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LIBERATION THROUGH SEXUALIZATION:
THE DICHOTOMOUS NATURE OF BURLESQUE PERFORMANCE

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Introduction: Defining Burlesque and Its Influence

In my time as an MFA student at Sarah Lawrence, I have found myself returning time and again to my experience as a burlesque performer. Both intentionally and quite by accident, I have regularly utilized elements of burlesque performance, especially striptease, to interrogate the materiality of the body and the performance of sensuality and sexuality. While I have always valued burlesque and been vocal about my participation in it, I entered into my education at Sarah Lawrence believing that my work as a professional burlesque dancer would become a footnote in my career and life-story, a fun anecdote to share with future collaborators and friends and little more. However, the past two years have demonstrated that it is actually vital to my practice as a theatre artist, informing how I move through space, as well as the performative questions I ask. My thesis performance is a culmination and celebration of this work, which has been joyful and challenging in equal measure. I set out to explore how the expectations and tropes of burlesque performance provide an opportunity for the performer to seek liberation from and undermine the male gaze, while simultaneously requiring them to engage with themes of sexualization and objectification. How can the performer safely navigate this duality, and how does creating an alter ego (a common practice in burlesque) assist them in their work? My solo performance, *The Marvelous Manifestation of Marla Milagro!* asks these questions through embodying the process of preparing for a burlesque performance, with the performer onstage, named Marla, working with a disembodied voice that guides the process and poses questions and prompts to her. I am Marla, and Marla is me, though sometimes I will be referring to her in the third-person. In addition to relying on my personal experience working as a burlesque performer in Chicago for approximately seven years, and examining the process of creating my solo show *The Marvelous Manifestation of Marla Milagro!*, I have also researched leading burlesque performers; issues of objectification and sexualization within our culture at large; and interviewed dancers Baumshell Belle (Chicago), Nelly Clementine (Chicago/Toronto), Roxanne Goodkat (Chicago), and Evelyn Tensions (Chicago).

For the purposes of this paper, I am defining 'burlesque' in terms of the Neo-Burlesque revival that began in the 1990s and continues to this day. This style of burlesque is characterized by striptease, gaudy costuming, and bawdy humor, and can include elements of cabaret or circus performance as well. The striptease is probably the most well-known and understood element of burlesque, which involves the removal of clothing down to pasties and (typically) a g-string thong or merkin, which is a pubic wig. I also want to be clear on the difference between burlesque and stripping. Burlesque does not involve full nudity, is characterized as an art form rather than a form of sex work, and, most crucially, burlesque performers face far less stigma than professional strippers. Performer Nelly Clementine succinctly articulated the difference between these two forms by discussing the audience and their expectations: "Usually crowds are pretty cool who are coming to see burlesque, because it is kind of an artsy thing...a strip club and a burlesque club are very different environments" (Clementine). While there is inherent danger in the performance of burlesque, which I will dig into more later in this paper, its perceived artistic and cultural value shields the performer from the worst of whorephobia. The burlesque artists I find most exceptional and exciting indicate through their work that they are aware of this difference, and utilize their talents for activism as well as entertainment.

Michelle L'amour, Sensual Power, and Sexual Healing

One such artist is Michelle L'amour, also known as The Most Naked Woman. She is one of the most high-profile burlesque artists currently working, having been featured on *America's Got Talent*, and is an inductee into the Burlesque Hall of Fame. Her performances "range from classic burlesque fan dances to provocative performance art" ("ABOUT THE ARTIST"), and she is also a self-described Empowerment Advocate, work which directly connects to her powerfully sensual performance style. Two projects of hers that I believe to be particularly important are "Look Down There" and "Pussy Confidence," empowerment projects designed for people with

vulvas to “encourage self love, discovery, shame reduction, sexual wellness and pleasure” (L’amour). Pussy Confidence in particular engages people directly with embodied practices of pleasure and love, utilizing dance in communion with lecture to decenter shame and celebrate sexual power and healing. I see this reflected in the structure of my solo performance, which incorporated voiceover lectures and a variety of movement based in burlesque dance styles. While my point of view was more critical of burlesque as a form, I do believe the center of it was concerned with reclaiming sexual and sensual power.

The connection between movement and empowerment Michelle L’amour describes is a central tenet of my own experience performing burlesque. I began working as a burlesque artist in 2015 by joining the cast of *Game of Thongs*, a burlesque parody of the HBO television show *Game of Thrones* - a very irreverent introduction to a very powerful art form and community. My impulse to audition for and eventually join the show was driven by a desire to build a network in Chicago, where I was still very new, and did not include a conscious desire to seek body and sexual liberation and healing. However, the act of disrobing in front of people required a shift in my understanding of my obligations as a sexual being. In order to safely and regularly perform a caricature of sexuality (which was required in this context) and reveal my body to a crowd, my personal pleasure in the performance needed to be centered. I was least successful in my performance when I was most concerned with how I was being perceived by others. Sometimes this meant I was physically underprepared because I spent more time on my makeup, hair, and outfit than I did on properly stretching or warming up; sometimes it meant I refused to commit deeply and fully to a performance for fear of further exposing my literal and emotional self; sometimes it meant the drain of comparing myself to my fellow performers, often negatively. All of these acts of self-sabotage and negative self-talk were prefaced on feeling a lack of autonomous sensual expression, and an inability to base my sensual and/or sexual expression in my own power and pleasure. I could not anticipate or negotiate the needs, desires, or energy of any particular audience without standing unassailably in my own power - no easy feat for

anyone, but especially those of us who have been socialized as women in Western society. This socialization had led me to believe that my obligations in sexually charged situations were to cater to the pleasure of others, and to make adjustments and concessions to ensure that other pleasure, even if it went against my own desires or self-interest.

Unlearning this while learning how to perform burlesque was revolutionary for me, and was the beginning of a continuing journey towards sexual positivity, liberation, and healing. It was a journey I shared with the people I was working with, including Roxanne Goodkat, whom I spoke to about her experience working in the Chicago burlesque and go-go dancing scene. “I grew up in a really religious household, and it felt like - I always felt like a sexual person, even when I was young, but...I was very heavily influenced by the guilt I felt around my sexuality, [and I was] grappling with it...So I started burlesque just to really reclaim my sexuality, you know? And to feel confident in that, because I felt such guilt and shame - it felt like I just couldn't breathe, you know? [Burlesque was a] way to explore my body, explore vulnerability, without anybody touching me” (Goodkat). Her comments mirrored my own feelings towards burlesque as a unique place to be as sexy and as raunchy as you desired, with the safety of a stage and (hopefully) theatre staff to interfere if anyone attempted to broach the boundary of the stage. This level of safety within sexual expression is, unfortunately, not a given outside of the structure of a performative space. According to RAINN, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds, the majority of which are women between the ages of 18-34 (“Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN”). This deeply upsetting statistic demonstrates how pervasively sexuality and sexual expression are weaponized, especially against women and femmes, and underlines the need for spaces where sexual expression is recontextualized in a positive and self-centered way. I believe burlesque is such a space, and has great political value in addition to its entertainment value. I also believe that this space can and should be expanded to interact with other forms, increasing the accessibility and visibility of burlesque performance.

Julie Atlas Muz, Intentional Objectification, and Questioning the Form

Julie Atlas Muz is an artist who I believe has utilized burlesque in conjunction with other forms very successfully. In addition to being called the “royalty of burlesque” by the New York Times and being a Miss Exotic World crown holder, she self-describes her style as “sucker punch[ing] the boundaries between performance art, dance and burlesque,” and further expands upon herself as a performer who “celebrate[s] the ever political lineage of naked ladies in public spaces as set in motion by Lady Godiva” (“Julie Atlas Muz”). I see the expression of these two statements most clearly in her piece *I am the Moon and You are the Man on Me*, which follows Muz as the moon as she falls in love with a group of men “in a race to colonize her” (“Julie Atlas Muz”). The trailer for the piece is a glittery and vibrating collage of movement that ranges from serene and beautiful to deeply violent and disturbing, and unflinchingly portrays the experience of objectification. The most striking image was that of a male performer staking an American flag on Julie, seemingly by inserting it inside of her upturned and exposed rear. It was a shocking but very clear representation of sexual violence, and the power dynamics that exist in intimate spaces. While *I am the Moon and You are the Man on Me* is not strictly a burlesque number or act, the sensibilities of burlesque are evident throughout; certainly in the way that Muz chooses to display her nude body, but also in the use of the bubble as an homage to balloon dances (a popular type of burlesque performance that involves wearing many balloons or being inside of one gigantic balloon) and the glittery and occasionally over-the-top costume and makeup looks. These and other burlesque touchstones work in conversation with elements of performance art and dance to comment on the experience of being objectified in a way that burlesque alone could not, for in spite of the potential for activism and liberation that it holds, it still communicates in the language of sexualization and objectification.

The ability to comment on the experience of being objectified, possibly willingly, is something I admire deeply about Julie Atlas Muz, and is a theme I explore within my own performance work. The first piece in which I consciously chose to explore the contradictions

within burlesque performance was a short dance/audio number entitled 'Sex Machine.' The performance was a classic striptease routine performed to the song 'Sex Machine' by James Brown that was continuously interrupted by a pre-recorded 'inner voice' that undermined the striptease and questioned the legitimacy of empowerment that comes from willful self-objectification. The central questions of this thesis began in the creation of this piece, the text of which is shared below:

"Oh God, what am I doing? I've convinced myself that this is a part of my journey towards empowerment and bodily autonomy, but have I really just rationalized my own complicit behavior in the mechanisms of the patriarchy? Have I been brainwashed by the sexualization and fetishization of female existence?

I mean, I am definitely a sexual being, and after I started doing burlesque I did find greater confidence in my emotional and physical self, but I still crave validation from the male gaze. Will I ever truly be free, or will my existence forever be tainted by the omnipresent influence of rape culture and my sick need to be found desirable by the very same people who would violate and abuse me?

[Why are you still dancing?] You are so much more than your physical self!

But wait a minute, I don't need to ignore my relationship to my body to be empowered. Like it or not, we all have bodies, and we deserve to love

and experience them no matter what! They carry us through this life!

Every size butt deserves to be shaken if it so desires!

Damnit, but then I go back to performative sexuality and femininity. As much as I want there to be, there is no easy answer. It's always gonna be a work in progress. Walt Whitman said it best: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes..."

(Bethel)

In making the striptease routine that accompanied this text, I built the most classically glamorous costume I could with items I already owned and a few well-planned purchases, and layered them so that I had an item to actively remove just before each voiceover, during which I would remain still. This was an attempt to embody the most stereotypical image of a "burlesque performer," and to confront each moment of stripping with a contradictory statement. I stand by these choices, and have employed similar ones in other works, such as *I'd Be All Alone*, a Grad Lab collaboration with Kyrie Ellison that combined stage combat and burlesque to question what is perceived to be powerful and what is perceived to be vulnerable. I similarly built a costume for this piece that emulated old school glamour, in order to deconstruct that image further along in the piece by having the violence of stage combat directly interfere with the softness and vulnerability of burlesque performance. I revisited the concept of violent interruptions in another Grad Lab performance, *Reset*. This performance offered the beginning 20 seconds of a burlesque performance that was continually interrupted by physical objects being thrown at the performer - a banana peel, change, a condom, a beer can, a shirt, and a glass of water - requiring them to deal with the interruption and reset the performance over and over and over. When they were finally allowed to continue their dance, the toll of the interruptions had made the performance more cautious and fearful, which was then rewarded with flowers. *Reset* was an attempt to embody and represent the violence that is often endemic to the expression of

female or femme sexual expression; only when the performer had endured multiple assaults and had fear visibly inhibit her movement was she allowed to continue with her performance, and ultimately rewarded.

The Empowerment Double Standard

This double standard - we want to see you, but only on our terms - exists in the culture at large and also within the expectations of a burlesque performer. When speaking to Roxanne Goodkat about the pressure I felt to perform a certain level of glamour and femininity, she not only sympathized, but laid out the sheer amount of work it took to achieve this look: "I remember feeling that expectation to shave everything, [and then] we're putting that tape on freshly shaven skin that is already irritated, then we have to cover up the irritation, it's absurd and unnecessary. And I remember we had to...beat our face so much, and I don't wear makeup at all, really, so like putting on so much makeup, and doing it stage-worthy ... we didn't have a lot of time before the show, and it already took us so long to do our face, [then we need] time to put our pasties on, we need to make time to get our props in order...the girls who weren't as lazy as me would do their makeup before they even got to the theatre, which takes up time, you know, and we weren't getting reimbursed at all for the makeup ... I felt the expectation from the show, and just in general - who would want to watch a hairy girl, or an unshaven girl, or a 'natural-looking girl' who isn't beat to hell, and hair done to the T, you know? I think we all felt that expectation to look our most beautiful, whatever that...means" (Goodkat). I believe that the amount of labor it takes to achieve these standards of beauty is simultaneously expected and ignored, and deserve commentary and discussion. I sought to embody the labor it takes to achieve these beauty standards in *The Marvelous Manifestation of Marla Milagro!* My goal was to enter the space with as little makeup as possible, and to complete the bulk of my preparations within the performance itself. However, within the thirty minute run of the show, I still did not have enough time to do all the makeup preparation that is expected of burlesque performance, and that I had

come to expect of myself and of Marla. In preparing a recording of my eye makeup routine to be projected during the segment 'Seeing Yourself,' I found that it took approximately twenty minutes just to apply my eye makeup. If I had committed to entering the space with no makeup, the entire show would have consisted only of my makeup routine, and even then I doubt that it would have been complete at the thirty minute mark. While this is a performance I would be interested in creating and/or witnessing, my other goals made it necessary for me to do the bulk of my makeup preparation before the show. Even within a performance that sought to embody the labor of preparation within burlesque, there still was not time to do all the labor! Ultimately, I was more interested in embodying the emotional and mental implications of burlesque performance, both positive and negative, and felt that the act of putting on the burlesque costume was sufficient to make my point about the labor of embodying beauty standards. In order to comment on and/or undermine over-the-top glamour standards often associated with burlesque, and the double standards of female beauty at large, they need to be made visible and easily recognizable. Or do they? Would it not be more valuable to refuse to participate in the perpetuation of patriarchal, white, heteronormative beauty standards, which are endemic to our society and impossible to ignore? I am still contradicting myself, and I still contain multitudes.

I directly used portions of *Sex Machine* again in *The Marvelous Manifestation of Marla Milagro!*, as part of my attempt to embody the complicated experience of working towards empowerment through a form that heavily communicates in the language of objectification. This was a very complicated task, and was one of the sections of my solo that took the longest time to craft. I did not originally want to use text from *Sex Machine*, hoping to be able to speak more directly about this dichotomy. The first draft of this section, entitled 'This Juggling Act Is A Metaphor,' was a somewhat lengthy monologue that described the experience of learning how to juggle with a rock instead of soft juggling balls - the rock was meant to be a representation of sexual violence and objectification, with the introduction of the soft juggling balls representing

the introduction of body and sexual autonomy and love. It was not a very successful monologue - even in this short summary, it is quite confusing. I still thought the metaphor of juggling was appropriate, however, and felt compelled to stick with it, eventually scrapping the entire monologue and building on the questions I had begun asking in *Sex Machine*. The final version of 'This Juggling Act Is A Metaphor' was a pretty straightforward attempt to juggle, interrupted by the voiceover asking questions in a cheeky and mischievous manner, as quoted below:

"Hey - Do you ever wonder if doing your little sexy dances is actually empowering or if you're just rationalizing your own complicit behaviors in the mechanisms of patriarchy? Dunno, just something to think about!

Hey, hey - Will you ever be free, or will your existence forever be tainted by the omnipresent influence of rape culture and your sick need to be found desirable by the very same people who would violate and abuse you? Food for thought!

By the way, everyone thinks you're really brave. That's a compliment!"

(Bethel)

The section ended with Marla, who cannot juggle, deciding to ignore the assignment altogether by refusing to continue to try and juggle, and directly confronting the voiceover physically, with a stern glance and the 'hand slicing across throat' gesture to indicate that the voiceover needed to stop, which they did. The addition of the body onstage having the ability to confront and interfere with the voiceover highlighted the question of choice for the performer, and indicated that, while the experience of performing sensuality and sexuality was certainly complex, it was also a joyful experience that deserved to be celebrated as much as it deserved to be interrogated. Marla ended the juggling section by using her breasts to pick up a juggling

ball, refusing to juggle at all and instead using her own sense of humor to create a fun and energetic final moment. It was one of my favorite sections to perform, and I felt that the simplicity of juggling, or failing to juggle, took some of the onus off of myself as a performer to perform 'sexiness' while still demonstrating the difficulty of such a performance. I anticipate I will continue to return to performing this juggling act time and again, both onstage and within the context of my personal life.

Naming Yourself: The Practice of Utilizing Stage Names

While this juggling act of empowerment and objectification is complicated and difficult, there is a tenet of burlesque that I have found to be remarkably useful in executing it successfully: the use of a stage name. It is a common practice for burlesque performers to create a stage name under which to present their work, rather than using their legal name. I understand this practice to have implications for artistic expression, but also for personal safety. While burlesque performance does not carry the same stigma as professional stripping or other forms of sex work, its emphasis on sensuality and sexuality does create a certain amount of potential danger for the performer, which could come in the form of family estrangement, stalking, sexual assault, or loss of employment, to name a few. Anecdotally, I worked with people whose stage names shielded them from abusive family dynamics, and allowed them to maintain careers in industries where the discovery of their nighttime gig could have serious ramifications on their employment. One such performer, Baumshell Belle, believed her stage name, in addition to general secrecy about her burlesque career, kept her work environment from deteriorating. Though she said she was not afraid she would ever be fired if her work in burlesque was discovered, she stated: "I thought I would get slut-shamed...it was a very real fear of mine. I worked for a general contractor, and was already being sexually harassed there, so I feel like that would have just added fuel to the flame as an excuse for people to talk to me a certain way, and...I was afraid of what would happen specifically if my HR manager found out...I

don't know if it would have...endangered my job, but I feel like it would have definitely endangered my environment" (Belle). Even for people who are not actively dealing with a hostile and unsafe work environment, the potential risks that come with engaging in a form that can be misidentified as stripping are high. While Evelyn Tensions did not face the same level of harassment at her day job as Baumshell Belle, she was still cautioned to protect her identity by creating a stage name: "When I first got involved...I wasn't sure how it was going to be perceived in the rest of my professional life...it wasn't like I thought that theatre would shun me...but people were like 'yeah a lot of us use those names because some of us have day jobs' and...not doing it felt like too big of a risk" (Tensions).

Baumshell Belle and Evelyn Tensions' risk-aversion is not at all unfounded - in addition to creating an unsafe work environment, the discovery of a burlesque persona can include the loss of employment. There was a widely publicized incident in 2015 of a school teacher being forced to resign after videos of her performing burlesque were widely shared on Facebook and Twitter (Burkett), leading to parent outrage and complaints. The teacher, whose stage name is Lottie Ellington, had successfully maintained a separation between her professional life as a teacher and her work as a burlesque performer, and has stated that she believes she was intentionally outed by someone who meant her professional harm (Greenfield). The overwhelmingly negative and whorephobic reactions from the parents of her former students and the swiftness with which she was asked to resign demonstrate very clearly why so many performers take pains to obscure their legal identities, as does the fact that, allegedly, someone in Ellington's life understood that exposing her burlesque career would mean the end of her career in education. Ellington had taught health to high schoolers, and it is unfortunate that her involvement in burlesque was demonized instead of being viewed as an asset for someone responsible for teaching young people how to safely navigate subjects including sex and relationships.

Personally, I have been very lucky to not have feared losing family relationships or major employment opportunities because of my work in burlesque. But I have found my stage name, Marla Milagro, very useful in avoiding social media stalking and harassment, and for maintaining clear personal and professional boundaries. Amongst my family and friends, I strongly prefer to be called by my given name, Amelia - if someone calls me Marla instead, I understand exactly how and from where they know me, and am able to appropriately adjust my level of engagement with them depending on if they are a colleague or stranger. Styling myself as Marla in a more glamorous fashion than I style myself as Amelia also helps create a clear boundary, and provides a measure of safety. I look very different when I paint my face, and can trust that if I am just out at the grocery store, I am unlikely to be recognized by someone who has seen me perform.

In addition to building and maintaining safe boundaries, creating and using a stage name is also just a lot of fun. "It's like if you join a cool club and it's really fun, but then you find out that you get cool jackets, like...you didn't join the club for the jacket, but you're still really excited to get the jacket" said Evelyn Tensions (Tensions), whose pun-derful stage name demonstrates her joy in this practice. A stage name can give 'permission' to the performer to engage with bolder and bawdier subjects, and can provide an opportunity to clearly articulate who you are as a performer and person. At my first job as a burlesque performer, we were encouraged to create stage names by the company manager, and I initially chose 'Torrance of Arabia,' as a reference to the classic film *Lawrence of Arabia*. However, it never felt like a good fit, for a number of reasons: while I am a lover of classic cinema, *Lawrence of Arabia* does not hold a particular emotional resonance; there was another local performer named 'Florence of a'Labia,' which became confusing as I got more involved in the scene; and I generally felt uncomfortable claiming a persona that referenced a film with strong colonial overtones, and a culture that I did not have a connection to. When the company I first began to work for went out of business, I took the opportunity to change my name to something that felt like a more authentic

representation of the performer I aspired to be. 'Marla' came from a joke between me and a friend, and I later added 'Milagro' (Spanish for 'miracle') as my last name for the alliteration, and as a small way of declaring my Latina identity, something which my legal last name, Bethel, does not clearly do. Marla Milagro is not that different from Amelia Bethel, but rather feels like an extension of the parts of myself that I had never quite figured out how to express or had straightforwardly stifled, especially in terms of sexuality, bodily autonomy and love, and my own internalized misogyny. Baumshell Belle discussed a similar experience - a self-described "prude" in her regular life, working in burlesque offered her opportunities to be more vocal about her sexual identity, and to cultivate a public space where straightforward discussions of sex and bodies was not taboo or shameful (Belle). Roxanne Goodkat also expressed that working in burlesque had expanded her mindset, specifically towards sex work: "it gave me a different understanding of sex work and an appreciation for [sex workers] and a respect that I didn't have before, unfortunately" (Goodkat) and her own body: "it's helped me gain a lot more confidence in my body, and...pinpointing what exactly I like about my particular body" (Goodkat). And the liberatory implications extend beyond the body - all the performers I spoke to described how working in burlesque had made them more assertive and assured of themselves in other creative ventures - performer Evelyn Tensions described burlesque performance as the first time she truly felt "faith" and joy in her own creative potential (Tensions), and producer/performer Nelly Clementine stated "...the thing I really like about burlesque and that keeps me doing it [is that] I have full creative control...everything is you" (Clementine). Personally, becoming Marla has made me more curious and less judgemental, and has likewise had a very real impact on my work outside of the context of burlesque, mostly by showing me what joyful, un-self-conscious, and liberatory performance can feel like, and providing a blueprint to create the circumstances for it to happen again, and again, and again. Una Osato, also known as exHOTic other, asked and answered the question " ...how is [burlesque] liberatory?...burlesque creates moments of liberation, moments of experience. Burlesque gives us space to feel all

emotions...It's about finding freedom onstage, in my own body, while others watch and experience. It's not just about rehearsing the revolution, it's about creating cracks that show our bodies that we can experience freedom " (Brown 370). For me, the creation of Marla was necessary to begin making those cracks, to create that initial moment of liberation, and to put aside the shame that is inherently placed upon my female, mixed race, fat body.

"A Mechanism To Rationalize Away the Horrors of Living Under Patriarchal Systems"

However, as liberatory as burlesque is and has the potential to be, there are elements of the form that I believe are oppositional to liberation, primarily the engagement with objectification and sexualization. To paraphrase *Sex Machine*, is burlesque performance an embodiment of sexual empowerment and bodily autonomy, or is it just a mechanism to rationalize away the horrors of living under patriarchal systems? Do we perform objectification to interrogate it, or do we perform it because we believe it is an inevitable part of existence? I don't believe these questions have clear answers, or possibly any answers at all, but I think to not ask them would be a mistake. There is a picture of the burlesque performer Dirty Martini that I believe encapsulates this conflict. It is a photograph from a party for Michael Musto's 25th anniversary of writing for *The Village Voice*; Dirty Martini is seated, wearing an ornate red lingerie set that consists of a bra, underwear, garter belt, and stockings. She has on no other clothes, and is surrounded by men in full suits with only their hands, necks, and faces exposed (Shankbone). On the one hand, wearing this outfit can certainly be described as an expression of bodily and sexual autonomy; why shouldn't she be wearing it? And she is a well-known burlesque professional attending an event where she will be photographed and presumably will interact with colleagues and collaborators - it is part of her job to present herself a certain way, and as discussed earlier, becoming Dirty Martini could mean that she is able to move through her personal life with some measure of security and anonymity. However, it is also undeniable that she is a very scantily clad woman in a room of fully dressed men, and is likely dealing with a

different set of professional and social standards as both Dirty Martini and her other self. I don't doubt that the party where she was photographed was full of people who were respectful and kind, but my own experience as a scantily clad woman in a room full of many fully-dressed men leads me to believe that there were at least a few people who interpreted her appearance to be an invitation for a variety of inappropriate behavior. This is of course not the fault of the scantily clad woman, but the truth is that such behavior by (typically) men directed towards (typically) women will become the responsibility of the woman being accosted. In a culture where we discuss gendered and sexual violence in such passive terms as "violence against women" (by whom?), and hold victims of sexual violence more accountable for the behavior of the perpetrator than the perpetrator themselves (Keren), using the physical and visual language of objectification seems completely counter-intuitive to actual sexual liberation. Is being intentionally objectified actually different than any other experience of objectification? Baumshell Belle straightforwardly stated that she believes there is - that as a woman, she is going to be objectified regardless of her actions, behavior, appearance, etc., and that engaging with the male gaze in a performative context allows her a measure of control over how and by whom she is perceived, as well as payment for her emotional and physical labor (Belle). There is certainly power in finessing an oppressive force to your own financial gain, as there is power in naming the oppressive structure in order to dismantle it, but it seems that the onus of sexual liberation lies with those who are marginalized and negatively affected by sexual oppression.

Even the structures that purport to uplift and encourage burlesque and burlesque performers can actually prove to be actively working towards the objectification of performers. Gorilla Tango Burlesque, where I began working as a burlesque dancer and where I met the performers interviewed for this paper, was one such theatre. It does not exist anymore after performers quit en masse when the company broke its contracts with performers by refusing to pay for completed performances without appropriate notice during a period of financial difficulty ("Gorilla Tango Burlesque Performers Walk Out Over Lack of Pay"). "[I think that] one part of it is

semantics,” stated Roxanne Goodkat, because “we weren’t referred to as dancers...or performers, we were referred to as inventory” (Goodkat), a deeply upsetting and blatant example of objectification. Personally, this company provided an invaluable introduction to burlesque and a community that I still cherish to this day, and it was incredibly disheartening to see management view the commitment that company members felt towards the art form and each other as something to be weaponized against us in order to maintain low pay and often subpar working conditions. “The company wasn’t...super caring about [the performers] and we did not get paid very much” said Nelly Clementine “...[there was] a lot of reliance on the love and passion and friendships between the people involved in the company as performers, and management took advantage of that” (Clementine). It is incredibly disheartening that performers who were willing and excited to create vulnerable, sensual performances, putting their literal bodies on display, had their own potential objectification further objectified by dehumanizing contractual language and an assumption of acquiescence towards management needs. It demonstrates a profound lack of respect towards the act of performing burlesque, as well as an assumption about the value of (typically) female bodies within a capitalist structure - the assumption being that that value is limited, if not nonexistent.

Furthermore, burlesque’s reliance on themes of objectification and sexualization operates within the racist, patriarchal context of Western, and specifically American, culture, which means that white hetero-normative standards of beauty and sensuality are uplifted. The Miss Exotic World Pageant, a burlesque pageant whose crown is considered possibly the highest honor in burlesque performance (Doherty), demonstrates this trend. Of all the winners since 2000, all but five appear to be white, and all but one are thin (“Miss Exotic World Pageant”). This is especially egregious when you consider how women of color, especially Black women, are sexualized and objectified to a much greater extent than their white peers (Chideya et. al.). This exclusion of bodies that exist outside of white hetero-normative beauty standards, specifically non-white and fat bodies, is completely counter-intuitive to Osato’s

assertation that burlesque can be a rehearsal for the revolution (Brown 370), and a denial of the vast array of human beauty and desire potential. “It doesn’t have to be like Dita von Teese doing it, it doesn’t have to be this one body type” Nelly Clementine stated, even though “that’s what, unfortunately, a lot of shows will cast for, but the coolest thing in a burlesque show is to see a cast of...all kinds of different people who are equally sexy and owning their sexuality in completely different ways...If your entire lineup is just skinny white ladies, then you’re doing something wrong” (Clementine).

And there are, of course, women of color who are major players in the burlesque scene. Jeez Loueez is a Black burlesque performer who has been named The #1 Burlesque Figure In The World by *21st Century Burlesque Magazine* (“Burlesque TOP 50 2019 ★”), has had her work featured on the Netflix original series *Easy*, and is the creator of Jeezy’s *Juke Joint: A Black Burly-Q Revue*, which is the only Black burlesque revue in the country (“Who Is Jeez Loueez?”). Jeez Loueez was a staple of the burlesque scene in Chicago when I was living and working there, and a truly fierce and mesmerizing performer. Her work pays homage to classic striptease styles while also engaging with modern styles of dance and audience engagement. I particularly remember a performance where she sang and spoke directly to the audience in and amongst the striptease, which was a refreshing departure from a burlesque convention I like to call the “silent showgirl,” wherein the performer does not speak or otherwise vocalize at all.

There is also work behind the scenes to address issues of BIPOC representation - notably, the Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum published an open letter to the Amazon show *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* urging them to reconsider a casting call which called for burlesque performers of “White/European descent,” and additionally used the letter to highlight prominent BIPOC burlesque performers such as Toni Eling, Lottie the Body, Princess Lahoma, Jean Idelle, Mitzi Dore, and Jadin Wong. “Ironically,” the letter reads, “your casting call is more discriminatory than the casting at the clubs you intend to recreate in your show” (Wax). The language of this casting call is a stark reminder that the public perception of burlesque is one of

whiteness, something which all performers, producers, and enthusiasts must work to correct by uplifting and celebrating performers of color.

Objectifying Upwards: Burlesque As a Challenge To Repressive Sexual Mores

Despite the challenges that are inherent to the form, I still believe burlesque to be an activist art form that ultimately challenges the misogynistic policing of bodies and sexuality by providing a generally safe and supportive environment that is focused on positive sensual expression. As Nelly Clementine describes it, even having the opportunity to do this type of performance can be deeply feminist: "...feminism is all about choice, right? So if you choose to express yourself through taking your clothes off in front of people, as long as it's in the appropriate space to do that, and everybody's down with it, everybody's consenting in the situation, then it's great...there are some people who will objectify you...but it's how [they] choose to respond to it, [it's not about] what you're doing" (Clementine). I also believe that, while I still find them troubling, there is value in engaging with the themes of objectification and sexualization, specifically in the way that burlesque performers have historically used their precarious relationship to obscenity laws to garner free publicity and spark conversation. Beginning with Lydia Thompson and Pauline Markham in the 1860s, burlesque performers who have found themselves on the wrong side of maddeningly vague laws relating to public decency have leaned into the controversy and publicity surrounding them for purposes of drumming up interest and ticket sales. For Thompson and Markham, they leveraged their arrest for brawling with a disdainful Chicago news editor into national headlines, which would have been prohibitively expensive had they sought to buy such publicity (01:23-01:50). The fan dancer Sally Rand - who performed in a full body stocking, not in the nude - inspired an entirely new legal term, "lewdity," or the act of portraying nudeness, in order to explain her multiple arrests for indecency despite the fact that she was clothed and well within the bounds of legality (02:48-04:07). Even today, burlesque performers are in danger of running afoul of decency

bylaws, which can include language that criminalizes such behavior as using the word “sexy” in marketing and advertisements (07:55-08:13).

Within my own solo performance, I attempted to illuminate how precarious obscenity laws can be for performers in a section entitled ‘How To Keep Your Fame Hungry Vulva And Her Equally Thirsty Friends From Making A Surprise Appearance,’ which detailed the great lengths I have personally gone to to make sure that my undergarments would not slip around and put me on the wrong side of Section 235.05 of New York Penal Law (FindLaw). The process to ensure that just my thong stays in place involves hair removal, wig tape, some light gymnastics, and usually a second ‘safety’ thong to wear underneath the ‘costume’ thong. There is some personal comfort in this routine - it is nice to know exactly what you are exposing, and to feel secure that you will not have any surprises - but there are also legal ramifications for failing to keep your underwear perfectly covering your genitalia. “Lewd exhibition of the genitals” is included in the definition of “obscene” within New York State unless “serious literary, artistic, political, and scientific value” is found within the performance (FindLaw), a maddeningly vague set of guidelines that could theoretically have a dancer in a club facing hefty fines for having a part of her labia revealed on accident, and no ramifications whatsoever for a completely nude performance that has so-called “value,” when ideally both performers would face no penalty of law.

Generally, lower profile dancers and clubs are often not able to bear the financial burden of litigation against such laws, but higher profile performers and venues can and have successfully fought against vice laws. For example, Stormy Daniels was able to successfully sue the city of Columbus, OH over a vice arrest in 2018, and collected a settlement of \$450,000 (10:40-10:50). Daniels’ fame and financial ability to retain a lawyer was crucial to her ability to challenge her arrest, of course, but the visibility of such a victory has consequences for how vice, indecency, and obscenity laws and bylaws are interpreted for all performers. Challenging these laws is how we move from “Censor Bans Bare Knees” to “Make America Horny Again” - a

complicated and potentially problematic victory, but I would argue a victory nonetheless. We are still swimming in the waters of patriarchy, and it is impossible to completely divorce oneself from the standards such a system dictates. However, suppression relies upon silence and shame, and by loudly and joyfully celebrating their own bodies and sensuality, burlesque performers can reclaim some power from patriarchal systems of oppression. To quote Michi Osato, aka sister selva, sister and creative partner of Una Osato aka exHOTic other: "...it's not like the first time you get on stage and get naked for an audience that it's just gonna be all easy, breezy 'I love myself and I'm at peace with systems of oppression that have made me internalize the hatred in the world' and so on and so forth! Sometimes, even when we are performing sexy self-love liberation, we may not feel that way. But doing the performance will remind us that part of us *does* feel that way, and by performing it, practicing that love for ourselves and all people, I feel like it can strengthen our ability to get there" (Brown 373).

Process Narrative: Building *The Marvelous Manifestation of Marla Milagro!*

The process of building my thesis performance has been one of unpacking my experience within the context of burlesque, and deciding whether or not I want to place myself in the lineage of showgirls. The structure grew out of the personal grooming routine I created to prepare myself to move from Amelia into Marla, and reflects my expertise and confidence in addition to my self-doubt and anxiety within burlesque spaces. While I am assured of my abilities as an engaging performer and personality, I have struggled to feel that I meet the sartorial and educational qualifications of a showgirl; I don't wear false eyelashes, I rarely wear shoes, I am hesitant to make major costume purchases, and I have never officially studied burlesque, but rather have learned on the job. I would not change these choices, but they have influenced my reticence to describe myself as a burlesque performer; for a long time, my artist bio included the phrase "occasional burlesque performer" as an attempt to acknowledge both my participation in the art form, and the fact that I primarily used burlesque as a tool in my

toolbox instead of my primary form of artistic expression. I have since removed “occasional” from my artist bio and statement, as I grew to see it as a word that undermined my own expertise and experience in burlesque. But in a way, I also see it as a sign of respect for showgirls who put more labor and money into creating their image than I ever did or likely ever will. However, in examining my own work, I do find that my burlesque experience has become inextricable from my point of view and my goals as a theatre artist. While I am not always prancing around in pasties and a g-string, I am constantly exploring the materiality of the body, the performance of identity, including sexual/sensual identity, and working to break apart shame live and onstage. I would not have been able to do this work without engaging with burlesque forms.

The performance as it exists now places the showgirl Marla Milagro front and center, making her a clear part of the showgirl lineage, while also examining the behind-the-scenes work that is necessary to create the appearance of confidence and self-actualization. I am also engaging with the “silent showgirl” by declining to speak, and using voice overs to explain the process of preparing to perform striptease on Marla’s behalf. I still have questions about what it means for a mostly nude performer to literally not have a voice - is it a form of self-preservation that makes the vulnerable act of stripping possible? Or is it an acquiescence to patriarchal norms? - but have found it to be a useful tool in guiding the structure of my performance. Additionally, it allows me to consciously engage with my own objectification, which in turn allows me to comment on the experience of being objectified and hopefully create necessary discomfort in my audience. I hope that my work prompts people to ask themselves how they engage with bodies, including their own, and to question the expectations that they have placed on the bodies of others.

Building my solo performance was, in some ways, very straightforward. I knew I wanted to use burlesque as my primary mode of expression, and that I was interested in exploring the concept of having an alter ego. I was far more concentrated on this in the beginning of my research, looking into stage names and alter egos within burlesque, stripping, professional

wrestling, and music performance. The breadth of this research was overwhelming at times, and amongst the diversity of sources I was still finding myself most drawn to the stories and/or performances of burlesque dancers and strippers, which I chose to honor by focusing on my own experience in burlesque and an examination of Marla Milagro as a character. Initially, I hoped to interweave Amelia and Marla together a bit more actively, and hoped to include the recorded voices of my family and friends in addition to my own. But despite the fact that Marla and Amelia are not very different, it was still very emotionally challenging to invite my family into the creative and sensual space that Marla represents, and which I tend to keep separate from the familial spaces in my life. Additionally, as I was writing the piece I began to recognize my own unique speech patterns coming through very strongly, and ultimately decided that my voice was the only one that I wanted to present in this iteration. The process of creating the soundscape that I would move in was a challenge within my existing skill set. I recorded all the voiceovers, which totaled to about 20 minutes, in my closet on an iPhone, which, unfortunately, was sometimes evident in the final performance, particularly during sentences containing a lot of plosive sounds that a wind screen might have saved me from. I decided to use Adobe Audition to create the bulk of the sound, choosing to have one continuous sound cue instead of multiple smaller cues in QLab. I chose to do this for a number of reasons, the first being that my personal computer is a PC and does not support QLab. However, I also felt more control and comfort with Audition as a program, and felt more secure that the very carefully constructed collage of music, voiceover, and sound effects that I was building would not somehow fall apart if it was delivered to QLab as one continuous sound cue. I stand by this decision, and am generally pleased with the result, though I do think sound design stood out as one of my weaker skills in the final performance.

The process of choosing music was one element of this performance that I felt received consistent attention throughout the year, and by the time I was ready to build the sound for the performance, I had a very long Spotify list of music to pick from. I largely did not use modern

music, sticking primarily to jazz, pop, and R&B from the late 20th century - Etta James' 'W.O.M.A.N.,' Tom Waits' 'Pasties & A G-String,' and Peggy Lee's 'Is That All There Is' were songs of particular importance to me in the creation process. Part of this is my personal taste - this is the music I like to listen to and am naturally drawn to. Part of it was a very conscious creative decision - I sought to create a world for an audience that would prepare them for the experience of watching burlesque, and even feel familiar or somehow recognizable. While I do not believe the music I chose is universally listened to or loved, I do believe that era of music has certain connotations of glamour, and is associated with cabaret, burlesque, or nightclub performance styles. As someone who regularly attended such events, that style of music was certainly used with frequency, but I believe it also is recognizable to people who only know burlesque or cabaret performance through brief references in television and film, e.g. the aforementioned *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. I did stray from this style of music occasionally, using 'One Week' by the Barenaked Ladies as an 'interlude' number, and including music by Salt-N-Pepa, Shakira, and Lizzo in a musical montage within the section 'Being Good and Getting Bored.' However, I believe these moments represented cracks within the carefully constructed world that Marla was moving through. This was especially evident in 'Being Good and Getting Bored,' which was an abstracted movement sequence that represented the cumulative effect of performing sensuality and sexuality in the burlesque context, beginning with simple repetitions of motions such as shimmying or caressing the leg, and culminated with a wild thrashing of the body as the songs played on top of each other in an equally wild and dissonant cacophony. It was one of my favorite moments of the performance, and I believe demonstrated the physical and emotional difficulty that repeatedly engaging with the sexualization of your own body can present, and how precarious the carefully constructed world of glamour and glitz is.

Though I believe I had a clear understanding of the world of Marla by the time of the final performance, I had a very difficult time entering into that world for quite a while, and did not write

or create anything that resembled *The Marvelous Manifestation of Marla Milagro!* until January 2021, when I wrote 'How To Keep Your Fame Hungry Vulva And Her Equally Thirsty Friends From Making A Surprise Appearance.' This 'how to' formula worked very well as an entry point for me, and I wrote a series of them that included how to film your own butt, how to walk home safely after a performance, and how to renegotiate your self-image. Some of my 'how to's did not make it into the final show, and all of them went through a series of revisions that allowed for more nuance. 'This Juggling Act Is A Metaphor,' which I discussed earlier in this paper, had the most intense revision, and 'Seeing Yourself,' the first 'how to' segment of the show had the least, primarily because it was one of the last sections to be written, at which point I had a clearer understanding of my performative questions: is burlesque performance actually liberatory? And how much labor is required to perform feminine sexuality? These questions differ slightly from the questions being posed in this paper, but point at the same issues of sexualization and objectification.

Beginning to embody the work once it was finished was simultaneously much easier and much more difficult than I imagined going in. Physically, a year of doing classes online and rarely leaving my home due to the pandemic had severely impacted my movement abilities, and I found myself playing a lot of catch up within my warm-ups and workouts to try and get back to my pre-pandemic flexibility and strength. I did not return to this pre-pandemic state, but I think that having to work at a reduced physical level highlighted my questions about the labor that goes into burlesque - I labored quite intensely in order to perform for a half-hour, which was evident by the end in my breathing and the amount of sweat I produced. Despite this physical labor, I found the act of choreographing, toward which I held a lot of anxiety, to actually be an act of ease and joy. Part of this comes from my own enjoyment of languid motion, which meant that simple, small motions were able to take up the bulk of my time, but it was also extremely heartening to simply move, and to notice that my body still remembered how to move within the context of a burlesque dance. It was a much more joyful experience than I anticipated, and

became a treat rather than a chore. However, despite the unexpected comfort and pleasure I found in putting this work on its feet, I did underestimate the amount of emotional labor that I had placed upon myself. While I have plenty of experience in performing in various states of undress, I had never created such a long solo work that required so much of my body to be shown at length. I was also literally existing in a different body than the last time I had performed burlesque - a body that was larger and less strong - and had to renegotiate my own boundaries very frequently in order to feel safe within the performance. It is already deeply challenging to enact your own objectification when you feel comfortable within and trust your body, and even more challenging to do so when you have lost much of that comfort and trust. Additionally, performing for a camera instead of a live audience proved to be a big emotional drain, as a defining feature of live burlesque performance is audience reaction and interaction. My desire to continue this work is based in no small part on my desire to be able to exist in meat space with other people again, and to see how the work will evolve when exposed to the energy and noise of a crowd. Despite these challenges, I am pleased with the version of *The Marvelous Manifestation of Marla Milagro!* that was presented via Zoom, and believe it to be a solid encapsulation of the work I have engaged in at Sarah Lawrence College.

Conclusion: “The Intention We Bring To It”

I still have unanswered questions around burlesque, and believe it is important to note how my decision to engage with the form did create additional emotional and physical stress within an already stressful thesis-building experience. But while working within this form presents challenges, I believe that asking these questions and being willing to explore the unique vulnerability that exists in presenting a nude or semi-nude body onstage is a net gain for myself as a person and an artist. Burlesque has made me a bolder and better theatre artist - more willing to take risks, more willing to be vulnerable, and more invested in the safety of the spaces I work in - and my thesis performance is an homage to the form and its influence on my

goals and point of view as a theatre artist. While I still have questions about the implications of performative sexuality and self-objectification that are part and parcel of burlesque performance, I ultimately believe that I have gained a deeper level of personal freedom and liberatory expression through working in burlesque - and isn't that the point of making art in the first place? In conversation with Evelyn Tensions, I posed my initial question to her - is burlesque actually empowering when it requires the performer to constantly engage with and cater to the objectifying and sexualizing lens of the male gaze? While she acknowledged the "constant balancing act" (Tensions) that was inherent in burlesque performance, she also surprised me by stating that she didn't believe burlesque performance necessitated any liberatory catharsis. "I don't believe all choices are empowering," she stated, "but not all choices need to be empowering" (Tensions). For her, performing burlesque was just fun, and that was enough to make it a worthwhile and positive experience. In the face of this straightforward and simple statement, some of my grander questions about empowerment and liberation and objectification seemed almost beside the point. Michi Osato alluded to this as well - "just because you are taking your clothes off doesn't mean liberation is a given...I feel like what makes it a liberatory practice is a lot in the intention we bring to it" (Brown 372-3), a statement that I return to when the question of how to empower and liberate oneself from a predatory culture seems too enormous to even contemplate, let alone answer. I can refocus my intentions and energies, and find different questions to ask of myself: Do I enjoy performing burlesque? Yes. Does it make me feel happy? Yes. Does it encourage me to prioritize and love my own body? Also yes. Are these small victories not significant? I believe that they are, and I am proud to create work within a lineage of people who commit themselves to joy, pleasure, and expression in the face of a dehumanizing patriarchal system.

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