripping and dub itself an "erotic cabaret" (Baldwin, 29). Eventually renamed Le Scandal, it remains one of the longest running and most influential neo-burlesque shows in the New York City neo-burlesque scene.

The connection between more conventional modes of sexual display and the development of neo-burlesque is not limited to New York City. In Seattle, Miss Indigo

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Blue - now head of the Seattle School of Burlesque - began doing burlesque-style performance as part of the "Fallen Women Follies" a twice yearly review started as a venue for women who worked in the sex industry to have an outlet for their more creative performance work. Miss Indigo Blue went on to found BurlyQ, a queer burlesque review. Before the title "burlesque" re-emerged as a recognizable term, Blue described her performances at Fallen Women Follies as "comic erotic performance" or "female female-impersonation," a phrase that reoccurs in the descriptions of performers influenced by the tradition of drag and female impersonation (Baldwin, 24).

The ties to drag performance are not limited to the experience of a few individual performers. Rather, neo-burlesque is heavily indebted to drag culture and many performers cite the drag queen tradition as an influence on their performances. Neo-burlesque also has ties to the drag king performances that have become increasingly prominent within lesbian and queer communities since the 1990's. While the majority of neo-burlesque performers are female-bodied performers who perform feminine personas, the genre also welcomes male-bodied femme performers (who may or may not identify as drag queens), female bodied performers doing masculine performance (who may or may not identify as drag kings) and male-bodied performers who perform masculinity or present as male on stage.

The re-emergence of burlesque parallels the renewed interest in sideshow and circus traditions and many neo-burlesque performers routinely perform alongside
sideshow performers. As in other cities, New York's revival has connections with the parallel explosion of interest in sideshow and circus traditions. Burlesque on the Beach, a well known New York City burlesque show, began as a collaboration between burlesque performer Bambi the Mermaid and Coney Island Circus sword swallower and emcee, The Great Fredini. (Baldwin, 12). Washington D.C's main venue for neo-burlesque performance, the sideshow- themed bar Palace of Wonders, often features neo-burlesque alongside sideshow performers who recreate traditional sideshow tricks like sword swallowing and fire-eating.

As neo-burlesque performance spread, participants from across the country strengthened their ties and a visible community coalesced around the new performance genre. Annual gatherings began bringing together performers to share tips, take classes and perform for one another. The first Tease-o-Rama convention was held in New Orleans in 2001. Miss Exotic World, an annual gathering and competition, was originally begun in 1992 as a gathering of veteran performers from burlesque’s “Golden Age”. The event is now a multi-generational gathering featuring older stars reviving their acts and performers from the new generation competing for the title Miss Exotic World (Baldwin, 15). Miss Exotic World remains one of the most prominent events, demonstrating the connections the existing neo-burlesque movement has to the historical burlesque tradition.

Though neo-burlesque has become popular throughout the country, some cities do
have communities that are more well established. Commenting on the scene in Seattle, one performer joked “you can’t throw a rock here without hitting a burlesque performer”\textsuperscript{3}. In other cities the neo-burlesque communities are much smaller. I tried to capture some of the movement’s geographic diversity in the discussion of newspaper coverage, including articles from a wide array of cities within the United States.

The emergence of neo-burlesque in the United States parallels similar movements in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and, more recently, continental Europe, Japan and Mexico. There is overlap between performers from the various countries as gatherings like the New York Burlesque Festival and the London Burlesque Festival attract performers from around the world. While there are doubtless some similarities between neo-burlesque in the United States and in these other countries, there are just as surely geographic distinctions that are beyond the scope of this paper. Geographic and time limitations, along with my own interests and experiences, necessitated focusing on neo-burlesque within the United States.

While most neo-burlesque performers are responsible for choreographing their own acts, creating their own characters and making their own costumes, they work within the framework of a particular performance genre, with its own pre-existing codes and expectations. Particular characteristics make the performances recognizable as neo-burlesque. Performances are typically short; many performers use contemporary popular

\textsuperscript{3} Samantha, Interview with the author, written notes, 18 March 2009.
or rock music and choreograph routines that last around 5 minutes. While some burlesque troupes choreograph more elaborate numbers involving multiple performers, most performances feature one, or occasionally two dancers. Elaborate costumes provide one immediately recognizable feature of the burlesque performance, though elaborate might mean a glamorous gown, on top of a corset, frilly bra and underwear and pasties, or a robot costume constructed out of cardboard. In almost all cases the centerpiece of the burlesque performance is the slow removal of most (or, in rare cases, all) of the elaborate costume. On top of that basic framework, many performers incorporate humor, often driven by a narrative created through their costume and music choices. Others may sing, perform acrobatics or incorporate sideshow tricks, such as lying on a bed of glass.

**Neo-Burlesque and the Historical Burlesque Tradition**

As a revival movement, neo-burlesque is heavily influenced by the tradition of burlesque theater that dates back to the mid-nineteenth centuries. While many neo-burlesque performers pride themselves on updating or reinventing the movement, they still express a large amount of respect for these veteran performers. Michelle Baldwin devotes the first section of *Burlesque and the New Bump and Grind* to an overview of burlesque’s history. As queer theorist Debra Ferreday notes in her work on the burlesque revival in the United Kingdom, the identification with and respect for earlier performers stems from the view that these veteran performers were “self-creating feminine subjects” who overcame the norms and restrictions of their day to make their careers as performers
(Ferreday, 5). Any effort to discuss the current revival, then, requires acknowledging burlesque’s history and the important influence it has on contemporary performers.

Burlesque as a theatrical genre has a long history. After starting out in the more adventurous, but still "respectable," theaters of mid-nineteenth century New York City, an increased focus on female sexual display led to burlesque's rejection from the "legitimate" theater. Relegated to increasingly disreputable burlesque houses, the performance genre largely disappeared during the 1960's, losing audiences to more explicit strip shows, pornographic films and the rising popularity of television.

While the term burlesque is now commonly associated with striptease and female sexual display, this was not always the case. As historian Robert Allen recounts, during the mid-nineteenth century the term "burlesque" referred to comic entertainment that played on a well-known cultural artifact as a source of humor or basis for visual spectacle. Travesties, extravaganzas and pantomimes drew on myths, fairy tales or works of "high culture," creating humor through the incorporation of contemporary allusions, songs and spectacles (Allen, 60). While these early forms of burlesque were most often viewed as harmless fun, the 1860's saw an increased prevalence of female performance and a greater reliance on female sexual display - what Allen terms the "feminization of burlesque" (108). This trend altered the public perception of burlesque, inviting the attention of social reformers and ultimately leading - after an initial increase in its popularity - to burlesque's rejection from "respectable" theaters.
The arrival of Lydia Thomson and her "British Blondes" to the New York stage in 1868 solidified the new trends (Allen, 138). Thompson's and the "Blondes" eschewed the classical and melodramatic themes adopted by earlier troupes and instead coupled their minimal costuming, dance acts and spectacles with satire and bawdy humor (Buszek, 42). As critics and morality crusaders decried burlesque, the form's popularity with audiences only increased. "Thompsonian burlesque" - as Allen terms the new style - was more than a shift in an older genre. These new modern burlesque performers "were dangerously impertinent in their mocking male impersonations, streetwise language, and nonsensical humor" (Allen, 28). While today's neo-burlesque performances bear little visual resemblance to Thompson's performances, the group’s humor and impertinence continue to inspire today’s performers.

While the spirit of the British Blondes may live on in today's performers, neo-burlesque performers draw more heavily on the style associated with twentieth century burlesque, from the genre's "golden age." It was during this time that the format and costume styles popular with today's revival began to appear. Striptease was incorporated into burlesque performance during the first years of the twentieth century, as was the fan dance (Shteir, 80 and 148). The 1930's saw the introduction of g-strings and nipple pasties - small circles of material that cover the nipple while leaving the rest of the breast exposed (Shteir, 201). These two costume items allowed performers to display the maximum amount of skin legally allowed at the time and also serve, as I discuss in chapter one, as a means of drawing attention to the breasts. Pasties often have tassels
attached to the tips which the performer may twirl at the end of an act by moving her body up and down so her breasts begin to move in a circular motion.

Burlesque's "Golden Age" solidified its associations with working class, male audiences. Discussing the anti-burlesque campaigns in New York during the 1930’s, historian Ann Friedman argues that anti-burlesque crusaders exploited the association between working class men and burlesque to successfully shut down the city’s burlesque houses. As the depression shuttered many of Times Square’s respectable theaters, burlesque houses moved from working class enclaves into the city’s main theater district. Critics portrayed the patrons of the burlesque houses as "sex-crazed perverts," whose lack of control posed a threat to the "respectable audiences" Time Square's "legitimate theaters" hoped to attract (Friedman, 206). As Friedman notes, the depiction of burlesque audiences by anti-burlesque crusaders can hardly be taken as a realistic assessment of the audiences that attended burlesque theater during the 1930's. While men made up the majority of burlesque audiences, accounts exist of women attending shows in New York. According to Friedman, the fear that burlesque theaters might succeed in attracting more middle-class and female audiences, due to their new locations and the economic pressures of the depression, were a driving factor behind the anti-burlesque crusade.

The connection between burlesque and working class audiences is not limited to Depression-era New York. Burlesque's supporters and its critics cite burlesque's connection to working class audiences as either proof of its authenticity or evidence of its
worthlessness. Performer Ann Corio defends burlesque as the "lowest branch" of show business, arguing that this status makes burlesque "the limb nearest the people" (Corio, 5). The celebration of burlesque as a democratic and quintessentially American theatrical form has its skeptics. Historian Michael Zeidman opens his history of American burlesque strongly denying that burlesque was ever "a lusty form of folk expression or a national forum for satire or a show place for knockabout hilarious slapstick" and ends his book happily exclaiming that, by the 1960's, burlesque "crawled back into the honky tonk crevices from which it first emerged" (Zeidman, 247). While Corio and Zeidman clearly have their difference, they agree that, for better or worse, the burlesque form is associated with working class audiences.

Articles and books on burlesque written prior to 1995 treat it as a dead theatrical genre, a relic of a bygone era. Friedman suggests that, after the anti-burlesque campaigns of the 1930's, burlesque "never again had a home in the nation's theatrical capital" (Friedman, 204). Ann Corio's memoir - tellingly titled This Was Burlesque - was published in the early 1960's and the stage show of the same name was first performed in 1965. (Corio, 1968) Zeidman celebrates the disappearance of burlesque he dates to the 1960’s. They may have decried burlesque's passing as a tragedy, or celebrated it as a triumph of good taste but, despite their different perspectives, none of these historians and performers foresaw burlesque's revival. Zeidman, Corio and Friedman all pronounced the genre dead or - at the very least - far less prominent than it once was.
Other influences on Neo-burlesque

Performance art’s connection to neo-burlesque takes two different forms. While some performers involved in the movement are influence by the tradition of performance art, especially feminist performance art since the 1960’s, performance art as a category also provides some audiences with a way of understanding the genre. As I discuss in chapter three, media coverage depicts neo-burlesque connection to performance art as evidence of its distance from conventional stripping. At the same time, critical writing on feminist performance art since the 1960’s suggest ways of looking at the body in performance that provide a critical lens for examining neo-burlesque.

While "performance art" became a recognizable term during the 1960's, art historian Rosa Lee Goldberg documents performance as a crucial aspect of the avant-garde tradition throughout the 20th Century. Avant-garde movements including Dada, Surrealism and Futurists turned to performance as a means of engaging directly with audience and subverting the status of the art object (Goldeberg, 7-9). It was during the 1960's and 70's, however, that artists began to present performance that engaged directly with the body itself as a site for creating meaning. Feminist artists were at the forefront of this trend, often using performance as a means of investigating the role of the female body within the art historical tradition. Discussing Eye/Body, an early work by performance artist Carolee Schneeman, performance theorist Rebecca Schneider points to the ability of performance art by feminist artists to trouble the traditional distinction between the artist and the art object: "Whether she ultimately wished it, the object of her body was unavoidably also herself - the nude as the artist." (Schneider, 36). The paradox
of this double role is expressed in Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* in which the artist held to a strict diet while documenting the transformation of her body over time. Displaying the work as a series of photographs, Antin presents her body itself as the object of art, illustrating the disciplining of the female body encouraged by contemporary culture of weight loss and dieting, while also referring back to the female body itself as the traditional subject of sculpture. It was the chance to explore these contradictory roles that led many feminist performance artists during this time to integrate their own bodies into their work.

While there is a line of influence connecting performance art to neo-burlesque, more important for our purposes is the way "performance art" as a category is used as a conceptual framework to explain neo-burlesque in some media coverage of the topic. Coverage of neo-burlesque sometimes evokes the genre's connections to performance art as a means of presenting neo-burlesque as cutting edge, politically charged and thought-provoking, in contrast to the assumed banality of conventional stripping. While the general public may not have specific knowledge of the history of performance art, the category acts as shorthand, suggesting bodily displays in service to a greater political or aesthetic purpose, as opposed to the shallow, misogynistic displays associated with conventional stripping.

Over the last few decades drag and its stylistic cousin, camp, have been attacked from numerous positions. On the one hand, drag is depicted as insufficiently radical. David Bergman argues in the introduction to *Camp Grounds*, that the drag artist is "the
first element of gay social practice that straight people are willing to confront" because she constitutes the "least threatening and most visible part of gay subculture" (Bergman, 7). As Bergman notes, the ease with which a straight audience could accept camp and drag performance as a confirmation of their stereotypes of gay men led some gay rights activists and academics to reject the practices as "politically retrograde." (Bergman, 7). Attacks on drag performance as reactionary came from feminists as well, who argued that drag queens mock femininity and represent misogynistic representations of women.

While the drag queen was accused of being retrograde and misogynistic, she was, paradoxically, shunned for representing the very characteristics that prevented wider acceptance of homosexuality. In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, Esther Newton argues that, for the gay community in the 1960's, the drag queen was an ambivalent figure - playing a crucial role in urban gay communities yet embodying the stigma surrounding homosexuality (Newton, 103-104). This stigma, Newton argues, led some gay men to distance themselves from drag performance, while other men who enjoyed drag performance "in homosexual contexts" but worried that queens projected "the wrong image" to straight culture (104). This paradox is visible within academic work on drag as well. As queer theorist Rachel Devitt argues, scholars have depicted drag as both "a kitschy, plucky attack on and a ruthlessly misogynistic reification of heterosexual gender norms" (Devitt, 30). The drag queen, then, is caught in a double bind - she is simultaneously too appealing and too frightening for straight audiences; she confirms the straight world's worst stereotypes about gay men and its greatest fears as well.
For some drag performers, this paradox provides a key to drag's potential subversiveness. In the 1974 essay *Genderfuck and its Delights*, Christopher Long denied his desire to "mock women," instead defending drag performance as a strategy for critiquing "the roles of women and of men, too" in order to "ridicule and destroy the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identification." (qtd. in Bergman, 7) Recalling the use of drag as a part of protests and street theater, Gay Liberation Front member Michael James argues that the group used drag to hold "the mirror up to man" and demonstrate a rejection of "what maleness stood for" (qtd. in Baker, 239).

The subversive potential of drag performance invoked by James and Long has, more recently, been adopted by a new generation of female-bodied performers who draw self-consciously on the drag queen tradition while performing femininity. Discussing the "Queen Bees" a Seattle-based performance troupe, Devitt terms the performers "femme drag queens" or "bio-queens," a title that, Devitt says, is short for "biological female who drag queens or performs a heightened femininity" (Devitt, 29). Devitt defends the use of the term 'drag queen' to describe female-bodied performers who perform femininity, arguing that a definition of drag that relies on a "binary sex-based concept of crossing not only belies the rich wealth of gender identities that inform contemporary gender performance and drag but also reifies the naturalness of that binary."(Devitt, 30). While she does not specifically mention neo-burlesque performance and the troupe she profiles does not appear to identify with that moniker, Devitt's call for a "theory or theories of femme queening" has clear implications for an examination of neo-burlesque
performance.

Perhaps most notable for our purposes is Devitt's acknowledgment of the "strategic earnestness" she describes "dance[ing] cheek-to-cheek with overstuffed irony" within the femme queen performances she describes (Devitt, 33). Through this combination of irony and earnestness, Devitt argues, femme queens both parody femininity and stake a "corporeal claim" *within* female sexuality. (Devitt, 33). This shift, between parodying and embracing feminine identity, plays a key role in neo-burlesque performance as well.

The contradictory meanings attributed to drag and the balance between irony and earnestness Devitt describes within femme queening practices both relate to a shift in thinking about power over the last few decades, from a model of oppositional resistance, to one that questions the very possibility (or desirability) of an entirely oppositional position. What some critics saw as a mocking parody of women becomes a subversive foregrounding of the supposed naturalness of heteronormative gender identities; the femme identities presented by bio-queens becomes not a surrender to patriarchal gender roles by queer-identified women, but a means of re-writing and strategically subverting femininity. These interpretations relate back to a larger shift in thinking about power that has occurred over the last several decades and underlies changes within queer and feminist theory *and* in the field of subcultural studies.
Theoretical Frameworks: Evolving Views of Power and Resistance

While it would be overly simplistic to suggest that neo-burlesque has developed entirely outside of the influence of popular culture, the neo-burlesque revival is largely performer drive, emerging in bars and clubs in cities across the country as performers organize, promote and choreograph their own shows. Performers quoted in media coverage often point to the community that has grown up around the revival as a driving force behind their involvement, an opinion that my interview subjects confirmed. Neo-burlesque, then, can be examined as a subcultural formation, a recognizable, if unstable, social grouping of performers who self-identify as part of a specific group, in opposition to particular characteristics of the larger social body, as well as in relation to other subcultural formations.

Over the last several decades, the study of subcultures has been transformed by researchers and subcultural theorists affiliated with the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. Approaching postwar youth subcultures from a Marxist viewpoint, researchers associated with CCCS interpreted the subcultures they studied as sites for resistance. The sartorial styles, everyday rebellions and tight-knit social structures developed by mods, rockers, teddy-boys and, later, punks, were interpreted as working-class rebellion against the economic system or oedipally-tinged rebellion against the "parent culture." While recent work sometimes termed “post-
subcultural studies” criticizes the binary oppositions repeated within the work of CCCS\(^4\), the foundation laid by CCCS still provides what post-subcultural theorist David Muggleton terms “a revered, yet critical, benchmark against which to mark out and assess subsequent developments” (Muggleton, 2003, 10). Though I draw heavily on researchers whose work calls into question some of the foundational tenets of the work on subcultures identified with CSSS, acknowledging the continued relevance of the body of work identified with CSSS remains important for any study of subcultural formations.

The work of Dick Hebdige provides a particularly important point of departure for the examination of any subculture that relies on spectacle and the appropriation of particular styles. As neo-burlesque performers draw on burlesque history, drag culture and performance art to create a new genre of performance, they practice the kind of stylistic pastiche examined by Hebdige in *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*. Hebdige draws on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to argue that the meanings attributed to particular signs are not inherent, but rather persist through the tacit agreement of the majority. Because commodities are themselves signs with inherently un-fixed meanings, Hebdige argues, they are available to be “symbolically ‘repossessed’ in everyday life” (Hebdige, 16). According to Hebdige, spectacular youth subcultures perform just such a repossession when they appropriate and re-purpose commodities as part of a subcultural

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style. Thus the claims Hebdige makes for subcultural style carry implications far beyond those generally attributed to sartorial choices. To Hebdige, what begins with the adoption of a particular subcultural signifier - a mohawk, perhaps, or maybe combat boots - “ends in the construction of a style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a Refusal” (Hebdige, 2). Hebdige reads the re-appropriation of commodities by subcultural participants as an unabashed statement against the family and the "parent culture" it represents and against the broader symbolic system of the mainstream culture, anything outside the subcultural formation.

Hebdige's understanding of subcultural appropriation provides a framework for beginning to understand the appropriation of styles occurring within the neo-burlesque revival. As discussed earlier, neo-burlesque performers draw heavily on late-19th and early 20th century burlesque. The performances are hardly pure re-presentation of historical burlesque, however - they also reflect the influences of drag and queer cultures, in addition to popular culture. The objects within burlesque performance - including costumes, props and sometimes scenery - act as signifiers, creating narrative and meaning within the performance.

Fully appreciating the significance of the stylistic appropriations at work in neo-burlesque, however, requires expanding the definition of commodity. The stylistic reappropriations on display in neo-burlesque include both the sartorial choices displayed on the body's surface and importantly, the body itself. In neo-burlesque performance, as
in other forms of dance, the body functions as a signifier, a material object that
communicates meanings. A site of meaning largely ignored by Hebdige, the body asserts
itself within neo-burlesque performance as a crucial cultural signifier, a site of charged
and often conflicted meanings. The meanings conveyed by various bodies and bodily
movements are always already constrained, limited in their ability to convey different
meanings by the audience's pre-existing understanding of the body.

The constraints that limit the possible meanings that may accrue to given
commodities spring, at least partly, from the inability of subcultural participants to
entirely displace hegemonic meanings. The body provides a particularly charged example
of the way that subcultural appropriation is not a matter of simply replacing one meaning
with another. The body as a site of meaning is particularly charged, overdetermined by
the layers of signification it contains. Yet it is simultaneously understood as 'natural,' a
biologically determined entity supposedly existing beyond the influence of cultural
forces. Feminist theorists have critiqued this conception of the body as natural, beyond
cultural influences and a new generation of dance and performance theorists draws on
feminist and postructuralist theory to examine the role of the body in dance.

The limitations faced in the appropriation of cultural signifiers become apparent
in the ease with which subcultural formations may be appropriated outside of their
subcultural contexts, re-deployed in service of the very cultural formations which,
according to much work in subcultural studies, they oppose. Manifestations of neo-
burlesque within popular culture reaffirm the difficult task facing those subcultural participants who wish to imbue the body with new, potentially resistant meanings. At the same time, the involvement of neo-burlesque subcultural participants in the incorporation of their subculture into the large field of popular culture challenges those subcultural theorists who would attribute resistant intentions to all subcultural participants.

Untangling the complexities that accrue to the body as a site of meaning requires consideration of the body’s location at the intersection of social meaning and lived experience. From this standpoint, the acknowledgement of the body’s status as a site of meaning provides a first step to any feminist or queer project. Janet Wolff argues for a feminist cultural politics of the body that "eschews naive essentialism and incorporates the self-reflexivity of the body as an effect of practices, ideologies and discourses." (Wolff, 94). Though she supports the possibility of the body as a site for a feminist politics, Wolff warns that any intervention must consider the ease with which such interventions may be "read against the grain of their intended meaning" or risk reaffirming thinking that ties women specifically to the body and assumes an "unchanging, pre-given" female essence (Wolff, 95). Given these challenges, along with the body's role as always already within discourse, a feminist body politics should, according to Wolff "speak about the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction, at the same time as disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation" (Wolff, 96). I do not wish to argue that neo-burlesque performance succeeds in meeting the criterion Wolff sets out. The genre is far too diverse and the
agendas the performers bring to the stage far too varied to make such a claim. Wolff’s articulation of the body as implicated in discourse does provide, however, a reminder of the context within which neo-burlesque performance is received.

Wolff’s call for self-reflexive, embodied practices is echoed by recent work from performance and dance studies that draws on feminist and poststructuralist theory to augment the understanding of dance as a situated practice, rather than the ahistoric, aesthetic practice it was long considered. As performance studies theorist Jane Desmond explains, bodily movements constitute a polysemic social text, serving "as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class and national identities" (Desmond, 31). Rather than expressing a naturally occurring creative form or demonstrating a universal, ahistoric aesthetic ideal, different types of dance are constituted, Desmond argues, as highly codified sets of movements. The process of learning a particular type of dance, whether formally or informally, involves internalizing the parameters that mark certain movements as acceptable or intelligible in certain settings (Desmond, 32). These parameters are, according to Desmond, "highly controlled, produced in a Foucauldian sense by specific discursive practices and productive limitations." Drawing on Desmond's analysis, burlesque can be viewed as just such a system, characterized by certain movements and defined by the productive limitations that dictate what it is not.

Incorporating these recent contributions to dance and performance studies into a consideration of neo-burlesque, it becomes clear that any analysis of neo-burlesque
performance must examine the genre as a situated practice, a system of movements internalized and reproduced by performers. The internalization and reproduction of certain bodily movements and gestures is integral to the creation of performances that audience and spectator alike recognize as neo-burlesque. While this process of reproduction by performers and recognition by spectators is central to our understanding of all genres, this process becomes especially crucial in neo-burlesque because of the genre's reliance on a self-reflexive relationship between performer and spectator which foregrounds the performance as a performance. Directly addressing the audience, to instruct them in their role as audience members or draw attention to the backstage and offstage infrastructure surrounding the show onstage, performers foreground the theatrical context of the performance.

New Models of Power

Acknowledging the inability of any subcultural movement to fully imbue commodities with a new, wholly "resistant" meaning requires reconsidering the possibilities for resistance offered by spectacular subcultures. This reconsideration of traditional Marxist categories is manifested in Ernest Laclau and Chantel Mouffle's critique of the post-1960's "search for the new privileged revolutionary subject which might come to replace the working class" (Laclau and Mouffle, 169). In place of what they claim is a hopeless search, Laclau and Mouffle suggest a new focus on forms of resistance that are polysemic and may take widely divergent forms. While there may be
"no subject...which is absolutely radical and irrecuperable by the dominant order," this does not entirely destroy the possibility for resistance to hegemonic power structures (Laclau and Mouffle, 169). While Laclau and Mouffle call into question the certainty that allowed for an all-encompassing "Refusal", they leave open the possibility for refusals that are multiple, contingent and necessarily incomplete.

Laclau's and Mouffle's call for an acknowledgement of resistances that are polysemic provides a helpful framework for examining neo-burlesque as a possible site for playing with gendered performance. While neo-burlesque performance may not constitute a site for "Refusal" in Hebdige's sense of the word, neo-burlesque performances that foreground the presentation of gender as such, provides an opportunity for the momentary reappropriation of signs.

Laclau and Mouffle's analysis of power presents a subject unable to enact a pure resistance, but capable of resistances that are localized, momentary and contingent. As a strategy that shifts questions of resistance away from a focus on purely resistant subjects and towards the possibility for resistances that are located within particular spaces, moments and actions, Laclau and Mouffle’s conceptualization of power presents potentially productive intersections with efforts by queer theorists to rethink “queer” as a verb, rather than a noun, a question of “doing” rather than "being". Queer theorist Janet R. Jakobson suggests this shift partly as a means of acknowledging the complexity inherent in calls within queer academia and activism to resist “norms”. According to
Jakobson, such calls fail to acknowledge complex distinctions between norms, normativity and normalization. Identifying normativity as a “network of norms” enables Jakobson to foreground the often contradictory norms that constitute normativity (Jakobson, 513). As Laclau and Mouffle contest the possibility of a fully resistant, embodied subject, Jakobson objects to models of power relations that would present that which should be resisted as its own solid, purely coherent set of norms. Calls for a purely resistant subject or a resistance to a set of norms imagined as an internally coherent both reaffirm a binary analysis and, as Jakobson argues, lose the “complexity of the network” (Jakobson, 520). Acknowledging the complex network of norms provides a crucial means of avoiding the trap of solidifying resistance to the norm as itself a new norm.

Jakobson's call to recognize normativity as a complex, at times contradictory, network of norms is echoed in queer theorist Debra Ferreday's work on neo-burlesque in the United Kingdom. Focusing on the online message boards frequented by neo-burlesque performers and fans, Ferreday suggests that the tension within neo-burlesque derives from performances that parody femininity, while demonstrating a "pleasurable attachment" to a feminine identity that is "lived as authentic" (Ferreday, 47) By highlighting the inability of feminine identity to be reduced to a single practice or identity, Ferreday argues, neo-burlesque "works to destabilize the ways in which dominant feminine identities become normalized. (Ferreday, 49) If, as Jakobson argues, normativity constitutes of a network of norms, Ferreday credits neo-burlesque with destabilizing the connections between these norms. The tension Ferreday identifies in the
message board postings by fans and statements by performers is heightened during performance, when the self-aware address aimed at the audience is coupled with a pleasurable embrace of stylistic and corporeal markers of feminine 'excess'.

Judith Butler: Gender and Performativity

While Jakobson highlights the need to acknowledge normativity as a network of contradictory norms, queer theorist Judith Butler argues that those contradictions, those failings, reveal normative gender identity as constructed. Given the role gender norms play in constructing the appearance of a unified subjectivity, placing oneself entirely outside of these norms constitutes an impossibility. For Butler the task is not "whether to repeat" but rather "how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable repetition itself." (Butler, 1990, 189). The subversive, parodic repetition reveals the constructed nature of all gender identities, revealing those identities constructed as "natural" or "stable" rely on the same repetitive acts parodied by the purportedly "unnatural" performer.

Butler's own example of a parodic gender repetition is drag. By revealing the distinctness of anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance, Butler argues, drag "reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler, 1990, 175). Drag performance, Butler argues, has the potential to highlight the performativity of gendered identities, by
presenting the drag performance not as an imitation of an original, but rather as an imitation of an imitation. While providing drag as an example of subversively parodic gender practice, Butler is careful to clarify that performativity was not meant to suggest a voluntarist model of gender performance, featuring a subject able to take various gender performances on and off at will. That agency that is available to the subject is only available, Butler argues, because "the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms" (Butler, 1993, 15). This "constitutive constraint" locates agency "as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice" (1993, 15). For Butler, as for Laclau and Mouffle, the subject cannot place itself outside structures of power. Both models leave room for agency, but only in the form of resistance that is contingent, localized and still within the broader structures of power.

Subcultural formations and networks of norms

The usefulness of these new models of power for the study of subcultures becomes clear when considering the role women have historically played, both within subcultures and within subcultural studies. While work on subcultures presents the formations as resistant, in an oppositional position to oppressive mainstream norms, the same groupings often recreate the gendered norms found in the mainstream cultural formations they are supposed to oppose. While a strict binary understanding of power, pitting resistant subcultures against a hegemonic mainstream may not be able to account
for this seeming contradiction, Jakobson’s model of normativity as a network of (often contradictory) norms presents a model for explaining the way groups both resist and recreate normative power structures.

Exploring the lives of girls and women in the punk scene, sociologist Lorraine Leblanc documents this contradiction at work within contemporary subcultures. Leblanc's exploration of punk confirms the marginalization women experience within male-dominated subcultures. Boys both outnumber girls in most punk scenes and play a larger role in establishing and enforcing the standards of appropriate subcultural behavior (Leblanc, 108-109). As Leblanc notes, the enforcement of normative gender roles within the punk communities she documents runs counter to the subculture’s self-image as a liberatory and resistant discourse. Following Jakobson’s description of normativity as a network of norms, we can see how punk’s liberatory discourse, its resistance to norms related to capitalist accumulation and productivity, can coexist peaceably with the enforcement of oppressive gender norms.

As other feminist theorists have argued, the binary, often-class focused viewpoint of power presented within much research on subcultures prevented the researchers from acknowledging the role gender and sexuality played within the subculture. In discussing the mods, rockers, teddies and punks, Hebdige, Willis and other subcultural theorists focused largely on the street and other public spaces that allowed subcultural participants to escape work, school and domestic life. What their analysis lacked, according to
McRobbie was a willingness to acknowledge that these escapes often happened "at the expense of women (especially mothers) and girls" (McRobbie, 1980, 20). Examining subcultures as reflections of generational and class conflicts, subcultural studies interpreted subcultural rebellion against family life and the classroom as the refusal of oppressive power structures. By failing to acknowledge the gendered dynamics at work in the rejection of the mother, the female school teacher and the steady girlfriend, early research on postwar youth subcultures ignored another power dynamic at work within subcultures.

Laclau and Mouffle's call for the acknowledgment of the impossibility of a total resistance within late capitalist industrial societies finds affirmation in recent work that falls under the umbrella of "postsubcultural studies". While acknowledging the continued relevance of the work done by Hebdige, Willis and others within CCCS, a new generation of researchers doing work within subcultural studies questions some of the basic frameworks of earlier work in the field. Recent critics argue that the focus on class-based analysis led researchers to overestimate the coherence of subcultural groups, while reaffirming binary and, in many cases, oversimplified distinctions that constructed subcultures as sites of pure resistance opposed to a coherent, hegemonic mainstream.

The increasing visibility of neo-burlesque in mainstream media and popular culture must be seen as more than the contamination of the genre's authentic roots. Just as the subculture surrounding neo-burlesque should not be viewed as entirely stable and
internally coherent, "mainstream" representations of neo-burlesque should not be viewed as monolithic. The role of subcultural participants in the movement from the margins to the mainstream is not simply a moment of appropriation, carried out over the objections of subcultural participants themselves. Subcultural participants express a pragmatic view of neo-burlesque's increased visibility in the media and popular culture. While they may express disdain for the representations of neo-burlesque presented in popular culture, they acknowledge that the genre's increased visibility results in larger audiences and more students, increasing their ability to support themselves financially through their subcultural involvement.

Existing literature on subcultural studies does little to address how financial exchange fits into subcultural involvement. I would like to suggest that this may be an area where the focus on "youth" within subcultural studies has impacted overall portrayals of subcultural groups. Constructing postwar youth subcultures as means of escaping domestic and familial life, theorists portrayed subcultural involvement as distinct from family, school or job responsibilities. Constructing subcultural involvement as an escape from responsibilities, subcultural theorists reaffirmed a framework that identified subcultures, no matter the age of their participants, as areas of non-responsibility and, hence, non-adulthood.

As McRobbie argues, monetary exchange is often seen as defiling "pure" subcultural objects or relationships, which may begin to explain why earlier work on
postwar subcultures focused on subcultural style, while ignoring the second-hand shops, outdoor markets and boutiques where the commodities that constituted subcultural style were purchased. The failure to engage with the role of second-hand markets in subcultural style, may, as McRobbie argues, be attributed to the focus within subcultural studies on men and the feminine connotations of shopping as a leisure activity. (McRobbie, 1997). As McRobbie notes, the markets for second-hand clothes that made possible the appropriated and re-fashioned style of the punk scene are largely ignored within work on the topic. As an activity implicated in both capitalism and femininity, shopping challenges the portrayal of spectacular subcultures as masculine and resistant, outside of the social networks of commodity exchange. Ignoring the role played by small-scale subcultural entrepreneurs prevents an analysis of how subcultural rely on the surplus goods of contemporary capitalist society and renders invisible the role of subcultural entrepreneurs who transform their subcultural involvement into a means of financial support.

The impact of subcultural participant’s age on their attitude towards financial pressures and subcultural purity represents only one example of an issue in subcultural studies that should be reexamined in light of the social transformation of postindustrial societies over the last few decades. The transformation of the traditional life cycle to include a longer period between adolescence and reproductive adulthood, accompanied by the shifting role of women in postindustrial societies has opened up space for an increase in subcultures dominated by adult women. This development calls for an
examination of subcultures that troubles the connection between subcultures and youth.

Questioning 'youth' subcultures

While recent researchers have called into question the us/them, subcultural/mainstream binary that work from CSSS often relied upon, these same researchers have recreated another binary: youth/adult, subcultural. Describing youth as less "anchored" in their social place than those "younger and older than themselves," subcultural theorist Sarah Thornton attributes subcultural participation to a disavowal of the domestic sphere and a desire to "further reject being fixed socially" (Thornton, 102). This rejection of the domestic takes on different meanings if subcultural participation is considered not simply the purview of youth, relegated to a socially un-fixed period between childhood and 'real' adulthood. By leaving the category of youth unexamined, subcultural theorists have ignored the significance that subcultural participation might hold for those who would, were age the only criterion, be considered adults.

The failure to further discuss the way the categories of youth and adult are constructed continues in current work on subcultural formations. In her work on British club cultures, Thornton explains that people between the ages of fifteen and nineteen are the largest age group of club goers, followed by those aged twenty to twenty-four (Thornton, 15). After giving those ages, the author then lays out a number of other milestones that often mark the end of subcultural involvement. Participants often demonstrate a loss of interest when they move out of their parent’s home or, "most
importantly," form serious partnerships through co-habitation and marriage (16). A decline in interest in involvement in the rave subculture is thus attributed both to the rejection of the parental space and to the formation of one's own "adult home" through either marriage or cohabitation. In both cases, rejection of subcultural involvement is connected to an acceptance of adulthood: either the rejection of the role of dependant or the acceptance of the role of partnered adult. Thornton's definition of "youth," then, relies less on a particular age than on a failure to achieve certain milestones - either moving out of one's childhood home or living with a spouse or long-term partner. Thornton's continued reference to the club cultures she explores as "youth" subcultures results not from the actual age of the participants, but rather from their disinterest or inability in enacting the behavior expected of an adult: abandoning the parental home, preferably by beginning to recreate the family structure by entering into one's own committed long-term, presumably monogamous relationship.

Judith Halberstam's 'Queer Time'

Though much self-identified "subcultural studies" work has failed to address the existence of adult subcultures, analysis of subcultures populated mostly, even exclusively, by adults can be found in more recent work on queer subcultures. In her account of queer subcultures, queer theorist and archivist Judith Halberstam coins the term "queer time" to refer to life cycles that trouble the binary division between adolescence and adulthood. While the traditional life cycle "charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through
reproduction," "queer time" and the postponement or refusal of reproduction allows for an extended period of subcultural involvement (Halberstam, 153). While Halberstam refers to this time as a "stretched-out adolescence," (153) she later suggests that queer time upsets the reliance on a strict division between youth and adulthood.

When Halberstam argues that Western cultures "chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation" (Halberstam, 152) she could be referring to subcultural studies itself and the tendency of researchers working within that framework to imagine subcultural involvement as a period of adolescent (at most young adult) rebellion against the "parent culture." Echoing the critiques put forth by McRobbie of subcultural studies' emphasis on adolescent males, Halberstam then takes her critique further, calling for a new approach to subculture that can account for "nonheterosexual, nonexclusively male, nonwhite, and nonadolescent subcultural production" (Halberstam, 161).

Problematicizing the conventional division between youth and adulthood allows us to explore the ways that these identities are constructed through particular social markers. Adulthood is a function not of reaching a certain age, but of taking on a particular role in one's familial and economic relationships - becoming a parent, a homeowner, a career-track employee or a spouse. This construction of adulthood ignores those people who are, for whatever reason, denied the ability to achieve these milestones, rendering them invisible or constructing them as perpetual non-adults. Applying Halberstam's critique of
the role temporality plays in the construction of heteronormativity provides another example how Jakobson's description of normativity as a "network of norms" allows for a more nuanced viewpoint of both normativity and resistance. The production of normative heterosexuality in the United States then, is produced through norms related to gender, but also those related to class and race. This intersectionality is clearly demonstrated by the way norms surrounding reproduction are experienced differently by women in the United States depending on their racial identity and perceived class status. While white, middle and upper-middle class adult women experience reproductive norms largely as a pressure to engage in reproduction, women of color within the United States have, historically, faced the opposite pressure. If the production of adult subcultural formations like neo-burlesque provides a means for participants to resist normative pressures related to sexuality and reproduction, this resistance must be viewed as localized and specific, as a resistance to norms experienced as a result of their positionality in regards to race and class identity.

Neo-burlesque's rapidly increasing popularity over the last few years means that a researcher investigating the topic finds themselves faced with a large number of possible ways of approaching the subculture. Hoping to explore the construction of neo-burlesque as a subcultural formation, organized around gendered performance and the impact of the genre's increasing popularity, I chose to focus on three different sites of subcultural meaning - the performances themselves, interviews with performers and manifestations of neo-burlesque in popular culture and press coverage. Though other possible sites of
investigation - the subcultures use of online social networking or the voices of spectators - might provide useful areas to explore in further research, I felt the three I chose provided the best means of beginning to explore the implications of neo-burlesque as a female-dominated subculture and a performance practice.

Chapter two focuses on performances, analyzing neo-burlesque as a performance genre made legible by its reliance on a particular set of movements, gestures and performer/spectator interactions. While the self-awareness demonstrated throughout neo-burlesque is often read as ironic, I argue that irony is not the most productive framework through which to consider the genre. The celebration within performances of aspects of femininity often deemed 'excessive' and the performer's connection between their lived identities and onstage personas complicates any reading that would see the genre as solely ironic.

The tension between the parodic, self-consciously 'artificial' aspects of neo-burlesque performance and the performer's own lived identities is further explored in chapter three. The participant's understanding of the neo-burlesque performance as a process of self-construction is further reaffirmed by the deployment of an ethic of 'do-it-yourself' or DIY as a marker of subcultural authenticity. The expectation within the subculture that performers should create their own costumes, choreograph their own acts and take an active role in constructing their own performance persona creates a temptation to read neo-burlesque as an opportunity for imaginative self-creation.
References by performers to neo-burlesque as a means of navigating their lived identities as women serve to temper this voluntarist interpretation, suggesting that neo-burlesque is more productively considered as a means for performers to navigate gendered identities in a space that allows both for parody and for the non-ironic celebration of aspects of femininity often deemed excessive.

The characteristics of neo-burlesque performance that creates space for the navigation of gendered identities within the subculture are largely erased both in press coverage of the subculture and in appropriations of neo-burlesque style that appear in popular culture. In the fourth chapter I conduct a reading of neo-burlesque as it is presented in popular culture and press coverage. Neo-burlesque performers display a more pragmatic attitude towards the increased attention on their subcultural production than other work in subcultural studies would predict. Performers acknowledge that increased visibility makes it easier for them to support themselves through their involvement with the subculture, as performers, teachers, costume designers and make-up artists. At the same time, they express reservations regarding the form neo-burlesque style takes as it becomes more prominent, viewing representations of the genre in popular culture as shallow and overly glossy. The misgivings of performers appear warranted, as manifestations of neo-burlesque in popular culture flatten out characteristics of neo-burlesque that make the genre appealing to subcultural participants.
Chapter 2: Neo-Burlesque Performance: Self-Reflexivity and Feminine Excess

As is the case with any performance genre, neo-burlesque is recognizable as a category of performance through the repetition on stage of particular bodily movements, costumes styles and gestures. Neo-burlesque foregrounds the gendered body and, through a self-reflexive performance practice, creates a framework within which performers engage with the performance as a gendered spectacle. While this critical distance sometimes results in an ironic self-awareness, the irony of the genre is tempered by performances that revel in feminine 'excess'. At other moments, the dominance of neo-burlesque by femme performance rewrites feminine excess as the 'norm.'

The framework that constitutes the genre as such expands beyond the stage, to include the self-aware relationship between performer and spectator and the types of venues that host performances. This framework consists of movements, costumes and performance themes that foreground the bodies of the performers – with a special emphasis on the performances as a display of the gendered body. The performance of gendered characters or stereotypes, along with the deployment of drag as a performance strategy contributes to the performances specifically focused on the body as gendered. What distinguishes neo-burlesque from other genres of performance is its focus on foregrounding its own status as a performance. This self-reflexivity - evident in the banter between performers and spectators and the common practice of playing off of the
audience's assumptions - is itself one of the genre's norms.

While the self-awareness displayed in neo-burlesque leads some to view the genre's appropriation of classic burlesque style as ironic, I argue that irony cannot account for all of the pleasures neo-burlesque offers, both to performers and to spectators. Both paroding and reveling in markers of femininity often deemed 'excessive,' the pleasures of neo-burlesque cannot be understood as primarily ironic, although irony does play a role in many performances. Neo-burlesque's critical edge, then, appears not just as a result of its self-reflexivity; self-reference is, after all, a characteristic displayed by many contemporary texts. Rather, the self-awareness the genre displays, coupled with an earnest pleasure in gendered display, creates a combination with the potential to infiltrate and destabilize the norms that constitute the normative gender system.

**Method**

The burlesque revival takes a number of different forms: many performers have a substantial online presence, the revival has influenced fashion trends and spread into television and film, well-known dancers have created training videos for potential dancers to purchase and watch at home. The live performance, however, remains central to the revival and the subculture that has developed around it. Any discussion of the phenomenon that considers the subculture without discussing actual performances misses that phenomenon that constitutes neo-burlesque’s central component.

The prospect of discussing and analyzing live performance, however, presents special challenges for a researcher. Live performances are, by their very definition, geographically and temporally specific. Gaining an appreciation for the full scope of the
performance – the act itself, but also the reactions of the audience and the context of the performance – requires being present. For a researcher with restrictions related both to time and geography – that is to say, any researcher- these restrictions must be taken into consideration. For the purpose of my discussion of neo-burlesque performances, I attended as many live performances as the restrictions of time and geography made possible, while supplementing these experiences by viewing recordings of live performances featuring performers I did not have the opportunity to see live. My analysis of live performances draws on my own experiences attending six live performances at four different venues in Washington, DC and New York City, viewing recordings of live performances online, by way of performers own websites or YouTube and watching recordings of full performances included in the documentary “The Velvet Hammer Burlesque,” a film about one of Los Angeles’ early neo-burlesque troupes.

Viewing individual acts outside of their performance context, either online or through documentary film, cannot replicate the experience of attending a live performance. These research strategies did, however, allow me to view neo-burlesque acts that I otherwise would not have been able to view. The neo-burlesque scene in the United States extends to both coasts and most of the states in between and, while there is interaction between performers from across the country, the neo-burlesque scenes in different cities have developed their own particular flavor. Yet there are commonalities that appear throughout. Shared styles, often repeated bodily movements and common performance themes draw performances together into an identifiable movement.
"Not entirely of her own choosing": Burlesque as system

The burlesque revival emerged as a largely grassroots and performer driven movement; the performers themselves create costumes, choreograph routines, find venues, publicize performances and manage their own careers. For many of the performers, this artistic independence is a large part of the appeal. The women who dominate the scene as performers, then, are also the driving force behind the growth of the subculture. As performer Dirty Martini explains, most neo-burlesque performances are produced, costumed, directed and performed by women (Baldwin, 47). While there are some men involved in the neo-burlesque subculture, as burlesque performers, emcees or sideshow performers, the movement is driven largely by the hard work and creativity of women.

The control performers maintain over their performances and careers contrasts with the professional life navigated by burlesque performers during most of burlesque's history, from its emergence on the 19th century stage to the "golden era" of stage shows during 1950's. This shift results partly from broader social changes that granted women greater social and financial opportunities. Equally important, however, is the different economic relationship today's performers have with their life as performers. Neo-burlesque performers involved in today's revival are less likely than their predecessors to depend on income from burlesque performance as their sole means of financial support. While some performers have created careers out of performing, the majority of participants who drive the movement's popularity participate in the subculture outside of the jobs they depend on for financial support.
Discussing the burlesque performers of the late-19th century, historian Robert Allen acknowledges that even the most well known and talented performers of the day were managed by men, performed scripts written by men, in a performance genre, that, after its initial attempt at respectability, was aimed at an audience imagined as heterosexual and male. While the performers may have subverted the norms of the day, she did so in a language "not entirely of her own choosing" using the codes from a system "not structured by her or for her benefit" (Allen, 283). If the structure of burlesque was not created by the dancer of for her benefit, then, Allen seems to suggest, it was created by and for the benefit of managers, producers, theater owners and audiences - all largely male.

Though contemporary performers approach burlesque performance from a different social and economic position than their predecessors, describing this new position as one of complete artistic freedom creates a misleading dichotomy, setting the creatively powerless performers of the past against the liberated performers of today. Contemporary neo-burlesque performers may not perform routines scripted by managers and may be less likely to depend on drawing an audience for their livelihood. However, this does not mean that their performance exists outside structures of power.

Contemporary neo-burlesque performers negotiate a pre-existing structure that creates the context within which their performances occur, by dictating the venues available for performances, the potential audiences that may attend and the other performers they might appear with on stage.

The structures within which neo-burlesque performers practice their craft are not
limited to the infrastructure - the venues, eager audiences and fellow performers - that constitute the subculture as such. The performances themselves exist within a set of boundaries that dictate how different styles of performance, various bodily movements and particular costumes create meaning. While there may be no outside choreographer dictating the details of their performance, neo-burlesque performers still work with a repertoire of movements, facial expressions and visual cues that constitute a pre-existing language, a structure of meaning that is, to borrow Allen's phrase, "not entirely of their own choosing." Though performers search for new ways to expand, disrupt or mock the audience's expectations of the genre, they still do so by navigating the genre's existing codes and meanings. Particular ways of presenting the body and interacting with the audience characterize neo-burlesque performances and are enacted repeatedly by performers. It is these particular characteristics, along with the choice of particular costumes and music to create certain kinds of narratives that make the performance recognizable as neo-burlesque.

That the process of learning a particular form of dance involves internalizing the norms and codes of that genre was reaffirmed during my conversation with one neo-burlesque performer. Describing her transition from belly dancing to neo-burlesque, Rebecca emphasized ways the shift from one genre to another became visible in her onstage bodily movements and attitudes, even when she returned to performing as a belly dancer. For Rebecca, neo-burlesque's "campy" and "tongue-in-cheek" style differentiates it from performances she did as a belly dancer. Transitioning from one performance

5. Rebecca, Interview with the author, written notes, 3 March 2009
scene to the other, she described becoming "sillier" and engaging in more comical body language than she would have prior to her involvement in neo-burlesque. Suggesting that the exaggerated movements and mocking attitude of neo-burlesque are recognizable even in the absence of other genre cues, Rebecca stated she believes spectators "consider [her] a burlesque performer even if [she] doesn't take off [her] clothes". She continues to perform as a belly-dancer and mentioned feeling out of place among the other performers at a recent belly dance event. Rebecca's internalization of neo-burlesque norms – her exaggerated onstage movements and campy style - marks her as distinct, even as she performs a different, though related, genre of performance.

Rebecca's recognizability as a neo-burlesque performer stems from the internalization of the norms and codes of the genre. These norms and codes go beyond the genre's most obvious attributes - types of costumes, the process of disrobing - to include certain kinds of exaggerated bodily movements and facial expression that read as campy or humorous. Neo-burlesque performers navigate these codes, often subverting or manipulating them. At the same time, their recognizability as neo-burlesque performers relies on their ability to internalize the genre's conventions, even as they may do so with the intention of overturning them.

**Burlesque and Self-Reflexivity**

The navigation by performers of neo-burlesque's codes and conventions relies in no small part on a self-reflexive relationship between spectators and the artists on stage. Performers address the audience about their correct role as spectators and engage in self-

6. ibid.
deprecating humor that draws attention to the codes of the genre. The use of smaller theaters and unconventional performance spaces contributes to the genre's self-reflexivity, as small venues place spectator and performer in close proximity, dingy interiors contrast with glamorous costumes and technical difficulties become fodder for emcee banter. The audience's own understanding of the codes and norms of the genre allows performers to creatively mock or push genre conventions. Self-reflexivity – the acknowledgement of the performance as part of a system – opens up a space within the performance to destabilize the norms being presented.

Central to the genre's self-reflexivity is the relationship between performer and spectator cultivated both by the actions of various neo-burlesque performers onstage and the contexts within which their performances are presented. In her discussion of a show by Pinchbottom Burlesque, reviewer Laura Dougherty describes a "complicit, dialogic exchange" between performers and spectators as "inherent to the genre's success and steeped in a gestural nod to the ironic recalling of nostalgic burlesque performance from the 1930's to the 1950's" (Dougherty, 631). Dougherty's emphasis on the "complicit" relationship between neo-burlesque spectators and audiences points to exactly that self-reflexivity that is key to the genre's potential for foregrounding and subverting gender norms.

As Dougherty's quote suggests, reading neo-burlesque as ironic is a common way of understanding the genre. Though the self-aware and self-reflexive attitudes suggested by the actions of performers and spectators contribute to this interpretation, I argue that irony is not the most productive framework through which to examine neo-burlesque
While irony appears in individual performances and may be read into performances by spectators, describing the genre in its entirety as ironic misreads the function of neo-burlesque and, I believe, the genre's appeal to performers and audiences. While neo-burlesque may be ironic it is not only ironic: In the pleasure the genre brings, both to performers and spectators, there exists an excess that is not explained by irony. As Debra Ferreday argues, neo-burlesque performance demonstrates a tension; it parodies femininity and yet demonstrates a "pleasurable attachment to a feminine identity that is lived as authentic" (Ferreday, 49). This pleasurable attachment belies interpretations that would view neo-burlesque as primarily ironic.

Performers I spoke with confirmed the embrace of burlesque glamour as marked by a non-ironic pleasure in the trappings of burlesque femininity. Performers did emphasize the disconnect between the femininity they perform on stage and the feminine identity lived in their day to day lives. In this sense, participants acknowledge their on stage personas as performances. However, they also described their interest in neo-burlesque as driven partly by an enthusiastic attachment to the feminine trappings of the neo-burlesque performance. While the performances are understood as exaggerations or caricatures, then, the attachment to the presentations of femininity in the performance is experienced by the performers as quite real. The pleasurable attachment constitutes the excess of the neo-burlesque performance, the pleasure which cannot be explained as the pleasure of irony or parody. The pleasure of enacting the excess of femininity then becomes the excessive pleasure of neo-burlesque, that which cannot be explained as resulting from ironic detachment.
Audiences and Venues: Constructing the neo-burlesque spectator

While I do not wish to foreground irony as the primary means of understanding neo-burlesque I do mean to emphasize the genre's self-reflexivity as important to an understanding of the genre. The exchange between spectators and performers is crucial to neo-burlesque self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity becomes most visible when performer's directly address the audience, instructing them in correct behavior, joking about technical difficulties that might arise or cracking intentionally unfunny jokes. The repetition of particular movements contributes to the genre's self-reflexivity, as both performer and spectator acknowledge the genre's predictability through the spectator's predictable reaction to the performer's predictable movements.

At the Palace of Wonders, a Washington, DC bar that hosts burlesque and sideshow performances several nights a week, emcees regularly start the show by reminding any newcomers in the audience that burlesque is not stripping. Providing the audience with an example of how not to behave, Emcee Albert Cadabra demonstrates a slack-jawed, glossy- eyed expression meant to represent the stereotypical look of a patron at a strip club. Though appreciative hoots and hollers are welcome, he explains, the audience shouldn’t wordlessly gawk or take on the demonstrated expression7. On a separate night, also at the Palace of Wonders, emcee Gary Gutter began the evening's show with a similar disclaimer, reminding the audience that what they were about to see was not stripping and joking that there was "no champagne room in the back"8. While the

8. Dutch Oven Burlesque, *Dutch Oven 2009 Space Odyssey* Palace of Wonders, (9 January
comment about the venue's lack of a champagne room was meant as a joke, it functioned to reaffirm neo-burlesque from stripping by framing the venue as not that kind of place, ie, not a strip club. While burlesque performers, emcees and show promoters construct neo-burlesque in opposition to other types of entertainment that involve sexual display, spectators are expected to do their part as well by correctly performing their role as neo-burlesque audience members and not patrons at a strip club.

In other instances, emcees mimic "correct" audience behavior, encouraging potential newcomers in the audience to enact particular behaviors expected of the neo-burlesque audience. At Divas, a performance by HyperGender Burlesque at WOW Theater and Cafe in New York, emcee and show organizer JZ Bitch began the evening's show by asking audience members who had not attended a burlesque show to raise their hands. After her informal survey demonstrated the presence of neo-burlesque newcomers in the audience, she engaged the remaining spectators in a demonstration of "correct" audience behavior. Standing in front of the audience wearing black slacks, a black bra and a black tuxedo jacket, Bitch ended the statement "when a performer goes like this.." by pulling one side of her jacket open to allow for a clearer view of the black bra underneath. The audience responded with the appropriate cheers, before falling quite as her jacket closed. Bitch repeated the exercise several times before commending the audience on their quick learning ability. In this particular instance, constructing spectators as neo-burlesque spectators occurred through reaffirming expected behaviors, rather than discouraging forbidden ones.

2009): Washington, DC.
It is worth noting that the different venues represented by the examples cited above provide a possible explanation for the different approaches taken by the emcees. The Palace of Wonders, a bar in Washington DC, attracts a largely (though by no means exclusively) heterosexual crowd. As a popular bar, located in an area with a growing nightlife scene, shows are aimed at bar going patrons, largely straight and in their twenties or thirties. WOW Cafe Theater, in contrast is a thirty year old women's theater collective "promoting the empowerment of women through the performing arts" and welcoming the "participation of all women and transpeople in cooperation with them"\(^{10}\). Given its mission and history, WOW attracts a largely feminist, queer and queer-friendly audience - one that, JZ Bitch seems to fear, might be unsure of how to react to a performance of sexual display. While the emcees at Palace of Wonders work to prevent audience members from enacting behaviors associated with conventional heterosexual strip clubs, JZ Bitch works to guarantee that her queer, feminist friendly audience is not so well-behaved that they remain silent throughout the show. In both cases, however, emcees make a point of disciplining audience behavior, reaffirming correct and discouraging incorrect forms of neo-burlesque spectatorship. While the emcees at the two venues took opposite approaches - discouraging certain behaviors at one venue and encouraging certain behaviors at the other - the audience behavior the emcees meant to encourage were the same. At both venues, emcees instructed, appreciative hoots, hollers and applause were the expected audience response.

While JZ Bitch's demonstration provides a good example of the way performers

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discipline their audiences it also reveals how the expected audience reactions become scripted, an automatic reaction to gestures that reference the removal of clothing, though they may or may not reveal additional flesh. Though Bitch enacts the removal of clothes, pushing one side her jacket open, the movement does not actually allow the audience to see anything that was not already on display. The gesture does not involve the removal of any clothing - it simply emphasizes the performer’s body as on display. Thus the audience reacts not to the increased visibility of flesh, but to a motion that suggests the exposure of more flesh. This dynamic reoccurs throughout neo-burlesque performances, as audiences cheer performers slowly removing a single glove or the top layer of a skirt. The enthusiasm expressed at the removal of minor costume parts reflects the audience's knowledge that the early removal of these initials items of clothing is only the beginning. At the same time, it also suggests the internalization by neo-burlesque audiences of their own role as neo-burlesque spectators and their acknowledgement of the genre's conventions and norms.

While the audience reactions provide one important context for neo-burlesque performance, the venues themselves provide another. As the comparison of the Palace of Wonders and WOW Cafe and Theater suggests, neo-burlesque occurs in a variety of venues. However, the performances take place most often in bar or nightclub environments or small performance spaces. Of four different venues attended during my research, two were venues considered bars and two were venues identified as theaters. Even this distinction, however becomes blurred. Both the bars had recognizable, if small stages; both the theaters were small venues that served alcohol and allowed the audience
to drink during performances. While some groups do perform in larger, more elaborate theater spaces this is not the norm. The presentation of neo-burlesque outside venues that traditionally host theatrical dance performances is noted as a point of pride by some performers. In an article in the New York Times, neo-burlesque performer Julie Atlas Muz brags about her ability to turn nearly any venue into a "semi-workable stage," and terms burlesque "bank robbery theater" due to the ad hoc nature of many of the performance spaces.11 This embrace of non-traditional performance spaces appeals to some performers who see neo-burlesque as a creative refuge from conventional theater or dance. It also frames the performances and the audience reactions to them, as the venues are largely informal and the spectators and performers are in close physical proximity.

The genre's increasing popularity and institutionalization has led to the use of more conventional performances spaces. In March of 2009, performers Michelle Baldwin and Reyna Von Vett opened Black Box Burlesque in Denver, Colorado. The theater is described as the first theater since the 1930's to be built specifically for burlesque12. Despite these developments, performers are still largely limited to small stages in bars or performance spaces. These more intimate venues, where spectators often find themselves physically close to performers contributes to the development of a rapport between performers and spectators, as the performers speak directly to or interact directly with performers.

Most neo-burlesque venues are also notable for their relative informality. The contrast between the interior space of the venue and the elaborate costumes of the performers result in a humorous incongruity. This incongruity appears especially noticeable during performances that draw heavily on classic burlesque or otherwise incorporate elaborate clothing. During a performance at the Palace of Wonders burlesque performer, Gal Friday maneuvered a small stage, surrounded by bar patrons mostly clad in casual wear - jeans, t-shirts, and the occasional skirt, dress or collared shirt. The old fashioned undergarments favored by many performers - garter belts, thigh high hose and sometimes corsets - appear especially elaborate and anachronistic surrounded by bar patrons, casually dressed in contemporary clothing. As Gal Friday slowly stripped off her elbow-length gloves to release a burst of glitter onto the stage and the audience, the cramped wooden stage and casual environment provided a humorous contrast with her appropriation of classic glamour. The contrast between Gal Friday's elaborate red gown and the small, cramped stage and casual surroundings contributes to the humor of her performance while also highlighting the performance as a performance, an embrace of classic glamour in the face of the bars unimpressive interior.

The destruction, during neo-burlesque, of the fourth wall - the imaginary division between performer and spectator - is further encouraged by the commentary provided throughout the performance by an emcee. During most performances an emcee, or in some cases, a series of emcees, introduces the show, entertains the audience between performances and introduces the performers. The emcee may be one of the neo-burlesque

13. Albert Cadabra and Gal Friday, The Skullduggery and Skin Show.
performers or a performer who acts exclusively as emcee. Emcees who are not neo-
burlesque dancers may do sideshow tricks between the acts. Three of the seven
performances I attended during my research featured emcees who swallowed swords, ate
glass, escaped from straight jackets or performed other classic sideshow tricks.

Emcees speak directly to the audience, something that does not happen during the
process of the individual three to five minute performances and often entertain the
audience with intentionally corny jokes. Acting as emcee for Sweet and Nasty Burlesque,
neo-burlesque performer Nasty Canasta reappeared continuously throughout the night in
a variety of increasingly revealing costumes. Demonstrating the self-deprecating humor
found throughout neo-burlesque, Canasta joked about her Ivy League degree in "get this -
thater" and described the elaborate preparation required for the performance. As
technical problems delayed the beginning of one performer's act, Canasta continued to
entertain, peeking through the closed curtains behind her and narrating the delay to the
audience. That the minor delay became a part of the show reflects the low-budget nature
of neo-burlesque performances and also hints at the way the framework surrounding the
performance - the venue, audience and even technical difficulties - become a part of the
show. This physical infrastructure, including venues and spectators, play an important
role in defining neo-burlesque as a genre.

The circumstances surrounding the individual acts play an important part in the
ways spectators and participants understand neo-burlesque. The use of particular venues,
the practice of instructing the spectators in appropriate behavior and the joking

York.
acknowledgment of technical problems all contribute to neo-burlesque's reflexivity, its acknowledgment of the performance as just that: a performance. While self-reflexivity is often read as ironic, irony is not the most productive framework through which to understand neo-burlesque. Instead, the pleasures connected to the enactment of feminine excess displayed by performers troubles any interpretation that would view neo-burlesque as primarily ironic.

**Burlesque as a system for bodily display**

While the surrounding infrastructure - the venues and audiences - play a crucial role in constructing neo-burlesque as a recognizable genre, the individual acts constitute the central focus of any performance event. The particular movements, facial expression and costume styles repeated within neo-burlesque, along with the physical infrastructure, constitute neo-burlesque as a recognizable genre, framing the audience’s understanding. The movements, costumes and facial expressions that constitute individual acts as neo-burlesque performances foreground the display of the body, so much so that neo-burlesque can be viewed as a system for the display of the body. The physical movements repeated throughout performances are those that draw attention to the body, the structure of individual performances is dictated by the slow exposure of the body and the costume pieces associated with the genre are those that conceal while simultaneously drawing attention to the body. Neo-burlesque's specific focus on displaying the female body is made apparent throughout performances and becomes especially apparent when the performance structure is adopted for performances by non-femme, male-bodied performers.
The dramatic structure and pace of neo-burlesque performance is nearly always dictated by the gradual removal of the performer's costume. Though the amount of clothing removed can vary drastically from one performance to another, the process of the performer removing parts of her costume remains the centerpiece of most performances. While the most common practice is stripping down to pasties and a g-string, some performers take off far less. In other cases, performers may end their performance wearing nothing at all. Despite the end result of any given performance, the tradition's movements continuously foreground the removal of the costume from the body. Thus - no matter how much clothing is removed - the focus of the performance remains the body being slowly revealed. The slow removal of different items of clothing creates the narrative progress of the performance.

The removal of a final piece of clothing, usually a top or, less often, a skirt or underwear, to reveal pasties, a g-string or bare flesh typically serves as the act's grand finale, a sign that the performance is over. In a performance by Fuchsia Foxx at Cabaret Noir in Seattle, the dancer removes her bra to reveal pasties and then turns her back the audience and lowers her skirt to reveal her buttocks to the audience, smiling in a moment of display that signifies the end of the performance\(^\text{15}\). The audience knows that, in most cases a performer is not going to remove her pasties or g-string. Once only these items remain there is nothing more to be taken off, and with few exceptions, the absence of more clothes to be removed signals the end of the performance. While performers may take on a wide range of characters, perform to widely different genres of music and

incorporate other talents into their act, the focus on the process of revealing the body constitutes the performances as neo-burlesque.

During a performance by Dutch Oven Burlesque in Washington, DC a series of performers appeared on stage presenting a variety of different performances. In performance after performance, the exposure of the performer's pasties signaled the end of the show, as performers continually exited the stage immediately after revealing their pasties.¹⁶ For the evening’s opening act, performer Little Dutch performed a striptease to the opening music from the Stanley Kubrick film 2001: A Space Odyssey, removing the final item of clothing directly before exiting the stage. Appearing dressed in a cardboard costume designed to look like Rosie, the robotic maid from the 1980’s animated television show the Jetsons, performer Little Luna slowly removed the costume’s separate parts, removing the cardboard section around her waist and chest before, revealing two bright blue pasties adorning her breasts and exiting the stage. Despite the differences between the evening’s different performances, they were notable for their structural coherence: in all three cases the performer revealed her pasty-covered breasts at the very final moment of the performance, before immediately exiting the stage.

While the removal of clothing functions to structure the neo-burlesque performance, reversing this process - performing the act of putting on clothes - provides a means of foregrounding the norms of neo-burlesque. Performing with HyperGender Burlesque, well known performer The World Famous *Bob* overturns the norms of neo-

burlesque, creating a performance that foregrounded the framework of neo-burlesque and, through this foregrounding, highlighted neo-burlesque specifically as a performance of femininity\textsuperscript{17}. Walking out onto the stage entirely nude, *Bob* walked over to a table holding items of clothing and makeup, picked up a large powder puff before blowing glitter dust into the air in front of her and then applying the powder to her arms and legs. After applying the powder, *Bob* began to dress, slowly putting on lacy black underwear, a black bra, a garter belt and stockings. *Bob* meticulously put on all the undergarments, keeping her attention on each item of clothing and her body, ignoring the audience entirely. The activities *Bob* performed were entirely mundane, distinguished largely by the presence of an audience and the anachronistic style of the lingerie the performer put on.

This particular act differs from most neo-burlesque, largely because of *Bob*'s understated demeanor. Rather than self-consciously playing to the audience, *Bob* focused her attention on each item of clothing, meticulously tucking each breast into the cups of her bra and pulling the hose up each individual leg. Playing in the background, \textit{All Tomorrow's Parties} by the Velvet Underground and Nico - a much more melancholy song than those often used in neo-burlesque - contributed to the performance's understated quality. After she finished putting on the items of clothing waiting for her on the table, *Bob* sat down in a chair on the stage, holding a pink handbag in her lap, waiting for the end of the song.

Bob's performance displayed few of the characteristics associated with neo-

\textsuperscript{17} The World Famous *Bob*, \textit{DIVAS} WOW Cafe Theatre, (7 March 2009): New York City.
burlesque. The performer reversed the typical course of events, dressing rather than undressing in front of the crowd. The music was down tempo and the performer did not signal her desire for encouragement from the audience. Despite the failure of the performance to display characteristics most prominently associated with neo-burlesque, *Bob*'s reputation as a performer and the presence of the performance during a show advertised as "post-neo-burlesque" featuring other performers more clearly readable as neo-burlesque made "neo-burlesque" the primary framework within which *Bob*'s performance must be understood. By overturning audience expectations of neo-burlesque, *Bob* exposes the genre's norms, presenting the act of dressing as a process of construction.

While neo-burlesque acts foreground the act of removing clothing, the dancer's movements also contribute to the presentation of the body as self-consciously on display. The difficulty of the dance steps and the degree to which the dancing itself is prioritized varies depending on a performer’s training as a dancer and her interests as a performer. The display becomes most noticeable at points between acts, when the bodily movements meant to display the body itself are no longer camouflaged by the performer’s dancing. During the Skullduggery and Skin show, a monthly burlesque and sideshow performance in Washington, DC the evening's "stage kitten," Candy Del Rio, appeared between performances to pick up clothing left on the stage by performers\(^{18}\). As the emcee made a point of getting out of the way, assuring the audience that he did not want to block their view, Del Rio made a point of leaning over from the waist, displaying either her buttocks

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18. Albert Cadabra and Gal Friday, *The Skullduggery and Skin Show*. 
or her cleavage to the audience in an obviously intentional display.

This movement, described by one performer as the "show-girl bend," reoccurs continually throughout burlesque. The movement provides the audience with a display of either the buttocks or the breasts and the performer's smile as she glances at the audience over her shoulder acknowledges the display as intentional. The popularity of the "show-girl bend" as a routine neo-burlesque move became apparent at two separate moments when the move was used to cover up for unexpected complications during performances. During the above-mentioned performance by Sweet and Nasty Burlesque, Nasty Canasta distracted the audience with physical display, in addition to self-deprecating humor. Glancing between the curtains to check on the progress behind the scenes, Canasta pulled her skirt up above her waist before bending over, allowing the audience a view of her buttocks as she leaned her head between the curtains. During a separate performance at the Palace of Wonders by New York based troupe Pinchbottom Burlesque, performer Anita Cookie appeared on stage in a large, oversize pea coat. Cookie slowly removed items of lingerie from underneath the coat, before sliding the coat off and around so she could hold it in front of her chest. As she moved the coat, one of her nipple pasties fell off, landing on the stage floor. While attempting to locate the pasty on the stage floor, Cookie held the coat to her chest, turned her back to the audience and leaned over, camouflaging her attempt to locate the lost pasty by acting out the "showgirl bend." The common appearance of this particular pose within neo-burlesque

20. Nasty Canasta, Let Them Eat Cake
performance made it the perfect means of distracting the audience while Cookie located and reattached the pasty. That performers enact this move as a means of distracting the audience when a performance has somehow gone awry suggests the central place this type of self-aware display plays within neo-burlesque's repertoire of movements.

**Pasties and Tassels: Costume as technology of the body**

The focus on the display of the body extends from the movements of the performers to neo-burlesque costume. The costume items most often associated with the genre are those that conceal the body, while drawing attention to it. The nipple pasty provides the clearest example of this type of emphasis through concealment. While pasties, like g-strings, were originally designed to comply with public indecency laws, while showing the greatest possible amount of flesh, they also act as a decorative element that emphasizes the otherwise naked breasts. Beyond emphasizing the body, nipple pasties also mark the body as female. Because the social stigma and legal sanction that accompanies female toplessness does not apply to male bodies, the nipple pasty becomes gendered, another means of emphasizing that the body on display is specifically female. The pasty is gendered despite a subtle paradox: though the nipple pasty is a feminized covering, it is designed to cover an attribute - the nipple - that both male and female bodies share. That the pasty’s primary purpose is concealment, then, becomes even more dubious.

The appearance of male performers in nipple pasties foregrounds the status of the pasty as a specifically gendered covering. On bodies otherwise marked as male, the
nipple pasty appears unnecessary and excessive— as much an example of cross-dressing as a corset or feather boa. While the female body is typically marked as excessive, clothing gendered female, displayed on a male body is read as equally excessive. While it is the female body’s excessiveness - the breasts - that creates the need for the concealment carried out by pasties, on the male body it is the pasties themselves that become excessive. Displayed on a chest gendered as male, the pasties point to an absence, marking the possession of female breasts as the 'norm' and their absence as a 'lack'. Male performers often succeed at twirling their tassels in the same manner as female performers, a movement that functions to compensate for their lack of breasts.

While the appearance of pasties on a male body momentarily rewrites the flatness of the male chest as a momentary 'lack' I do not mean to suggest that simply constructing a new hierarchical binary - situating the male bodied as 'lacking' in comparison with a female body now considered 'whole' - provides a successful model for challenging normative gender roles. As many feminist and queer theorists have pointed out, such a reversal hardly constitutes a radical shift. While I do believe that neo-burlesque opens up a space for the exposure and subversion of gender norms, it would be naive to claim that this particular moment of performance contains the ability to rewrite a hierarchical binary so deeply ingrained.

The status of pasties as both a covering gendered feminine and a routine part of the neo-burlesque costume demonstrates the extent to which the neo-burlesque subculture is female-dominated, both "numerically and normatively," to borrow a phrase from Leblanc's description of the male-dominated punk scene (Leblanc, 1999). While pasties
are not part of the costume of all male burlesque performers, they appear with consistency during non-drag performances by male-bodied performers. Some male performers don pasties to provide a moment of humor; others wear them as part of the neo-burlesque costume. During a performance of Pinchbottom Burlesque's *How To Sex*, performer Johnny Porkpie reveals two tasseled pasties underneath a man's suit. The moment of the pasties exposure puts a twist on the traditional exposure of the pasties as the incongruity between Porkpie's masculine outerwear and the pasties underneath it is played for laughs. Performer Va Va Verloren sported pasties during the performance *Fear and Loathing in Candy Land* but, rather than revealing the pasties at any particular moment to demonstrate the incongruity between masculine outerwear and feminine pasties, Verloren wears them along with an assemblage of variously gendered items, including tennis shoes and a tutu, while displaying a male body.

The repurposing of the nipple tassel reveals one consequence of neo-burlesque's status as a female dominated subculture. Leblanc argues that the status of punk as a male-dominated subculture is evidenced by the way in which markers of subcultural authenticity - holding ones own in the thrash pit, or living on the street - are behaviors typically coded as masculine. In the same way, the adoption and re-purposing of the nipple tassel by male performers speaks to neo-burlesque's status as a female-dominated subculture. I do not mean to suggest that pasties are "markers of subcultural authenticity" in the same way that thrash dancing or mohawks are for the punks Leblanc discusses. To

do so would ignore the important differences in the way that "authenticity" is deployed within neo-burlesque, in comparison with the depictions of "authenticity" described by Leblanc within the subculture she documents.

The incorporation of tassels into a routine is hardly required for the performance to be considered neo-burlesque. However, these items are standard parts of the neo-burlesque costume. The appropriation of these feminized items by male-bodied performers, presenting as men, reflects the development of neo-burlesque as, initially, a performance genre focused on performances of femininity largely by female-bodied performers. The comic re-purposing of the tassel in performances of both masculine and femme characters disconnects the tassel or pasty from its ostensible purpose - concealment - and reveals its status as decorative.

At Obama-Wonderama, a combination of burlesque and sideshow performances put on in Washington DC two days before the inauguration of President Barack Obama, DC-based performer Short Staxx appeared onstage as a Charlie Chaplin-esque character, wearing a tuxedo, fake mustache, cane and top hat, dancing to Louis Prima's medley, "Just a Gigolo/ I Ain't Got Nobody". The performer removes the tuxedo to reveal a plastic form of a man's chest on top of a cushion that had created the illusion of a paunch. Removing multiple layers of clothing, Short Staxx sheds her middle-aged man costume, stripping down to a g-string and pasties before twirling her nipple tassels for the performance's finale.

Staxx's "Just a Gigolo" routine provides one example of the space burlesque can provide to allow performers to explore the presentation and subversion of gendered identities. Those acts that foreground the performance of multiple gender positions most overtly demonstrate burlesque's ability to reveal how gender is constructed through the performance of a myriad of material and bodily cues. While Short Staxx's performance provides an especially cogent example, the practice of performing gender - most typically certain images of femininity - reoccurs throughout neo-burlesque performance. Staxx’s performance provides a useful example though it also differs from most neo-burlesque performance in its utilization of drag as a performance strategy.

A similar example appears in the performance of New York based drag and burlesque performer Tigger!. Appearing onstage in female drag, wearing heels, a silver skirt, shirt and jacket, Tigger! begins removing his costume to "Surrender" by Cheap Trick. As the lyrics to the song recount the warning given to the singer by his mother about "girls like you" Tigger! removes his coat and places the clip on earrings carefully into his just removed glove before letting his fake "breasts" under his top fall onto the stage. As he strips off his initial costume, Tigger! reveals not his "authentic" identity, but rather another drag performance. Rather than revealing the authentic identity underneath his initial female drag, Tigger! now appears in masculine drag, performing a second character, clad in a red singlet, the leotard-like one-piece outfit worn by wrestlers. Leaving the blonde wig on his head, he raises his fist in the air and rocks his head back and forth to the music, transforming from his initial character of a young woman to a

head-banging adolescent boy.

The performances by Staxx and Tigger point to the possibility, within neo-burlesque, of highlighting the structures that make both femininity and masculinity readable as such. While the ease with which femininity can be performed has become nearly axiomatic, performances of masculinity are, most work on the topic agrees, more difficult. As Judith Halberstam notes in her book *Female Masculinity*, it has only been within the last two decades that drag king performance has become popular within lesbian subcultures. Though the need for butch lesbians to "pass" in order to navigate public space safely provides one explanation for the lack of a lesbian drag tradition, Halberstam argues that the social meanings attached to masculinity provide another possible explanation. The "realness" and "naturalness" associated with masculinity and its "signifying effects" discourages performances of masculinity, giving it the appearance of non-performativity (Halberstam, 234). Appearing as a lack of affect and artifice, masculinity lends itself less easily to performance or imitation than femininity.

The performances by Short Staxx and Tigger!, then provide a glance at the ways that neo-burlesque performance opens up a space to foreground the performances of both masculinity and femininity. Both Staxx and Tigger! transition from one gendered performance to another, not as a means of revealing their 'natural' or 'true' identities but rather to foreground both performances as performances. Both performances stay true to the neo-burlesque practice of removing layers of clothes as the performances continues and both end their act performing a gender that 'matches' their biological sex. Yet because both acts involve two separate characters, the exposure of the performer's body informs
the presentation of a second character, rather than positioning the exposure of the body as the presentation of an 'authentic' identity.

**Neo-burlesque and the Abject Body: The Classical meets the Grotesque**

The markers of neo-burlesque - humor, glamour, the slow exposure of the flesh - transform the bodies of performers into crowd-pleasing spectacles. The same characteristics that produce burlesque's visual pleasures when pushed a little too far, transform the display of the body into a presentation of feminine excess. Drawing attention to the body and its fleshy excesses, reveling in over-the-top displays of glamour and incorporating outside substances into their acts, neo-burlesque performers navigate the space between the classical and the grotesque body.

Burlesque's ties to grotesque display date back to the genre's beginnings. During the 19th and 20th century, burlesque performers shared the stage with sideshow acts and travelled with carnivals. The current burlesque revival intersects with a parallel revival of interest in sideshow traditions and burlesque dancers often appear with performers who swallow swords, eat glass and drive nails up their noses. While a few burlesque performers incorporate sideshow tricks into their acts most do not directly incorporate these types of shocking bodily feats into their performances. Burlesque's connection to the grotesque occurs in more subtle ways, blurring the line between the self-contained, glamorous classical body and the excessive, out of control grotesque body. Burlesque presents a merger of the classical and the grotesque body, presenting on the one hand the body as an object of desire and, on the other, the body as excessive.
If the movements of burlesque serve to display and highlight particular parts of the body, tassel twirling performs this function most spectacularly. Often performed as the finale of a performance, tassel twirling involves moving the body in a way that causes the tassels on the tip of the dancer’s nipple pasties to twirl. Tassel twirling is considered a skill that must be learned and many burlesque teachers offer classes specifically for this purpose. A related, though far less widespread performance trick involves spinning tassels - termed 'assels' that are attached to the buttocks. Denver based performer Fanny Spankings brags of her ability to spin her nipples tassels and her 'assles' all at the same time\textsuperscript{26}. While burlesque movements that foreground the breasts and buttocks often present these body parts as erotic and desirable, the practice of tassel-twirling pushes this focus into the absurd. Tassel twirling, and the physical exertion required to accomplish it, transforms the breasts from an individual part of the self-contained, classical body into the unruly protuberances of the grotesque body.

The infiltration of the grotesque body into the burlesque performance occurs in other ways as well. The inclusion of outside materials that are poured and smeared onto the body, often as the finale, provides an opportunity for tactility in a medium that remains largely visual. Within the performance, these objects serve as abject substances; meant to be consumed by the body, they are instead placed on its surface. Though the audience cannot touch the performer, the contact between her skin and an outside substance evokes the sensation of touch. While some performances utilize this strategy to

reaffirm the performance as a spectacle of bodily pleasure, others push their interaction with the outside substances to a point of excess that borders on the grotesque. This misuse enacts a playful abjection: the substances are not "unclean" enough to evoke pure disgust, but rather create a tension that straddles the line between desire and revulsion.

The incorporation of outside substances into the neo-burlesque performance can take different forms. In some cases, the use of non-abject substances and the containment of the body and the substances results in the preservation of the classical body. During the signature act of performer Dita Von Teese, the dancer slowly strips out of her classic burlesque costume - usually a gown, corset and bra covered with glitter or rhinestones - before climbing up a step ladder and bathing in a giant martini glass filled with a clear liquid. Von Teese splashes around in the glass, poses on the side of the glass and squeezes the water out of an olive shaped sponge on to her chest and stomach. While the act draws on the pleasure evoked by the connection between the body of the performer and the liquid, the performance contains both the performer and the liquid within the glass. This containment, along with the use of a clear liquid assumed to be water - a substance that is not out of place on the body - creates a performance that fails to challenge the coherence and beauty of the classical body.

In one of her signature acts, the burlesque performer World Famous *Bob* mixes a martini with a shaker placed firmly between her breasts. After shaking the martini thoroughly utilizing a shimmying motion, the performer strains the drink with a martini strainer held between her teeth. The humor of the act relies initially on the absurdity of the activity - the performer making a martini without using her hands. The act borders on
the grotesque as, for the acts finale, *Bob* reaches between her legs and pulls three olives out of her underwear, drops them one at a time into the martini and offers it to a patron in the front row. Featured in the documentary film, Velvet Hammer Burlesque, *Bob* performs the routine for the documentary without an audience and, looking into the camera, offers the martini to the viewer. Offering the martini to an audience member, or, in the documentary the imagined spectator, *Bob* presents the viewer both with the spectacle of her body and the result of its labors - the martini. At the same time, the proximity between the martini - specifically the olives - and the performer's body, hints at the grotesque.

Conclusion

As a performance genre, neo-burlesque foregrounds the conditions of its own presentation, as performers instruct audiences in appropriate spectatorial behavior, incorporate technical difficulties and other mishaps into the performance and highlight the contrast between elaborate costumes and mundane venue interiors. The repetition within neo-burlesque of particular movements, gestures and costume styles marks neo-burlesque as a recognizable performance genre. These norms are acknowledged and often overturned by performers who draw on the audience’s knowledge of neo-burlesque norms and conventions to create performances that push the genre’s boundaries. The self-reflexivity of the genre co-exists with performances that enthusiastically embrace trappings of femininity often deemed excessive. The focus on the excessiveness of the

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female body is reflected in performances that incorporate aspects of the abject body, navigating the space between the classical and the grotesque body.
Chapter 3: Lived Identity and 'DIY':
Neo-Burlesque Performers and Subcultural Authenticity

Neo-burlesque is, in many senses, a very public subculture. It centers on performances that take place in public spaces, open to anyone who can pay the admission fee and prove they are old enough to enter. Yet the infrastructure that supports these performances - the costume production, rehearsals, technical support, and other behind-the-scenes work - exists outside of the public eye. Perhaps more importantly, the social network that underlies this infrastructure, along with the ways that subcultural participants make sense of their participation, remains largely hidden. The self-awareness observed during performances is largely an acknowledgment of the performance and the context surrounding it, an admittance of neo-burlesque as a particular style with certain norms. It does not necessarily shed light on the underpinnings that make neo-burlesque a recognizable subculture.

In discussing the perspective neo-burlesque performers have on the subculture they inhabit, this chapter focuses on the way performers define the subculture through particular markers of subcultural authenticity and as it relates to their lived identities. The emphasis on creativity, self-reliance and an ethics of 'do-it-yourself' as markers of subcultural authenticity reaffirms the tendency of performers to view neo-burlesque as a site for self-construction, for the assumption of stylized, artificial and hyperfeminine performances. At the same time, many performers also emphasize the relationship between neo-burlesque and their lived identities, portraying neo-burlesque as a means of exploring their identities as women. Participant's focus on neo-burlesque as a means of
exploring an attachment to lived, feminine identities disrupts any attempts to frame the subculture as an example of voluntarist gender performance. While viewing neo-burlesque shows provides an opportunity to examine neo-burlesque as a performance genre, speaking with subcultural participants allows for an analysis of neo-burlesque as a situated practice and a social network.

Conversations with performers also shed light on the attitude subcultural participants take towards the increased visibility of their subculture. While subcultural studies documents the appropriation of otherwise "pure" subcultures by the mass media, neo-burlesque has a more complex relationship with mainstream appropriation. The burlesque revival is, after all, a performance based subculture - it relies on an audience for its very survival. Interview subjects expressed a more pragmatic attitude towards manifestations of their subculture in mainstream media and popular culture than is depicted in most work on subcultures. Despite this pragmatism, participants expressed concern with the form neo-burlesque takes as it is represented within popular culture. Subcultural participants take for granted that, as neo-burlesque gains visibility, the versions of it depicted in popular culture will be shallow or uninteresting from their perspective. At the same time, the performers I spoke with were not especially distressed by this development, choosing instead to focus on the continued creation within the subcultural sphere of performances they deem creative and subversive. Subcultural participants differentiate between manifestations of neo-burlesque in popular culture derided as inauthentic and the increasing success of performers they view as fellow members of the subculture. I argue that the emphasis on 'DIY' creates an environment
where subcultural roots trump questions of mainstream success as the deciding factor when questions of subcultural authenticity arise. Those performers who are seen as having achieved visibility and success through their devotion to 'DIY' are admired and respected, while mainstream manifestations of neo-burlesque that are seen as being manufactured outside of the subculture are maligned.

**Method**

Researchers doing work on subcultures are faced with the challenge of taking into consideration the opinions and statements made by subcultural participants, while keeping a critical distance and sustaining their role as a researcher and subcultural outsider. Speaking with subcultural participants provides a perspective on neo-burlesque that cannot be accessed from watching performances or reading other outsiders accounts of the subculture. These conversations informed my analysis of performances and provided a look at subcultural participant's opinions concerning manifestations of neo-burlesque in popular culture. Given the lack of research on neo-burlesque, the interviews raised issues that suggest possibilities for further research on female-dominated subcultures.

The balance between researcher and subcultural participant is an issue often mentioned within subcultural studies. Recounting the distance between his own experience of punk and the representation of the subculture put forward by Dick Hebdige, postsubcultural theorist David Muggleton critiques what he sees as Hebdige's failure to fully consider the viewpoints of subcultural participants themselves. (Muggleton, 3). That the researcher does, in most cases, approach subcultural participants as a non-participant,
an outsider, must be considered. I fall roughly into the same demographic as my interview subjects in regards to gender, age and educational background but I approached neo-burlesque as a subcultural outsider; I was an occasional neo-burlesque spectator prior to beginning my research but have no performance experience.

By conducting longer interviews with a handful of subjects, I hoped to gather a deeper perspective on the subculture than might have been possible through survey data or conducting shorter interviews with more subjects. This decision was also driven by the lack of existing research on neo-burlesque. There has been relatively little academic work published on the topic, which is not surprising considering the movement's relatively recent development. Debra Ferreday and Jacki Wilson, authors of the existing published academic work on the topic, approach their research with an emphasis on the United Kingdom and, though the authors include the voices of performers in the form of quotes from already existing interviews, websites or online message boards, neither author conducted research by directly speaking with or surveying neo-burlesque performers²⁸. Given the lack of current research on neo-burlesque performers as subcultural participants, this aspect of the research is, perhaps, the most tentative. It provides the beginnings for further research on neo-burlesque specifically, and female-dominated subcultures more generally.

During interviews I began with a few questions concerning the interview subject's own involvement in neo-burlesque, asking how they became involved, if they

²⁸ The only two substantial published work on neo-burlesque available at the time of writing were Ferreday, 2008 and Wilson, 2008.
had performance experience prior to their involvement in neo-burlesque and what inspired them to begin performing or taking classes. I also broached the topic of the neo-burlesque community, inquiring about their experiences with and impressions of the wider subculture. Beyond these beginning questions, the interviews differed from one interview subject to another as I focused my questions to fit their particular experience within the subculture, or let them take a stronger role in guiding the conversation. The subculture offers participants a creative outlet for performing, but also becomes a social network. Performing, along with creating costumes, rehearsing, getting bookings and doing publicity work becomes a second job for performers who do not quit their day jobs and more than a full time job for those who do. It should come as no surprise then that the performers I spoke with were eager to discuss the subculture and had strong opinions on their role as performers and the neo-burlesque community as a whole.

The six subcultural participants I spoke with represented a wide range of levels of experience within the neo-burlesque community. One of the interview subjects, Erin recently began taking neo-burlesque classes in San Francisco but has yet to perform publicly. Another relative newcomer to the subculture, Emily began taking classes about a year ago and has performed a few times. Two of the performers, Rebecca and Adam both currently support themselves through their careers as neo-burlesque performers. Only one of the interview subjects, Beth, is not currently involved in neo-burlesque. Beth provided the perspective of someone who was involved the early development of the subculture: From 2001-2003 she organized a series of all-female strip shows she describes as "back alley prohibition burlesque." Though the shows were organized for all-
female private parties Beth was hosting, some of the performers who first performed at the parties went on to become involved in the neo-burlesque scene.

Examining neo-burlesque specifically as a subculture, rather than as a movement within the arts, necessitates a greater focus on the participants, their backgrounds, interests and experiences within the neo-burlesque community. The neo-burlesque movement has been driven largely by performers and has emerged outside of the support or credibility bestowed by arts institutions. Considering their interests in, perspectives on and experiences with neo-burlesque provides a crucial perspective that must be considered in any discussion of the movement.

**Subcultural Authenticity: Neo-Burlesque and DIY**

For any subcultural group, the boundary between subcultural participant and outsider hinges on the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge, the display of styles and behavior that mark one as an insider, a legitimate subcultural participant. Within neo-burlesque, subcultural authenticity hinges less on the display of certain styles of performance than on the internalization of an ethic of 'do-it-yourself' or 'DIY'. ‘DIY’ as a marker of subcultural authenticity is apparent in the importance placed by performers on the genre's creative freedom. The focus within the subculture on participants creating their own costumes illustrates the importance of DIY as a marker of subcultural authenticity. While some participants cite monetary limitations as a reason for the emphasis on constructing ones own costumes, the practice is also discussed as a marker of dedication and creativity. Performers cite the chance to create and wear elaborate costumes as inspiring their initial interest in neo-burlesque performance and acknowledge
that performers may be looked down upon for relying on mass-produced costume items. The creation of costumes is both a draw for many performers and a crucial skill for gaining subcultural authenticity.

The importance placed on the process of costume creation, as opposed to the style of costumes themselves, presents another important point regarding neo-burlesque and subcultural authenticity. While neo-burlesque has an identifiable style - largely drawn from classic burlesque - questions of subcultural authenticity hinge less on the style of a performer's costume than on the role she played in creating it. The value placed on creativity and the creation of performances that expand the boundaries of neo-burlesque means that unconventional costume choices may garner more respect from other subcultural participants. The emphasis on DIY applies as well to participants who are involved in various styles of neo-burlesque performance. Neo-burlesque artists express admiration for other subcultural participants who may specialize in styles of performance quite different from their own. Even those performers deemed less boundary pushing or more "mainstream" gain the respect of their subcultural peers through their commitment to DIY.

Subcultural participants often frame the practice of constructing their own costumes as a matter of financial necessity. As Rebecca points out, the cost of creating costumes as elaborate as those preferred by many performers can be prohibitive. According to Rebecca, most performers do not make enough to purchase costumes and so instead learn to make their own or buy and trade things with other performers. While she

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29. Rebecca, Interview with the author, written notes, 5 March 2008
mentioned an acquaintance who spent around one thousand dollars on a custom-made corset and accompanying outfit, spending this much on a costume is not the norm. Only extremely successful performers are seen as needing custom made costumes. More often, according to Rebecca, performers make their own costumes, or may trade or purchase parts of costumes from other performers.

The importance placed on making your own costumes and the role that the process of costume creation plays within the neo-burlesque community suggests that the focus on an ethics of ‘DIY’ goes beyond simple necessity. While the focus on performer-produced costumes is doubtless fueled partly by the inability to afford more elaborate costumes, this devotion to a DIY ethics also serves other purposes within the subculture. Emily, a neo-burlesque performer in Los Angeles, emphasized the importance of creative costumes, recounting a performer who was "looked down on" for wearing a mass-produced mini-skirt as part of a costume. Emily also mentioned holding craft nights together with other performers, suggesting that the focus on DIY provides a means by which neo-burlesque is solidified as a community, in addition to a performance genre. As a performer who supports herself through performance, Rebecca stated that she and a good friend who is a fellow performer spend their days working on costumes and choreographing routines and their nights performing. Producing or designing ones own costumes become a marker of subcultural authenticity, proof of a performer's creativity and dedication to their craft and binds one to the community as the process of creating costumes becomes a communal activity.

30. Emily, Interview with the author, written notes, 1 March 2009
31. Rebecca, Interview with the author, written notes, 3 March 2009
The community's reliance on and embrace of ‘DIY’ influences the way that newer subcultural participants are brought into the community. Describing the process by which "green performers" become involved in neo-burlesque, Samantha described the neo-burlesque community in her city as a "back-scratching community" stating that newer performers are expected to help out backstage with performances as a means of becoming accepted as full subcultural participants and serious performers32. Neo-burlesque has become so popular that new performers may have a hard time being taken seriously or finding a place in the subculture. One way to get involved, according to Samantha, is by helping more established performers with their shows, acting as a stage manager or helping with other tasks that go into the production of a show. Samantha emphasized the lack of funds that exist for shows and emphasized volunteering to help as an important step for less experienced performers who want to get involved.

The loyalty to fellow subcultural participants is also reflected in the willingness of interview subjects to praise other performance groups that may perform a style of neo-burlesque quite different from their own. Discussing the Atomic Bombshells, a Seattle based troupe known for a classic burlesque style, Rebecca praised the troupe's performances, calling the troupe a "gem to watch".33 While Rebecca saw the Atomic Bombshells's style of burlesque as less confrontational or shocking than some other acts, this did not diminish her respect for their performance. Describing them as "really digestible, really mainstream," Rebecca suggested she would gladly take her grandmother to their show. She contrasted the Atomic Bombshells with a performance group called

32. Samantha, Interview with the author, written notes, 18 March 2009
33. Rebecca, Interview with the author, written notes, 3 March 2009
Trannyshack who she described as "the most debaucherous," "gross" and "in your face," though these adjectives were not meant to be a negative assessment of the group. At the same time, she praised the Atomic Bombshell's glamorous "classical striptease" as "such a treat to watch and "of a different era. While portraying the two groups as occupying either end of the neo-burlesque performance spectrum, from the classical to the grotesque, Rebecca expressed admiration for both and mentioned attending and enjoying performances by both groups.

The expressions of admiration for groups performing a wide array of styles reflects the emphasis, within neo-burlesque, on DIY as a marker of subcultural authenticity. While some performers may prefer one style over another, they voice respect for other subcultural participants who are seen as self-created performers, who display a dedication to their craft and an adherence to the ethic of DIY. The focus on community creativity and self-reliance extends to the process by which newer participants are accepted into the subculture. Dancers wishing to become accepted into the subculture are expected to display their talent as performers, but also as costume designers, stage managers and promoters and may also be expected to assist more experienced participants. Displays of creativity and a commitment to DIY are the means by which newer participants are accepted into the subculture and the standards current participants use to judge the subcultural authenticity of fellow subcultural participants.

34. ibid.
35. ibid.
Neo-burlesque and Lived Identities

The emphasis within neo-burlesque on 'DIY' and the role of the performer as the driving force behind the performance may seem to invite interpretations that credit neo-burlesque with opening up a space of liberated self-construction. That this type of reading ignores the status of performance genres as already codified sets of movements was discussed earlier. Additionally, interpretations of neo-burlesque that might draw on Butler's theory of performativity to justify such a reading fail to consider Butler's own response to certain common misreadings of her work. While neo-burlesque may, for some performers, open up a space for "a repetition of the law that is not its consolidation" this potential navigation of the law cannot be considered a rejection of the law.

In the preface to *Bodies that Matter*, Butler attempts to correct misreadings of the theory of performativity, stating it is not meant to suggest that one "wakes in the morning, peruses the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, dons that gender for the day, and then replace this ferment to its right place at night" (Butler, 1993, x). Quoting this passage from Butler, Ferreday ends her article on neo-burlesque suggesting that the "fantasy of putting femininity on and off in this way" might be central to neo-burlesque femininity. I agree that some aspect of the neo-burlesque subculture lend themselves to this interpretation. The focus on DIY, the self-awareness displayed in performances and the agency performers display in choosing to become performers contribute to a reading that highlights neo-burlesque as a practice of feminine self-construction.

Ultimately, however, I believe a reading that focuses on voluntarist fantasies as a
basis for understanding neo-burlesque risks misreading Butler's correction. Her example of the fictional closet constitutes a misreading of performativity not only because of the suggestion of unbridled agency - the ability to "[don] that gender for the day" - but also because, even in the circumstance described, the choice of genders - and their accompanying meanings, norms and expectations - is always already circumscribed, limited to whatever available genders appear in the closet. In the same sense, the genders performed within neo-burlesque are always already dictated as identities recognizable to the audience. Though the combination of norms and codes from a variety of structures of feminine performance opens up possibilities for subversive and humorous pastiche, this raiding of various genres is comprehensible because it draws on recognizable structures of gendered meaning. While the combination of various discourses or the genre's own self-reflexivity may increase the possibility of "a repetition of the law that is not its consolidation" it still functions as a repetition of a law not chosen by the performer.

Additionally, such a reading downplays the tension between parody and lived experience that Ferreday herself identifies. This connection between performers’ neo-burlesque femininity and their lived identities was evident throughout my conversation with interview subjects. Several performers described neo-burlesque as a way of performing hyper femininity, taking on a feminine persona understood as over the top and artificial. While other interview subjects did not emphasize their feminine performances as artificial, they did present them as consciously distinct from their daily, lived identities. At the same time, performers framed neo-burlesque performance as a means of navigating their lived identities, either as an exploration of them or a means of
Several of the performers connected neo-burlesque specifically to a hyper feminine performance that they discussed in relation to drag. Rebecca described the presentation of femininity in neo-burlesque as a "caricature". According to Rebecca, the excessive presentation of femininity found in neo-burlesque creates a spectacle that is the "opposite of real womanhood". Describing herself as a "drag queen stuck in a woman's body," Samantha also considers neo-burlesque a "hyper" feminine performance. She sees little difference between neo-burlesque and drag besides the focus within neo-burlesque on the striptease. As further evidence of neo-burlesque's relation to drag, Samantha says that, when in "burlesque drag" performers "look like completely different people". In conversations with both performers, comparisons between neo-burlesque and drag functioned to accentuate neo-burlesque as a conscious performance, an assumption of an intentionally exaggerated identity.

Performers I spoke with who did not frame their neo-burlesque performance in relation to drag still emphasized performing as an opportunity to enact a feminine identity imagined as distinct from, though related to, their daily 'lived' identity. Erin, a relative newcomer to neo-burlesque, cited the opportunity for dressing up as part neo-burlesque's appeal, comparing it to "being a kid again, putting on mom's clothes". Neo-burlesque provides an opportunity to wear clothes and makeup that she deemed "not appropriate to

36. Rebecca, Interview with the author, written notes, 3 March 2009
37. ibid.
38. Samantha, Interview with the author, written notes, 18 March 2009
39. ibid.
40. Erin, Interview with the author, written notes, 9 March 2009
her day to day lifestyle" where they would interfere with activities like riding her bike. She believes neo-burlesque offers a chance to demonstrate "the hyper feminine side that [she] never shows". Though Erin characterized neo-burlesque femininity as different from the identity she performs in her daily life, she described her involvement in the genre as a means of dealing with her relationship to her own identity as a woman. Saying she never "really dealt with what it means to be a woman or what [she] thought it meant," Erin suggested that displaying what she called her "hyper feminine" side might help her do that. The distinction then, between her daily, lived feminine identity and burlesque femininity was depicted as a matter of convenience: elaborate trappings of femininity are not practical for day-to-day life. At the same time, she suggested burlesque femininity was not entirely unrelated to her own identity, as it might help her understand her own identity as a woman.

The appeal of performing was framed, by some other performers, as an escape from a daily lived identity depicted as unpleasant. Though she is no longer involved in neo-burlesque performance, Beth cited her belief in the "healing" power of performance as a driving force behind her desire to organize the all-female strip shows she was formerly involved with. Describing performance as an opportunity "to step outside your boring life where you [are] miserable or ugly or marginalized or whatever" and enter into a "glorious, sexy, fabulous" space, Beth emphasized performance as a fantasy space. For Beth performance offers the possibility of a momentary transformation, the creation

41. ibid.
42. ibid.
43. Beth, Interview with the author, written notes, 12 March 2009
44. ibid.
of a performed identity deemed more appealing than ones lived identity. While the actual performance may be momentary, Beth credited her experiences as a performer with helping her blossom into a "more aware person"\textsuperscript{45}. Though performances are short, Beth believes that the "split seconds" on stage "can be really transforming"\textsuperscript{46}. For Beth, then, the performance spaces constitute an escape from everyday life, a chance to step into a "glorious, sexy, fabulous space."\textsuperscript{47} While this space is imagined as outside of everyday life, Beth believes it impacts the performers lived reality, potentially transforming them into a "more aware person"\textsuperscript{48}. Even those performers who identified the onstage performance as constituting a fantasy space connected it, in some way, to their lived identity.

The potential for performances to engage with the performer's lived identity in some way was judged to be an important part of performance by one performer I spoke with. Critiquing performances she described as "easily digestible," Samantha stated that she preferred neo-burlesque performances that went beyond what she termed "cute burlesque"\textsuperscript{49}. Instead she prefers performances that she thinks demonstrate the performer grappling with larger questions, asking "what does this mean to [them] as a performer, what does this mean to [them] as a woman?"\textsuperscript{50}. While she was not able to describe exactly the distinction between "cute burlesque" and the "more intellectual burlesque," she sees as distinct from it, Samantha admitted that, when she first began performing, she

\textsuperscript{45} ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} ibid
\textsuperscript{49} Samantha, Interview with the author, written notes, 18 March 2009
\textsuperscript{50} ibid.
performed what she now thinks of as "cute burlesque". She attributed her "cute burlesque" performance, then, to inexperience; after developing as a neo-burlesque performer and seeing a broader range of performances, she now sees herself getting away from what she referred to as the "nudge nudge, wink wink" of "cute burlesque". For Samantha, then, neo-burlesque opens up the possibility for addressing feminine identity, but performances that are able to address those issues are governed by a certain set of (difficult to vocalize) rules. At the same time, performances are judged partly on the belief that the participants have approached the performance as relevant to their lived identity, considering what it means to them "as a performer" or "as a woman."

Performers understand their involvement in neo-burlesque performance as both the assumption of an artificial, hyper feminine identity and as a means of understanding their lived identities. The pleasure performers take in the assumption of excessive performance identities and elaborate costumes belies interpretations that present neo-burlesque as primarily ironic. Though participant's commitment to DIY expresses a need for creative autonomy that suggests a desire for self-creation, the appropriation of feminine identities drawn from a myriad of sources hints at the inability of any gendered performance to spring, fully formed, from the imagination of its creator. Given these limitations, neo-burlesque performers combine a critical distance - framing their onstage identities as artificial, hyperfeminine and consciously constructed - with an acknowledgment that the performances are relevant to their lived identities.

51. ibid.
52. ibid.
Neo-burlesque as situated resistance

The connection between performer's lived identity and their assumption of the norms of neo-burlesque performance cannot be viewed outside of their lived identities and the power structures that shape the experience of those identities. Viewing neo-burlesque as a form of situated resistance to gendered norms requires acknowledging the way gendered norms adhere differently to different groups depending on the intersection of various identity categories. While neo-burlesque performance revolves largely around performances of femininity, neo-burlesque's reliance on classic burlesque style creates performances that are inevitable marked by race and class. Burlesque's historic associations with white, working class, female sexuality marks any appropriation of the genre as, at least partly, an appropriation of a feminine identity marked as white and working class.

For one performer I spoke with, her identity as a woman of color, combined with the genre's reliance on performances of femininity marked as white, complicates her relationship to performing. For Erin, drawing on the history of neo-burlesque and pin-ups is one of the main pleasures involved in neo-burlesque performance. Erin cited her interest in pin-up images as a driving force behind her interest in neo-burlesque and specifically mentioned enjoying old pin-up photos of Bettie Page and Tempest Storm. She described herself as a "history buff" who also had an interest in fashion and was more interested in the "revivalist" side of neo-burlesque. At the same time, Erin stated that, as a woman of color, she faced additional "issues" with performing acts that

53. Erin, Interview with the author, written notes, 9 March 2009
reference earlier periods of burlesque. Using the popularity of straight bangs inspired by pin-up model Bettie Page as an example, Erin pointed out that she "can't do that kind of thing" with her hair. She could wear a wig to achieve that look, she admitted, but that was not something that appealed to her, as she is "not that into wigs" or into doing "high femme" performance\(^\text{54}\). By suggesting that donning a wig would mark her performance as "high femme," Erin connected the wig to a performance marked as more exaggerated or artificial. In order to achieve the Bettie Paige "look" she would need to take on a performance persona she imagines as more artificial, a move she is not interested in making.

Another performer I spoke with presented her identity as an African-American as less of a complicating factor. While Samantha acknowledged that neo-burlesque is a largely white subculture, she attributed this to a lack of exposure to burlesque within the African-American community, discounting the possibility of any exclusivity, stating "it [is] not like there is [not] room for them"\(^\text{55}\). Citing her own experience and the experience of other performers she knows, Samantha suggested that many African-American women who are involved in the subculture "find burlesque through the gay community"\(^\text{56}\). Samantha seemed to discount critiques of neo-burlesque as relying on models of femininity that exclude women of color. At the same time, she acknowledged that many women of color who are performers link their involvement with neo-burlesque to their connection with the gay community, suggesting that the social networks and cultural

\(^{54}\) ibid.
\(^{55}\) Samantha, Interview with the author, written notes, 18 March 2009
\(^{56}\) Samantha, Interview with the author, written notes, 18 March 2009
attachments that bring some women of color into neo-burlesque derive from their identification with the gay community.

While these two performers presented slightly different perspectives on the role of race within neo-burlesque, neither wanted to see their involvement in the scene as solely, or even mostly, determined by their racial identity. While she remarked on some of the ways her involvement in neo-burlesque was impacted by the subculture's overall whiteness, Erin also emphasized that she does not "go into things to bring diversity to them". While Adam stated that he sees "heated debates and feelings about how white the scene is," I found it was a topic rarely broached outside of interviews with or statements by women of color who are performers. Neo-burlesque’s reliance on codes of femininity shaped specifically by whiteness is a topic that is not often addressed. Given the tendency of whiteness to go un-noted, to become the default, it should not be surprising that it often functions that way within neo-burlesque. At the same time, this absence of acknowledgement conceals the way the identities enacted throughout neo-burlesque performance are constructed in and through norms shaped through frameworks of race, gender and class.

While neo-burlesque allows for a feminine performance that draws largely on norms of femininity constructed as white, it also exists in a specific relation to economic class. Like age, economic class is imagined as a quantitative measure, a question of income and personal financial means. As with age however, the focus on quantitative...
measures conceals the way the category relies heavily on social markers. Despite the individual incomes of performers, neo-burlesque is marked as largely a middle or upper-middle class pursuit. Performances occur in theaters and bars not solely marked as "strip clubs" media coverage of emphasizes the genre's relationship to performance art. Presenting neo-burlesque performers as "artists" marks them with the cultural capital bestowed on artists constructing them as middle or upper-middle class despite their income.

Acknowledging the relationship between neo-burlesque performance and economic class, Erin stated that the exclusion of some women was a "class thing" because performers doing neo-burlesque have the "luxury" of choosing to perform, stating "if [performers] strip [they are] doing it because [they] want to". This agency is contrasted with the assumed lack of choice faced by women who work in conventional strip clubs or other parts of the sex industry. Suggesting that "neo-burlesque performer" and "conventional stripper" are two distinct, mutually exclusive categories is clearly problematic, due to the existence of performers who move between the two genres, but the distinctiveness of the two forms is emphasized by media coverage.

At the same time, the construction of neo-burlesque as a pursuit identified with a group marked socially, if not financially, as middle or upper-middle class appears in stark contrast to the images of the performers from burlesque's golden age, for whom burlesque was a route to financial independence. The appropriation of a genre identified with working class spectators and performers suggests that the question of resistance to

59. Erin, Interview with the author, written notes, 9 March 2009
gendered norms must also consider the way norms function differently due to perceived differences in socioeconomic class. The reproductive pressures enacted onto the bodies of white, middle and upper-middle class women differ significantly from those enacted onto the bodies of women of color and working class women. While women identified as white, and middle or upper-middle class experience pressure to achieve what Halberstam terms "reproductive time," the reproductive capacities of non-white or working class women are constructed as dangerous and excessive (Halberstam, 4). Neo-burlesque, then represents the appropriation of working class identity markers, by performers with access to cultural capital that marks them as symbolically, if not financially, as middle or upper-middle class. While the appropriation of these markers of working class femininity is not entirely unproblematic, I would argue that the appropriation of glamour and sexual identity identified with classic burlesque may act as a form of resistance against the reproductive pressures and expectations of sexual purity projected onto middle and upper-middle class women.

**Burlesque and 'Natural Bodies'**

The embrace of performers with a variety of body types constitutes the site at which neo-burlesque defines itself most specifically in opposition to popular culture. The emphasis, within neo-burlesque on women with 'natural bodies' is central to the discussion of neo-burlesque as subversive and empowering. Several of the performers I spoke with mentioned neo-burlesque's openness to performers who fall outside conventional standards of attractiveness as part of the genre's appeal. The celebration of 'natural' bodies constructs neo-burlesque in opposition to the surgically enhanced and
airbrushed bodies associated with popular culture. Targeting specific cultural norms, neo-burlesque claims to ‘size-acceptance’ and the embrace of ‘natural bodies’ constitute a site for the resistance of certain norms that construct ‘acceptable’ feminine bodies through performances that engage with and express a lived attachment to feminine identity. At the same time, some within the community are skeptical of the subculture's claims to size-acceptance, noting that the appearance within neo-burlesque of a broader range of body types only exists in comparison to the excessively narrow range of bodies presented in popular culture.

Several performers I spoke with discussed neo-burlesque's openness to performers whose bodies challenge conventional expectations of feminine attractiveness. Discussing the neo-burlesque classes she was taking, Erin spoke positively of seeing women "of all different ages and body types"\(^60\). Emily, a performer in Los Angeles stressed the emphasis within Los Angeles's neo-burlesque scene on "natural bodies": women who haven't had plastic surgery and whose bodies may not match up with cultural ideals of the 'perfect' female form. Emily encouraged burlesque classes as a "fun experience" and a "good way to raise your self esteem" even for people who are not necessarily interested in performing publicly\(^61\). The acceptance of certain norms of femininity - the pleasure offered by sexual display - accompanies the challenge of others through expanding the definition of what constitutes a sexually desirable female body.

Portrayed as a specific rejection of mainstream cultural ideals, the embrace of

\(^{60}\) Erin, Interview with the author, written notes, 9 March 2009
\(^{61}\) Emily, Interview with the author, written notes, 1 March 2009
natural bodies is also the first thing performers fear will be lost with neo-burlesque's increasing popularity. Adam, who describes neo-burlesque as "non-age-ist" and "non-size-ist" admits that, as neo-burlesque becomes more "assimilated" there will be "pockets" that adhere more to "mainstream cultural ideals of what bodies should be". Rebecca acknowledged that the performers she knew in Seattle have "drastically different body types" but are still all "cute people" who are "proportional". The range of body types welcome in mainstream culture is so narrow, Rebecca believes, it should "not be surprising" that burlesque dancers do have more diverse body types. Neo-burlesque performers only seem to represent a diverse range of body types, according to Rebecca, because the range is compared to the completely unrealistic standards set by the dominant culture. At the same time, Rebecca believes that "girls that are way bigger have a harder time getting booked unless they're super talented". She specifically mentioned Dirty Martini, a well-known performer in New York City who is often mentioned during discussions of the diverse body types in neo-burlesque. In Rebecca's opinion, Dirty Martini succeeded because she is an extremely talented performer. Rebecca seems to suggest, however, that Dirty Martini had to display more talent than performers with bodies that fit more closely with cultural ideals of what an attractive body looks like in order to become successful. To Rebecca, then, the acceptance of a more diverse range of body types is partial as a resistance to normative beauty ideals, connoting an expansion of the extremely narrow beauty ideals of the dominant culture.

62. Adam, Interview with the author, written notes, 14 March 2009
63. Rebecca, Interview with the author, written notes, 3 March 2009
64. ibid.
Good For Business: Neo-burlesque and mainstream visibility

The movement of music, fashion, slang and performance styles between subcultural groups and popular culture is an often-covered topic within subcultural studies. The transformation of neo-burlesque from do-it-yourself subculture to pop music inspiration initially seems to confirm arguments made within subcultural studies about the progression of subcultural style: a subcultural group develops around certain clothing or music styles and behaviors, these new styles are picked up by mainstream press, stripped of their resistant meaning and commodified into mass-produced goods with little or no benefit to most subcultural participants. Neo-burlesque participants I spoke with, however, expressed more nuanced attitudes to the increased popularity of the subculture they participated in. This was especially true of performers who are attempting to support themselves through subcultural involvement.

Subcultural participants who strive to make a living from their participation in neo-burlesque - as performers, producers and teachers - express a pragmatic attitude towards the subculture's increasing visibility and popularity. While they may express disdain for particular 'mainstream' manifestations of the neo-burlesque 'look,' they acknowledge that neo-burlesque's popularity expands their pool of potential audience members and students, thereby increasing their ability to support themselves solely from their involvement in the scene.

This more pragmatic attitude may stem partly from the age of neo-burlesque's members. All those involved are adults who may feel financial pressure younger subcultural participants are less likely to experience. In addition, many neo-burlesque
performers have professional training as dancers, artists or performers, a background that encourages them to approach performing not as a hobby but as something more akin to a career. Of the six performers I spoke with, three had backgrounds in theater or the visual arts. Both the performers I spoke with who relied on neo-burlesque related activities as their sole means of financial support had formal training as artists.

Rebecca, a performer in Seattle who supports herself performing neo-burlesque and teaching belly dance also works with a friend to offer professional pin-up portrait packages. For a set fee, Rebecca does the client's hair and makeup in a pin-up or neo-burlesque style and provides the client with a costume. After the client's new pin-up 'look' is complete, her friend, a professional photographer, does a series of portraits. Rebecca described neo-burlesque's increasing popularity as "kind of a good thing." She expressed disdain for the appropriation of neo-burlesque style in pop culture, complaining about pop star Katy Perry's "stupid ass look" and the performance of "faux" lesbianism depicted in Perry's hit single "I Kissed a Girl." At the same time, she also acknowledged that performers like Perry, who is known for a vintage-inspired style, increase the popularity of neo-burlesque and pin-up style, a shift that Rebecca hopes will create more customers for the pin-up portraits service. In this way, Rebecca acknowledged, the mainstreaming of neo-burlesque style is "good for business." Her pragmatism belies the impression, often present in research on youth subcultures, that participants are simply hostile to the increased popularity or commodification of the subcultures they have created. While critical of manifestations of neo-burlesque style

65. Rebecca, Interview with the author, written notes, 3 March 2009
appearing in popular culture, Rebecca acknowledged that she might benefit financially from the increased visibility of neo-burlesque.

While the increased popularity of neo-burlesque may be good for business, performers do express concern over how neo-burlesque changes as it becomes increasingly popular. Adam acknowledged that the more burlesque is "embraced by everyone" the more it is "polished" and, eventually, "turned into the Pussycat Dolls"66. This transformation overturns neo-burlesque's appeal for many of its participants, Adam claims, as it becomes about "people objectifying women instead of women empowering themselves"67. Adam believes that neo-burlesque's increasing popularity may lead to the popularization of performances that eschew the more radical intent of neo-burlesque performance that he enjoys. At the same time, he does not necessarily think that this increased popularity will diminish the ability of some neo-burlesque performance to remain interesting and vibrant. Instead, he says, there will always be "Dirty Martinis or Indigo Blues out there, doing something more important" than the, in his estimation, less interesting manifestations of neo-burlesque in popular culture68. By invoking the names of two well known performers, Adam signals his confidence that the type of performance they do will continue, although it may garner less attention than types of neo-burlesque performance that are more easily assimilated into popular culture.

Samantha expressed a similar confidence in neo-burlesque's subcultural participants to continue performing, even as the genre becomes more visible within

66. Adam, Interview with the author, written notes, 14 March 2009
67. ibid.
68. ibid.
popular culture. Acknowledging that neo-burlesque's visibility will likely continue to increase, Samantha described this popularity as part of a cycle, explaining "like anything," neo-burlesque will "get big" and then "it will recede". Samantha's prediction reflects the attitude of many contemporary subcultural participants who often expect their subcultural styles and creations to be incorporated into mainstream popular culture, but in ways that are viewed as shallow or incomplete. Several interview subjects mentioned the Pussycat Dolls specifically as an example of how they expected neo-burlesque to manifest itself in popular culture. Samantha predicted neo-burlesque will eventually recede from popular culture specifically because the manifestation of neo-burlesque represented by the Pussycat Dolls holds no appeal for most performers who, she believes, have "no desire to be a part of that". Rather, Samantha believes that performers want to "stay where [they] are," to continue performing within neo-burlesque's community of participants and spectators. Like Adam, Samantha expressed confidence in the ability of neo-burlesque's subcultural participants to resist incorporation into popular culture and instead continue performing within their own subcultural context. This confidence in the subculture's ability to perpetuate itself, despite its increased visibility, belies depictions of subcultures within subcultural studies that portray subcultural participants who view mainstream attention as a subculture's death knell.

Though most of the performers I interviewed expressed more ambivalent views towards neo-burlesque's increasing popularity, others do feel that once the neo-burlesque is exposed to mainstream culture it is no longer as interesting or exciting. Beth told me

69. Samantha, Interview with the author, written notes, 18 March 2009
70. ibid.
that she did not believe that neo-burlesque had "hit the mainstream" yet and suggested that, because neo-burlesque had not yet been featured on the front of the *New York Times* Style section, it was still relatively unknown. After I informed her that there have been multiple stories on neo-burlesque in the *New York Times* Style section she joked that this meant it was "totally dead" and suggested that I might want to find a new research topic. While Beth was joking, her statement did reflect the belief, held by some subcultural participants that once a movement has gained a certain level of visibility - symbolized in this case by coverage in a prominent newspaper - it is no longer interesting.

At the same time that performers express concern over the form neo-burlesque may take as it becomes increasingly popular, none of my interview subjects expressed negative feelings towards neo-burlesque performers who have gained a greater degree of visibility. Adam expressed his admiration for Michelle L'Amour, a very successful performer who has appeared on a number of television shows, including *America's Got Talent*. When he first began performing in Chicago, Adam told me, L'Amour dominated the city's neo-burlesque scene. Adam acknowledges that the queer burlesque troupe he performed with in Chicago "wasn't for a wide audience" and was quite different than the glossy neo-burlesque style L'Amour popularized in the city. At the same time he described L'Amour as "amazing" explaining that she "really made a career out of it and catered to a straight audience". The suggestion that she "catered to a straight audience" did not seem to carry a stigma - Adam simply depicted L'Amour as a talented and successful performer who has created a niche for herself.

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71. Beth, Interview with the author, written notes, 12 March 2009,
72. Adam, Interview with the author, written notes, 14 March, 2009
The hesitancy to put down other performers, even those that have achieved a greater level of mainstream success or visibility reoccurred throughout the interviews. While questions of 'authenticity' did arise when more mainstream manifestations of neo-burlesque were discussed, the performers I talked with reserved their disdain for acts that arise from outside the subculture. Interview subjects made dismissive comments about the Pussycat Dolls, pop-singer Katy Perry and the burlesque performances associated with 'alternative porn' website Suicide Girls. Performers who began their careers as participants in the neo-burlesque subculture and have gone on to achieve a greater level of visibility than their subcultural peers, are talked of admirably, even by performers who have significantly different approaches to performing.

My status as a subcultural outsider and a researcher must be taken into consideration when discussing the largely flattering portrait of the subculture that was presented to me by my interview subjects. The hesitancy of my interview subjects to say unflattering things about these more successful performers might be attributed to their hesitancy to 'betray' the subculture by insulting a fellow performer to an 'outsider'. However, I believe that the loyalty displayed towards more successful performers reflects the strategies by which the subculture surrounding neo-burlesque creates its borders and solidifies its group identity.

While earlier work on subcultural studies emphasizes 'selling out' as the primary means of losing subcultural authenticity, neo-burlesque instead emphasizes a performer's background as evidence of their possession or lack subcultural authenticity. Although the Pussycat Dolls began performing in 1995, when the burlesque revival was just beginning,
the group was created by professional choreographer Robin Antin and quickly began performing at a Los Angeles nightclub. They later were transformed into a pop group and signed to Interscope records. The group's performance style, target audience and adherence to cultural norms surrounding acceptable female body types distinguishes them from most neo-burlesque performance. However, the most important factor that separates them from "real" neo-burlesque performances is the impression that the group was manufactured by a professional choreographer, specifically to be a marketable commodity. Performers like L'Amour, who have become successful by working their way up through the subculture - choreographing their own performances, designing their own costumes and producing their own shows - are largely admired, at least by the performers I spoke with. While earlier work on subcultural studies has portrayed subcultures as viewing commercial success negatively, as "selling out," the neo-burlesque performers I spoke with do not see commercial success in and of itself to be a bad thing. Rather, attaining subcultural authenticity depends on gaining the respect of one's subcultural peers through demonstrations of creativity and a commitment to DIY.

**Conclusion**

Performers depict their involvement in neo-burlesque as an opportunity to take on personas consciously constructed as artificial and hyperfeminine. The subculture's emphasis on ‘DIY’ as a marker of subcultural authenticity emphasizes this process of self-construction, extolling performers who are seen as constructing their careers and personas through their own hard work and creativity. At the same time, neo-burlesque artists also talk about their involvement in the subculture as a means of understanding or
expressing aspects of their own feminine identities. That neo-burlesque has a relationship to the performers lived identities is reflected in the way neo-burlesque performance intersects with identities beyond those related specifically to gender and sexuality. For women of color, neo-burlesque's reliance on feminine identities coded as 'white' may impact the way they navigate their involvement in neo-burlesque.
Chapter 4: ‘Your Grandpa’s Porn’:
Neo-Burlesque in Popular Culture and the Press

The growing popularity and prominence of neo-burlesque has led to far greater visibility for the movement. An explosion of press coverage over the last few years and the increased presence of neo-burlesque inspired style in popular culture has drawn attention to neo-burlesque and the surrounding subculture. Appearances of neo-burlesque in popular culture suggest the difficulties faced by performers attempting to re-frame the meanings associated with female bodily display. Re-imagined within popular culture, neo-burlesque's self-reflexivity and humor are left behind in favor of depictions that reaffirm heteronormative modes of looking, presenting female sexual display for a heterosexual male viewer. Press coverage of the burlesque revival presents a vision of neo-burlesque that reaffirms normative heterosexuality, imagining a desiring male spectator while attributing the genre's popularity with women to its lack of explicit sexual display.

The apotheosis of the transformation of neo-burlesque from grassroots performance genre into heterosexual spectacle appears in the film Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle. In a scene featuring burlesque troupe turned pop music group the Pussycat Dolls as back-up dancers, the characters played by Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore and Lucy Liu go undercover to a nightclub called Treasure Chest, where they appear in a neo-burlesque inspired dance routine73. Despite the visual cues that mark the scene as inspired

by neo-burlesque - feather boas, fishnet tights and the presence of the Pussycat Dolls - the scene differs significantly from the neo-burlesque performances carried out weekly by troupes across the country.

The scene eschews the qualities of the "tease" emphasized by press coverage of neo-burlesque and by performers themselves. Rather than appearing initially in elaborate costumes, the performers appear on stage already scantily clad and their routine contains little of the humor normally associated with neo-burlesque. In the scene’s most explicit reference to neo-burlesque, Cameron Diaz appears nearly nude in a large martini glass, recreating the signature act of neo-burlesque star Dita Von Teese. While Von Teese performs an elaborate striptease prior to ascending a ladder to bathe in the glass, the film's re-creation moves straight to the routine's ending, cutting directly to Diaz in the martini glass squeezing an olive-shaped sponge filled with water onto her breasts and stomach. Skipping straight to the routine's ending, the scene flattens out the tensions displayed within neo-burlesque performance. Without the context that surrounds neo-burlesque performance - the interaction between emceess and spectators, self-deprecating humor and devotion to mocking and expanding the genre's conventions - the re-creation of neo-burlesque in Charlie's Angel's bears little resemblance to the performances of subcultural participants.

Most significantly, the audience for the performance in film’s scene is made up exclusively of men, contradicting media coverage that emphasizes the genre's appeal to women, statements of performers who emphasize the importance of neo-burlesque's female audience and the demographics observed at shows. As the film moves back and
forth, between shots of (female) performers and shots of (male) spectators, the dancers gyrate in neo-burlesque inspired costumes. While media coverage of the revival downplays the potential for desiring female spectators, the scene in Charlie's Angels erases them entirely, at least as far as the mise-en-scene of the film is concerned. As a film featuring three female protagonists that combines comedy and action, Charlie's Angels can be expected to attract a largely, though be no means exclusively, female audience. The film depicts the neo-burlesque inspired performance as primarily performed for the male clubgoers, while the female audience members watching the film are reduced to a secondary spectatorship. Female spectators are left watching a performance "not structured by [them] or for [their] benefit" - to draw on Allen again - but with no way of intervening into the scene's solidified system of meaning.

By reducing female audience members to secondary spectatorship, while ridding the neo-burlesque of its signature self-reflexivity and humor, the scene in Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle flattens out those aspects of neo-burlesque that allow performers to infiltrate the genre. Rather than manipulating the codes of the genre as performers or constructing themselves as active neo-burlesque spectators, female spectators remain outside of the frame, looking in an the heteronormative spectacle.

While Charlie's Angels presents an admittedly extreme example, the erasure of women as potentially desiring spectators is a common occurrence, both in press coverage of neo-burlesque and in popular culture appropriations of the genre. Presentations of neo-burlesque outside of the subculture render invisible many of the aspects of neo-burlesque that constitute the genre as a space for potential subversive incursions into the normative
gender system. Flattening out the tensions crucial to neo-burlesque performances as a recognizable genre, press coverage rewrites neo-burlesque as a nostalgic homage to a mythologized past or a more tasteful version of conventional female sexual display. Emphasizing neo-burlesque's nostalgia and modesty as key to the genre's appeal for female audiences, while depicting male audience members as desiring spectators, descriptions of the genre in popular press render invisible the genre's connection to drag and queer cultures. As the scene from Charlie's Angels demonstrates, manifestations of neo-burlesque in popular culture solidify this transformation, rejecting entirely the active, self-aware spectator/performer relationship that characterizes neo-burlesque in favor of depictions that reaffirm a conventional heterosexual framework for looking, highlighting a displayed female performer and a desiring male spectator.

Subcultural studies has often depicted the relationship between the mainstream media and subcultures as antagonistic, if not hostile. The media co-opts subcultural style, separating it from its original, subversive meanings, or vilifies subcultures, highlighting drug use, antisocial behavior and violence to create moral panics. Hebdige describes the "wave of hysteria" that accompanies the emergence of a spectacular subculture as ambivalent, fluctuating "between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement" (Hebdige, 93). In her work on rave culture, subcultural theorist Sarah Thornton acknowledges the role mass media play in subcultural formation, arguing that media are "there and effective right from the start." At the same time, Thornton depicts the role of the mass media in the formation of 'underground' rave scenes she examines as largely oppositional, depicting the mass media as an antagonist "who continually threatens to
release [subcultural participant's] knowledge to others” (Thornton, 117). Neo-burlesque performers express a more nuanced view of the media's increasing interest in their subculture. They acknowledge that 'releasing their knowledge to others,' as Thornton describes it, remains an integral part of attracting spectators, without whom the subculture could not sustain itself.

Method

Focusing on the ways neo-burlesque becomes visible to those outside the subculture, this chapter examines both print media coverage of neo-burlesque. Analyzing a substantial set of news articles, from geographically diverse print media, provides a broad look at how the genre is presented to readers throughout the country. Newspapers account for the majority of coverage neo-burlesque receives in the traditional media. While there doubtless has been coverage of neo-burlesque in online and new media, I chose to focus on traditional media outlets as a way of exploring how neo-burlesque is presented to a general audience, one assumed to be unfamiliar with the movement. Press coverage from both mainstream and alternative newspapers is explored, although this distinction is not meant to suggest that "alternative" press coverage presents a more authentic portrayal of neo-burlesque.

Research conducted through Lexis-Nexis and Dow Jones Factiva focused on finding articles published in major national papers and gathering coverage from a broad range of smaller, regional papers. Excluding short event listings, the final set of articles analyzed included 35 articles from twenty-three different newspapers in nineteen different cities, ranging from USA Today to the Kalamazoo Gazette. The New York Times
and Los Angeles Times account for seven of the thirty-five articles, a percentage that reflects the role their home cities played in the emergence of neo-burlesque. The earliest articles - from the Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle - were published in 2002. Of the thirty-five articles examined here, eighteen were published in 2008. The increase, from two articles in 2002 to eighteen in 2008, parallels the increasing popularity and visibility of neo-burlesque. In addition to newspaper coverage, my examination of neo-burlesque in more mainstream news outlets included some coverage of neo-burlesque in television, radio and magazines, including an early article in New Yorker magazine and short segments on National Public Radio and CBS News Sunday Morning.

In addition to the more mainstream press coverage, my analysis extended to alternative weeklies: weekly, often free newspapers found in many American cities that focus on local nightlife. Articles included were found through Alt-Press Watch database and searches on the site of particular alternative weeklies, with a focus on finding coverage that represented neo-burlesque's increasing popularity in cities across the country. The thirty-three articles included in the analysis represent coverage from twenty-two different publications in twenty-one different cities. Of the thirty-three articles, seven are from the Village Voice, again reflecting the early start neo-burlesque had in New York City.

Press coverage examined - including mainstream and alternative sources - represents a non-performers perspective on neo-burlesque. Only one of the pieces examined here was authored by someone directly involved in neo-burlesque.
performance. In that particular case, the author, a male performer who does a comedy routine as part of a burlesque troupe's show, takes pains to present himself as an outsider, depicting himself as out of place in the backstage environment and uncomfortable with his fiancé's role as a burlesque performer. The focus on media depictions created by and targeted towards non-participants provides an opportunity to examine how the meanings attributed to the subculture shift when presented in more widely circulated media and popular culture.

Though differentiating between "mainstream" and "alternative" media sources provides a way of acknowledging that "the media" is not a monolithic entity, these categories may also serve to create a false dichotomy, between a corporate controlled, status-quo affirming mainstream media that either appropriates or vilifies subcultures and a subversive, locally controlled alternative press that supports and celebrates them. In truth, these two categories both obscure the similarities between the media outlets they describe and overlook the differences among media outlets within each category. While "mainstream" and "alternative" have always been oversimplified categorizations, the current media environment makes any clear distinction even less tenable. The 2005 merger of New Times and Village Voice Media - two of the largest publishers of alternative weeklies in the United States - resulted in Village Voice Media controlling roughly one quarter of the circulation associated with the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies. This particular merger typifies the increased consolidation the so-called

"alternative" press experienced throughout the 1990's and into the new millennium.

Although there are distinctions between coverage of neo-burlesque in "alternative" and "mainstream" press, the "alternative" press should not be taken as a more "authentic" representation of the neo-burlesque subculture. Differences in coverage should be considered in light of the expectations the two types of publication face. While the mainstream press might be more likely to shy away from content considered too sexually explicit, alternative weeklies, because they appeal to a more limited target audience and rely on slightly different sources of ad revenue, are generally more free to include sexually charged content. The alternative press - and more specifically the alternative weeklies that provide most of the alternative press coverage reviewed here - also distinguish themselves by a greater focus on entertainment and lifestyle coverage. Most often found in urban centers, alternative weeklies serve a more specific demographic than most "mainstream" newspapers, one assumed to be younger, childless, socially liberal (though not necessarily engaged in electoral politics) and interested in going out to bars and clubs.

‘Retro Innocence:’ Press Coverage of Neo-Burlesque

Emcees at some neo-burlesque performances construct the neo-burlesque spectator in opposition to the spectatorial practices assumed to occur at more

conventional strip clubs. At the same time, performers interviewed for this project expressed little concern with the distinction between what they did and stripping. While they do believe that neo-burlesque is distinct from conventional stripping, it was not a topic they themselves broached. The distinctiveness between neo-burlesque and stripping is often foregrounded at moments when the subculture interacts with non-participants, when an emcee encounters an audience of potential newcomers or when a performer's quotes are used in a newspaper story. That the performers themselves were not particularly insistent on defining their performance as distinct from stripping is notable considering the emphasis placed on this particular distinction in coverage of neo-burlesque.

The burlesque performance involves, and in most cases revolves around, a performer on stage removing her, or occasionally his, clothes. In media coverage, however, the term "stripping' refers to much more than the basic removal of a costume in front of an audience. Stripping becomes shorthand for a very particular type of sexualized female spectacle - one assumed to be explicit, crass and performed by bored, financially motivated and surgically enhanced women for an audience of lascivious men. The accuracy of this admittedly oversimplified description of contemporary stripping is beyond the scope of this study and a study that focused on conventional stripping would likely present a more complex picture. For the purposes of this analysis it is only important that this common perception of stripping provides a foil for the media's depiction of neo-burlesque.

Throughout coverage of neo-burlesque performance in mainstream press, neo-burlesque's status as a revival provides a means of differentiating burlesque from the
more explicit sexual display associated with contemporary forms of sexual entertainment. Newspaper, television and radio coverage emphasizes neo-burlesque as a nostalgic return to a more innocent, nonspecific time. Burlesque's "timelessness" disassociates it from the "stultified formula" of pornography or the "predatory shakedown" of stripping. Neo-burlesque nostalgia, then, relates back to a generic time, a "timelessness" that serves to distance neo-burlesque from the current moment. Neo-burlesque's "timelessness" marks it as not of this particular time, not associated with the crassness of contemporary culture. This nostalgic emphasis within some coverage, expressed in reference to "your grandmother's strippers" and "retro innocence," serves to distance neo-burlesque from contemporary sexual entertainment not by presenting it as a challenge to the normative heterosexuality associated with most mainstream types of female sexual display, but by presenting it as a less explicit, more innocent diversion.

Nostalgic interpretations work against reading neo-burlesque as potentially subversive or challenging, instead presenting it as escapist, its link to a generic past providing proof of its wholesomeness. This past, described as "a time before online dating and reality tv," remains vague, a generic past used to disconnect neo-burlesque from this particular cultural moment. Alternative weeklies fall into this pattern as well,

76. Dean Kuipers, “Dressing Up the Old Art of Seduction; in an Era of Explicitness, the New Burlesque Thrives on Leaving Something to the Imagination,” Los Angeles Times, 14 March 2002. sec. F, p. 6
describing neo-burlesque as a throwback to "an era of full coverage panties and fan
dances"\textsuperscript{80}, evidence of "a society longing for a little glamour again"\textsuperscript{81} and an opportunity
to step back from "modern sexuality"\textsuperscript{82}. Describing neo-burlesque as "your grandmother's strippers,"\textsuperscript{83} or "your grandpa's porn."\textsuperscript{84}, this nostalgic take on burlesque results de-
sexualized the genre, linking it to an innocent, asexual past. Readers from Salt Lake City
to Charlotte, North Carolina are introduced to the burlesque revival as an escape from
contemporary sexual culture, "not a skin show" or a "bunch of strippers taking off their
clothes"\textsuperscript{85}. The tendency within press coverage of reaffirming neo-burlesque’s connection
to a vaguely defined past functions as a way of constructing it in opposition to the
assumed crassness of contemporary American culture. At the same time, harking back
to a generic past of more strict gender roles, the emphasis on neo-burlesque as a primarily
nostalgic movement reaffirms the genre as best understood through conservative, even
reactionary gender roles.

The connection between neo-burlesque's nostalgia and its modesty is
expressed as an embrace of the "tease" - a quality attributed to neo-burlesque and
presumed absent from conventional stripping. References to the tease emphasize neo-
burlesque's relative modesty, while playing up its connection to the past. Covering the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{80} Nikki Trader, “Hot Tease,” \textit{Pittsburgh City Paper} 2-9 November 2005, 44. p.36.
\textsuperscript{83} Blanchard, “Va, Va, Va.Voom; New-Age Burlesque Strips Away X-Rated Sleaziness, Resurrects Old-Time Tease, Humor and Skits”.
\textsuperscript{84} “Burlesque Performers Trade Garters for Cuffs: Undercover Cops Learn a Revealing Lesson At Pink Elephant,” \textit{Westword} 7 February 2008.
\textsuperscript{85} Corrigan, “Support Our Troops”.
\end{flushleft}
Velvet Hammer Burlesque in the LA Times, Dean Kuipers contrasts the “burlesque tease” with the “mainstreaming of serious sleaze,” presenting burlesque as a less explicit, more fun alternative to the sexual entertainment produced by Los Angeles' strip clubs and pornography industry. Headlines pronounce burlesque’s distance from most contemporary sexual entertainment, reassuring readers that burlesque “strips away X-rated sleaziness” and “thrives on leaving something to the imagination.” Like the references to veteran performers, emphasis on the 'tease' frames neo-burlesque as innocent and inoffensive, providing a glimpse of enough bare flesh to keep the audience entertained, but not enough to satisfy.

It is not only the content of the performances that is presented as proof of burlesque's distinctiveness. Neo-burlesque performers themselves are presented as different from the kind of women traditionally associated with sexual entertainment, as "real women" with "real day jobs." As the neo-burlesque audience is held up as evidence of the genre's distinctiveness from conventional stripping - and is expected to play their role correctly - neo-burlesque performer's lack of stripping experience is presented as evidence of neo-burlesque's distinctiveness from stripping. Coverage of the Velvet Hammer, one of the earliest troupes identified with the revival, highlights troupe founder Michelle Carr's policy against recruiting women who are professional strippers,

86. Kuipers, “Dressing Up the Old Art of Seduction; in an Era of Explicitness, the New Burlesque Thrives on Leaving Something to the Imagination”.
88. Kuipers, “Dressing Up the Old Art of Seduction; in an Era of Explicitness, the New Burlesque Thrives on Leaving Something to the Imagination”.
89. Zak, “A Va-Va-Voom Boom; a Burlesque Revival Takes Off in Washington”.

- 121 -
have appeared in pornography or have had plastic surgery. The Baltimore Sun profiles the participants in performer Trixie Little's "Burlesque Boot Camp," playing up the participant's lack of stripping experience while listing their "day jobs." Presenting neo-burlesque performers as "real women," newspaper coverage suggests that the distinction between neo-burlesque and conventional stripping lies partly with the identity of the performers themselves.

Presenting the performers involved in neo-burlesque in this way contributes to the construction of neo-burlesque as a respectable, innocent pursuit, identified with performers portrayed as middle or upper-middle class and thus not driven by financial interests assumed to inspire performer's involvement in conventional stripping. Viewed through a nostalgic lens, burlesque loses the associations with working class audiences it held during earlier periods and is recreated as an innocent pursuit for 'respectable' women, distinguished from conventional stripping by its claims to modesty and artistic relevance.

‘What Man Wouldn’t?’: Neo-burlesque Spectators as Heterosexual

Throughout the coverage of neo-burlesque, the presence of female spectators is mentioned repeatedly as evidence of the genre's distinctiveness from traditional stripping or pornography. Describing burlesque dancers as “your grandmother’s strippers – naughty but nice,” Jayne Blanchard quotes a neo-burlesque and vaudeville producer who distances neo-burlesque from contemporary sexual entertainment, arguing that there is “no comparison to those strip clubs where women look like Pamela Anderson or one of

Hugh Hefner’s girlfriends. This is so much better – and both sexes can enjoy it” 92. Emphasizing neo-burlesque's intelligence and appeal to women, the local alternative weekly in Little Rock describes a new troupe in that city as "the thinking man - and woman's - burlesque”93. Media coverage of neo-burlesque reaffirms the assumption that the explicitness of stripping and pornography are anathema to female audiences, pointing to the relative modesty attributed to neo-burlesque as a crucial part of the genre's appeal to women.

Despite the emphasis placed on neo-burlesque’s appeal to women, media coverage emphasizes the genre’s sexual appeal to men. In an interview on the CBS Morning News, Dita Von Teese envisions men "rejoicing" as their girlfriends or wives suggest attending a burlesque show94. Other writers address potential male spectators directly, instructing them, "admit it guys, you're a little furtive on entering [a strip club] - and well you should be," before suggesting neo-burlesque as a less shameful alternative95. Attributing the popularity of the new burlesque to a shift in "What Men Want," New Yorker writer Adam Gopnik ignores the desires that might drive performers or female fans - a stunning blind spot when covering a subcultural movement driven largely by women96. Articles construct neo-burlesque as the perfect compromise for the normative heterosexual couple. The show will be entertaining and affirming for female

spectators, who can identify with the variety of body types on display without being offended by anything too explicit. Their boyfriends can enjoy the spectacle of female sexual display within a format deemed both "female-friendly" and "hip." The emphasis on neo-burlesque as primarily a heterosexual spectacle - characterized by an active male spectator and a displayed female performer - flattens out the complexities of the performer/spectator relationship within neo-burlesque, ignoring the interactions between spectator and performer the genre encourages.

The framing of neo-burlesque as another instance of heteronormative dynamics of looking is reflected in the absence of coverage of manifestations of neo-burlesque performed within a queer framework. An article outlining the emerging neo-burlesque scene in Washington, DC profiles the city's three main venues for neo-burlesque performance and illustrates the way that coverage renders queer spectators invisible, highlighting the presence and reactions of male spectators, while framing queer neo-burlesque performances solely through a focus on the performer's challenge to conventional norms of attractiveness. Profiling two venues that attract a largely heterosexual audience, the article describes the attentive audience members, mentioning men who smile “as they realize what they’ve been dragged to by their girlfriends”97. Asked if her boyfriend is enjoying the show, a patron responds "What man wouldn't?". By highlighting the pleasure offered to male spectators, the article reaffirms the relationship between spectators and audience members as heterosexual, characterized by male heterosexual desire and female sexual display.

97. Dan Zak, “A Va-Va-Voom Boom; a Burlesque Revival Takes Off in Washington”.

- 124 -
The depiction of desiring spectators stands in strict contrast to the portrayal of the third venue in the same article. Profiling the city's main venue for queer burlesque performance - a weekly show that features neo-burlesque performers and drag kings - the article eschews the focus on the audience found in the other two profiles. Instead, coverage focuses on one particular performer, framing her interest in performing as a rebellion against mainstream beauty norms. While there is no doubt that subverting conventional norms of female beauty is of interest to many performers, the failure to engage with questions of spectatorship during the third vignette renders queer spectators invisible, reaffirming neo-burlesque as a heterosexual spectacle.

'The anti-Scores Strippers': Neo-burlesque as performance art

While a good deal of the coverage within the alternative press mirrors the mainstream press coverage in its construction of burlesque as decidedly not stripping, there are notable exceptions. Though none of the coverage examined here equates neo-burlesque and stripping, the alternative press is more likely to acknowledges the complex and ambivalent relationship between the burlesque revival and more conventional forms of entertainment centered on female sexual display. This is especially true of coverage of the burlesque revival in New York City, where the legal crackdown on sex shops and strip clubs during the tenure of Mayor Rudy Giuliani coincided with - and, some argue, helped to inspire - the development of the neo-burlesque scene. Referring to the legal hurdles of "post-Guiliani New York," one New York burlesque club owner tells the Village Voice that burlesque is now "as sexy as you can get without breaking the law."98

At the same time, coverage that acknowledges neo-burlesque's links to other forms of female sexual display still carefully distinguishes neo-burlesque, often by emphasizing its connections to performance art. In media coverage that emphasizes neo-burlesque's performance art influences the content of the performances, rather than the amount of flesh revealed, is held up as evidence of burlesque's distinctiveness. In this coverage, accounts of politically charged content and shocking behavior provides evidence that distinguishes burlesque from more conventional sexual entertainment.

Media depictions of New York's neo-burlesque scene provide an example of coverage that acknowledges neo-burlesque's connection to conventional stripping. Le Scandal, an early and influential contribution to New York's neo-burlesque scene, emerged out of a weekly performance night held at the Blue Angel Cabaret. Dubbed an "erotic cabaret" by its owner, a former stripper, the Blue Angel featured performance and burlesque artists, in a club environment that also featured lap dances and more "traditional" strippers. After New York City implemented greater restrictions on strip clubs and sexual entertainment, the Blue Angel dropped lap dances and more explicit routines and became Le Scandal, now one of the city's longest running neo-burlesque shows (Baldwin, 29). Contrasting the performers at Le Scandal with the performers at Scores, a well-known New York City strip club, the Village Voice depicts the performers from Le Scandal as subversive and unpredictable, the "anti-Scores" strippers. Like the Scores strippers, performers at Le Scandal are "all-American girls" but in a "proud, I'll shove-the-flag-up-my-cunt-while-reciting-the-First-Amendment kind of way" rather than

a "blond fake-boobed, Barbie-Doll way." Framing Le Scandal as subversive and cutting edge, the article vouches for the genre's distinctiveness from conventional stripping by reframing the club's offerings as performance art.

Distinctions between neo-burlesque and conventional stripping are presented more sharply in other coverage. In an article highlighting two of New York's most well known performers, The New York Times suggests a sharp distinction, insisting "there are striptease dancers and then there are artists, like Ms. Muz and the World Famous *Bob*". Depictions of burlesque's performance art influences are not limited to coverage of New York City's burlesque scene. Local troupes are "politically motivated", "more like performance art" and offer "one-stop shopping for anyone who wants to get turned on and feel intellectually superior at the same time". While this coverage acknowledges burlesque's potential to be explicit, even shocking, it depicts the performers as subversive and rebellious artists, unlike the predictable and surgically enhanced performers associated with traditional strip clubs.

The emphasis on neo-burlesque’s connection to performance art, like the emphasis on nostalgia, provides a means of distinguishing neo-burlesque from conventional forms of sexual display. At the same time, it bestows performers with a cultural capital not available to strippers and other sex workers, bringing them under the

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respectable umbrella of "artist." At the same time, constructing neo-burlesque performers
as artists distinguishes their performances from conventional stripping without
questioning how neo-burlesque challenges the heterosexual dynamics of looking at work
in conventional forms of female sexual display.

‘Just an old-fashioned variety show;: Accounts of legal issues

It is worth considering that the insistence on the distinction between neo-
burlesque and stripping serves practical purposes for neo-burlesque performers, shielding
them from the social opprobrium and legal surveillance sex work attracts. Albert
Cadabra's insistence that the performance on view is not a strip show acts as a warning to
the audience, specifically instructing them how not to behave105. Modeling appropriate
and, importantly, inappropriate audience behavior, the emcee works to prevent the
audience from engaging in the more obnoxious behavior associated with strip club
patrons. The show's status as a neo-burlesque performance, rather than a strip show,
depends partially on the audience's ability to recognize and internalize the expected
standards of behavior and this process of audience internalization shields performers
from being exposed to the kind of treatment that might be expected from an audience at a
strip club.

Perhaps more dire than the threat of inappropriate audience behavior is the risk of
legal sanction. While no accounts of police action against neo-burlesque performances
were found in the more mainstream press, three articles in the alternative press recounted

105. Albert Cadabra and Gal Friday, *Skullduggery and Skin Show* Palace of Wonders, (3 January
2009): Washington DC.
police surveillance or questioning at neo-burlesque performance\textsuperscript{106}. A fourth article documented a zoning conflict brought on by neo-burlesque performance at a bar in Monterey County, California\textsuperscript{107}. In these articles, assertions of neo-burlesque's modesty and its distinctiveness from conventional stripping serve to depict police or zoning board behavior as misguided overreaction. The performers insist to police that their show has remained within the limit of laws on public indecency and their arguments are recounted by the article's author. An account of a police raid on a show in Grand Rapids, Michigan includes quotes from perplexed performers, insisting that their performance is "just an old-fashioned variety show"\textsuperscript{108}. The inclusion of these quotes in articles that mention the threat of legal action serves as a reminder that the attempt to distance neo-burlesque from other forms of sexualized entertainment has a practical dimension as well.

Although only a small number of articles do mention legal concerns, the appearance of law enforcement is treated as little more than a joke. The tendency to make light of potential legal intervention does not necessarily reflect the attitude of performers and venue owners, who, outside of their interaction with reporters, may take the threats quite seriously. Within media coverage, however, the arrival of police provides a chance for a joke and another opportunity to insist on burlesque's relative modesty. Articles depict the police as "prudey-prudes"\textsuperscript{109} who don't understand that burlesque is "just a lot

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{106} Akens, “Risqué Business”; Mark Wedel, “‘Safe Bawdy Fun’ Grand Rabids' Burlesque Troupe Bares Most This Weekend,” \textit{Kalamazoo Gazette}, 17 July 2008; “Burlesque Performers Trade Garters for Cuffs: Undercover Cops Learn a Revealing Lesson At Pink Elephant”.
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Jessica Lyons, “Burlesque Too Risque?,” \textit{Monterey County Weekly}, March 22-28 2007, p. 9-10.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Wedel, “‘Safe Bawdy Fun' Grand Rabids' Burlesque Troupe Bares Most This Weekend”.
  \item \textsuperscript{109} “Burlesque Performers Trade Garters for Cuffs: Undercover Cops Learn a Revealing Lesson At Pink Elephant”.
\end{itemize}
of fun". The arrival of police officers at a show in Colorado Springs provides another opportunity to connect burlesque to some distant past, as the author presents the incident as proof of the backwardness of Colorado Springs, joking that the next step might be prohibition. Though there is no evidence that any of these shows broke local obscenity laws, it is important to note that, in some cases, burlesque performers have a specific legal reason for distancing themselves from stripping and other types of legally regulated performance.

Though only a few articles recount legal issues related to neo-burlesque performance these articles serve as a reminder that the emphasis on neo-burlesque's distinctiveness from stripping so prevalent in media coverage serve to distance neo-burlesque from the social and legal opprobrium directed at sexually explicit entertainment. Treating legal threats as no more than a joke, these articles go out of their way to emphasize neo-burlesque's relative modesty and innocence. While these few articles may be notable for the explicit mention of legal threats, the image they present of neo-burlesque - as an innocent, nostalgic diversion - reaffirms the themes that appear throughout coverage.

Conclusion

Subcultural groups cannot be considered coherent wholes; they consist of individuals who may define and construct their subcultural participation in widely different ways. Neither are subcultures hubs of unquestioned resistance: resistant possibilities within neo-burlesque coexist with trappings of the power structure of the

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110. Akens, “Risqué Business”.
111. ibid.
wider culture. Thus, while mainstream media cannot be accused of misrepresenting neo-
burlesque - there are many performers whose acts resemble those described - coverage
privileges one form, of many, that the subculture takes. The articles analyzed here
appeared in widely circulated news source that were likely to be an uninitiated reader's
first or only exposure to neo-burlesque. When addressing potential spectators, coverage
focuses on the equanimity of a heterosexual couple that could happily enjoy a show
together - for separate reasons, of course. While neo-burlesque is portrayed as more
modest, less crass and more female friendly than conventional stripping, media coverage
fails to question how the dynamics of looking associated with neo-burlesque might differ
from those associated with most contemporary forms of female sexual display.

The solidification of the spectator/performer relationship, from the active, self-
reflexive dialogue that characterizes live neo-burlesque performances to a strictly
demarcated, heteronormative framework, becomes complete during the neo-burlesque
scene in *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*. While press coverage does give some credence
to performer's motivations, including quotes and, at times, short descriptions of
performances, the scene in *Charlie's Angels* silences performers and renders invisible
female spectators.

The treatment of neo-burlesque in press and popular culture reaffirms much of the
existing work on subcultures and media. Press coverage downplays the subculture's
subversive potential, highlighting neo-burlesque's connection to the past and installing a
heteronormative relationship of looking as the primary framework for understanding the
genre's spectator/performer relationship. This reconstruction is further reaffirmed in the
popular culture text examined here, as female spectators are ignored completely. Performers who express a skepticism as to the form their subculture will take as it gains more widespread visibility are likely justified in their skepticism, even as they acknowledge that the genre's increasing visibility may prove beneficial in their own lives as performers.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Discussing the shift, within queer theory, from a focus on queer as 'being' to queer as 'doing,' Jakobson identifies the body as a crucial site of engagement, arguing that such a shift requires doing things "in, on, with - even constitutive of - the body." The shift from being to doing, then, requires being "implicated in the complications of embodiment." Being "implicated" - with its suggestions of both involvement and guilt - encapsulates the position of the neo-burlesque performer for many outside observers. Historian Rachel Shteir encapsulates this attitude, suggesting that neo-burlesque as a strategy used by "so-called Grrrl Feminists" to "congratulate themselves on how far they've come from the radical feminism of the 1960's and 1970's" (Shteir, 338). Shteir's reductive reading reflects the attitude of many outside observers, who would dismiss any type of performance of female sexual display as irredeemably entrenched in the power dynamics associated with the oppressive heterosexual gaze. Dismissing neo-burlesque in such an offhand fashion, Shteir paints participants as cultural rubes, naively enacting oppressive heterosexual norms in the name of empowerment, at the same time that her own dismissal reifies the same oppressive norms, imagining them as coherent, stable and immune to challenges.

In light of transformations in contemporary thinking about power, both in subcultural studies and queer theory, I do not wish to suggest that neo-burlesque
constitutes a "Refusal." Indeed, given neo-burlesque's participation in a number of a normative structures of power, such a claim would be absurd on its face. Rather, I would argue that neo-burlesque constitutes a productive example of the way contemporary subculture navigates its relationship with the surrounding dominant culture, enacting localized, small scale movements of resistance, while also, at times, recreating structures of power from the very system it attempts to challenge. The limitations of this strategy are revealed in the ease with which neo-burlesque becomes appropriated into popular culture, presented as another opportunity for heteronormative female sexual display.

For performers, however, neo-burlesque provides an opportunity to approach feminine identity with the critical distance of parody, while at the same time acknowledging a connection between their performance personas and their lived identities. This 'critical distance' clearly has its limits. That neo-burlesque performers identify neo-burlesque as a means of exploring their identities 'as women' should serve as a warning against an interpretation that positions performance as purely liberatory, a celebration of empowered subjects choosing a gendered identity to perform. Rather, connections made by performers between their lived identities and performance suggests that performance serves as a means of navigating various cultural codes that construct the identities performers already imagine themselves as inhabiting.

Given the scant attention paid to women in much work in subcultural studies and the relevant dearth, until recently, of female-dominated subcultures, the area calls for further research. Within neo-burlesque and other performance based subcultures, the tension expressed between participants lived identities and their performance personas
opens up more questions than I have been able to address here. The role of men in female-dominated subcultures provides another area of potential inquiry that I have only begun to address here.
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*Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of interview subjects.