Performing Agency – Contemporary Burlesque and the Feminist Gaze

By

Hannah Dickson

Submitted to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Art Histories
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2022

Abstract

Building off Laura Mulvey's theories on the male gaze as well as bell hooks' theories on the oppositional gaze and Indigenous scholars Carla Rice et al.'s research on the anti-colonial gaze, this paper will define the feminist gaze as an active and informed rejection of the objectifying and power-hungry white, heteropatriarchal, male gaze. Performances done through or for the feminist gaze can be interpreted as empowered and done primarily for the self, in order to activate and engage with one's agency and subjecthood. Through analysis of the work of two burlesque performers, Miss Paige and Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière, the feminist gaze can be understood as an active refusal and disentanglement of the male gaze, which constricts women, femmes, and queer people to the role of passive object, providing the performer with opportunities to construct new, intersectional ways of seeing and being that center the self and one's own agency. Contemporary burlesque uses this feminist gaze to create performances that allow the performer to reject this way of being seen by others and find their own empowerment and agency through a performance of their sexuality that is done for themselves, to resist oppression and celebrate their own pleasure.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Michelle Miller for being so insightful and for sharing her ideas with me throughout this process. I am so appreciative of the support she has given me over the last few months and am grateful to have had her on my team. I would also like to thank all my friends Rachael, Emily, and Kyrie; my partner, Jade, and my cohort. Thank you for always being there to help me talk through ideas, letting me ramble about corsets and rhinestones, and for being my favourite people. Lastly, thank you to Miss Paige and the burlesque community for all you have contributed to this project. I could not have done this project justice without you.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to burlesque performers, strippers, and sluts everywhere.

Table of Contents

Introduction

There are many things that give burlesque its sparkle: bright stage lights refracting off rhinestones and sweaty skin covered in body glitter, hair done carefully in tightly rolled pin curls, the toxic and intoxicating smell of hairspray, cigarettes, and gin and tonics, the overwhelming sound of audience chatter, the reverberating bass of the microphone, and the click-clack of ballroom heels. But what truly makes burlesque such a unique and important genre of performance art is its defiance.

Burlesque has existed as a form of entertainment for hundreds of years and has evolved and shifted in definition many times. Today, burlesque in North America is suggestive and political, incorporating elements of dance, drag, humour, and sexuality. Contemporary burlesque is for everyone of all sizes, ages, genders, sexualities, and backgrounds and is performed all over the world, from small rural towns to large urban cities. While every performer's starting point is different and acts can range from campy to solemn, at the centre of burlesque is a desire to perform one's sexuality. Women, femmes, and queer people are often told that their sexuality is shameful and best kept hidden; those who flaunt or celebrate their sexuality are blamed for their own marginalization or objectification. Why then, do burlesque dancers perform? How do they celebrate their sexuality and identity while avoiding contributing to their own marginalization?

Some view burlesque as a type of performance for the male gaze, upholding ideas of traditional beauty and patriarchal power. Journalist Kelly DiNardo suggests that feminism and burlesque are incompatible, critiquing the self-objectification of burlesque and arguing that it does more harm than good. She explains that although the performer's intentions may be feminist and from a place of self-celebration, the audience is still objectifying them and therefore

the feminist intentions of the performer are redundant.[1] Throughout this paper, I will argue the opposite:[2]the lingerie, the music, and the sexual and suggestive movements that make up a burlesque performance are not chosen or done for a male audience or to cater to a heteropatriarchal, male perspective. Because I place such a strong emphasis on performers' agency, in my view, it is the act of choosing to share their performances, lives, and bodies, that make it feminist. Through the integration of an intersectional feminist gaze, in my reading of burlesque, performers render these outside perspectives tangential and unimportant in acts of feminist activism and self-seduction.

There are many different reasons why someone might enjoy performing burlesque. There are supportive communities of performers in almost all large cities, which creates opportunities for community, friendship building, and learning. The elaborate costuming and crafting that goes into creating a burlesque number fosters creativity and skill-building. Pageants and competitions such as Miss Exotic World and the New Orleans Burlesque Festival's Queen of Burlesque fulfill a need for competition and challenges. The thrill of creating a performance you are proud of creates a rush of pleasure and excitement. However, all these elements can also be found or fulfilled in other activities or industries like theatre, pin-up modeling, or beauty pageants. It is through the combination of all these elements that the unique art form of burlesque emerges; an art form that has helped hundreds of performers reclaim and take ownership of their bodies and sexuality.

Done in the supportive spaces in shows produced by fellow performers, for audiences that are burlesque lovers and performers themselves, in venues that support stripping and sex

---

1 Kelly DiNardo, "Burlesque Comeback Tries to Dance with Feminism," *Women's E-News*, December 7, 2004, https://womensenews.org/2004/12/burlesque-comeback-tries-dance-feminism/.

[2] Similarly to how feminist porn scholars such as Drucilla Cornell argue that sexually explicit videos, literature, and art can promote sexual freedom.

work - burlesque can create a wonderful experience of patriarchal defiance and self-pleasure. However, burlesque is not utopian, and I am of course aware of tensions within the practices and burlesque communities. It is important to acknowledge instances wherein performers are required to perform for the male gaze. As defined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, the male gaze refers to the fact that in Western patriarchal society, men are considered to be active and engaged subjects while women are deemed passive and submissive objects.[3] In this paper, I will argue that burlesque is a practice of and for the feminist gaze, a concept I will define in detail. However, I must first acknowledge that burlesque does not operate entirely outside patriarchal structures. Existing and working within a capitalist society often requires performers to work in settings that might not align with the genre's feminist and inclusive dynamic, in order to make a living and support themselves working as artists. Many corporate gigs, wherein individual performers, or burlesque troops (groups of performers who work and perform together) are hired as entertainment for workplace celebrations, do not look at burlesque as the genre-bending, sexually empowering, feminist performance art that it is seen as by the burlesque community; rather it is opportunity to openly objectify. While many might simply appreciate the vintage aesthetics of burlesque, it is not uncommon for these corporate gigs to desire and insist upon the white, heteropatriarchal values that burlesque often seeks to dismantle, with white, non-tattooed, thin, performers being hired over others.[4] While these values do not align with that of the core values of burlesque, these events often pay well and offer good exposure to new communities, making them an integral part of burlesque culture as it currently stands.

[3] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.
[4] Vice Media, "First Nations Burlesque in Canada," YouTube, August 24, 2019, Video, 9:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4smKB4vHeog.

Through a discussion and the use of intersectional feminist analysis of two case studies, I will define the feminist gaze as an active refusal and disentanglement of the male gaze, which constricts women, femmes, and queer people to the role of passive object, providing the performer with opportunities to construct new, intersectional ways of seeing and being that center the self and one's own agency. Although it might not be a conscious decision or effort on the performer's part, contemporary burlesque performers use this feminist gaze to create performances that allow the performer to reject this way of being seen by others and find their own empowerment and agency through a performance of their sexuality that is done for themselves, their own pleasure, and joy. Performers might be unaware of the concept of the gaze, but that does not change the fact that the feminist gaze is present and at work since it articulates and represents the core values of burlesque.

Two burlesque performers that exemplify the ideals of contemporary burlesque, performing for and through the feminist gaze and in celebration of self-pleasure are Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière[5] and Miss Paige.[6] Lou Lou is an innovative performer in the field of contemporary burlesque. Her work embodies the traditional glamour and classic style of burlesque, while also incorporating expert costuming, professionally produced numbers, and a decolonial perspective. She uses burlesque as a form of activism and protest, decolonizing Indigenous sexuality and making Indigenous women's sexuality visible and celebrated. Miss Paige is self-described as a "feminist fatale" and is known as a trailblazer in the community for her teaching and performing style that incorporates vintage glamour, seduction, and

[5] Due to time constraints surrounding this project, Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière was not available to be interviewed for this project, however, I hope to connect with her on other projects in the future.
[6] The interview conducted with Miss Paige referenced in this paper was approved by the Research Ethics Board at OCAD University.

intersectional feminism.[7] Her artistic pedagogy believes that sexuality begins with self-seduction and that it is both healing and empowering. Both performers centre feminist ideologies and activism in their work, making them integral and highly influential members of the burlesque community. Though both are unique in their accomplishments and their integration of activism into their performances, Lou Lou and Paige make ideal case studies because they both represent the combination of glamour, camp, sexuality, and social disruption that makes up contemporary burlesque. While their performances and artistry are unique to them, Lou Lou and Paige are able to represent the core values and ideals of the burlesque community.

A Brief History of Burlesque

Burlesque has many origin points, as it is an amalgamation of many different genres and art forms.[8] Author Constance Rourke explains that in the 1840s in America, burlesque could be understood as "a number of forms of comedic entertainment," often involving parody or mocking of high culture and not necessarily including music or dance.[9] These performances often took place in large theatres in urban cities, catering to both upper and middle-class audiences creating a unique genre of art that was considered to be both high and low. Although contemporary burlesque incorporates elements of this early form of burlesque like acting, singing, and especially humour, the iconic burlesque costumes, dance styles, and stripping that hallmark burlesque today would not become part of the genre until much later. In 1868, Lydia Thompson and her burlesque troop the "British Blondes" arrived in New York and inspired a

[7] "Miss Paige," Dangerous Beauty Entertainment, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.dangerousbeautyent.com/miss-paige.
[8] It should be noted that this paper specifically focuses on contemporary burlesque in North America and does not attempt to delve into the complexities of international burlesque traditions.
[9] Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2004) 29.

more risqué burlesque style, wherein women played men's roles, revealed more of their bodies, and often made sexual references.[10] Thompson's burlesque style was wildly popular and marked the change towards a more salacious, form of performance that would continue to evolve into the sexualized form of burlesque that is known today.

Inspired by belly dancers at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, a number of vaudeville and variety performers begin performing "hootchy-kootchy" dances, wherein dance was combined with striptease and sexuality.[11] It is unknown who exactly coined this new burlesque, with some saying it was Minsky Burlesque dancer Mae Dix who got so hot during a summer performance that she began to disrobe (to her audience's enjoyment and encores) and others claiming that it originated with renowned dancer Hinda Wasseau, who would reportedly shimmy so hard during shows that her costume frequently came off.[12] No matter who came up with the idea of taking clothes off during the performance, it was (unsurprisingly) equally popular and scandalous and quickly became the hallmark of burlesque.

By the early 1900s burlesque was a hybrid of dance, theatre, vaudeville, striptease, comedy, and political commentary, offering new forms of entertainment and expression. As burlesque historian Robert C. Allen explains, burlesque offered a new and innovative genre of performance that would allow for experimentation and blurring of boundaries.

> It presented a world without limits, a world turned upside down and inside out in which nothing was above being brought down to earth. In that world, things that should be kept separate were united in grotesque hybrids. Meanings refused to stay put. Anything might happen.[13]

---

[10] Robert C. Allen, "A Chronicle of Lydia Thompson's First Season in America," In *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 1-21.
[11] Lucinda Jarrett, *Stripping in Time: A History of Erotic Dancing* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 59–83.
[12] Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 248.
[13] Ibid, 29.

These performers were pushing the boundaries of censorship laws, sexual politics, and performance. Indecent exposure and public indecency laws were often intentionally vague and broad, leaving it up to the community and law enforcement to decide what was or was not appropriate.[14] In New York City in 1931, the 42nd Street Property Owners Association attempted to close down popular burlesque clubs by having performers charged with obscenity violations, as they viewed these performances as demoralizing and thought they would drive away respectable business.[15] By intentionally defying or pushing up against these laws, these women were challenging what was seen as socially acceptable and the often unfair policing of women's bodies. Burlesque became an art form that was both high and low, accepted and unacceptable, and unlike anything that had been seen before.

While burlesque shows of this era can be seen as progressive for the time, shows could also be problematic and harmful. Shows or performers were often advertised as "oriental" or "exotic," playing to the idea of the primitive wild women from exotic lands, and making use of skits, dances, and jokes that were, as artist and theatre professor Katherine Liepe-Levinson refers to as "rife with racial, ethnic, and sexual stereotypes".[16] While burlesque created the opportunity for some women to explore their sexuality and capitalize on it, it often did so by furthering the marginalization of racialized minorities. Very few women of colour were allowed to perform on burlesque stages, and even fewer were documented and remembered today. Those who did perform and made a name for themselves, like Josephine Baker, experienced racist attacks in the

[14] "Public Indecency in England 1857-1960: 'A Serious and Growing Evil'," Criminal Law and Criminal Justice Books, Rutgers Newark, March 2016, https://clcjbooks.rutgers.edu/books/public-indecency-in-england-1857-1960-a-serious-and-growing-evil/.
[15] Andrea Friedman, "'The Habitats of Sex-Crazed Perverts': Campaigns against Burlesque in Depression-Era New York City," *Journal of the History of Sexuality 7*, No. 2, (1996): 212.
[16] Katherine Liepe-Levinson, "Choreography I: The Basic Moves," in *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001) 111.

media.[17] Additionally, while the Great Depression and subsequent poverty made it more acceptable for women to seek employment, it also created opportunities for the exploitation of women in vulnerable positions by the striptease industry.[18] Even today, with burlesque being done by and for many minority groups, with shows like Land Back Cabaret produced by Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière, featuring an all-Indigenous cast, festivals like What the Funk?! An All POC Burlesque Festival, in Seattle, Washington, and Virago Nation, an Indigenous burlesque and theatre troupe that seeks to reclaim Indigenous sexuality, burlesque like many areas of the art world, is still dominated by the white community; with BIPOC performers often being paid less, passed over for work, and treated with racism and discrimination. Although burlesque is an inclusive community there is still a lot of work that needs to be done by white performers, producers, audiences, and venues to unlearn racist and harmful practices.

After a decline in popularity in the 1970s, the 1990s and 2000s saw a re-emergence of the burlesque scene, with nightclubs in New York and London offering burlesque and cabaret shows.[19] This resurgence, referred to as neo-burlesque, began a showgirl revival, with the desire for vintage styles and new avenues for performance leading people to the genre. Burlesque legend Dixie Evans, inspired by friend and fellow performer Jennie Lee, formed the Exotic World Museum (now known as the Burlesque Hall of Fame) in California (now in Las Vegas) and the annual Miss Exotic World competition, which preserves the history of classic and neo-burlesque as well as hosting shows, teaching new performers, and keeping the burlesque community alive and thriving.[20] From there, burlesque would continue to rise in popularity and is

---

[17] Sekiya Dorsett, "The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project," City University of New York, 2017, 9.
[18] Katherine Liepe-Levinson, "Choreography I: The Basic Moves," in *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001) 110.
[19] Debra Ferreday, "Showing the Girl: The New Burlesque," *Feminist Theory* 9, no.1 (2008): 48, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086363.
[20] "Burlesque Hall of Fame: About," Burlesque Hall of Fame, accessed November 10, 2021, https://www.burlesquehall.com/about/#mission.

performed today by thousands of performers around the world. Although there are many different styles, including nerdlesque, classic, comedy, and so on, contemporary or neo-burlesque, is hallmarked by the act of striptease wherein performers start out fully clothed and end their performance in pasties and a thong (or something similar). Music genres vary from classic jazz to pop to heavy metal music, and dance styles are equally diverse, including classic burlesque bump and grind, ballet, and tap. Burlesque would also become an integral part of pop culture in the early 2000s, through celebrity performers like Dita Von Teese and movies like *Burlesque* starring Cher and Christina Aguilera, fueling the revival of the performance genre and pushing more people towards attending local shows or sparking an interest in performing. Although these more mainstream forms of burlesque are often very different than performances done by the burlesque community and can have different ethics, motivations, and intentions, they often serve as an entry point for new audience members who might then delve deeper into the reality of the burlesque community.

Contemporary burlesque audiences are often made up of women, femmes, and the queer community, possibly because they are able to see themselves and their identities mirrored on stage through the diversity of performers. However, corporate events and large parties that hire performers as entertainment can allow burlesque performers to reach a wide range of viewers. Perhaps one of the reasons so many people are drawn to burlesque is its ability to encompass so many diverse art forms. Truly any artistic preference, costume idea, music genre, dance style, or concept can be made into a contemporary burlesque act. For example, Willa Von Alta performs in a classically beautiful and graceful ballet style to Lily Allen's song "Fuck You," Rhapsody Blue has a number where she dances with large feather fans while dressed as Big Bird from Sesame Street, and one of Roxi D'Lite's most popular numbers in one wherein she bathes in

champagne on stage. To quote burlesque performer and professor of burlesque at New York University, Dr. Lucky (also knowns as Dr. Lynn Sally) "[neoburlesque is] glamorous, campy, parodic, excessive, and salacious."[21] Contemporary burlesque performers are seen as both high and low brow artists and are, in my opinion, almost always political.

Neo or contemporary burlesque is an extraordinarily diverse art form, done by performers of all different identities and bodies, in many different styles, for many different reasons. Notable performers tour their acts, performing everywhere from small bars with no stage, to art galleries, theatres, and convention centers. Contemporary burlesque is a celebration of sexuality, art, queerness, and empowerment. Dainty Smith, notable Toronto based burlesque performer and founder of Les Femmes Fatales: Women of Colour Burlesque Troupe, Canada's first burlesque troupe for Black women and women of colour, femmes, and gender non-conforming people explains her thoughts on burlesque and feminism by saying:

> For me, burlesque is a feminist act. It is femme worship and defiance. It is about affirming myself, my body, and my sexuality as a Black woman moving through the world. As a storyteller, I feel it is important to tell a story with my body – not as a secondary object or as somebody else's object, but purely my own… it is an autonomous act of self-love and ownership.[22]

It is this autonomous self-love and defiance that burlesque becomes a political, feminist act. Owning and celebrating the Black femme body is an act of resistance; worshiping and loving what Western society has rejected and dismissed for so long. In her performance, as well as with many other performers, Smith chooses to honour and glorify both her body and identity; in turn, also celebrating and empowering those who watch her performances and see their own identities reflected. Smith tells a story with her body, centering her own perspective and affirming this

---

[21] Lynn Sally, "'It Is the Ugly That is So Beautiful': Performing the Monster/Beauty Continuum in American Neo-Burlesque," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 21, no. 3 (2009): 7.
[22] Adriana Disman, "The Politics of Burlesque: A Dialogue Among Dancers," *Canadian Theatre Review*, 158 (2014): 8. https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.158.001b.

self-love and agency. Through this, burlesque provides a platform for women, femmes, and queers from many different backgrounds to build and support empowerment and agency.

The Drama and Intrigue of a Tassel

Censorship laws were responsible for many of the unique costume pieces that are now associated with burlesque. Things like nipple pasties, panel skirts, and body stockings toed the line of the censorship laws, risking indecency charges, while also enacting what Liepe-Levinson calls "the pleasure- pain of erotic eye-strain."[23] This eye-strain is a way for burlesque dancers and strippers to hold power and agency through costumes and dancing, by forcing viewers to strain to see more but only allowing them to see as much as they are permitted.[24] This method keeps the dancer safe from breaking obscenity laws (both historic and current) while also allowing them to tease their audience and leave them wanting more. This idea of teasing the audience is one that burlesque centres on, with the removal of costume pieces being prolonged and stretched out over the whole act. As professor of visual communication and fashion theorist Barbara Brownie explains "the act explores the promise of nudity, not nudity itself."[25] Liepe-Levinson also says, referring to both burlesque performers and strippers, that "no matter how simple or complex the stripper's initial outfit, it always creates 'drama and interest' for the spectator because it functions as an obstacle to the story's transgressive outcome —public nudity."[26] Similarly, Roland Barthes suggests that it is the "intermittence of skin flashing

[23] Katherine Liepe-Levinson, "Costume Dramas and Sexual Subjectivity," in *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001) 77.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Barbara Brownie, *Acts of Undressing Politics, Eroticism, and Discarded Clothing* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 26.
[26] Katherine Liepe-Levinson, "Costume Dramas and Sexual Subjectivity," in *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001) 76.

between two articles of clothing" this is the most erotic part of a body.[27] It is not necessarily the nudity that is so appealing, but more so the excitement of the unpromised and intermittent glimpses of appearing, disappearing and reappearing of skin under costume pieces. These costume pieces that tease the audience are not only aesthetically pleasing, with complementary colour schemes and rhinestones strategically placed to glitter under the stage lights, but also reference burlesque history and allow the performer to maintain and gain power during their performance, controlling what is seen and when. The pasties, skirts, and corsets hint at nudity and tease the audience until the moment wherein the performer is ready to show more.

Performing High-Femme Womanness

Feminists who take an essentialist approach (often seen in second-wave feminist theory), critique femininity for being additive and suggest that by stripping away these oppressive notions of femininity women can find true, authentic female identity. Second wave feminists like the once praised, now highly criticized feminist author and journalist Naomi Wolf suggest that "femininity is code for femaleness plus whatever society happens to be selling."[28] Not only does this assume that there is a universal 'femaleness' that all women have, it also does not consider the factors that impact different experiences of femininity or how one *chooses* to perform their identity. This assumption is an example of trans exclusionary radical feminism, wrongly equating sex with gender and assuming that "female" automatically equates to "woman."[29] While Wolf is not wrong to critique the effects of capitalism and social constructions of gender

[27] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 9-10.
[28] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage Classics, 2015) 177.
[29] I would like to use this space to highlight the trans burlesque community, including notable performers Moscato Sky, the first openly trans and gender-queer performer to make their mark on the Burlesque Hall of Fame stage and the late Marinka, the legendary "Queen of the Amazons", who came out as a transgender woman at 80 years old.

identity, she assumes that femininity and feminism are incompatible with each other and that sex and gender are synonymous, dismissing the wide range of experiences of women and reducing them to a singular identity. By these standards, burlesque would be promoting the socially prescribed idea of gender performance, which is restrictive and celebrates only a certain type of femininity. However, because of burlesque's implementation of the feminist gaze, and the fact that burlesque artists are challenging the restrictive elements of femininity while simultaneously performing and celebrating the femme identity, this is untrue. Performers use the gaze to unlearn and reject the male gaze and perform carefully considered performances of femininity and "womenness" that bring pleasure to themselves, rather than only to others.

Instead of this restrictive version of femininity, contemporary burlesque suggests a camp version of gender and of womanhood. Jessica Thorp, a burlesque researcher, applies Susan Sontag's theories on camp to contemporary burlesque:

> In style and content, neoburlesque seems to embody the camp aesthetic. It is a throwback to earlier forms of burlesque and the eras in which they were performed, but it also simultaneously lampoons the present… Through the use of satire, burlesque seeks to undermine conventional notions of femininity and deconstruct, queer them and replace them with an empowering spectacle whereby the flaunting of sexuality is freely chosen and fun![30]

Thorp suggests that by performing femininity in a camp way, burlesque undermines and mocks conventional femininity. I disagree with the notion that burlesque mocks femininity as that implies that performing one's femininity is a negative thing and that performers do so to ridicule femme identities. It is more that it mocks the male gaze's interpretation of femininity, with burlesque performers queering and reconstructing these identities, changing them from existing as exclusively part of the male gaze to identities that empower and allow for an exploration of

[30] Jessica Thorp, "Fishnets & Desire: Performing the Neoburlesque," Ryerson University, 2009, 14.

identity. This reconstruction of femininity is done with care, love, and respect for the femme identity, and through a desire to reclaim it through the feminist gaze.

Often (although not always)[31]burlesque performers adapt a high-femme visual persona for their performances. By using what feminist cultural theorist Debra Ferreday calls a "'DIY' approach to femininity" performers are able to create feminine identities that are specifically and thoughtfully constructed, celebrating certain aspects of femininity while rejecting the normalization of a homogenized idea of femininity.[32] Through this rejection of the normalized idea of femininity that is popularized and maintained through the male gaze, the feminist gaze allows performers to create a performance of their sexuality and their femininity that is intentional, active, and done for themselves. This "do-it-yourself" method of creating a feminine identity means that performers must examine and press against different aspects of femininity and contemplate what these elements represent and then decide if these aspects will add to or detract from the performance or their burlesque persona.

Ferreday compares the socially learned and performed elements of femininity with the learned and performed elements of burlesque; movement, hair, makeup, and costumes that come to represent this performance of femininity are all techniques and skills that must be learned. Established performers will often host classes and teach new performers how to dance or do hair and makeup in a classic burlesque style and Ferreday suggests that "[t]hese classes… demonstrate awareness that femininity needs to be learnt: in this, they reveal an implicit relationship between burlesque and queer notions of performativity."[33] Learning these new ways

---

[31] This can include Boylesque performers, like Toronto's Boylesque T.O. troupe whose members all identify and perform as men and butch or gender non-conforming burlesque performers, such as Luscious von Dykester, Katori Knight, and Jinxy Deviate.
[32] Debra Ferreday, "Showing the Girl: The New Burlesque," *Feminist Theory* 9, no.1 (2008): 57, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086363.
[33] Ibid, 51.

of performing identity for one's self in a way that provides agency and pleasure also offers an opportunity to unlearn socially prescribed norms of femininity and of what it means to exist as a femme in Western society. The subsequent two case studies will introduce the two performers and examine the ways in which they reject the male gaze and embrace the feminist gaze.

The Feminist Gaze: Seeing and Being Seen

Two key terms inform my thinking: the male gaze and the feminist gaze. As previously stated, the male gaze refers to the concept that in Western culture, men are seen as the ones who look and are active, powerful, participants in society while women are the ones who are seen; who are passive and submissive.[34] The male gaze is harmful as it keeps women, femmes, and queer people trapped within the constructed boundaries of a heteronormative, white, colonial, patriarchal structure, restricting them to being passive objects. Through the male gaze, and subsequent marginalizing gazes, like the colonial gaze and the white gaze, power structures are reinscribed, which in turn create privileges that make their way into all facets of society. Coined in Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, the term "male gaze" refers to the cinematic technique wherein women are framed as the objects of heterosexual male desire.[35] According to this theory, Mulvey explains that the male gaze is a way for men to maintain their social and cultural power while restricting women to the role of erotic object to be used for their pleasure.

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.[36]

[34] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid, 11.

Mulvey's essay refers to the male gaze in the context of cinema, however, this theory has since been applied to all types of media and different facets of life, including music, art, literature, politics, and power structures of everyday communities.[37] Although it is not brought up by Mulvey, using an intersectional lens it can also be understood that colonialism and the colonial gaze also impacts the male gaze and how women, femmes, and queer people are seen. Through the colonial gaze, subjecthood is removed by the settler and the figured being looked at (that which the settler is attempting to colonize) is othered, marginalized, and objectified.[38] This, in combination with the male gaze, creates a power structure that privileges white, colonial, heterosexual, men as those who look and everyone else as those who are looked at.

The feminist gaze, informed by bell hooks' theories on the oppositional gaze and Indigenous scholars Carla Rice, et al.'s work on the anti-colonial gaze, acts as an active and informed rejection of the objectifying and power-hungry white, heteropatriarchal, male gaze. The oppositional gaze refers to the act of resisting against repression and restriction of a Black woman's right to look, as well as the pleasure that can be found in looking and seeing as an act of resisting.[39] Decolonial feminist scholars at the University of Guelf, Rice et al suggest that the anti-colonial gaze can be a way of resisting the settler gaze, countering the effects of colonialism and by extension, misogyny, racism, gender, and sexual normativity.[40] Performances done through or for the feminist gaze can be interpreted as empowered and done primarily for the self,

---

[37] Examples include Monica Germana's analysis of "Bond Girls" in the James Bond series, in her book Bond Girls: Body, Fashion and Gender, Paola Bica and Raquel Martin's analysis of the male gaze in literature in their article The Male Gaze in Literature: the case of They're not your husband (1973) by Raymond Carver, and Journalist Amina Sergazina's thoughts on the "manic pixie dream girl" trope.

[38] Kalpana Ram, "Gender, Colonialism, and the Colonial Gaze," *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, (2022), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1873.

[39] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

[40] Carla Rice et al. "Re/turning the gaze: unsettling settler logics through multimedia storytelling," *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1707256.

as a way to activate and engage with one's agency and subjecthood. Although the gaze is rooted in looking, the feminist gaze, as I have defined it, is about simultaneously looking, and being looked at; about looking at the restrictive nature of gender norms, at beauty and bodies, at femininity and how identity is performed, at oneself and at others within the community. The feminist gaze works to actively challenge and subvert this male gaze on several fronts. First, performers who align themselves with the feminist gaze refuse the male gaze; while others might see them as objects, they see themselves as subjects, refusing to concede to the expectations of the male gaze. It is then disentangled, unraveled, questioned, and the power structures that make up and support the male gaze and critiqued. Finally, the pleasure of resistance allows performers to seek out their subjecthood and agency, creating space for new ways of seeing and being seen as active figures.

This resistance does not entirely negate the performance or the effects of the male gaze, however, using the tactics of the feminist gaze to find agency, empowerment, and pleasure within this heteronormative, colonial, patriarchal society is necessary for those who do not experience privileges under this system. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz writes on the potential for queerness to provide hope and the feminist gaze can be understood similarly:

> We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality… Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.[41]

His theories of queerness as a way of hoping and working towards a better future for marginalized people can be applied to the feminist gaze in a similar manner. While the world is still very much entrenched in heteronormative, colonial, and patriarchal values, performers who are using the feminist gaze imagine a world in which it is not and actively take steps to see

[41] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009) 1.

themselves outside of this lens. While art is subjective and there will always be individuals who will disagree and see the open display of sexual freedom as inherent objectification because the feminist gaze places value on the experience and intentions of the performer over the experience and interpretation of the viewer, the audience's interpretation of the work is rendered secondary in this context. As in Muñoz's theories on queer futurism, while the feminist gaze cannot undo the patriarchy on its own, it gives people hope for a future where there will be more options and opportunities for women, femmes, and queers. Like queer hope, burlesque can withstand and stand up to disappointment.[42] No matter how others interpret the genre, attempting to explain that it is demoralizing or antifeminist, burlesque performers continue to shimmy, shake, and take their close off for fun.

Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière – Defiant and Decolonial Burlesque

Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière is "the stripping sensation from the Mohawk Nation." From the Mohawk Territory of Kahnawake, Quebec, Lou Lou is one of Canada's first Afro-Indigenous burlesque performers and has been performing for almost 17 years, becoming one of Canada's most famous and influential burlesque performers. Beginning her career in 2005 at the age of 18 in Montreal with Blue Light Burlesque troupe, and then starting her solo career in 2007, Lou Lou has performed all over the world and is known for both her glamour and her activism.[43] She has been voted into the Burlesque Top 50 by 21st Century Burlesque three times, was crowned the New Orleans Queen of Burlesque in 2018 and won Most Innovative at the Burlesque Hall of Fame in 2019, all of which are considered to be prestigious and respected

[42] Ibid.
[43] "Accolades," Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière, accessed October 15, 2021, https://www.loulouburlesque.com/accolades.

accolades within the burlesque community.[44] Using burlesque as a method of decolonizing and celebrating Indigenous sexuality and combining the satirical, sexual, and political, Lou Lou's acts are always introduced with her signature tag line: "you stole her land, now she's going to steal your heart."

Lou Lou's act "Peace, Power, and Righteousness" begins with a totally dark stage. A single spotlight then shines down on her from above as the music starts, while she stands with her back to the audience. She wears a purple floor-length robe and turban, and white gloves covered in purple rhinestones which shimmer and reflect the spotlight. Her makeup is dark and beautiful; expertly painted on, it draws attention to her facial expressions which range from seductive to excited to intense. As A Tribe Called Red's "Electric Pow Wow Drum" begins, she starts to bounce in place to the drumbeat. With each jump, the marabou feathers that line the hem of the robe and the sleeves move with her. As the voices of the song begin to sing, Lou Lou starts to spin, turning towards the audience and revealing her moccasins, a departure from the high heels usually worn during burlesque performances. The robe lends itself to the movement of this performance, swirling around her body and accentuating each move, kick, and spin.

As the song transitions to A Tribe Called Red's "Sila (feat. Tanya Tegaq)," her robe is removed and when the beat of the song drops, she rips off her turban allowing two waist-length braids to cascade out and down her back. Lou Lou says that she wanted to play with the concept of the unexpected reveal:

> I wear a turban – which… is very old-school burlesque garb — but when I take the turban off I have braids that go down to the floor. For me, in times of trouble women braid their hair to centre us, to ground us, and to keep ourselves close to Mother Earth.[45]

---

[44] Ibid.

[45] Alexander Varty, "Burlesque queen Lauren Ashley Jiles performs to help Indigenous women reclaim their sexuality," *The Georgia Straight*, 2019, https://www.straight.com/arts/1219571/burlesque-queen-lauren-ashley-jiles-performs-help-indigenous-women-reclaim-their.

From there, the performance is full of fast, hard-hitting movements, stripping off clothes until all that remains is a purple body harness, rhinestone pasties with tassels, and her moccasins. The last minute of the performance is, as she refers to it, "aggressively, unapologetically sexual."[46] Full of floor work, she spins, rolls, and grinds on the stage, her braids swinging behind her. The performance ends with her on her knees, spinning her tassels as she leans back, hair pooling on the floor behind her. She leaves the stage with a bow and blows a kiss to the audience, who are cheering, applauding, and are left in amazement.

Refusal

The contemporary burlesque performer refuses to align themselves with patriarchal society and the marginalization and limiting of femininity, in order to be accepted and praised. In the chapter "Feminist Killjoys," feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed asks the reader to "take the figure of the feminist killjoy seriously. Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy?"[47] Although burlesque does not inherently "kill joy" the way Ahmed describes in her chapter (in many ways, it often brings joy or pleasure to its performers and viewers), at the core of Ahmed's concept is the refusal to sustain the fantasy of happiness by compromising one's own beliefs, opinions, and values of injustices, which can also be applied to burlesque performance. Performers only show as much as they want and do it on their own terms, even if it is not what the audience might want to see, how viewers might want it to

[46] Ibid.
[47] Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys" in *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010) 65.

happen, or a body that might not be considered conventionally desirable, such as fat, non-white, disabled, etc.

The burlesque performer distorts Western society's perception of sexuality, shifting it from something to be hidden to something out in the open and from women's sexuality being seen as something that is done *to* them towards being done *by and for* them. This rejection and distortion of the norm can be seen in Ahmed's explanation of the distortion of the happy family:

> [s]o much you are not supposed to say, to do, to be, in order to preserve that image [of a happy family]. If you say, or do, or be anything that does not reflect the image of the happy family back to itself, the world becomes distorted. You become the cause of a distortion. You are the distortion you cause.[48]

Although here Ahmed refers to the feminist killjoy in the context of the family, this act of disorientation can also be applied to burlesque performers. In Western society, shame, secrecy, and dirtiness are associated with sex and sexuality. Performing burlesque refuses to adhere to these associations, distorting this image of sex as a negative into a moment of celebration and freedom (specifically for women, femmes, and queer people and even more so for people of colour and Indigenous people). Additionally, if a burlesque performer is not someone who fits traditional Western beauty standards of thinness, whiteness, etc., the expectations of what kinds of bodies are allowed to be celebrated, valued, and seen as beautiful are also distorted. Burlesque performers distort and fracture these expectations that the male gaze expects them to reflect back, using their art form to create new images and performances that satisfy the self, above all else while disrupting and refusing heteronormative, colonial, fatphobic, and whorephobic values.

Lou Lou's act "Peace, Power, and Righteousness" is a perfect example of performative use of the feminist gaze. As Rice et al. suggest, through multimedia making and storytelling, Lou

---

[48] Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)," *Scholar & Feminist* 19, no. 3 (2010), https://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm.

Lou's performance uses a "creative research method" that is able to "counter, respond to, and re/turn the heteropatriarchal settler colonial gaze" which contributes to a "feminist decolonizing and Indigenizing aesthetic – an embedded and embodied aesthetic – that consciously weaves together process and form."[49] Burlesque, as Lou Lou refers to it, is "intrinsically powerful, but also ridiculous and opulent" linking together the two worlds of showgirl glamour and her culture to create something powerful and defiant while also sexual and beautiful.[50] Lou Lou's performance is done for herself as a method of reclamation of her sexuality and pleasure as an Indigenous woman. It first acts as an active rejection of the heterosexual, colonial, male gaze and its values, and then allows for these ideas to be disentangled and reworked, allowing for new ways of seeing and enacting Indigenous sexuality to be imagined and practiced.

In an interview with burlesque performer Michelle L'Amour on her podcast *Look Down There,* Lou Lou discusses how in the past, she only wanted to present classic, glamour burlesque because there was an expectation from audiences and show producers that she would bring elements of her Indigenous identity to her performance for the enjoyment of viewers, reflecting on a time where an un-named producer advised her to do a Pocahontas themed act.[51] After many years of performing, winning titles, dancing in pow wows, and being "entrenched in politics for her whole life" she began to reflect on who she was as a performer and what she wanted to bring to burlesque.[52] This is where her act "Peace, Power, and Righteousness" comes from. This act, in all its defiance and sexuality, was not created to please a producer or audience, "Peace, Power, and Righteousness" is a performance of Lou Lou's sexuality, for herself and a rejection of the

---

[49] Carla Rice et al., "Re/turning the gaze: unsettling settler logics through multimedia storytelling," *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): 3.
[50] Adrienne Huard, "The Vibrational Effects of Indigenous Burlesque," *Canadian Art,* March 25, 2021, https://canadianart.ca/features/the-vibrational-effects-of-indigenous-burlesque/.
[51] Michelle L'amour, "Indigenous Burlesque with Lou Lou La Duchesse de Riere: Ep 35 Look Down There," YouTube, November 23, 2021, Video, 52:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16zAnnXUQdw.
[52] Ibid.

colonial male gaze; "this isn't a reciprocal kind of performance; I'm not performing for applause… It's not about anybody in the audience, this is about me and you're going to watch."[53] Here, the audience's reaction to the performance is rendered unimportant. Lou Lou is enacting this performance and these ideas for herself, refusing to allow the male gaze's opinions of or restrictions on her identity and body to impact how she sees herself. Lou Lou demonstrates Ahmed's concept of distorting socially constructed ideas of what it means to be an Indigenous woman and kills the joy of the male gaze by refusing to go along with it.

Disentangling Sexuality

Once an artist has refused the male gaze, it can then be disentangled, unraveling these thoughts and reworking ideas into new concepts, ways of seeing, and being seen. Through their work with the ReVision Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph, authors Carla Rice et al. examine multimedia artwork that "counter, respond to, and re/turn the heteropatriarchal settler colonial gaze."[54] Although this article focuses specifically on Indigenous multimedia art and the colonial gaze, and the male gaze and colonial gaze can be different, they overlap in many ways. Both the male and colonial gazes' privilege white, heterosexual, patriarchal perspectives, rendering those who have those privileges powerful and attempting to keep those without, powerless. Additionally, Muñoz's concept of disidentification, wherein a minority subject uses artistic performance to subvert oppressive social stereotypes and uses them to represent agency and support self-expression, can be applied here.[55] By disentangling from the

[53] Ibid.
[54] Carla Rice et al. "Re/turning the gaze: unsettling settler logics through multimedia storytelling," *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1707256.
[55] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

male gaze, performers disidentify from the stereotypes and expectations (of gender, race, body) that the male gaze cases upon them, creating performances that celebrate themselves and their identities. Through this re/turning, disidentifying, and responding to the heteropatriarchal, colonial, male gaze, it is disentangled and further rejected.

The concept of disentanglement allows those who utilize the feminist gaze to see themselves as they want to be seen. To allow themselves to imagine and hope for a world in which their bodies and sexuality are not used against them and that other might see them as they want to be seen. As in Muñoz's concept of queer utopia, wherein he suggests that utopia can allow us to "conceptualize new worlds and realities…" and "offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be.*"[56] Similarly, disentanglement of the male gaze allows the existing ways of being, seeing, and looking to be reimagined and reworked into new ways of existing as women, femmes, and queers that are not limited by current power structures. Like utopia, disentanglement and the overall concept of the feminist gaze critique what currently is by imagining other possible ways of being.

As Rice et al. explain, often telling and sharing stories is not enough to undo the narratives and the power structures that the male gaze has created (because the patriarchy's need to preserve itself makes people not want to listen or believe those who share their trauma and experiences), so artists perform and create visuals, which respond to and disentangle these gazes as well as take up space that was previously denied to them.[57] The experiences of women, femmes, and queers are often disregarded and ignored, making it difficult for them to take up space, be listened to, and taken seriously. Through burlesque, artists create performances that are

---

[56] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009) 35.
[57] Carla Rice et al. "Re/turning the gaze: unsettling settler logics through multimedia storytelling," *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): 9, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1707256.

both responding to and working against this marginalizing gaze, taking up space and enacting commanding performances that challenge existing narratives and constructs of looking and being looked at. Through control over their sexual agency and the performer's defiance of socially constructed norms, the gaze is returned, rejected, and disentangled. Burlesque uses the feminist gaze to tear down what is expected and asked of them and replaces it with what the performer wants.

Lou Lou disentangles the male gaze through her performances, effectively reworking the current narrative of Indigenous sexuality and creating space for new ways of seeing oneself as an active participant in one's sexual identity. Speaking about some of the lasting effects of colonialism, including the shaming of women and their sexuality, which leads to encouraging and teaching women to be and dress modestly, Lou Lou says that "they're taught to protect themselves by covering their bodies, but this isn't a healthy mindset."[58] Teaching women these concepts is an example of the ridiculousness of victim blaming, suggesting that if a person is dressed "immodestly" they deserve what happens to them. As if dressing conservatively or covering up has ever stopped men from feeling entitled to women's bodies. She also reflects on the fact that the only times Indigenous women get to hear about their sexuality is in reference to rape and murder. If sex and sexuality are only ever spoken about in a perspective of danger or in a triggering way, it is easy to see how this harmful association of sex with violence and fear and women as always and automatically being victims could be created. As curator and Indigenous studies researcher Adrienne Huard explains, Indigenous burlesque has the power to revert and alter some of this messaging; "it's an accessible medium that pushes people to understand that we, Indigenous Peoples, are worthy of experiencing lust and pleasure. And through that, we are

[58] Vice Media, "First Nations Burlesque in Canada," YouTube, August 24, 2019, Video, 9:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4smKB4vHeog.

establishing that Indigenous bodies are autonomous and sovereign outside a heteropatriarchal and colonial world."[59] Performing through the feminist gaze, Lou Lou actively disentangles the colonial mindset of viewing sex and sexuality, specifically Indigenous women's sex and sexuality, as shameful and reworks it, creating a moment of aggressive celebration and pleasure. When she twirls her tassels, leaning back so far that her braids gather on the floor behind her, it is a moment of refusal, a moment of disentanglement, of claiming this performance and this space as her own, and a moment done for herself.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that Indigenous burlesque does not need to have visual references to Indigenous culture, like moccasins or music by Indigenous artists, in order to be decolonial and empowering. Multidisciplinary artist and educator Yolanda Bonnell explains this concept of inherent indigeneity within Indigenous arts creation.

> Indigenous artists don't owe you culture. We don't owe you beads and feathers. Our talents and creativity contain multitudes of experiences and nuances and inspirations… I could write a play about a blender and it would still be Indigenous because I am Indigenous.[60]

Although Lou Lou's performance of "Peace, Power, and Righteousness" does visually reference her Indigeneity, all of her acts are inherently Indigenous and decolonial because she is an Indigenous woman performing her sexuality for herself. Speaking about her performance that won her the title of Queen of Burlesque at the New Orleans Burlesque Festival, where she is dressed as a black widow spider, she describes the act as unapologetically herself, saying that this act was "was very much me and less what I thought the judges would want. It was so much

---

59 Adrienne Huard, "The Vibrational Effects of Indigenous Burlesque," *Canadian Art*, March 25, 2021, https://canadianart.ca/features/the-vibrational-effects-of-indigenous-burlesque/.

[60] Yolanda Bonnell (@yobiwankenobe), "Indigenous artists don't owe you culture. We don't owe you beads and feathers. Our talents and creativity contain multitudes of experiences and nuances and inspirations… I could write a play…," Instagram, photo, January 25, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CZKMRy8rjle/.

fun. I don't think I've performed with that much energy and just kind of pure joy ever."[61] This highlights the fact that performances that centre and focus on what the performer wants, rather than what others might want, can produce more effective and more empowering performances. No matter the performance, Lou Lou's burlesque is powerful, anti-colonial, and refuses the male gaze while creating moments of celebration and pleasure for herself.

Miss Paige and Her Reclamation of Femininity

Miss Paige is "burlesque's dangerous beauty," a performer who delves into both glamour and politics in her stage performances and teaching.[62] Beginning her career in 2013, after stumbling upon a burlesque school in Toronto, Ontario and now working in Montreal, Quebec, Paige has performed and taught all over Canada and internationally. Her contemporary take on classic burlesque centres self-seduction and has made her a two-time winner at The Burlypicks Solid Gold International Festival in 2020.[63] Paige is also the founder of Dangerous Beauty Entertainment, a production company that produces event entertainment, wardrobe styling, burlesque classes and workshops, and more. As a teacher, she educates participants on both the mechanics of performance and the history of burlesque, ensuring its history is passed on to new performers. When she first began performing, she "did not realize at the time how much burlesque would serve a therapeutic purpose, far beyond the joy of performing."[64]
Now, she believes that burlesque is both healing and empowering and is for all bodies, genders, identities, and abilities and means embracing one's sexuality and playing with these

---

[61] Ka'nhehsí:io Deer, "Kahnawake woman crowned Queen of Burlesque in New Orleans," *CBC News,* October 2, 2018, https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/kahnawake-indigenous-queen-burlesque-lauren-jiles-1.4846905.
[62] "Miss Paige," Dangerous Beauty Entertainment, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.dangerousbeautyent.com/miss-paige.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Miss Paige (burlesque performer) in discussion with the author, February 2022.

constructions of identity.[65] Her performances are an excellent example of performing high femme "womanness" in a way that refuses and unravels the male gaze while also proving pleasure and new opportunities to construct identities and empowerment.

Miss Paige's act "Miss Starburst" is the definition of contemporary burlesque done in a classic style. Dressed in a gold robe adorned with rhinestones and black beaded fringe, black elbow-length gloves, and a white fur stole with a black tassel on each end, Paige struts slowly and purposefully across the stage, pausing every so often to wink or blow a kiss at the audience. Her hair is done in brushed out, 1940s-style waves and her makeup is glamorous with a bright red lip and long, dark eyelashes; she looks vampy and beautiful, like a high-femme film noir star. Her facial expressions make it seem like each time she touches her robe or glides the fur over her body, it is an erotic and pleasurable experience, not just for the audience to watch but for herself to perform. When she opens her robe, she reveals a black and gold panel skirt, another nod to classic burlesque, and begins to spin. The transparent panels of the skirt and the silk robe all spin, sway, and open, just enough to allow the viewer to glance at what is underneath but not enough to reveal it all. Once she has stripped down to her black bullet bra, underwear, and gloves (all black and covered with silver rhinestones that form starburst shapes and glimmer under the stage lights) she drops to the floor and then to her knees, bouncing to the beat of the song, smiling because she already knows this will get the audience to cheer. Peeling her first glove off in between her legs, Paige then whips an audience member with it, before tossing it aside. The energy of her movements makes the viewer feel like Paige is doing this because she wants to and could not care less if you like it or not. Her confident body language, casual smile, and the way she teases and interacts with the audience make it seem like we (the viewers) are given the

[65] "Miss Paige," Dangerous Beauty Entertainment, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.dangerousbeautyent.com/miss-paige.

privilege of watching Paige perform, but that she would be performing in exactly the same way, even if there were no audience. In just her sparkly pasties and underwear, Paige does her final peel, taking her second glove off with her butt, to the audience's amazement. As the music ends, she poses, fluffs her hair and slaps her own ass, then smiles and saunters off stage.

Camping Femininity

Miss Paige's defiant take on femininity and sexuality is one of the many ways she refuses to act in accordance with the male gaze. Diane Ponterotto, a professor of English language and linguistics at the University of Rome studying the relationship between gender and language, explains that this ability to navigate one's identity freely and be able to choose how to define one's gender outside of a binary can be a radical notion.

> What can be more revolutionary than the affirmation of the right to negotiate one's identity, to choose the when and how of one's embodiment, to move freely within the multiple masculinities and femininities of the gender order, to erase borders and reject the structures and strictures of binaries?[66]

This notion of choice, of affirmation of agency and identity, and the rejection of binary identities and how women, femmes, and queer people see and are seen, is how the male gaze is rejected through burlesque performances.

In rejecting heteropatriarchal norms and expectations, Paige also believes that for her, burlesque is the celebration of a women's choice to be sexual for an audience, for profit.

> Under the realm of patriarchy and gender roles, 'the coy female' aka the proper woman is not sexualizing herself, only being sexualized. My burlesque is about reclaiming my sexuality, my choice, my body, after having that right forcibly taken away. The male gaze

---

66 Diane Ponterotto, "Resisting the male gaze: feminist responses to the 'normatization' of the female body in Western culture," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016): 146, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A443011529/AONE?u=toro37158&sid=summon&xid=8e36d84e.

> is about conquering femininity, there is absolutely nothing meek or timid about my burlesque.[67]

By reclaiming femininity from a society that has demonized and weaponized it, and using it to find empowerment, profit, and joy, Paige refuses the male gaze and in turn, moves towards the feminist gaze. She is able to reappropriate the femme identity and shift it from something that patriarchal society uses to keep women as passive objects who are sexualized without consent, to an identity that gives her power. Through burlesque, Paige successfully disentangles femininity from the male gaze and begins to construct new meanings that allow her to identify in a way that fits her. The ability to identify as an active agent in her sexuality allows Paige to take back power from the patriarchal society that attempted to define her identity for her.

In Paige's burlesque, her femininity and her womanhood are a performance of camp. Sontag explains the concept of camp and the notion of performance by relating it to theater.

> Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility of the metaphor of life as theater.[68]

In contemporary burlesque and in Paige's performances, this concept of not a woman but a "woman" is exemplified and demonstrates the feminist gaze's disentanglement of what it means to be feminine when viewed through the male gaze and how the reappropriation of femininity from the male gaze can be used against it as a way to reframe how femininity is understood. This idea of being a woman in a camp way is performed through actions, costuming, and makeup with performers who take on a high femme persona translating this concept of femininity from one that is often interpreted as additive, superficial, or demeaning, to one that is a deliberate

---

[67] "Miss Paige," Dangerous Beauty Entertainment, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.dangerousbeautyent.com/miss-paige.
[68] Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London, England: Penguin Modern, 1964), 4.

performance of gender.[69] Paige explains that she intentionally and thoughtfully performs gender in her burlesque:

> My burlesque is queer - it challenges gender norms. I believe my burlesque is a dramatization of a 'woman' - I am playing with gender identity by wearing fake lashes, stage makeup, wearing a cinched-in corset, and shading my cleavage.[70]

Although she identifies as a woman in her daily life, her performance of femininity in burlesque is camp, over the top, and critiques traditional notions of femininity as understood in a cisgendered, heteropatriarchal society. This disentanglement, however, is not a complete rejection or a mocking of femininity; rather it is a rejection of the male gaze's corruption and weaponizing of femininity. She uses this high-femme performance to reclaim this identity from the male gaze and uses it to bring herself power and agency.

Paige goes on to explain how burlesque has given her the opportunities to explore her identity in different ways and break out of the typecasting that women often fall into:

> A big part of why I quit theatre was because I was unable to get outside of the dull-type casting that I was stuck in - ingenue, innocent, dumb, or the occasion highly sexualized young woman written as a victim. Burlesque, as I tell my students often, allows you to be whoever I want to be, that's empowering and healing in itself - especially since women are constantly told how to dress and look.[71]

As Muñoz suggests, "camp… resituates the past in the service of politics and aesthetics that often critique the present."[72] Camp is able to reposition the past in order to critique the contemporary. Here, Paige's performance of her femininity resituates the history of how the femme identity is interpreted, understood, and used against femmes by patriarchal society and uses it to critique these norms. She creates a camp performance of her gender identity that

---

[69] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty* Myth (London, England: Vintage Classics, 2015).
[70] Miss Paige (burlesque performer) in discussion with the author, February 2022.
[71] Ibid.
[72] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 162-163.

challenges the constriction of women, femmes, and queer people to the role of passive object, and finds pleasure in creating new ways of being and seeing femininity that center her own agency and desires.

Although her performing aesthetic of vintage glamour is not necessarily unique to her, it is the fact that she finds empowerment in it that disentangles the male gaze:

> My 'angry glamour' and passion is what gives my style a touch of 'neo-burlesque'. Different acts have different characters, stories, and energies, so not all my acts are necessarily angry, however as a kid who was constantly told not to be angry, not to be competitive, and not to be loud because I was a girl, even just my energy alone is political and anti-patriarchy.[73]

The burlesque aesthetic, although not always the same, often implements camp, vintage glamour, and style. This aesthetic becomes a way of reclaiming femininity from a past that used these aesthetics and fashion to restrict women and transforming it into a moment of freedom, pleasure, and celebration. Additionally, Muñoz (referring to a Kiki and Herb dance number) explains that "camp celebrates virtuosity while revealing in an antinormative degeneracy. In this instance camp works as an index to a shared aesthetic and a communal structure of feeling."[74] Through this shared aesthetic of a high-femme camp performance of femininity and womanhood Paige disentangles the male gaze, leading to new ways to perform and finding joy and empowerment in the femme identity, contributing to this shared aesthetic and the communal feeling of defiance and agency. Author and queer theorist Fabio Cleto refers to camp as a "site of ('perverted,' deviated) critical *reflection.*"[75] Through burlesque's use of sexualized and reappropriated femininity, performers are able to use camp's critical reflection to not only defy the male gaze

[73] Miss Paige (burlesque performer) in discussion with the author, February 2022.
[74] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 70.
[75] Fabio Cleto, "Introduction: Queering the Camp," in *CAMP Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader,* ed. Fabio Cleto (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 7.

but also to offer an altered and distorted reflection back onto it; reflecting an alternative version of womanness that disentangles and defies norms and expectations while also celebrating these queer, femme identities.

The Pleasure of Defiance

There is a fundamental element of pleasure that can be found within the feminist gaze that comes from the act of resisting. As activist bell hooks suggests in her theory of the oppositional gaze, "black women look from a location that disrupted" and can find pleasure in the act of resisting the power structures that oppress them.[76] Here, hooks specifically refers to the experience of Black women, however, her notion that resisting an oppressive gaze can be an enjoyable and pleasurable experience is one that can also be applied in a more broad scope. After rejecting the male gaze and its ideas of how women, femmes, and queer people are supposed to act, look, be, etc. the opportunity to imagine new ways of looking, acting, and being emerge. Referencing *Passion of Remembrance,* created by the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, hooks says that it is "how they see themselves [that is] most important, not how they will be stared at by others."[77] The act of looking and performing for oneself, allows the performer to reject the title of "object" and recognize their subjecthood and self-appreciation. In burlesque, performing an act that has been choreographed, costumed, and designed by the performer themself becomes an opportunity to affirm their subjecthood, and find joy in performing for oneself. The self-seduction of a burlesque performance is a moment of rejection of oppression and a moment of pleasure.

---

[76] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 123.
[77] Ibid, 130.

Through this reworking of femininity through the feminist gaze, Paige is able to find pleasure in this performance of gender and can construct new meanings for this high-femme identity. Burlesque and its reworking of femininity allow for new opportunities to be forged, where previously gender-based discrimination and homophobia have used femininity to prevent women, femmes, and queer people from opportunities and from feeling safe. Paige explains that burlesque allows her to maintain full control over her career in ways that she has been denied previously. She explains that while it can be challenging to be her own "director, musical director, music editor, website designer, creative director, choreographer, booker/agent, h&m[78] artist, and of course, performer," it is this control over her career, identity, and art form that brings Paige joy.[79]

This opportunity for empowerment through sexuality and gender performance is unique to burlesque, allowing for complete control over how the act happens, how clothes are removed (if they are removed), and how their bodies are displayed. As suggested by writer and performance artist Joanna Freuh, this agency and the ability to act as an active subject in one's identity and sexuality means that as long as a performer maintains this agency, it does not matter how performers are viewed by the audience, because there is consent given to view them as sexualized. In Paige's performances, the audience is given permission to view her in a sexual way and to begin to explore their relationship to their own bodies.

> I am empowering my audience and myself to take ownership of their body and their sexuality. I am completely in control of my stripping - there is absolute consent to the experience with my audience. This consent is also incredibly therapeutic for me and many performers.[80]

[78] H&M artist refers to hair and makeup artist.
[79] Miss Paige (burlesque performer) in discussion with the author, February 2022.
[80] Ibid.

Here, the feminist gaze expands its range from empowering just the person performing, to also include the audience. Though it is still rendered secondary in this context, with emphasis placed on the performer's intentions and retaining of their subjectivity, audiences who can see their identities reflected in Paige's performances or use these experiences as a moment to reflect on their relationship with their own bodies, identities, and agency, can find empowerment through the feminist gaze here as well.

Paige's bold and sexual performances are defiant and actively resist and challenge the male gaze in favour of the feminist gaze, however, she acknowledges that she has the ability to do so because of the privilege that her whiteness and thinness give her:

> In my acts, I purposely choreograph bold, inappropriate, and overtly sexual movements to even further push the boundaries with my audience… removing my glove with my butt, tea-bagging myself with my pompom belt, etc.… Yes, I am being bold, challenging what is 'classy'[81] but my ability to do these things and still be considered a 'Classic' and 'Glamorous' performer is often because of how I look. I am white, blonde, and a thin performer.[82]

It is important to acknowledge that while all burlesque is defiant and is an act of resistance that empowers and allows dancers to find and activate their agency and subjecthood, it is not without risk. As is true in the wider culture, performers who have white, thin, class, gender, and other forms of privilege are often afforded more safety and acceptance than their marginalized counterparts.

Miss Paige finds joy, empowerment, and agency in her rejection of the male gaze, with her performances being done firstly and above all else, for herself. Her self-seduction acts as a site of rejection of oppression and a moment of pleasure, allowing for an activation of her agency and subjecthood. Paige refuses the label of passive object given to her by the world and instead

[81] Paige notes her distaste for the term "classy" by adding – "fuck that word"
[82] Miss Paige (burlesque performer) in discussion with the author, February 2022.

creates sexual performances that allow her to act as an active subject in her sexuality and identity. For her, burlesque is a way to heal the trauma of existing in a world that does not consider her to be an active participant in her own identity; through performance she finds empowerment and self-fulfillment.

Conclusion

The process of refusal, disentanglement, and pleasure culminates in the feminist gaze, which then allows for the construction of new ways of seeing, looking, and being. The feminist gaze is intersectional and encompasses the experiences of many different marginalized communities who want and need to reject the white, colonial, heteropatriarchal, male gaze and see themselves through a new gaze that empowers and values the self. This is not to say that those who partake in the feminist gaze and burlesque do not still exist within the male gaze. The current structure of the world does not allow for the total eradication of the male gaze; we are born into it, raised in it, and even when we work to unlearn it, it persists. Freuh says "[a]s long as I am an erotic subject, I am not averse to being an erotic object."[83] Through the feminist gaze and burlesque, performers are able to act as active sexual subjects and maintain agency in their identities and sexuality without contributing to their own marginalization. As long as burlesque performers view themselves as subjects and feel empowered through this act, how they are interpreted by the viewer (as object, other, etc.) is rendered a minor concern.

Even if performers are not knowingly or intentionally performing through the feminist gaze, their acts are still done for themselves and are still inherently feminist acts. By taking the stage, covered in glitter and rhinestones, and performing their sexuality, the burlesque performer

---

83 Joanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 4.

automatically defies society's expectations of them. Western society demands that women, femmes, and queer people minimize their sexual identities and weaponizes femininity against them, but in choosing burlesque, the performer rejects and reworks this, and finds joy in doing so. Even if the performers do not have the language to express that what they are doing is performing through the feminist gaze, these concepts prevail, making contemporary burlesque an act of defiant, feminist art.

Burlesque performers appropriate aspects of the male gaze in order to tear it apart from the inside out. By taking hold of their sexuality and bodily autonomy and creating a performance that is done for the enjoyment and uplifting of the self, through what I have defined as the feminist gaze, what could be read by some as self-objectification becomes a form of self-pleasure and self-fulfillment. As demonstrated by Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière and Miss Paige, burlesque can be a method of resisting longstanding oppressive power structures and a way to find pleasure in finding new ways of seeing and looking at oneself. Contemporary burlesque is a space for experimentation and exploration of one's identity, for self-advocacy and expression, and for self-love and seduction.

Bibliography

"Accolades." Lou Lou la Duchesse de Rière. Accessed October 15, 2021. https://www.loulouburlesque.com/accolades.

Ahmed, Sara. "Feminist Killjoys." In *The Promise of Happiness*, 50-88. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Ahmed, Sara. "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)." *Scholar & Feminist* 19, no. 3 (2010). https://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm.

Allen, Robert C. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

Bonnell, Yolanda (@yobiwankenobe). "Indigenous artists don't owe you culture. We don't owe you beads and feathers. Our talents and creativity contain multitudes of experiences and nuances and inspirations… I could write a play…". Instagram, photo, January 25, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/p/CZKMRy8rjle/.

Brownie, Barbara. *Acts of Undressing Politics, Eroticism, and Discarded Clothing*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

Burlesque Hall of Fame. "Burlesque Hall of Fame: About." Accessed November 10, 2021. https://www.burlesquehall.com/about/#mission.

Cleto, Fabio. "Introduction: Queering the Camp." In *CAMP Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader,* edited by Fabio Cleto, 1-42. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Dangerous Beauty Entertainment. "Miss Paige." Accessed December 1, 2021. https://www.dangerousbeautyent.com/miss-paige.

Deer, Ka'nhehsí:io. "Kahnawake woman crowned Queen of Burlesque in New Orleans." *CBC News.* October 2, 2018. https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/kahnawake-indigenous-queen-burlesque-lauren-jiles-1.4846905.

DiNardo, Kelly. "Burlesque Comeback Tries to Dance with Feminism." *Women's E-News*. December 7, 2004. https://womensenews.org/2004/12/burlesque-comeback-tries-dance-feminism/.

Disman, Adriana. "The Politics of Burlesque: A Dialogue Among Dancers." *Canadian Theatre Review,* 158 (2014): 1-16. https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.158.001b

Dorsett, Sekiya. "The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project." City University of New York,

2017.

Ferreday, Debra. "Showing the Girl: The New Burlesque." *Feminist Theory* 9, no.1 (2008): 47-65. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086363.

Friedman, Andrea, "'The Habitats of Sex-Crazed Perverts': Campaigns against Burlesque in Depression-Era New York City." *Journal of the History of Sexuality 7*, No. 2, (1996): 203-238.

Frueh, Joanna. *Erotic Faculties*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation.* 115-131. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

Huard, Adrienne. "The Vibrational Effects of Indigenous Burlesque." *Canadian Art*. March 25, 2021. https://canadianart.ca/features/the-vibrational-effects-of-indigenous-burlesque/.

Jarrett, Lucinda. *Stripping in Time: A History of Erotic Dancing*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997.

L'amour, Michelle. "Indigenous Burlesque with Lou Lou La Duchesse de Riere: Ep 35 Look Down There." YouTube. November 23, 2021. Video, 52:24. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16zAnnXUQdw.

Liepe-Levinson, Katherine. *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2009.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Ponterotto, Diane. "Resisting the male gaze: feminist responses to the 'normatization' of the female body in Western culture." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016): 133+. https://gogale.com.ocadu.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=toro37158&id=GALE%7A43011529&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon.

Ram, Kalpana. "Gender, Colonialism, and the Colonial Gaze." *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. (2022). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1873.

Rice, Carla, Susan D. Dion, Hannah Fowlie & Ingrid Mündel. "Re/turning the gaze: unsettling settler logics through multimedia storytelling." *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): 1-36. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5256d4ebe4b065c225ee0d50/t/5e4c46324dc86a0a59485de1/1582057010898/Rice_ReturningTheGaze_ra07.pdf.

Rourke, Constance. *American Humor*. New York: NYRB Classics, 2004.

Rutgers Newark. "Public Indecency in England 1857-1960: 'A Serious and Growing Evil'." Criminal Law and Criminal Justice Books. March 2016. https://clcjbooks.rutgers.edu/books/public-indecency-in-england-1857-1960-a-serious-and-growing-evil/.

Sally, Lynn. "'It Is the Ugly That is So Beautiful': Performing the Monster/Beauty Continuum in American Neo-Burlesque." *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 21, no. 3 (2009), 5-23.

Sontag, Susan. *Notes on Camp*. London, England: Penguin Modern, 1964.

Thorp, Jessica. "Fishnets & Desire: Performing the Neoburlesque." Ryerson University, 2009.

Varty, Alexander. "Burlesque queen Lauren Ashley Jiles performs to help Indigenous women reclaim their sexuality." *The Georgia Straight*, 2019. https://www.straight.com/arts/1219571/burlesque-queen-lauren-ashley-jiles-performs-help-indigenous-women-reclaim-their.

Vice Media. "First Nations Burlesque in Canada." YouTube. August 24, 2019. Video, 9:22. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4smKB4vHeog.

Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty* Myth. London, England: Vintage Classics, 2015.