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Queer Burlesque's Histories, Fantasies, and Futures

By

Julia Havard

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Performance Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract

Queer Burlesque's Histories, Fantasies, and Futures

By

Julia Havard

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

and the Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender and Sexuality

Professor Abigail De Kosnik, Chair

“Queer Burlesque’s Histories, Fantasies, and Futures,” interprets queer and disabled burlesque through interviews, ethnographies, and performance analysis, reading history, craft, and choreographies that together reimagine the intersectional possibilities of “queer” away from queer mainstreaming and toward queer and trans liberation. I point to the entanglement of crip drag and racial mimicry and the way burlesque can cite, reclaim, satirize, or exploit the construction of the other. Burlesque as a performance genre evolved from minstrelsy, and many mainstream burlesque performers continue to use black dance without attribution or citation, employ culture as a costume, and use disability as a narrative trope. I interview over twenty international burlesque performers in order to interpret performers’ responses to racial appropriation and disability drag and investigate their pedagogical strategies of education, activism, and the cultivation of desire for justice. I use *crip glam* as an epistemology for citing the lines of gestural exchange and manipulating traditional models of femininity, where performers invent strategies of refusing objectification and reimagining intimacy.

Chapter 1, “Un-Choreographing Violence: Transformation in Trauma Time,” delves into how burlesque can create cultural shifts toward undoing rape culture through its nondiscursive form of erotic activism. I argue that *trauma time* is a mode of crip time that enables survivors to experience the world differently and in doing so implement their unique skill set to create transformative performance toward abolishing sexual violence. Chapter 2, “Crip Glam As Eroto-Technoscience: Transforming Devices in the Dancing Sensorium” examines the making of queer and disabled burlesque props. This chapter examines *crip glam* as a form of *crip eroto crip-technoscience*, a disabled strategy of reinvention that emerges from the labor of cultivating desire combined with the scientific knowledge disabled people garner from surviving ableist medical systems. Chapter 3, “Anti-capitalist Re-use and Refuse: Wigs, Rhinestones, and Compost,” looks at the hand-making Do-It-Yourself practices of building costumes in queer and disabled burlesque and the relationship between these practices and racialized queer excess, femme disposability, and reclaiming trash as aesthetic. Finally, chapter 4, “Object Choreographies and Gestural Attitudes: A Biography of The Cane,” travels further into the realm of critical prop studies, using the case study of the *cane* as both prop and medical device to signal the ways that stage objects can reveal buried histories. Together these chapters provide a guide for interpreting queer burlesque that reimagines the intersectional crip erotic possibilities of “queer.”

To my queer, crip, and bio families, who continue to teach me all the ways that sparkle matters

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Introduction

Crip Glam: Historiographic Fantasy, Critical Prop Studies, and Other Dreams of Embodied Theory

When I first moved to New York, I bartended regularly for a monthly queer burlesque show at the women and trans lesbian anarchist theater collective Wow Café Theater in the Lower East Side.¹ Founded in 1980 and built on a system of sweat equity where members work shows in order to produce their own, it was where I first learned to design anti-racist lighting for theater, build accessible sets, and facilitate exhausting three hour long conversations on group dynamics via consensus-based decision-making structures. An intergenerational multi-racial radical queer space, it was an on-the-ground teach-in on queer history and intra-community legacies of conflict. I remember the moment I was sucked into burlesque's vortex. It was one of the first shows I worked, during the second act. The performer had removed their clothes, languidly, dramatically, and the piece appeared to be winding down. Then, apparently naked, they continued to strip, tearing off their eyelashes, throwing away their wig, wiping away their makeup, and I felt something shift in me. The piece was hot, yes, but when the performer stripped down not only their clothes but also the tools that shaped the audience's perception of their identities, I started to examine my own bodily performance differently, mind echoing with the screams of affirmations and applause for that performer's political reveals. Those crumpled lashes in the corner of a dirty stage taught me a lesson I continued to learn over and over again throughout this research process: queer, disabled burlesque artists and burlesque performers of color craft their own theory in performance. My job, over the course of this dissertation process, has very simply meant transforming this embodied theory into the discursive.

Burlesque points to our norms around gender, race, ability, size, and through eroticization, allows them to be not only seen differently but *felt* differently. By providing a different rhythm, a different bodily relationship in time for seeing and feeling, burlesque allows for disruption and carves out space for perceptual shift. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes how our ways of perceiving function as a sedimentation of our being.² He explains that our habits of seeing have a specific rhythm. When we see a performance that surprises us, that shakes what we expect to see, that shifts our expectations, perceiving can be a space for shifting how we experience ourselves in relationship to others. When we add to this experience of seeing, the experience of feeling--of arousal, disgust, shame, excitement-- there is room for even further disruption in the solidification of ourselves, our rhythms, and our relations.

I focus on performers' technologies of manufacturing the feeling of performance. Showgirl scholar, Alison Carr, details four distinct modes of viewing in her book *Viewing Pleasure and Being a Showgirl*.³ She notes that John Berger's and Laura Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze has created, in visual culture, an orthodoxy with which the gaze is thought of that actually reifies masculinity as more actively determining a narrative through looking and femininity as passive, embodying objects and images. She explains how through forms of viewing that she calls the double-take and the grab, different ways of conceptualizing looking

¹ Wow is also where I read my first performance studies text, *Acts of Gaiety* by Sara Warner that discusses the Five Lesbian Brothers who founded Wow, a book I found backstage and flipped through in the tech booth while bored during a cue-to-cue.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald Landes. (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 466.

³ Alison J. Carr, *Viewing Pleasure and Being a Showgirl: How Do I Look?* (Routledge, 2018), 2.

can upend this sense of orthodoxy. Burlesque certainly employs the double-take, the use of expression, costume, choreography, and gesture that force a second look at that which is usually taken for granted as normal. The grab, Carr explains, derived from New Media scholarship, is the way a media creator dictates the direction of the gaze, grabbing it and thrusting it in a certain direction.⁴ This study will pay special attention to the way queer and disabled burlesque employs double-take and the grab, focusing on the ways performers direct the gaze and in doing so also direct feeling, re-configure thought, and through these sly forms of shifting the internal conditions for perception, create opportunities for cultural change.

“Queer Burlesque’s Histories, Fantasies, and Futures,” interprets queer and disabled burlesque through interviews, ethnographies, and performance analysis, reading history, craft, and choreographies that together reimagine the intersectional possibilities of “queer” away from queer mainstreaming and toward queer and trans liberation. I point to the entanglement of crip drag and racial mimicry and the way burlesque can cite, reclaim, satirize, or exploit the construction of the other. Burlesque as a performance genre evolved from minstrelsy, and many mainstream burlesque performers continue to use black dance without attribution or citation, employ culture as a costume, and use disability as a narrative trope. Though there is much to critique about burlesque, I am interested here in how performers craft possibility out of legacies of harm. I interview over twenty international burlesque performers in order to interpret performers’ responses to racial appropriation and disability drag, investigating their pedagogical strategies of education, activism, and the cultivation of desire for justice. I use *crip glam* as an epistemology for citing the lines of gestural exchange and manipulating traditional models of femininity, where performers invent strategies of refusing objectification and reimagining intimacy.

Why *queer* burlesque?

Looking at “queer” and “burlesque” together in their spread of meanings, new (and old) questions, desires, and fantasies surface, touching in some ways, refusing each other in others. As Cathy Cohen argues, “queer” need not be limited to those who identify with that word politically or with regard to sexuality, but rather stretched to include “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” people with family structures, gender identities, sex lives, or economic situations that diverge from a white and wealthy “normal.”⁵ Siobhan Sommerville’s keyword definition of “queer” runs through *queer’s* uses, histories, and contradictions, describing how the word “productively refuse[s] to settle down.”⁶ Queer of color thinkers such as Roderick Ferguson and José Muñoz assert that race and racialization are at the center of “queer.” When “queer” is so heavily commodified in mainstream culture, which some argue evacuates it of political meaning, Sommerville asks, what are the limitations of a queer lens for examining the way that the state informs processes of racialization and sexualization? Though I use queerness as an organizing principle for this dissertation, I hold the ways that its utility as an identity category is limited. I use it as a loose and fractured verb, a shroud full of holes (pun intended) that blankets my readings of performances and practices, meaning a critical engagement with cultural norms around gender, sexuality, and sex.

⁴ Carr, *Viewing Pleasure*, 20.

⁵ Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ*, (3, 437-465, 1997).

⁶ Sommerville, “Queer,” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. Ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

A keyword definition of “burlesque” also points to productive contradictions in its tensions between the form’s commodification and its use for affirmation, joy, and healing. Burlesque explores the distance between historical reenactment and political intervention. The word contains within it a critique, as it can be used to mean to “make ludicrous by grotesque representation in action or in language.”⁷ The grotesque in this definition suggests that disability functions as an unnamed but ubiquitous presence in burlesque. The sub-genre of neo-burlesque known as *queerlesque* highlights queer identities, aesthetics, and politics and blurs the borders between performance art and sex work, celebration and protest. Ace Falcor, New Orleans burlesque performer who over the past decade has been archiving queerlesque performances online describes queerlesque as “Burlesque by, for and about the queer community.”⁸ However, I argue that it is more than content or identity that makes burlesque quiver with queer political potential. My project is unique in its centering of queer burlesque, but also its examination of cultural appropriation alongside crip drag in burlesque performance, which I argue is also central to unpacking queer movement building’s possibilities and limitations. “Crip,” in Robert McRuer’s definition, refers to the ways that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are co-constituted.⁹ Critical Disability Studies scholars Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley urge us to also think toward compulsory whiteness alongside able-bodiedness as another site where power is reified that is deeply linked to access to resources, education, healthcare, wealth, and safety.¹⁰

Burlesque in some ways participates in “enfreakment,” as Ellen Samuels terms, “the process by which individual difference becomes styled as cultural otherness,” through its capitalization on and sometimes exploitation of performances of otherness.¹¹ But queer burlesque also pokes at enfreakment as a systemic process, inciting desire for the grotesque, forcing audiences to wonder at the parts of themselves that are also queerly monstrous. I unpack how the categories of race, queerness, and disability are co-created through burlesque and the hierarchies within them maintained or disrupted. To unpeel the layers of how burlesque both critiques and deepens sedimented concepts of identity, I examine queer burlesque’s methods and assess how it employs sexual culture as mode of empowerment, resistance, sexual education, and political critique. I investigate performers’ strategies of making and performing in the midst of precarity, limited resources, oppressive systems, and inaccessible spaces to unravel how they re-make their genre and, in the process, themselves.

Research Approach and Political Positioning

My research tactics for this project were multi-pronged. I attended the largest burlesque conference in the world, BurlyCon, in 2017, 2019, and 2020 and the 2017 “Fierce! Queer Burlesque Festival.” I participated as audience member for incalculable shows across the US and Canada between 2012 and 2021. I also performed in theaters, bars, and venues in New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area. I interviewed 21 total performers across the US, Canada, and Australia. I selected performers to interview through a combination of research, mutual contacts,

⁷ Wiktionary, “Burlesque,” <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/burlesque>, (Accessed March 22, 2018).

⁸ Ace Falcor, “Queer Burlesque History and Archives,” <http://fuckyeahqueerlesque.tumblr.com/>, Blog. (Accessed March 22, 2018).

⁹ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, (NYU Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley, “Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework,” *Gender & Society*, 33, (October 12, 2018).

¹¹ Ellen Samuels, “Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet,” *Signs*, 37, no. 1 (2011): 53–81, 66.

and encounter: I met Versace La Bismalva in the basement of Buddies Toronto at Fierce! Queer Burlesque Festival while we commiserated on the lack of accessibility. Jacqueline Boxx and I connected after the 2017 BurlyCon in Seattle after a panel on microaggressions, and she later became my teacher and mentor. Sweet Lorraine and I worked on each other's shows at Wow Café Theater in New York from 2011 to 2014. Though the snowball research methodology I used here felt the most natural to me as a participant-observer, it's possible that my closeness to my interlocutors may have impacted my results. However, I also identify as being in community with many of my interlocutors, and I don't believe that justice-oriented research can occur without a deep long-term reciprocal relationship between interlocutor and researcher that acknowledges the emotional labor of interviewing and being interviewed as well as, in a larger sense, our interdependence.

When so much of this work is created in response to or in the aftermath of trauma or sexual violence and abuse, burlesque can function as a vital space for sexual reeducation, dreaming collective futures without harm, therapeutic revenge fantasies, and nonlinear healing. Burlesque and sex work have myriad divergences and overlaps; however, I believe it is generative to view analysis of burlesque through the frame of erotic labor. In this dissertation, I focus my argument on the ways that agential reclaiming work of performers contributes to systemic shifts in cultural climate and functions as part of a process of healing and survival from trauma. Noting that burlesque is work helps us understand why burlesque impacts an audience. This frame also has material implications for the people who perform this and other low barrier work of a sexual nature, who are often those most marginalized by capitalism: queer people, disabled people, people of color, and poor people.¹² Some sources describe burlesque as a stripping with a class difference, populated by academics and performance artists who eagerly differentiate themselves from strippers and sex workers. Though many of the people I interviewed did not view burlesque as their primary income stream, I did not find a clear social or class distinction present among my interlocutors and their communities. I find differentiations made between burlesque and sex work to most usually be anti-sex worker rights and protections. I aim to lift up the work done by marginalized performers engaging in sexual culture so that this work is seen as culturally vital and compensated as such. Cultural work is often consumer-driven, market-defined, and precarious, making it not so different from sex work in key ways. Workers in each field receive few if any protections or benefits through their workplace, often struggling to meet the costs of healthcare and basic needs. Burlesque has historically been at odds with the law and continues to function in extralegal and underground ways. For example, the extent to which performers can strip naked is limited by state and federal law. I have been warned that my pasties better not come off because it puts the producers at risk. Working the bar at a venue without its liquor license, I have also been prepped to quickly hide the bar backstage if the cops show up. The policing of burlesque performance and spaces is tied to the policing of sex work and the criminalization of queer and trans bodies, especially those of black and indigenous people of color. In seeing burlesque performance work as work within and against capitalist systems, burlesque studies can work towards destigmatizing and decriminalizing sex work, while fighting the victim-blaming and slut-shaming that make up the foundations of rape culture. STOP SESTA-FOSTA.¹³

¹² Caty Simon "'They Want Us Dead': Anti-trafficking Laws Attack Drug-Using Sex Workers," *Filter*, (Sept 25, 2018). Qtd in *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, (AK Press, 2020).

¹³ "Stop SESTA/ FOSTA," Electronic Frontier Foundation, <https://stopsesta.org/>. (Accessed April 28, 2021).

I also aim to write forms of citation into dance lineages, which is essential when the idea that gesture has untraceable origins is consistently used to justify cultural appropriation. In approaching burlesque as a genre that was formed through processes of both racial mimicry and disability drag, I employ queer historiographic methods to unpack the circulation of these practices of embodying other and assess the possibilities that emerge through the politicized reclamation present in contemporary performance. I approach this project holding the belief that citation is generative, working reparatively in addressing the harm of stolen creative labor, while also materially bolstering the careers and advancement of marginalized cultural workers.

In the following pages, I draw out the entanglement of history and fantasy, tracking the ways that the emergence of identity categorization intersected with the development of burlesque as a genre and paying special attention to the role crip drag holds in sexual performance. I then unpack the modality of crip glam, the ways that glamour aesthetics can be constructed toward undoing ableism and racism in performance, and discuss the importance of this dissertation's attention to objects. Finally, I discuss how each chapter plays a different role toward unraveling the ways that burlesque makes queer meaning.

Historiographic Fantasy

This project centers on contemporary objects, interviews, performances, and spaces, but as with any performance work, memories of the past infiltrate present gestures. Queer burlesque history survives through a complex process of mythologization, performers running their hands over sequined hand-me-downs and whispering lineages of past performances in tones of awe and envy. These hauntings are often intentionally called upon, stirred up, summoned through gossip and storytelling, costume and gesture, explicit invocations of burlesque ancestors. Burlesque performers learn about those who came before through the mythologizing of burlesque icons (termed "legends"). This history itself works as a type of queer tease, circulating outside, within, and despite chrononormativity, surfacing capitalist modes of restraining bodies in time while providing fantasies of something other.¹⁴ Thinking queerly about "the tease" invokes a disruptive non-normative sexual timeline of arousal, which like fantasy and desire, imagines a multiplicity of sexual futures. Early 20th century burlesque performer Carrie Finnell would drag a strip out for months, raising the entrance fee week by week, each week removing one additional article of clothing.¹⁵ Though this is not a historical project, it questions burlesque's tangling of past and future in its sticky, shiny present, wrapping together memory and desire in one sparkly package. The strip tease prolongs a sense of sexual fulfillment, employing playfulness, longing, control, perhaps even cruelty in the service of building anticipation and connection. The tease as a mode of interpreting burlesque is a framework that allows for fantasy and fact to collaborate in creating history.

I want to linger for a moment on the ways that constructions of identity-based difference became sedimented across cultural forms just as burlesque emerged at the end of the 19th century. Understanding how the roots of burlesque are necessarily embroiled in performances of otherness is foundational to this dissertation's unpacking of how performances of race, disability, gender, and queerness are questioned and deepened, vilified or rejoiced in in queer burlesque.

Burlesque's origins mark it as both queer and constantly appropriating other. The dance form evolved as the minstrel show shrunk in popularity in the late 19th century, but borrowed

¹⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010).

¹⁵ Michelle Baldwin. *Burlesque and the New Bump-N-Grind*. (Denver: Speck Press, 2004), 5.

heavily from its structure.¹⁶ Early burlesque consistently featured a racialized sexualized other, appropriating and exotifying dress, music, and movement. The formative gestures of burlesque—the shimmy, the bump and grind—were appropriated from black women performers, leaving white performers and producers to profit off of this choreography in a process performance scholar and historian Jayna Brown calls “racial mimicry.”¹⁷ The overt sexuality of an early popular burlesque dance, the “cooch dance,” seen for the first time at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair Columbian Exposition (as in an exhibition dedicated to Christopher Columbus) was explicitly an attempt to popularize “the new science of anthropology,” as part of the project of solidifying racial difference in the service of justifying colonization.¹⁸ Monica Miller in her book *Slaves to Fashion* describes how in early African American stage performance, similar to in minstrel shows, race was constructed through costume, makeup, masks, and other fabrics to mimic blackness of the skin so the performance of race onstage took the same form no matter the race of the performer.¹⁹ This fact that stage-based racial construction looked similar across differently raced bodies is consistent with the ways that performances of race were implemented across difference toward creating a perceived consistency throughout legal, scientific, and cultural institutions, a solidification process that burlesque to some extent pushed back upon.

This preoccupation with categories of identity and their use as a tool of state-based control has to do with what Ellen Samuels terms the “crisis of identification” of the mid-nineteenth century, a fear that the dissolution of identity categories would result in mass ungovernability.²⁰ From the evolution of eugenics to emerging policies around immigration, this period continually circulated a “a new social investment in regularizing objects and people,” impacting norms around racial categories, ability designations, and gender roles that seeped into 20th century discourses and social forms.²¹ Samuels points out that, “once embedded in the cultural realm, fantasies of identification stubbornly persist, despite being disproved, undermined, or contradicted, and this persistence provokes resistance and disidentifications from subjects attempting to escape the fantasy’s totalizing imposition of identity.”²² This persistence helps to explain the continued presence of reductive tropes and narratives around marginalized identities in neo-burlesque. In fact, burlesque as an erotic medium, puts the *fantasy* into “fantasies of identification,” since sexual culture can both be a ground for desire to reduce the distance of difference but also to craft fetishes of difference that maintain social structures and hierarchies.

Queerness, gendered drag, and sexual fluidity also functioned as a foundational component of burlesque history and, it follows, contemporary burlesque. The first woman’s account of viewing a burlesque show in the 1890s described the performers as “queer.”²³ These performers were playing the banjo and the bugle, instruments considered masculine, but also associated with minstrelsy. The queerness of burlesque did not only relate the gendered drag that

¹⁶ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 100.

¹⁷ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 3.

¹⁸ Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 225.

¹⁹ Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2009), 43

²⁰ Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 2.

²¹ Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 2.

²² Ibid, 3.

²³ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 169.

accompanied burlesque shows, but the remnants of minstrelsy as well, these two types of drag inseparably tied up with one another, sonically and visually. Though at the time the word, “queer,” of course, meant strange or odd, this moment texturizes the meanderings of queerness through burlesque history, entangling its association with strangeness with a general breach of identity categories. Gendered and racial drag in women’s performance in vaudeville, according to historian Kathleen Casey, “drew attention to the ways in which gender and race were flexible cultural projects, actively revised, contested, and rebuilt through each other.”²⁴ The explicit looping together of queerness and racial drag in barely veiled forms of contemporary minstrelsy makes burlesque a fertile site for examining the co-construction of race and queerness via appropriation more widely.

Susan Schweik expands on the legal aspects of identity categorization in the context of the Ugly Laws, implemented in the late 19th century, which criminalized public presence of sick and disabled bodies.²⁵ Schweik goes on to expand this idea of ugly bodies to encompass ugly gestures, explaining that a disabled mode of movement, for example a limp, could also be used as evidence toward criminalizing disabled bodies in public. The development of the Ugly Laws points to a preoccupation with a “cultural aesthetic,” a construction of beauty that was used to police bodies.²⁶ Cameron Awkward-Rich in his discussion of early twentieth century figure Jack Bee Garland’s crip transmasculinity points to the fact that language of the Ugly Laws was reflective of the anti-cross dressing laws, these two examples of criminalized cross-identity passage both threatening the emergent social order based on rigid identity categories. Awkward-Rich also draws out how racial passing was attached to the specter of disability drag in the late 19th century.²⁷ In this way then, gender nonconforming, disabled, and racialized bodies would appear in separate and specific spaces: the freak show, the asylum and the courthouse.²⁸

The emergence of burlesque coincided with the emergence of the freak show. The title of PT Barnum’s Freak Show exhibit, “What is it?” exemplified a commodifiable hunger around categorizing bodies.²⁹ The freak show is a site where the medicalization of difference collided with stripping; male doctors would “authenticate female ‘freaks,’ lending credibility to the freak show’s reputation while simultaneously allowing paying men the ability to view an unclothed female under the guise of scientific interest,” as Ellen Samuels explains in her 2011 piece on mid-19th century African American conjoined twins Millie and Christine McKoy.³⁰ As articulated in collections such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Freakery*, there are many ways to read the presence of agency, capital, and community in the site of the freak show.³¹ However, this instance of disabled stripping described above is one persistent “fantasy of identification” that is eerily reminiscent of contemporary nonconsensual violence in the medical arena as many disabled people continue to be nonconsensually stripped and paraded for doctors to observe and examine. This dehumanizing process is justified by the supposed neutrality of medical

²⁴ Casey, Kathleen B. *The Prettiest Girl on Stage Is a Man: Race and Gender Benders in American Vaudeville*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015), xviii.

²⁵ Schweik, Susan M. *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. (Chesham: New York University Press, 2010), 85.

²⁶ Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 86.

²⁷ Cameron Awkward-Rich, “‘She of the Pants and No Voice’ Jack Bee Garland’s Disability Drag,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (February 1, 2020), 23.

²⁸ Awkward-Rich, “Jack Bee Garland’s Disability Drag,” 25.

²⁹ Casey, *The Prettiest Girl on Stage Is a Man*, xxiii.

³⁰ Samuels, “Examining Millie and Christine McKoy,” 74.

³¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

objectivity, which Lisa Blumberg poignantly describes in her piece “Public Stripping.”³² These legacies of disabled people being stripped of humanity as they are stripped of clothing load contemporary disabled burlesque with significations: from painful tensions triggered when a nondisabled person crips up to rich possibilities of reclaiming that which was taken nonconsensually.

As the 20th century wore on, visibly disabled people were forbidden from taking up public space, including stage and theater space. This was supposedly to prevent the unsightliness of public begging, which was a major source of income for disabled people at the time.³³ In public space, disability drag was present in the form of nondisabled people faking a disability to appear worthier of collecting alms.³⁴ Simultaneously on stages, disability drag occurred in the form of nondisabled actors performing disabled characters toward the advancement of plot and acclaim for their acting skills. It follows that the memory of disability drag rings painful for disability communities, a reminder not only that disabled bodies were legally named as ugly but also that their presence was punishable. Throughout this dissertation the presence of disability drag is felt, especially in the form of disabled people self-policing, asserting that the gestures of a disabled dancer make it clear they are not disabled or that the creative use of a mobility device creates a spectacle that casts their disability status into question. I use the term crip drag to point to the way queer culture is not an idyllic space for disabled people, but rather reinstates norms that emerge out of an ableist white supremacist logic, the same logic that craves static definable identity categories, productive bodies, and beauty, perpetuating Eurocentric and ableist hierarchies. The intersection between disability drag, gender drag, and racial drag has not gone unexamined in Critical Disability Studies, though this particular intersection remains untouched in burlesque studies.

Musical Theater and Disability Studies scholar, Samuel Yates, details “the vocabulary describing the portrayal of disabled persons by nondisabled actors, [which] includes ‘disability masquerade’, ‘disability drag’, ‘cripface’ and ‘cripping up’.”³⁵ He explains, “These terms index performance histories involving bodily transformation and citations of Otherness.”³⁶ In contemporary burlesque, these practices are commonplace, especially, as one of my interlocutors Jacqueline Boxx has noted, in nerdlesque, a type of burlesque that commonly cites science fiction or fantasy depictions of disabled characters through various forms of cosplay.³⁷ The 2019 and 2020 meetings of the Disability Caucus at BurlyCon, the yearly burlesque conference that serves as a locus of community connections, skill shares, and professionalization efforts, resulted in the creation of a document, spearheaded by Jacqueline Boxx, listing a variety of shifts that could make shows more accessible and address ableism within the burlesque community, including an ask that producers not book able performers who are “cripping up,” which, the document specifies involves “using mobility aides, acting as disabled people/CHARACTERS.”³⁸

³² Lisa Blumberg, “Public Stripping.” In *The Ragged Edge : The Disability Experience from the Pages of the First Fifteen Years of The Disability Rag*, Edited by Barrett Shaw. (Louisville, KY: Advocado Press, 1994).

³³ Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 1.

³⁴ Ibid, 17.

³⁵ Samuel Yates, “Choreographing Conjoinment: Side SHow’s Fleshly Fixations and Disability Simulation.” *Studies in Musical Theater* 13, no. 1 (2019), 68.

³⁶ Yates, “Choreographing Conjoinment,” 68.

³⁷ Jacqueline Boxx, Interviewed February 27, 2019, Facetime.

³⁸ Disability Caucus, “Creating accessible shows: burlycon 2020/ 2019,” BurlyCon, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/19GQBfVP9NUdKzD7oEHgOZ1cav14WR8FQfiL8nL5V2BA/edit>, (Accessed April 20, 2021).

The emphasis on the word character suggests the outrage of the reduction of disabled people to tropes for the advancement of plot.

As articulated by Tobin Siebers and others, the phenomenon of disability drag removes disabled people's authority and keeps disability out of sight by keeping disabled people off of stages.³⁹ Siebers also draws out the various uses of "disability as masquerade" by disabled people, for example the deployment of visible markers of disability in order to connect with disability community, the performance of disability in order to gain access to care, and various other forms of "keeping secrets and telling lies" toward the ends of accessing a scarcity of support.⁴⁰ Disabled people are asked to perform a kind of drag in order to acquire social services and healthcare. Suspicion of disability drag impacts medical care just as it impacts performance. Some disabled people are protective of a static and strategic image of disability without which access to services might decrease, and this attitude I found was particularly present in audience reception of disabled burlesque performance.

Awkward-Rich specifies that "disability drag is a useful framework [...] because of these multiple valences: dragging out the time of sociality, drag as an appropriative performance that reinforces the distance between normal and the other, drag as an action that brings two or more categories into close proximity, and drag as repetition with a subversive difference that produces spaces of freedom."⁴¹ According to Awkward-Rich, drag has a dual, contradictory function of bringing categories of identity closer, while also re-articulating the space between them. It drags time out, while also facilitating time's repetition. Performances of disability regardless of disability status can enable people to acquire access to power and resources, occasionally resulting in personal or larger scale resistive work. Charlie Chaplin's tramp character who performed a disabled walk and used a cane was foundational to his anti-capitalist and anti-fascist film-making.⁴² Jack Bee Garland's performance of speechlessness was core to enabling his gender and racial passing. Examining the role of cripple drag in performance and audience reception in all of its fluidity and complexity is important in this dissertation's examination of burlesque's performances of otherness and the resistive acts of dancers against, despite, and through such performances.

Creative strategies of returning the gaze that dehumanizes, objectifies, and otherwise harms form a foundation of resistive practices in reaction to these histories of violence and violation. Burlesque, among its many uses and problems, creates the conditions for performers to stare back. I am interested in the logics and practices through which performers convert histories of harm into healing, truth-telling, pleasure, and revenge.

Fashioning Crip Glam

Crip glam is a selection of strategies, methods, and tools by which queer disabled performers remake desirability through work with costume, props, and choreography in contemporary burlesque performance. Crip glam as queer disabled performance methodology aesthetically subverts visual narratives around queerness, gender, race, and/or disability. It works on the plane of the visual but also the haptic and the aural, shaking loose implicit narratives of

³⁹ Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008, 116.

⁴⁰ Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 96.

⁴¹ Awkward-Rich, "Jack Bee Garland's Disability Drag," 30.

⁴² Constance Brown Kuriyama points to the ways that Chaplin also was not able-minded, asserting the ways that trauma and depression influenced his art making. "Chaplin's Impure Comedy: The Art of Survival." *Film Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (April 1, 1992): 26–38.

disability, race, and sexuality indicated through the visual and disrupting them. Glamour is often thought of as an elusive, enthralling, romantic charm. Merriam Webster's second definition of glamour defines it as a magic spell.⁴³ Crip glam is a type of magic that aesthetically induces alternate imaginings of compulsory heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and whiteness. It shimmers in the spread from performer to audience, a particularly queer strategy of getting inside the body. By "getting inside the body," I refer to the afterlives of performance in the bodies of audience members: their emotional, conceptual, physiological responses. Practices of prop use, costume development, community-building, and choreography can function as interconnected strategies of *crip glam*. This process of constructing glamorous aesthetic fantasies of disability disrupts ableist and white supremacist ideas of beauty and imagines a future and a past where glamour is built off of something other than a norm that reinforces a Eurocentric nondisabled conception of what is beautiful.

Costumes are a rich and generative site of performance analysis in burlesque. The typical sequence of a burlesque piece involves the strategic removal of costume, often through unpredictable and surprising means that necessitate innovative costuming constructions: unexpected Velcro, elongated zipper pulls, quick-release corsets, among so many others. In close attention to costume, we can trace burlesque's processes of becoming in material ways. Cultural appropriation and imperialism manifest across the spectrum of burlesque performance: from the decontextualized use of racially coded costume (e.g. geisha costumes, indigenous regalia, bling) to dance forms (such as bellydance and twerking).⁴⁴ Australian performer La Viola Vixen's 2018 article for *21st Century Burlesque Magazine* aims to educate white burlesque performers by breaking down the violence of cultural appropriation. The author gives a long list of examples of common forms of cultural appropriation she has seen as a performer and producer; she includes fifteen performers' reflections on how cultural appropriation in burlesque has been personally harmful.⁴⁵ The recent nature of this article and robustness of sources reflect the urgency of the issue of white supremacy in burlesque performance as it is revealed through costume and gesture. As performer-scholar Lil Cotton Flower, explained in an interview, while dreamily contemplating a future burlesque piece/ performance art intervention where this statement was repeated by the audience call and response style, inescapably "all burlesque is racial mimicry."⁴⁶

As a genre that crafts fantasies of the past, the historical is always bound up in and being rewritten in contemporary burlesque performance. In this way, contemporary burlesque may either function as a purposeful rejection/reclamation despite white supremacist histories or may feign innocence, the latter a clear example how white supremacy entangled with white feminism splays out over this performance genre. For performers of color, doing creative work with racial tropes, this legacy may manifest as play, fantasy, drag, critique, satire, and may allow for a different kind of potential communication between performer and audience, one that humanizes in/from/within objectification and across difference, a thesis that Sydney Fonteyn Lewis examines in depth in the dissertation *Looking Forward to the Past: Black Women's Sexual*

⁴³ "Glamour," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glamour>, (Accessed 11 Jun. 2020).

⁴⁴ La Viola Vixen, "Cultural Appropriation in Burlesque: What Is Harmful, and Why?" *21st Century Burlesque Magazine*, (November 10, 2018), <http://21stcenturyburlesque.com/cultural-appropriation-burlesque-what-harmful-why/>.

⁴⁵ La Viola Vixen, "Cultural Appropriation in Burlesque."

⁴⁶ Lil Cotton Flower, Interviewed March 1, 2019. In person.

*Agency in “Neo” Cultural Productions.*⁴⁷ Toronto burlesque performer and scholar Julia Matias’ ongoing dissertation project on exoticism in burlesque historicizes contemporary burlesque’s exploitation of “the exotic” as erotic capital, adding to the growing archive working toward decolonizing burlesque scholarship and practice.

Costume aesthetics and the construction of burlesque’s glamour are an aspect of burlesque through which performers can either reiterate cultural norms or speak back to oppressive standards. Jo Weldon, burlesque icon who was instrumental in bringing about burlesque’s recent return in the neo-burlesque movement, documents the ways that fashion has been written into mechanisms of state control, citing regulations imposed by sumptuary laws meant to visibly reinstate social hierarchies.⁴⁸ She links the term “bombshell” to its military origins, reflecting how posing for pinup photoshoots was referenced as a patriotic duty.⁴⁹ In citing 50s fashion, performers are inescapably citing an aesthetic developed for the purposes of “supporting the troops.” Soldiers would decorate the sides of their planes with art featuring famous pinups. Weldon describes how the bikini swimsuit, the most popular choice of clothing for pinups, was named after the Bikini Atoll, the structure and style of the bikini linked to the atom bomb’s chemical structure: “If an atom was the smallest unit of a chemical element, then the bikini was the smallest garment that could be worn and still considered a swimsuit. Moreover, it was a one-piece split into two, like an atom being split to induce the explosions that bloomed across American television sets and magazines.”⁵⁰ Here the line between explosive bombshells and bombshells exploding is thin, the splitting of the bikini across the body referencing the splitting of an atom that caused mass murder, trauma, and disability across generations, a literal weaponizing of the pinup body toward imperialist ends. Understanding the citations that stretch across performers’ bodies when unfastening a bikini gives depth to costume analysis in performance, the normalization and eroticization of deadly military actions justified in a coyly smiling sexualized body as symbol.

In neo-burlesque’s reclaiming of the “Atomic Age aesthetic,” Weldon qualifies that these fashion moves were not about a desire to re-create the past but rather to co-opt stylistic elements from the period and reimagine them, combining “swing, tiki, exotica, lounge, rock’n’roll, glam, punk.”⁵¹ With increased interest in retro fashion in this period, “vintage” looks were mass marketed and mass produced, using contemporary materials and stretch fabrics to re-create past looks with greater comfort.⁵² These styles each hold their own histories of appropriation (swing, rock-n-roll), orientalism (tiki), and white supremacy (metal, goth, punk). This tension between purely citing and citing with a difference stretches across burlesque as a genre, where close work with costume construction can provide insight into the ways cycles of oppression perpetuate, new worlds are imagined, or a grey area between the two continues to loom.

White genderqueer Toronto performer Pickles LaVey exemplifies one strategy used to queer burlesque’s aesthetic norms. They create sigils [Image 1], or magic symbols, by embroidering figures into their costumes that represent the type of energy they hope to embody in performance and impart to the audience.⁵³ They assert that much animal symbolism used to

⁴⁷Sydney Fonteyn Lewis, *Looking Forward to the Past: Black Women’s Sexual Agency in “Neo” Cultural Productions*, (Dissertation. University of Washington, 2012).

⁴⁸Jo Weldon, *Fierce: The History of Leopard Print*, (Harper Design, 2018), 53.

⁴⁹ Weldon, *Fierce*, 110.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 113.

⁵¹ Ibid, 184.

⁵² Ibid, 194.

⁵³ Pickles LaVey, Interviewed June 12, 2018, Skype.

embody strength and courage involves animals that are predators; they choose instead to embroider sigils of prey animals like rabbits or mice. These animals “live their entire life while everything is out to kill them” and in that way are beings that inspire bravery for Pickles.⁵⁴ Pickles’s reflection distinctly contrasts with genre-wide norms. Jo Weldon analyses leopard print through a detailed history of variations, meanings, and cultural contexts, identifying the unifying factor as “fierceness.” For wearers of leopard print, “the print expresses the power they feel within or makes them feel armored against the power they may lack.”⁵⁵ In channeling bunny versus predator, Pickles is placing themself on the same stage on the other side of the fabric from Weldon, insisting that showgirls can claim power through vulnerability and softness, rather than initiating violence or attack. Pickles’s sigils suggest that some forms of courage are manifested instead through surviving attack and continuing to live.



[Image 1: Two colorful embroidered bunnies rest against yellow polka dotted fabric, each with a third eye in the middle of their forehead. They float above an arrow that just misses them. A magical symbol is embroidered above one of their heads and on the other’s haunches.]

Pickles embroiders these sigils on the inside of their costumes to call in courage for a performance. This embroidery requires a great deal of detailed embodied work. As Pickles weaves these images into their costumes, oils from their hands become a part of the costume. As they dance, their sweat soaks into the fabric. The space between body and costume folds in on itself, lubricated with bodily remnants. As their fingers pinch and pull threads, their cells are smeared across the costume. Passage between Pickles’s internal performance landscape and the cloth on the surface of their body is oozy, porous, continuous. It is this sensitive fabric, not necessarily visible from the audience that I aim to capture on these pages, which hopefully will serve to shift perception of queer and disabled burlesque performance if only to make us squint for the presence of gestures on the underside of costume. Pickles’s reflections are echoed in Alison Carr’s research with showgirls and her unpacking of glamour as a tool. Carr asserts that for some performers “glamour is a strategy of protection that enables them to move around their respective performance and presentation contexts more freely, knowing they have constructed

⁵⁴ Pickles LaVey, June 12, 2018.

⁵⁵ Weldon, *Fierce*, 17.

themselves in a way that makes them feel indomitable."⁵⁶ Crip glam feels past the hard edges of rhinestones and the veneer of a perfectly glossed lip, and asks, what are the seams and brushes of glamour's protection? How do marginalized performers practice and teach the skills of surviving in the midst of perceived weakness?

Introducing Critical Prop Studies

Jumping off from the examination of costume and bringing together new materialist study with prop studies through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies, I suggest that critical prop studies can do edge work between fields and genres. Examination of objects opens up crucial paradoxes in burlesque performance as a genre. Contemporary queer burlesque's central reversal is the refusal of a simplistic sexual objectification of the dancing body. The objectification of stripping performers is never straight-forward. Rather it is agential, purposeful, used against the viewer toward the end of disrupting a normative sexualizing objectifying gaze. The audience's gaze, when met by a performer's who refuses to give the viewer what they want until the performer decides it's time, is not a straightforward technology of objectification.

Because burlesque complicates objectification, it follows that burlesque objects—the props and accessories used by burlesque performers—are doing similarly nuanced work with seeing and being seen, use and being made use of. Objects are used in burlesque to convey myriad meanings. In the short timescale of burlesque pieces, usually between three and ten minutes, an object can provide a narrative shift or a major plot point. Objects are often eroticized and dramatized through touch, placement, choreography, and the intimate histories and relationships between performer and object.

Burlesque objects often have curious histories of making, remaking, barter, and inheritance, used as currency to trade for an especially sparkly gown or thematically relevant pasties. In this way, their passage allows for the tracking of community connections simultaneously with material histories. As a genre, some core gestures are figured around costume-ish props or prop-ish costumes: tassel twirling, fan dances, performing floor work on a raised block, and of course creative reuse of costumes as they are stripped off. For example, the following two pieces take the ordinary object of the stocking and disrupt, expand, and manipulate its everyday use, showing its narrative and conceptual import. In the winning performance of the Burlesque Hall of Fame's "Queen of Burlesque 2018" competition, queer burlesquer Inga, performed her entire winning number stripping off a single thigh high fishnet stocking, stretching it, bending it around her body, milking the tease of a single stocking across the minutes long narrative arc of her entire piece, where the piece ended when the stocking was finally unpeeled.⁵⁷ [Performer redacted] performed a piece where she began completely engulfed in a body stocking and ended with the removal of a nylon stocking from inside of her vagina, turning her costume and remnants of her body inside out in an eroticizing of the liminality between body and costume piece.⁵⁸ In each of these examples, burlesque costumes and objects co-create the choreography and narrative of a piece, playing a crucial role in the pieces' central reversals, surprises, and erotics.

⁵⁶ Carr, *Viewing Pleasure*, 66.

⁵⁷ Inga, "2018 Miss Exotic World Inga!" ohioburlesque, *Youtube*. (April 15, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y812FBnOQU>.

⁵⁸ [Performer redacted] Interview with author.

Chapter Tease

Each chapter examines different burlesque performers' choreographies, methods, costumes, props, or medical devices to explore their contributions toward queering and crippling burlesque/ burlesqueing "crip" and "queer."

Chapter 1, "Un-Choreographing Violence: Transformation in Trauma Time," delves into the ways that burlesque can create cultural shifts toward abolishing rape culture through its unique nondiscursive form of erotic activism. Through choreographic manipulations of time, narrative, sequencing, and aesthetics in performance, as well as through the process of developing a survivor-centered piece and the crip instrument of improvisation, survivors of sexual violence can craft agential and community-based modes of nonlinear healing, while creating work that simultaneously functions as anti-racist and anti-ableist educational tool. I analyze the performances of and interviews with Poison Ivory, Aurora BoobRealis, and Jacqueline Boxx to assess how performers across race and disability speak back to burlesque's history of appropriation, while processing harm they have experienced alongside that of their community. Through explicit citations of community and the practice of shattering narrative, performers fold cycles of violence in on themselves to create compact performances that stretch across generations of trauma and reflect wider community experiences of harm. I argue that *trauma time* is a mode of crip time that enables survivors to experience the world differently and in doing so implement their skill set to create transformative performance toward abolishing sexual violence.

Chapter 2, "Crip Glam As Eroto-Technoscience: Transforming Devices in the Dancing Sensorium" examines the making of queer and disabled burlesque props. Often referred to as a core component of burlesque performance, props can be a useful frame to align disability devices and stage performance, working to destabilize reductive tropes of disability. Through an examination of the technologies used to revise canes, wheelchairs, and IV ports as stage objects, I connect prop studies with new materialism across Critical Disability Studies and dance studies in suggesting that the repurposing of medical objects on stage as tools of rage and joy shifts the frames through which disabled performers are seen. In a further unraveling of pieces by Jacqueline Boxx and Chaos X Machina, this chapter examines *crip glam* as a form of *crip eroto-technoscience*, a disabled strategy of reinvention that emerges from the labor of cultivating desire combined with the scientific knowledge disabled people garner from surviving ableist medical systems.

Chapter 3, "Anti-capitalist Re-use and refuse: Wigs, Rhinestones, and Compost," looks at the hand-making Do-It-Yourself practices of building costumes in queer and disabled burlesque and the relationship between these practices and racialized queer excess, femme disposability, and reclaiming trash as aesthetic. I theorize sparkle as an epistemology while tracking the self-fashioning involved in the hand-made costumes and props used in burlesque. Taking inspiration from Krista Thompson's analysis of bling in black visual culture, I examine the relationship between capital, commodity, excess, and movement as it relates to queer burlesque economies. In the process of hand-crafting, performers construct fantasies that upend ableist mandates of capitalist productivity. This chapter re-conceptualizes the queer and disabled burlesque archive as a sparkly mess, examining objects as extensions of bodies and as worth far more than their assigned value, invaluable in the currencies of memory, desire, and care.

Chapter 4, "Object Choreographies and Gestural Attitudes: A Biography of The Cane," travels further into the realm of critical prop studies, using the case study of the *cane* as both prop and medical device to signal the ways that stage objects can reveal buried histories. The

cane has appeared as an instrument of gender and racial transgression from minstrelsy to contemporary use, while simultaneously signaling disability. Engaging my own experience as cane user and burlesque performer as well as that of my interlocutors, I perform a deep dive into the history of the cane in the context of burlesque and cite the ways this object can work as historical portal toward disturbing entrenched identity categories.

Together these chapters provide a guide for interpreting queer burlesque, conducting the reader through methods of reading history, craft, and practices that together reimagine the intersectional crip erotic possibilities of “queer.”

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Chapter 1

Un-Choreographing Violence: Transformation in Trauma Time

Experiences of trauma, intergenerational and interpersonal, infiltrate almost every interview I performed for this dissertation. Burlesque can be a form of celebration and relief, persisting in lingering affirmations and post-show endorphins, but it also exists in *trauma time*, a time-space where expressing the experience of violence through performance can result in a manipulation of history with a different result. The maneuverings of time that occur in queer, disabled, and POC burlesque form it as a survivor genre, a performance form that exists in relationship to trauma and allows the audience to experience the “survivor magic” inherent to art made in the midst of or in reaction to trauma.⁵⁹ Trauma time as manipulated through choreographic process, improvisation, movement, narrative sequencing, and performance technologies, works to unravel damaging assumptions of what it means to survive trauma of many kinds, from interpersonal violence to racialized trauma to microaggressions, and is a central component of queer and disabled burlesque that critically reflects on burlesque’s history in order to dream up less violent futures. Across the work of Poison Ivory, Aurora BoobRealis, and Jacqueline Boxx, I illustrate how these performers transform their experiences of trauma onstage, and how, in doing so, they offer innovative tools for surviving and healing from harm.

Rather than reading the effects of trauma onstage in terms of disclosure, where the activist work of survivor performance is considered to be the revealing of trauma narratives, I suggest that trauma time affects the *methods* of performance-making, including choreographic strategies and approaches to improvisation. Disclosure of trauma narratives and storytelling around experiences of violence have historically been implemented as an anti-violence strategy across black women’s movement building⁶⁰ and held a central role in feminist movements across time and geography.⁶¹ However, disclosing a survivor status means coming out as survivor over and over again, an experience that is often accompanied by significant emotional labor, a mandate to educate, discrimination, shame, and stigma. Therefore, looking at survivor tools and methods that do not include explicit verbal disclosure can be a resource for survivor tactics of how to avoid unnecessary further harm, while doing beneficial work connecting to community and educating toward undoing violence. This chapter examines how choreographic and theatrical choices can do anti-violence work, even without the use of verbal or linear narrative trauma stories.

Temporal manipulations are a key component of how trauma time works as method in queer burlesque performance. In Ellen Samuels’ short piece, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time,” the author describes crip time as a type of time travel: “Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and

⁵⁹ *Survivor magic* reflects the idea that survivors have unique resources and strategies of moving toward collective liberation that were gained through the experience of trauma. Julia Havard, “#WhyIStayed: Virtual Survivor-Centered Spaces for Transformation and Abolishing Partner Violence,” in *#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, eds Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman (University of Michigan Press, 2019).

⁶⁰ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

⁶¹ Sarah E. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society’s Response to Survivors* (American Psychological Association, 2010) and Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

abrupt endings.”⁶² For Samuels, crip time intercepts normative time, a wormhole of space-time that instead of telling a linear narrative story, involves a fractured experience of time. This description of crip time aligns with Disability and Performance Studies scholar and practitioner Petra Kuppers’ assertion that performance is a time-based medium, “it takes time, rehearses time, restructures time, overlays time, creates multiple presences and absences.”⁶³ She continues, reflecting on disability performance, “Some of the adventurous ways that bodies are set in motion include intervening into the time-frames offered by statistical probability, or into the certainties of cause and effect.”⁶⁴ According to Kuppers, disability performance creates uncertainty, intervening in the most probable outcome. Though every disability offers a specific experience of time, the special formulation of crip time in relationship to performance time offers an approach to trauma as methodology in burlesque.

Neo-burlesque performance is often cited as sexually empowering, often implemented as a response to trauma, a strategy of reclamation where performers explore or re-imagine sexual agency and assert it through performance. However, if “all burlesque is racial mimicry,” what implications does this hold for white performers who use this form as a practice of responding to trauma?⁶⁵ I suggest that queer of color and crip of color performers use burlesque choreographies as a strategy of responding to trauma while also staging a critique of what I am referring to as *empathetic appropriation*, the use of choreographies historically appropriated from performers of color toward the reclamation of white women’s sexuality after the experience of trauma.

Scholars have reflected on the importance and use of burlesque as tool of empowerment in the aftermath of trauma.⁶⁶ In fact, this chapter uses movement analysis to get specific about how and why burlesque that cites trauma can make a powerful impact on audiences. Neo-burlesque can be a site to look closely at the failures of white feminism as it asserts in aesthetic forms, but it can also serve as a site of world-creating for queer and crip of color survivors. Here, I examine the sophisticated critiques present in queer and crip of color choreographies, while also exploring how these performers choreograph toward an innovative vision of survivor solidarity.

Trauma Time and Muscle Tension: Process and Improvisation

⁶² Ellen Samuels, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time,” In *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Alice Wong, (Vintage Books: New York, 2020), 190.

⁶³ Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*, (Routledge: New York, 2003), 8.

⁶⁴ Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance*, 8.

⁶⁵ Lil Cotton Flower, Interview by author, March 1, 2019.

⁶⁶ Kaitlyn Regehr, “The Rise of Recreational Burlesque: Bumping and Grinding Towards Empowerment,” *Sexuality & Culture* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 134–57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-011-9113-2>; Pamela Lilleston, Jacqueline Reuben, and Susan G. Sherman, “‘This Is Our Sanctuary’: Perceptions of Safety among Exotic Dancers in Baltimore, Maryland,” *Health & Place* 18, no. 3 (May 2012): 561–67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2012.01.009>; Ferreday, Debra. “Showing the Girl’: The New Burlesque.” *Feminist Theory - FEM THEORY* 9 (April 1, 2008): 47–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086363>, Popular media: H.D Roslin, “How Burlesque Dancing Healed Me,” *Medium*, (December 14, 2015). <https://medium.com/the-establishment/how-burlesque-dancing-healed-me-8a95cb0c696>; Perle Noire, Interview by Julianne Pepitone, “What It’s Really Like to Be a Burlesque Dancer,” *Cosmopolitan*, (October 16, 2015), <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/career/a47758/burlesque-dancer-career-perle-noire/>; Saul Gonzales, “Healing Sexual Assault Through Cabaret,” *KCRW*, (August 18, 2018), <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/articles/healing-sexual-assault-through-cabaret>.

Each year, the Burlesque Hall of Fame crowns a “Miss Exotic World,” also known as the “Queen of Burlesque.” The first time that a black woman had the honor bestowed upon her was not until the 26th annual competition in 2016, when Miss Poison Ivory, performed her winning piece. This piece was the first she had ever choreographed, and the piece underwent a multi-year process of transformations.⁶⁷ Her application for the Burlesque Hall of Fame “Tournament of the Tease” was her final bid to be included in the competition for the title, finally accepted after three years of applying and being rejected.⁶⁸ In this piece, the moments of suspension and jolting surprise, the timeline of the piece’s development, and the approach to improvisation all reveal the impact of trauma time in both the process and end result of this piece. Poison Ivory states that what drew her to burlesque was being able to create every component of her performance onstage, from choreography to costume, which allowed her to in doing so forge a deeper connection with herself. “It’s how I came to embrace the fact that I am a queer woman. I just was never in an environment that was supportive of me being my authentic self and burlesque was very much that place for me.”⁶⁹ She choreographed this particular piece many years ago in response to her abusive relationship, as a part of deepening her creative engagement with her own history. She also built all of the costume pieces, stating that “so much of [herself] was onstage,” her self multiplying across the components of her performance: costume, character, choreography, narrative, and gestures.

Poison Ivory enters the stage spinning, a bone-white blur of flowing layered skirts contrasting with her skin-tone as she moves toward a lone chair against the starry night backdrop. Her costume has a simple fifties silhouette, her hair in a bouffant accented by a large flower. When she comes into focus, we see that every inch of her knee-length flouncy skirt and halter bodice is covered in sparkly rhinestones. Her hand slinks down over the chair, her extended fingers tapping down one by one to rest on the chair back, caressing it as if it is a lover or her own body. Seconds later, she’s sitting with one leg extended to the side, pushing her gloved hand slowly down her leg and allowing it to linger. Her movements are suspended, full of tension and pressure as if moving through water. Her exceptional musicality was what first struck me about this piece—she accents pauses and crescendos in the music with great expertise and unpredictable timing. It takes her three counts of eight, an entire verse of the Florence and the Machine song “Girl with One Eye,” to remove a single glove, while the other comes off as an accent on one count, flying off abruptly on the word “cut,” which emphasizes the lyric, “I’ll cut your little heart out ‘cause you made me cry.” The slow strip of the one glove next to the quick removal of the other creates an asymmetrical and jarring rupture, setting the tone for more surprising and punctuating movements in the piece. When Florence sings “Hu-uh-urt,” Poison Ivory flaps the piece of material covering her ribs and stomach three times, revealing her midsection only for a millisecond before she takes it off completely. In this movement, she punctuates the staccato voice by breaking the word “hurt” into three syllables in her choreography. She unhooks her skirt and uses the big sheet of tulle to partially reveal her shimmying ass. After tossing her skirt away, a pluck of the bass causes her to fall abruptly from completely upright to a deep drop facing away from the audience, hands outstretched, catching

⁶⁷ Several sources suggest that there was one black queen of burlesque in 1996, 20 years before Poison Ivory was crowned; however this queen’s racial identity remains unconfirmed, and Poison Ivory experienced the fact that the burlesque community quibbled over this after she was crowned as a manifestation of burlesque’s anti-black racism, taking away from the impact of her win.

⁶⁸ Poison Ivory, “Poison Ivory—Winner, Miss Exotic World 2016, the Reigning Queen of Burlesque,” Burlesque Hall of Fame, Uploaded December 5, 2016, Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/194433973>.

⁶⁹ Poison Ivory, Interviewed February 1, 2019 over Facetime.

herself on the chair only when her right leg is a deep grand plie and her left is fully extended on the ground, essentially in a half split. Spinning to tower over the chair, mostly nude, she dominates it, holding her spine straight as she crushes it beneath one crystal-embellished 50s-style heel. She thrusts the chair toward the audience and shoves it stage left as she falls stage right, ending the piece with a slow roll across the floor upstage, facing away from the audience but revealing the back of her shining g-string as her extended fingers one by one fall against her thigh, echoing the opening movement of the piece.

Poison Ivory describes the character she creates in the piece as an “ex-Stepford wife,” who defiantly breaks out of the role of submissive femininity. The performance described above occurred four years after the initial conceptualization of the piece, the piece changing significantly over the four years. The many years of this piece’s development allowed her to dig into the significance of the music, costume, props, and character, fueled by her background in theater. As she continued to explore her character development, she recognized that this act represented her own story of being in an abusive relationship, negotiating a love for something harmful and trying to locate her own voice amidst chaos.⁷⁰ This drawn-out development period is one manifestation of trauma time in this piece. Poison Ivory used the long frame for creation and development to deepen and repeat, rehearsing her own self-knowledge. Trauma time impacted the process of this piece rather than explicitly asserting in a hyperlegible form of disclosure. Time stretched over four years of development and then collapsed into four minutes, these expansions and contractions of time functioning as one way that Poison Ivory’s survivor methodology served the creation of the piece.

Disability Studies scholar Jina Kim suggests that a Crip-of-Color critique involves investigating disability *as* methodology, “a mode of analysis that urges us to hold racism, illness, and disability together, to see them as antagonists in a shared struggle, and to generate a poetics of survival from that nexus.”⁷¹ “Disability as methodology” imbues the experience of disability with an acquired knowledge of systems of oppression but also suggests that disability can provide an approach, a mode of praxis, in and of itself. In the context of burlesque as a survivor genre, the form can embody a very explicit “poetics of survival” as a response to the nexus of experiences of disability, racism, queerphobia, and transphobia. Kim’s conceit of the poetics of survival, the outgrowth of creative potential possible in the midst of limitation or injury, is present in Poison Ivory’s approach. In deepening her work with this piece over four years, she is implementing her survival of relationship violence as methodology, a source of embodied knowledge, and also a way of creating through and within oppressive experience, an example of trauma time in action as intertwined with process.

Poison Ivory performs temporal ambiguity choreographically in her piece, holding the viewer in suspension, twisted between vulnerability and revenge. In her vividly flexed fingers, extended and slowly settling one at a time, a motif in the piece, she performs muscle tension. We are suspended musically and choreographically in this moment of digital pause, our attention wrapped around Poison Ivory’s fingers. Following Poison Ivory’s example of collapsing and stretching time, I want to take this single gesture of outstretched fingers coming to rest one by one on a chair or thigh and stay with Poison Ivory’s muscle tension in this movement, which holds particular resonance across black queer studies of racial trauma. A recurring metaphor in

⁷⁰ Poison Ivory, Interviewed February 1, 2019 over Facetime.

⁷¹ Jina B Kim, “Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich’s ‘Enabling Whom?’ *Lateral*, Issue 6.1, (Spring 2017), <https://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-crip-of-color-critique-kim/>.

Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin White Masks*, which is further examined in the work of Darriek Scott and Amber Jamilla Musser, *muscle tension* as literary tool represents the embodiment of an experience of racial trauma, evoking a stillness full of painful and nonconsensual racialization. Poison Ivory's choreography of muscle tension in her performance shows the application of this concept through the choreographic body, as it is informed by her trauma narrative in this piece. Franz Fanon, who worked as psychiatrist in the Algerian war, wrote extensively about the experience of colonial and wartime trauma and details the way the psychic wounds of trauma manifest in the body and the debility caused by "colonial depersonalization."⁷² Darriek Scott explores the recurring metaphor of muscle tension and suggests that it denotes an ambiguous body posture, frozen between movements.⁷³ He explains that this pose contains an "interarticulated temporality," looping past, present and future. The body in this moment reaches backwards into histories of subjection, an experience of defeat living in a body not yet defeated. He further examines the implications of muscle tension in the context of Fanon's description of a dance: "the repetition of cultural practice [...] loops past and present in a knot: to dance in the present of Fanon's observation is to invoke the past of conquest and enslavement and to make it present, to reenact its defeat and the possibility of its overthrow, to interarticulate the temporalities of subjugation and domination," suggesting that dance, while engaging and releasing muscle tension allows for a rehearsal of trauma while moving toward the "overthrow" of the matrices of domination that caused it through the method of disrupting linear temporal flows.⁷⁴ Amber Jamilla Musser takes up this same concept in the context of masochism, power, and time, claiming that "as a metaphor [muscle tension] speaks both to the possibility of change (at an indeterminate time) and to the state of stagnation where past and present blur into a particularly pernicious form of stasis."⁷⁵ The choreography of muscle tension, for Poison Ivory, in the context of her transcendent strip created in the aftermath of trauma, similarly flows backward into histories of her own experiences of trauma and feeds into a larger tributary connected to generations of black women's anti-violence movement work through cultural and narrative interventions. As both Scott and Musser move to suggest, from this point of biological stasis suspended between past and future experiences of time in response to histories of trauma, comes a nexus of possibilities for power.

In the radical vulnerability resulting from the physical and emotional exposure in Poison Ivory's piece and in the artistry that communicates her experience, Poison Ivory engages the alchemy of trauma time in performance. Scott asserts that a willed vulnerability to powerlessness "encodes a power of its own," a strategy of locating "transformation, through harm, of the foreign into one's own."⁷⁶ This use of the abject as a resource exists in relationship to histories of ancestral and personal trauma, where injuries of trauma, violence, and abuse may be used as tools to forge "political transformation."⁷⁷ The practice of being present with these histories of trauma, refusing to distance the self from them and in fact engaging them in a sexual context can function as a political tool. In Poison Ivory's moments of choreographic suspension and surprise, she engages her luminous ambiguous body in tension between experiences of violence and the agential cultivation of desire, not only in the bodies of the audience for her, but in herself for

⁷² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 217.

⁷³ Darriek Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 64.

⁷⁴ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 68.

⁷⁵ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 110.

⁷⁶ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 30.

⁷⁷ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 9.

herself. In this way this performance is not a rehearsal of trauma but rather something altogether different than the sum of trauma and choreography. The act of sharing her choreography and of determining the audience's gaze through teases and reveals, combined with her deep presence over time with this work, allows this dance piece to perform politically, its efficacy demonstrated through the piece's win of the Queen of Burlesque title.

Poison Ivory's acknowledgment of how the experience of relationship abuse has wedged its way into her performance means an engagement with brokenness and a reclamation of it. Following Ellen Samuels' assertion that "crip time is broken time,"⁷⁸ as a facet of crip time, trauma time also inhabits brokenness, the body forced to experience new rhythms, patterns and ways of moving after experiencing trauma. Poison Ivory understands the pieces of her costume as extensions of herself, so when she strips out of them, Poison Ivory is peeling herself open, offering a radical vulnerability, which we can understand as an agential vulnerability with a purpose, a source of healing not just for herself but for audiences as well. Clothes become a skin that is shed, like an abusive ex or generations of trauma. Stripping becomes the practice of leaving behind. Because experiencing trauma requires a constant state of leaving behind, mandated as survivors navigate temporal disruptions such as flashbacks, nightmares, and anxiety, burlesque can be a practice space for nonlinear healing. Healing is often thought of in healthcare systems as a process with an endpoint, cure as ultimate goal. Queer and disabled burlesque practitioners and queer performers of color offer a different approach, holding that recovery is a looped process, with no endpoint, only a spiral reaching toward the hope of transformation.

Improvisation as Survivor Skill

Improvisation is a tool that many performers, especially disabled performers, cite as necessary in the case of in-the-moment shifts in bodily capacity, and it also is essential in the case of costume or prop malfunctions. Improvisation acknowledges performers' habits, often offering a chance to deviate from them, while also necessitating knowledge of formal norms, which creates the opportunity to move away from those as well. It is in itself a practice, requiring self-knowledge and careful listening to one's embodied needs. Within the space of improvisation, performers occupy multiple time-spaces simultaneously, presence accompanied by a type of fragmentation and splitting of the body-mind, planning for future possibilities while continuing to perform the emotional core of a piece. Improvisation allows for a politicized relationship to form: an acknowledgment of the base components of the choreographic landscape while creating space for shifting relationalities and broken norms.

The skills that make a seamless piece possible despite the myriad opportunities for malfunction (of wardrobe or body) overlap with survivor skills, those skills that make recovery from trauma possible, which require constant improvisation in the face of the effects of trauma, which are often disruptive to "normal" daily processes and work. Improvisation is one of such trauma-informed methodologies that allow for a smooth performance when things fall apart. I watched Poison Ivory's winning piece before our interview and noted especially the incredible fluidity of her choreographed reveals; so I was stunned when she told me, "I had a huge wardrobe malfunction onstage, [and] felt very disconnected from the act."⁷⁹ She explained what happened:

⁷⁸ Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," 192.

⁷⁹ Miss Poison Ivory, Interviewed February 1, 2019, Facetime.

Well my bra came off, my bra top wasn't secured properly so it came off a minute too soon in the act, so I had to do some flip-flopping of costume pieces and stuff. So, I was so distracted. By the time the act was over, I just lost it for myself. Like I had this one opportunity to come here and I completely fucked up and I remember sobbing backstage when it was over. [...] I was so disconnected, it was different from what I usually do where I really try to be present. So when I found out that I won, it was like, wait are you freaking joking? And then I saw the video, and I was like, oh my god, my autopilot game is really amazing.

The moment she refers to in our interview is hard to catch in performance. The sixth time I watch the video, I finally spot it: as she tosses her voluminous skirt in the air, her bra comes unhooked. She clearly feels it and raises a hand to her ribs to keep the bra in place. What happens next is stunningly subtle. Without a hitch in her movement, she unhooks the top fastener of the bra and spins, suddenly tossing the bra stage right, pausing to look momentarily at the audience. Poison Ivory employs temporal disruption within her musicality, varying her choreography to include long moments of suspension and also quick snaps and spins. The moment of improvisation with the removal of the bra, though surprising, seems completely congruous with the rest of the piece, fitting seamlessly into the choreographic structure of the piece.

After she removes her bra, she walks straight upstage, away from the audience so all we see are her tumbling shiny black curls over the tree branch tattoos climbing up her bare shoulder blades and expansive lace skirt, while she promenades dramatically, giving herself a moment to rechoreograph her piece. She collects her skirt and holds it to her chest, so when she turns it covers her breasts, the many layers of tulle underneath still covering her thighs, further suspending the moment of the reveal over thirty seconds despite the one-count (accidental) removal of her bra. After series of quick *chaine* turns toward the audience (fast-paced turns on the balls of the feet), she finally releases the skirt revealing her pastie-covered chest. This piece and Poison Ivory's reflections on it manifest the process of being in multiple places at once in terms of psychically disassociating while a physical performance continues. Poison Ivory describes her experience performing this piece as "disconnected," "distracted," and on "autopilot," suggesting a temporary fracturing of self, accompanied by survival skills that create the appearance of flawlessness despite the emotional charge of the costume glitch.

In improvisatory work in burlesque performance, the possibilities for choreographic deviation provide infinite routes for becoming, an endless branching of possibilities. For disabled performers and performers of color, whose bodies have been so narratively overdetermined, the ripples of embodied potentialities in improvisation can offer a freedom, an opportunity to rewrite narrative, through choreography, muscle memory, and the well of possibility in responding differently to the same stimuli. To some extent, of course, there is the element of the unknown in every performance, which gives performance its in the moment presence, a sense of being co-created between performer and audience. Phenomenologist and trans studies scholar Gayle Salamon describes the way that the body is co-constituted in part by its materiality, but also by our perceptions of it and the desire of others. Salamon suggests that the "epistemological uncertainty" that surrounds the "felt sense" of the body in the space between feeling and sensing does work for those who are non-normatively gendered.⁸⁰ Citing Merleau-Ponty, she states that the body parts are not objects but "potentialities," and proposes that bodies become material

⁸⁰ Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

through relations with others.⁸¹ In this way, performers' experience of their bodies is actually co-created in collaboration with audiences, part of their felt sense developing from their experience of being desired. The improvised reveal adds another level of unknown choreographic components, a potentiality becoming felt sense, materializing out of many possibilities of movement, where the epistemological uncertainty creates a productive tension. The improvised burlesque piece is a co-configuration of improvisation as an aesthetic tool and as a survival tool, one way that disabled performers and performers who have experienced trauma, with their different experience of time-space, forge disability as methodology, as discussed above, a poetics of survival.⁸²

This is a type of improvisational readiness that requires a deep awareness of one's physiological needs. Alison Kafer posits "anticipatory time" as a mode of experiencing time in response to trauma and CPTSD that describes the experience of panic attacks, anxiety, flashbacks, and other altered relationships to the experience of time, feeling both time before it happens as well as the repetition of past times, all simultaneously.⁸³ Anticipatory time is a resource for improvisation onstage, a mode of experiencing multiple times at once that survivors of trauma and disabled people have unique access to. Poison Ivory moves between muscle memory with her choreography and an improvisatory readiness to respond to her body's needs.

The skill of improvisation could possibly be built through the survivor muscle of occupying more than one time-space at once or through the unexpected asset of an anticipatory experience of time, where planning and doing occur almost simultaneously in performers' body-minds. Musicologists Samuels and Schroeder discuss the role of improvisation as a tool for disabled people using musical instruments. They suggest that improvisation is a mode of crafting different relationalities within the form and of questioning the social hierarchies present in Western music, that it is both aesthetic and political. They assert that improvisation provides the freedom to choose how to respond, giving the performer the opportunity to "question exclusionary identities and assumptions."⁸⁴ Poison Ivory holds a skillset that readies her for the myriad of things that can go wrong in performance, but as Samuels and Schroeder state, improvisation is also a strategy of asking questions about power structures inherent to performance forms and of building a different type of relationality with their audiences. Poison Ivory alters audience's expectation of what reveal is next, removing her bra before her skirt, and in doing so re-choreographing her piece in a way that not only surprises the audience but even surprises herself. This sense of surprise reflects the efficacy of confusion as trauma methodology, which will be further explored in the following section, surprise demonstrating a temporal disruption where an expected linear progression of events is ruptured. This temporally abrupt confusion reflects her capacity for honoring in-the-moment embodied changes and implementing an improvisatory method perfected through survivor skills and also resulting in Poison Ivory's win.

The "Reverse Strip" as Survivor Method

The tool of the narrative reversal works backward with time to create a sense of confusion, thwarting sexual norms and aesthetic standards. The desire cultivated in acts such as

⁸¹ Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 4.

⁸² Kim, "Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique," 2017.

⁸³ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 39.

⁸⁴ Koichi Samuels and Franziska Schroeder, "Performance without Barriers: Improvising with Inclusive and Accessible Digital Musical Instruments," *Contemporary Music Review*, 38, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 476–89.

Poison Ivory's and Aurora BoobRealis's works backwards and out of time. These artists create erotic desire out of the narrative fragmenting of past traumas, cultivating desire for their own body-minds with a desire for justice, for a world where proximity to whiteness is not the basis for personhood, desirability, or freedom from violence. To return to Samuels' formulation of crip time as a "wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings," choreographies that rewrite trauma narratives in burlesque weave erotics into these forward starts and reversals, creating space for the experience of temporal multiplicity, intervals, and loops.⁸⁵

The "reverse strip" is a choreographic strategy and an example of creative work with time in action. To perform a reverse strip, a performer begins undressed and the narrative arc of the piece involves putting clothes on, as a way of working against linear progressions of time and linear expectations of the reveal. In 2016, after performing the piece described above, Miss Poison Ivory was crowned the queen of burlesque by the Burlesque Hall of Fame, the highest honor in the burlesque world in the United States. As the first black queen of burlesque, she experienced the position as both an honor and an overwhelming responsibility.⁸⁶ In her step-down performance in 2017, the piece that marked the end of her reign and her passing the crown on to the next queen, her piece blasted through burlesque norms: a reverse strip that tells a story of black femme intergenerational trauma and survival.⁸⁷

The piece begins in darkness with Maya Angelou's words: "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you," suggesting that the piece is about to reveal an invisible narrative, and in doing so strives toward a kind of relief.⁸⁸ Poison Ivory emerges from a shipping container completely nude, signaling a journey through the Middle Passage, to the opening notes of "Freedom," by Elayna Boynton and Anthony Hamilton from the album of the film *Django Unchained*. She is thrown to the ground by a white woman performer depicting a slave owner and lies there for about twenty seconds as she gathers herself, totally nude except for a glittering g-string. She climbs into the torn white dress tossed beside her, and dances, falling and reaching, trying to get her feet underneath her. Finally, she tugs the dress off of her like it burns, unceremoniously dropping it to the ground. She then bends back over the shipping container and pulls out two enormous white fans, the reveal of the fans occurring over the bridge of the song, both climax and transition point. As she begins to flap the fans, they appear as an extension of her body, wings rather than props, gleaming hot pink in the lights as she dances toward becoming free. The song ends and she collapses to the floor. We see her belly move as she breathes, elbows and knees on the stage, bending over her fans, the feathers softly soothing her. As she rests and collects herself for the next section of her piece, we witness both effort and a sense of rest.

Next, "I'm a Slave 4 U," by Britney Spears sounds out across the stage. Poison Ivory dances to the beat with her fans to great applause while two black femme performers donned in floor length lace join her. Interrupting the song, the white performer who previously represented a slave owner, returns, now wearing a police hat in a clear link from enslavement to incarceration. Cuffed, Poison Ivory performs a dramatic hinge to the floor. She is thrown in a deconstructed cell demarcated by a white lined box against the black background of the stage

⁸⁵ Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," 190.

⁸⁶ Miss Poison Ivory, Interview conducted over Facetime, February 1, 2019.

⁸⁷ Miss Poison Ivory, Interview.

⁸⁸ Poison Ivory, "Miss Exotic World 2016 Step Down," *Burlesque Hall of Fame*, <https://vimeo.com/243551310>. (Posted November 19, 2017, Accessed February 20, 2019).

floor. Finally, encountering another femme figure covered in lace, she is gently covered in soft brown silk. Her friend offers her a gentle touch goodbye and Poison Ivory finally fastens a dress over her body. Throughout the remainder of the piece she is handed piece after piece of gorgeous clothing: a floor-length brown satin gown, sparkling silver heels, finally a large crown, brought to her by the women of color burlesque artists she invited to participate in her piece. The piece ends as she stands gazing at the audience, 18 burlesque performers of color lined up at the back of the stage, the following quote echoing in the soundscape: “I come as one. I stand as 10,000.” The following two minutes of the piece involve Poison Ivory kissing and thanking every person onstage while the audience continues to applaud, the performers onstage, visibly moved.

In the final quotation, Poison Ivory envelopes her performance in a long legacy of black women’s performance and resistance practices, situating her work within this rich history and reminding audiences of her relational care networks and the simultaneous responsibility and power of representation. This piece reflects on burlesque’s history as a performance culture steeped in white supremacy, that for over a century has continued to impact performances, from the use of appropriative costume and choreography to racist casting and booking practices. Poison Ivory reflects on the white supremacy foundational to the cultural life of the US, using her platform to create an unmissable statement linking the racism present in burlesque culture to systemic racist violence and police brutality. Poison Ivory controls time’s passage using creative methods in this piece, narratively indicating that she is traveling across centuries through shifts in music, lighting, costume, and props. Poison Ivory moves around the stage geographically, situating time periods in different corners of the massive stage space. She sifts through generations to tell a story of forced passage to the US, slavery, and incarceration, dancing the way that her body holds the trauma of generations, while also holding a belief in the liberation of future generations, manifested by her own historic disruption in the power structures of the burlesque world. In her reverse strip, she undoes the classical structure of the act by constructing the major drama of her piece as dressing rather than undressing, referencing the last year that she has been queen and using the technique of the reverse strip to indicate how she has arrived at this point in her career. Her body’s journey is synecdoche for collective liberation for black femmes, while simultaneously reflecting on the weight of the responsibility that burlesque as an institution has rested on her shoulders.

The objects, songs, and choreographies Poison Ivory incorporates reflect an intentional temporal blending, a sense that now is also the past is also the future and that the choreography we are witnessing holds elements of multiple temporalities simultaneously. At the final moment of the first song, “Freedom,” she removes the neck piece representing a slave collar and badge. This padlock adornment holds nesting citations. As Monica Miller notes in her text *Slaves to Fashion*, which tracks the historical emergence of the black dandy figure, some slaves were forced to wear collars and padlocks, these objects occasionally made from gold or silver to represent the wealth of the slave owner. This accessory of enslavement also appeared in minstrel shows, the costuming worn by white performers as a feature of blackface.⁸⁹ Poison Ivory, with her use of this prop, is noting not only the use of costuming as historical feature of enslavement, but also points to burlesque’s complicity, as a genre emergent out of minstrelsy, with the construction and maintenance of racial hierarchies. This one prop is used both as historical portal and as cultural commentary, its removal, another moment of temporal transport and rupture.

⁸⁹ Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2009), 39.

Poison Ivory notes a transition across time with the elimination of this accessory as the Britney Spears pop song “I’m a Slave 4 U” begins to play.

The choreography to the Britney song is attacking and vibrant, syncopated, punching and arching. This section of the piece contains a duality of earnest choreography and pointed critique. Next to the longing, yearning, spinning movement that approximates flying in the previous section, the movement in this section is grounded in the lower body and allows for effusive flexion and great mobility in the spine and arms. This movement exudes an almost conflictual emotional state, what Brenda Dixon-Gottschild describes as “high affect juxtaposition,” one of the five premises of an Africanist aesthetic.⁹⁰ Poison Ivory, with her choice of song and the juxtaposition with the song immediately before, points to Britney’s lyrics, drawing a connection between the use of references to enslavement by white women toward embodying a “liberated” sexuality. As Jayna Brown writes in *Babylon Girls*, a formative text on the history of black women’s performance, especially in the context of erotic dance, “For white women, performing fantasies of African American, as well as various types of native, femaleness provided moments of immunity from restrictive social protocol, a license for physical expression and self-possessed sexuality.”⁹¹ However, the grounded communicative force of the choreography, speaks to an ability to re-work damaging cultural objects such as this song and re-choreograph them as full of power and vitality.

Throughout the piece, the enactment of suffering and healing retains opacity in its non-linearity, reversals, and temporal leaps. Opacity, from its wide-ranging meanings across Black Studies, I take here to mean the intentional maintaining of obscurity as a right.⁹² Poison Ivory is not dancing to induce a false sense of empathy, which, as Amber Jamilla Musser has noted, is often used to facilitate white subjectivity, centering white feelings, experiences and bodies, over black subjectivity, in doing so maintaining racial hierarchies.⁹³ Rather she produces a fracturing that disturbs the sedimentation of identity. The piece forbids historical amnesia, acting as a reminder that burlesque as a genre in many ways contributes to racist assumptions about black women’s sexual and emotional availability. In the layered reminders that this dance form participated and continues to participate in the structural and interpersonal violences depicted, the piece avoids inducing empathy and arouses instead a productive confounding of narrative and erotics that does not allow for a straightforward emotional response, but rather mandates time for reflection, through the pauses between songs and especially the final minutes as audiences applaud while Poison Ivory takes her time acknowledging her community onstage. The majority white audience’s hands likely tired as they clapped for two straight minutes, those two minutes elongated to cultivate a sense of not knowing for white audiences, a sense that this performance perhaps is not for them. Trauma time, then, is entangled with black femme methods as well as crip of color methods of facilitating recovery from harm and community building, of disidentifying and taking what resonates from burlesque’s structure and reimagining the rest.

⁹⁰ Brenda D. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998).

⁹¹ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 100.

⁹² Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Trans. Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

⁹³ Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 101.

In a genre dominated by white women, Poison Ivory employs temporal and narrative confusion to thwart white women's straight forward access to her experience of trauma, a political choice considering the historical role that empathy has played in white women's expressions of white supremacy. Jayna Brown goes on to discuss the use of empathy as a facet of white women's participation in the continuation of white supremacy: "Empathetic access to black bodily memory is made possible in conjunction with the history of how these bodies were understood as commodity. The body becomes the medium for the one-way transmission of empathic appeal."⁹⁴ According to Brown, white women's empathy cannot be a form of solidarity in itself because it objectifies and instrumentalizes black women's bodies, and in doing so continues to follow the logic of enslavement. This imagined process of racial transmutation where white women acquire access to black embodied memory through empathy was historically a misplaced effort by white women abolitionists who asked fellow white women to imagine the suffering of black women as part of their political strategy. Brown points out that this strategy is also foundational to white women's imitation of black artistic forms from the 1910s and 20s on.⁹⁵ In contemporary burlesque, when the performance form is often a strategy of embodied reclamation in the aftermath of trauma, white women employ black dance as a way of processing trauma, and through this process of *empathetic appropriation*, the nonconsensual use of black dance as a tool of expressing trauma, white women reinforce the white supremacy that is a foundational component of gendered violence.⁹⁶ In this way, appropriation of black sexual performance reinforces cycles of systemic sexual violence, the same violence which white performers explicitly respond to and condemn. When Poison Ivory choreographs against a linear trauma disclosure narrative, she is intentionally cultivating a response beyond empathy, perhaps one that accesses those feelings that live below and against narrative, communicating, with hope, toward another kind of togetherness across difference in burlesque spaces, one that works against appropriation and tokenization.

While audiences may not immediately interpret Poison Ivory's piece in the context of this public history, her piece incites a challenge to uncomplicated burlesque histories and straightforward narratives of reclamation. Through the tools of narrative reversal and temporal skipping, melding, and travel, audiences may experience an embodied sense of disruption in their own understanding of these histories, of linear narratives of trauma and recovery. Following historical source material and data from my interlocutors that grounds burlesque in a practice of racial mimicry, I in part write as a white scholar and performer to convey to other white burlesque performers that our practices of healing from trauma can reinforce systems of violence in and of themselves. This, I believe, is one central message of Poison Ivory's piece. Trauma time, as a method of burlesque composition is inseparable from the construction of race, the process of racialization, and response to racial trauma. Methods of surviving trauma and transforming it into creative work, through the genre of burlesque, are tied to black femme survival strategies of working with trauma and reclaiming embodied presence.

Another queer black burlesque performer who crafts a political intervention into linear burlesque sequencing is Miss Aurora BoobRealis, co-founder of Brown Girls Burlesque and co-

⁹⁴ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 73.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 57.

⁹⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (New York: Routledge, 2005); INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, ed. *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2nd edition. 2016), and many others.

producer of brASS (Brown RadicalAss Burlesque). Aurora BoobRealis's piece "How Miss Aurora BoobRealis Begins Her Day" is another example of a queer re-examination of temporal flow in choreography in the context of the reverse strip, and examining this piece as theory, we can get a feel for the complexity involved in the burlesque's construction of consent, intimacy, and interiority, employing trauma time as method.⁹⁷ In this piece, through creative work with costuming and props, Aurora BoobRealis thwarts the typical expectations of the visual—that the visual gives one access to the interior of the body—manifesting that even revealing the inside of the body gives the viewer only a tease of what lies within a performer's self. Miss Aurora BoobRealis walked me through the piece in detail. Performed as a reverse strip to Prince's "Sexy MF," the piece was created as a tribute after the artist's death. When the music returns to its refrain "sexy mother fucker shaking that ass/ shaking that ass," Aurora touches the button on her electric toothbrush, which activates her butt shimmy. She slowly uses her gyrating ass to turn her around and holds her hair back so the audience can see the words "Sexy MF" bedazzled across the back of her lavender shirt. She then spits rhythmically to the music into a purple mixing bowl. According to Aurora, "this number stands out to me [...] I am hella sexy in it. I am dope as fuck, but I'm not sexy in a way that can be commodified or consumed easily, like for the heteronormative male gaze. I'm fucking brushing my teeth onstage." Aurora performs everyday activities, sexy as fuck, cleaning the grit from her teeth, and spitting it out rhythmically, a public intimacy that undoes norms around the idea of a perfect unblemished sexy and infiltrates it with the mundane and grotesque, showing the labor of getting ready as work.

The reverse narrative of this piece pushes against Eurocentric standards of beauty, using an aestheticization of the everyday to suggest that even before Miss Aurora's teeth are brushed, she oozes sexy. The queer work of Aurora's reverse strip involves a reverse reveal of process in performance, allowing the audience to witness her everyday glam, imperfection co-creating her sexy as fuck. By allowing the audience to witness her aestheticized daily rituals, Miss Aurora BoobRealis offers layers, complexity, and erotic confusion as a site of sexual re-education. Her burlesque displays the confusion of interiority and exteriority. The audience assumes when they see a performer strip that they will see the performer's body. Instead, Aurora BoobRealis gives a reveal of her inner world, where wounds are transformed into daggers and the audience participates in the process of transformation.

In our interview, Toronto-based clown and sideshow performer, Pickles LaVey, communicated the contradictions present in the aesthetics underlying their queer burlesque, where vulnerability can represent both softness and a weapon. They assert that femme modes of communication can be perceived as weakness, "and like the whole world's out to kill you and you're really, really brave by still being vulnerable."⁹⁸ They continued that performers take "all this like and history and then come forth and share their sexualities and their hearts and souls and it's dangerous and it's revolutionary." When I asked them to say more about this sense of revolution, they responded, "it's reclaiming things that were taken away and bringing it back forth as a personal weapon or thing of power." The act of alchemy that Pickles described to me is very linked to the impact of trauma time in burlesque. Through choreography, costume, props, lighting, and the magic of performance, the pain of personal trauma is transmuted to something holding power, a thing that could wield real damage if used as a weapon, something as Pickles says, that is potentially "dangerous."

⁹⁷ Miss Aurora BoobRealis, Interviews conducted August 23, 2018 and September 5, 2018, Facetime audio.

⁹⁸ Pickles LaVey, Interviewed June 12, 2018, Skype.

The emotional vulnerability of stripping, of revealing not only one's body but also oneself is a part of the confounding process of cultivating desire. Gayle Salamon locates desire in the futural, suggesting that desire holds potentialities of a future sexual becoming. She asserts that it is simultaneously located in the past, shaped by sexual history. This combination of sexual desire and sexual history creates the sexual self through a time-based intermingling, not dissimilar to the time-based multiplicities manifested in queer burlesque performance through methodologies of trauma time. Salamon characterizes the sexual body as "internality and externality folded one around the other."⁹⁹ Sexuality and desire remove the boundaries between the internal and external and in fact stir them together, disrupting their evident boundedness.

In Anne Cheng's work on surface in her analysis of representations of burlesque performer Josephine Baker, she asserts that access to interiority via embodiment is a myth, and that even in her completely nude representations, the lighting of Baker's skin constructs her as a modern object, her interior unfillable, unavailable, unpenetrable to the viewer.¹⁰⁰ Cheng argues that the assumption of authenticity that comes along with analysis of embodiment is a relic of colonial racism embedded in liberal criticism. Nudity does not necessarily reveal a performer's self. Burlesque obscures while revealing, a rejection of assumptions crafted from a racist colonial logic. Through opacity, a failure of availability, paired with the contradictory depth of unexpected insight into a performer's interiority, burlesque by queer artists and artists of color reworks trauma as a superpower that drives performance methodologies which ask audiences to re-write those narratives, reversed, fractured, undone.

Shattering Self, Citing Community

In Poison Ivory's step-down piece, the memory of trauma is folding, unfolding, refolding, where moments of intensity rise to the surface and then sink below again. As Disability Justice activist, poet, and burlesque performer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about crip survivorhood, "Traditional ideas of survivorhood think of remembering as a time-limited process that happens upon recovery of abuse memories and then is over. But in another survivor universe, we are continually expanding--we are always remembering and remember again, and thinking about what our wounding means. We are mining our survivor experiences for knowledge."¹⁰¹ We can see these folds of memory, "remembering and remembering again," as "not about cure but about increasing possibility," a passageway between times, between personal history and communal futures, an exponential expansion across self-hood, unbinding it, disallowing survival in isolation.¹⁰²

Piepzna-Samarasinha cites a passage from Eli Clare's *Beautiful Imperfection*, where he reflects on decades of abuse, "Even so, I know the past will again pound through my body-mind... I've come to know that there will be no cure. I claim brokenness to make this irrevocable shattering visible."¹⁰³ Clare acknowledges that living with trauma entails enduring an unsettling flow of histories through his body-mind. It does not stop. There is no point of "healed." Surviving has no cure. He suggests claiming broken is a way to move within the temporal

⁹⁹ Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 47.

¹⁰⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12-13.

¹⁰¹ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 34

¹⁰² Piepzna-samarasinha, *Care Work*, 235.

¹⁰³ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2017), Cited in *Care Work*, 235.

alterity that survivors already inhabit. Rather than escape, Clare offers shatter. We can think of shattering as method of burlesque performance. Shards of history get inside the body and create a rupture. Poison Ivory performs stories collaged from myriad shards, offering a way of claiming those shards across embodied experiences and imposed otherness, of dancing shattered selves into something like love, while acknowledging the work of community to knit the shards of self into an approximation of wholeness.

Jacqueline Boxx's performance, "Microaggressions," takes the idea of a shattered self in community and technologizes it, incorporating projected text into her performance on the micro-traumas of microaggressions. Queer Puerto Rican femme and self-described "disabilibabe," Jacqueline Boxx, addresses flattened and policed narratives around disability, giving them dimension, abstraction, depth, and also refuting them. By re-appropriating a multiplicity of disability narratives, she deconstructs and makes explicit the harmful messages often projected onto disabled bodies, in doing so offering a space to process the traumatic impact of such narratives. Jacqueline premiered the work at the Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender annual festival in 2017 in the category of "Best Debut."¹⁰⁴ In the piece, ableist microaggressions are projected across the back of the stage while she dances her refusal in front of them. Jacqueline states, "burlesque performance for me is about again taking ownership over how you're going to be seen. Disabled bodies are often, they are projected onto. They are bodies that people decide that they are either an image of inspiration or an image of pity. They're either a hero or they're a tragedy... And I feel like with my burlesque I try to offer other options. I try to be seen in a different way."¹⁰⁵ Stacey Milbern, speaking about the work of the disability justice performance group Sins Invalid, cites the tropes around disability ever-present in popular culture, explaining how these assumptions about disabled bodies are shaped by both ableism and racism. She wrote, "In order to unravel ableism, racism, and these frameworks, people need access to imagery that contests those images."¹⁰⁶ Jacqueline Boxx's work is explicitly a contestation of popular misunderstandings of disability. Her stated intentions place her work in a lineage of queer disability culture creation that construct the possibility of a world where queer disabled bodies of color are treasured.

Jacqueline Boxx's performance shows the possibilities of reshaping tropes onstage and working with the cumulative effect of microaggressions as method of claiming power. She uses the metaphor of projection materially in the form of video projection technology. She collected stories of small, painful, reverberating moments: her own and those of her community. Her methodology involved mining her online networks for short verbal phrases that enact prejudice in small ways, hateful speech acts from strangers as well as loved ones. "I decided to go to one of my online communities of disabled people who have, you know, just saved my life over and over again. And I said, you know I'm thinking of doing an act where I address some of the shitty ableist things that friends and loved ones say to us. If you'd like, please send me like either an email or a comment, like send me some of the stuff that people have said where you've wanted to say fuck you to." During her piece, she projects these phrases over her dancing body and dances this "Fuck you" to Cake's "Shut the Fuck Up." There are resonances between Jacqueline Boxx's methodology of invoking her community and Poison Ivory's choreography of bringing

¹⁰⁴ Jacqueline Boxx, "Jacqueline Boxx: Best Debut," Burlesque Hall of Fame, (2017), <https://vimeo.com/241583075>

¹⁰⁵ Jacqueline Boxx, Interviewed February 27, 2019, Facetime.

¹⁰⁶ Patricia Berne, Jamal T. Lewis, Stacey Milbern, Malcolm Shanks, Alok Vaid-Menon, and Alice Wong, "'Beauty Always Recognizes Itself': A Roundtable on Sins Invalid," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 1/2 (2018): 241–52.

her community onto the stage for her step-down. In the above quote, the performer, as an aside, refers to her community as saving her life, over and over. Though the lyrics and intention behind the choreography speak “Fuck you” to ableism, the underbelly of this piece is an expansive “I love you” to her community. In integrating her community’s pain visibly intertwined with her own, Jacqueline Boxx is also citing her interdependence with her community, essential to her survival. Alison Kafer writes on the first page of *Feminist Queer Crip*, “my future is written on my body,” suggesting that queer disabled bodies such as hers hold the scripts of futures pre-recorded and visually translated through the associations, stereotypes, misinformation, and histories the sight of a disabled body summons.¹⁰⁷ Jacqueline’s work offers a queer crip of color response to making the writing on the body visible and working across multiple time frames of pasts and futures, relationships to pain and pleasure, to offer a steaming, juicy “Fuck you” to those who continue to employ those scripts. She fragments traumatic experience across bodies and time toward imagining healing a more collective sense of trauma, working to undo the systemic violence of these narrative tropes.

The piece begins with the phrase projected across the screen, “You just don’t look very disabled.” Jacqueline performs a confrontational glaze back at audience, chin up, chair swiveling side to side, giving that good burlesque three quarters face. When the text “How did you break yourself?” comes up across the screen, she takes two red gloved fingers and points them at her own eyes and then at the audience as if to say, “I see you and I know what you did.” As the lyrics urge the audience to “Shut the fuck up” and the screen projects the words “But you don’t look sick,” she pops a wheelie and slowly reveals her long black-stockinged leg under her long black sparkly gown, unfolding it slowly, toes pointed to the sky. Jacqueline’s overlay of these words across her sparkling, dancing, disabled body suggests the audience reconsider what “sick” looks like, or perhaps what looks are “sick” in the colloquial sense. Jacqueline’s extravagant sparkly gown and athletic wheelies, headstands, and splits, suggest that a sick look, or a disabled aesthetic, can be glamorous, powerful, and sexy.

Harmful narratives around disability are perpetuated by both disabled and nondisabled people. When I saw the microaggression, “You obviously have able legs,” pop up on the screen, I was reminded of an anecdote Jacqueline Boxx relayed about the first time she performed in her gold throne wheelchair. A disabled person in the audience came up to the concessions table after her performance and told the person working the booth that the piece was deeply offensive, that Jacqueline Boxx cannot be disabled because she obviously has “able legs.”¹⁰⁸ Jacqueline’s “sick” look was clearly too far from what this person understood disability to look like and move like. This self-policing among disabled community is a way in which the white supremacist tool of policing functions to maintain flat narratives around disability and reduced complexity around disabled bodies. The editors of *Crip Genealogies* invite us to consider such policing of disability representation as a form of “ableist supremacy,” a mode through which white supremacy plays out across disabled community via policing, and in doing so replicates the ableist constructions of neoliberal statehood that guard disabled people’s movement, gatekeeping access to resources and cultivating shame about our perceived lack of productivity.¹⁰⁹ Jacqueline, reflecting back on this moment, stated that she wished the audience member had spoken to her. When she can connect directly with another disabled person and ask them about their disability journey, sharing hers, she finds that animosity tends to melt away, that audiences can identify parts of themselves

¹⁰⁷ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Jacqueline Boxx, Burlesque virtual private lesson, September 4, 2019, Skype.

¹⁰⁹ *Crip Genealogies*, in progress, ed. Mel Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Julie Avril Minich.

in her story. Jacqueline's methodology is adept in dismantling ableism relationally: she shifts the dynamic between the person policing and the person being policed, humanizing both parties as people experiencing ableism, and working toward evaporating the future impulse to surveil and control what counts as legitimate experience. In this relational work lies the fragments of trauma time. Jacqueline makes clear the ways that fragments of harm get stored up in disabled people's bodies. In piecing apart the ways that disability narratives get applied nonspecifically to disabled bodies, Jacqueline breaks apart these narratives into their micro fragments. She manifests how working relationally, through solidarity across difference, means performing micro-healing, addressing small moments of harm through building community.

This possibility for moments of policed disability to be transformed relationally points to the fact that this desire to surveil is not individual but rather systemic, and in fact authorized in the language of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which allows venues to police people using mobility devices. This means that policing occurs not only through the audience's gaze on the performer but also the venue's gaze on the audience. ADA guidelines state that credible assurance can be requested at any venue to guarantee that the user of the mobility device indeed needs that mobility device. Verbal assurance counts as credible evidence, "unless the person is observed doing something that contradicts the assurance."¹¹⁰ The examples the ADA guidelines provide that would contradict assurance are running and jumping; it seems clear that other physical activities such as dancing, kicking, twirling, etc. would also function as evidence to disprove credible assurance. In this way, a burlesque performance itself is enough to prove that a performer is not in fact disabled and does not need accommodations in line with the ADA's requirements. I outline this legal framework to highlight why performance that creates alternate narratives through disabled methodologies is dangerous—it raises suspicions that cannot easily be swept away, and these suspicions haunt performers and audience alike. No performance more explicitly articulates this than "Microaggressions," which makes explicit the associations disabled bodies carry with them in the swirl of desire and suspicion that erotic disabled performance raises.

Jacqueline ends the piece, as she began, with a challenging gaze, flipping off the audience through the removal of her glove, drawing the glove away from her hand by viciously biting the material over her raised middle finger and drawing it away until the glove slipped off her hand, shown in Image 2. She covers her chest with a flourish after removing her bra, using three gestures in time to the music, one with each hand followed by her chin, to reveal her two middle fingers pointed upward, her chin raised to the audience, revealing her red sequined broken heart pasties. The final words projected onto the screen: "Clearly you aren't actually disabled." This last phrase among others ("You're too young for this," "But you're so pretty") suggest that desirability is antithetical to disability. In animating her own disabled body and the words of her community, Jacqueline breathes complex erotic feeling to disability when proximity to death, inertness, failure, lack of productivity, pervades its cultural associations, making it impossible for a body like hers that pulls desire from her audience to be understood as disabled. Disabled bodies are seemingly incongruous with not only desire, but also the range of emotion from joy to rage, and this ableist perception strips disabled people of their humanity. Jacqueline vibrantly outpours aliveness, her own and that of her community.

¹¹⁰ "ADA Requirements: Wheelchairs, Mobility Aids, and Other Power-Driven Mobility Devices," (Accessed September 23, 2019), <https://www.ada.gov/opdmd.htm>.

Jacqueline's piece works through her embodied method of processing and transforming verbal microaggressions, and though she does not speak in her piece, her movement expresses a counterpoint to the words projected across the screen, as exemplified in Image 2.

[Image Redacted]

[Image 2: Jaqueline Boxx on the floor with her legs spread wide. She eyes the audience defiantly as she removes her rhinestoned glove with her clenched teeth by the middle finger, effectively flipping off the audience. In the background we see her rhinestoned chair and the obscured projection of words on the screen behind her.]

Burlesque is often nonverbal, which as some performers have noted, can be silencing, frustrating, or limiting.¹¹¹ She explains:

I was feeling that kind of throat clenching silencing effect when people who would say these things and I wouldn't know how to respond. I wouldn't know how to explain to them that these are not good things to say. That you are actively hurting me. So I was like thinking and thinking about the best and most you know, polite and considerate way to tell people that's not helpful please don't say that. And then I got really frustrated and I was like, well, like sometimes you just want to say fuck you. [...] And I decided to do an act that would kind of release that energy, that anger, but also transform it into a place of joy. Because that's something that I tend to do in my acts. I want to leave this lasting impression that there is joy in my life and that there is joy in disability.

Jacqueline's story about the transformation of her experience of silencing into anger and finally joy is compelling for a few reasons. She performs this transformation wordlessly, meaning, through the alchemy of her dance, she shouts her refusal to the binding of not only her voice but the voices of her community. This strategy scatters voice across the material of the body, decentralizing the verbal as primary mode of communication, and decentralizing her self as the sole narrator or creator of this piece. This nonverbal narrative fracturing works in opposition to both traditional therapeutic methods as well as the use of trauma narratives in activist contexts. That is, rather than exposing a single and coherent story, the fragmented, nonlinear, imagistic, and sensation-based pieces of narrative are more akin to the embodied form of traumatic memories, potentially offering possibilities for identification and transformation beyond and beneath the discursive.¹¹² This piece was forged in community across a multiplicity of experiences, an assemblage of bodily experiences woven into one performance, making the performance by definition intersectional. Simultaneously, Jacqueline converts her anger into joy, stating that "part of the fuck you energy is delighting in myself and my body and so [I] kind of fused these two kinds of fuck yous into one." Finding pleasure works for Jacqueline as a type of revenge on those who desexualize, infantilize, or pity disabled bodies. However, as she reflects, "primarily what I do is for other disabled people and for other disabled performers. They are my number one priority. My intention is always to [...] perform acts that bring more attention to stuff that we deal with all of the time and to help them feel validated and seen and to encourage them to say those things in ways that they're comfortable with." Jacqueline's intention is two-fold, working multi-modally to speak to disabled and nondisabled viewers. She offers a teaching tool to nondisabled viewers who may have the experience of starting to understand and undo the associations they have with disabled bodies, and simultaneously she dances cathartic angry

¹¹¹ Sweet Lorraine, interviewed June 27, 2018, Facetime audio.

¹¹² Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 37.

choreography to stir the many messages projected across the screen and tie them into a hard sexy knot of vengeful pleasure for her disabled audiences.

Narrative fracturing engages a process of choreographing change via the shifts in audience perception: the inducing of anger, confusion, laughter, and surprise in association with trauma instead of the more predictable and overdetermined emotions of empathy, sympathy, and sadness. Rage, rather than straight-forward desire, is a tool performers implement in order to disrupt the time of the tease and assert narrative with a difference, invoking another emotional valence of the choreographic tactic of trauma time.

Folding Time: Survivor Wormholes

Queer crip burlesque performers of color use their relationships to trauma as a creative resource that allow them to manipulate time differently in performance, specifically through performative folds of space-time. A fold involves taking two pieces of material and greatly decreasing the distance between them, allowing a pin or needle or perception to penetrate two time-spaces at once. Folds in the brain increase exponentially the amount of neuronal connections that can occur in our brainspace. Folded space-time is the central conceit behind wormhole theory, the theory of physical time travel which suggests a passage-way or bridge between multiple times and spaces.¹¹³ The concept of the fold is taken up in fashion studies, evoking temporal repetition with a difference, the pleat and the crumple used as metaphors for material representations of time's anti-linearity and/or infinite nature.¹¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze's unfurling of the fold poetically suggests that the idea of the infinite has two levels, "material coils" and "folds of the soul."¹¹⁵ Trauma time as method in burlesque functions as meeting point of material and soul. As burlesque labors to reveal fold after fold after skin after soul, the entanglements between these layers get wrapped around the affective punctum of performance. A reveal pierces through to a feeling state, a revelation of social, communal, historical, or personal truth that is a window into the doubling or infinite coil of trauma. These moments of seeing trauma as embodied, relational, and ongoing are guides for the audience, offering possibilities for what movement through trauma can look like, and envisioning possibilities for repetition without continuing cycles of violence.

Brian Massumi in *Parables of the Virtual* describes the event of domestic violence as the "folding of dimensions of time into each other," a result of the "conversion of surface distance into intensity [which] is also the conversion of the materiality of the body into an event."¹¹⁶ Jasbir Puar reads this moment of Massumi's as a process of imagining material patterns in scripts differently, destabilizing matter as a kind of doing, which offers new ways to think through social scripts across difference and intersections, beyond the limited model of identity and subjecthood.¹¹⁷ The material body in performance, when confronting the theme of trauma, becomes something beyond the materials of the piece. It is transformed into an event, a body-

¹¹³ Nola Taylor Reid, "What is Wormhole Theory?" Space.com, (October 21, 2017). <https://www.space.com/20881-wormholes.html>.

¹¹⁴ Caroline Evans and Alessandra Vaccari, eds. *Time in Fashion: Industrial, Antilinear and Uchronic Temporalities*. (London; New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 27

¹¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Jonathan Strauss. "The Fold." *Yale French Studies*, no. 80 (1991): 227-47. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930269>, 227.

¹¹⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2002), 14, 15.

¹¹⁷ Jasbir K. Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *philoSOPHIA* 2, no.1 (2012): 49-66, 60.

space-time moving between one and many, past and future, inside and outside, process and product, set choreography and improv that becomes as it is performed. Massumi's theorizations of affect highlight the body's movement, materiality, and potential, the possibility of the body in transition: "The feeling of transition by nature stretches through phases of a continuing movement."¹¹⁸ In Massumi's study of the feeling of change is an opportunity to think through the audience's felt experience of the body in performance and the potentiality for the body onstage and the body in the audience to both move across this fold and into the next, one where the fantasy of a world without violence is felt and desired, together. In the in-between-ness, the creasing of these folds, is a possibility to imagine responses to violence that do not continue patterns of violence. Trauma time as disability methodology creates a theory of harm as a part of an embodied process that requires collective action and response toward the healing of a collective body, a felt critique of a neoliberal world where harm is perceived as the sole responsibility of the survivor.

¹¹⁸ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 16.

Chapter 2

Crip Glam As Eroto-Technoscience: Transforming Devices in the Dancing Sensorium

The first time that Jacqueline Boxx ever used a wheelchair, it was for performance. Standing while kicking or twirling was not accessible to her, so she discovered that using a wheelchair could make it possible for her to dance. She purchased a cheap chair off the internet, painted it gold, and covered it in glitter and rhinestones, hand tufting the cushions to make it look like a beautiful throne. She came to feel, through using her wheelchair in her piece, “This Is My Throne,” that in her words, “wheelchair means freedom. Wheelchair means access. And accepting my identity as a disabled person also means freedom.”¹¹⁹ This built-for-stage disability device signified multiple forms of freedom (mobility, expression, relief from pain), which is spread multiply in performance through the technology of sparkle. The amendments made to the device such as the rhinestones, tufted cushions, and gold paint disrupt and confound the audience’s gaze through visual effect, impacting viewers through a reversal of the power dynamic normally accompanying the use of a wheelchair—for Jacqueline, to dance in the chair signified a gain in many ways, while simultaneously holding the grief surrounding her loss of ability.

For Jacqueline Boxx and the other performer I discuss in this chapter, Chaos X Machina, disability-supportive devices such as mobility aids, IV ports, and IV stands are technologies that merge with bodies to make performing and surviving possible. When used in the context of the campy subculture and performance space of queer crip burlesque, these disability objects can become magic wands that summon fantasies of different futures and time machines that long for historical alternatives. I argue that the aesthetic, prosthetic, and mechanical technologies of what I am terming *crip glam* derive from a crip eroto-technoscience, a skillset that emerges from the labor of cultivating desire combined with the scientific knowledge disabled people garner from surviving ableist medical systems. *Crip glam* highlights how disabled burlesque performances can foreground glamorous and erotic gestures, while not erasing disabled realities of pain, bodily leakage, anger, trauma, and inequity. Disabled performers implement a range of disability-related objects, devices, and accessories, such as the shiny chrome of a wheelchair, the rhinestones on a cane, even the vibrant red of human blood, in creative and surprising ways to draw out sick and disabled everyday experience and cultivate a desire for those realities.¹²⁰ Crip burlesque’s diversions from temporal linearity, as discussed in Chapter 1, provide queer fantasies where disability is desired in non-repronormative ways, or without the expectation of biological reproduction.¹²¹ For disabled populations, to imagine a future when disability is so often situated as the foreclosing of future possibilities, witnessing or embodying such glimmering transformations can be life-changing. Performers queerly and crip-ly reproduce through ripples of feeling, tectonic shifting of narratives, and sharing of scientific secrets, skeleton keys to safety, rest, and spoons (a disability culture metaphor which considers the immobile object, the spoon, as representative of crip time, health, and energy).¹²²

¹¹⁹ Jaqueline Boxx, Interview by author, February 27, 2019, Facetime.

¹²⁰ Content note: This chapter contains descriptions of nudity and blood in performance. Images containing nudity and blood are located at the end of the chapter prior to the Works Cited.

¹²¹ Michael Warner, ed. *Fear Of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹²² As in, “I’m out of spoons today,” or “I don’t have the spoons to explain that.” Christine Miserandino, “The Spoon Theory,” But You Dont Look Sick? support for those with invisible illness or chronic illness, April 25, 2013. <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>.

This chapter illuminates the processes that sustain queer, disabled, and racialized bodies within state systems that undervalue them and participate in the further “disablement” of multiply marginalized people.¹²³ Here, I examine the work of three queer disabled burlesque artists who transform their medical devices for the purpose of intervening into normative conceptions of disability. I discuss Jacqueline Boxx’s process of building a vintage wheelchair as a mode of reworking disability history to include glamorous and desirable images and Chaos X Machina’s playful and vulnerable manipulations of her IV port and IV stand that confront audiences with disabled rage and alternative structures of care. These three performers’ making and performance practices embody methods of engaging with disability objects onstage that are vastly different, but which collectively point to the potentiality of crip eroto-technoscience to articulate ableist logics and offer alternative possibilities for public understandings of desirability and care.

Jacqueline Boxx: Cultivating Desire for Disability

Jacqueline Boxx was the first performer to compete at the internationally renowned and foremost festival of burlesque performance, “The Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender,” in a wheelchair in 2017. In her performance, teaching, and activism, she aims to “bring attention through glamour and spectacle to disability.”¹²⁴ Though she performs in multiple genres from nerd-lesque to neo-burlesque, her work in classical burlesque performs a temporal intervention, choreographing the disabled body into burlesque’s fantasies of the past. In order to maintain the 1940s aesthetic of her classical pieces, Jacqueline Boxx acquired a vintage 1940s wheelchair. The entire chair, including its wheels, is made completely out of wood. It is not collapsible, so it is enormously heavy and needs a truck for transport. She restored it herself, because, she pointed out, there are no professional wheelchair restoration experts. So she become one. She sanded it down, replaced some of the wheels, got rid of the rust by scrubbing them with steel wool, and applied a fresh wood finish. In approaching her 1940s wheelchair as a necessary continuation of her vintage glam aesthetic, Jacqueline Boxx wanted to push back on the fact that disabled bodies are rarely seen as glamorous. Her goal was to rebuild conceptions of disability as glam, as desirable. When signs of disability have historically been written as criminally ugly, crafting disability as glamorous is a critical intervention continuous with crip theory’s contention that disability is desirable.

Jacqueline Boxx developed her own tools and expertise to build a usable disability performance device. Her crip glam is achieved through what Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch refer to as “crip technoscience.” Hamraie and Fritsch write that crip technoscience involves “practices of critique, alteration, and reinvention of our material-discursive world” to be implemented as “political action, refusing to comply with demands to cure, fix, or eliminate disability.”¹²⁵ Jacqueline Boxx’s practices of alteration and reinvention show how constructing desire for disability through erotics is a political technology.

¹²³ Jina Kim discusses disability as a verb, employed by the state along the lines of racial and economic difference, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as state-sanctioned exploitation of a group that makes the group more vulnerable to premature death. Jina B Kim, “Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich’s ‘Enabling Whom?’ *Lateral*, Issue 6.1, (Spring 2017), <https://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-crip-of-color-critique-kim/>.

¹²⁴ “About,” *Jacqueline Boxx*, <http://www.missdisaburlytease.com/about.html>, (Accessed September 21, 2020).

¹²⁵ Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch. “Crip Technoscience Manifesto.” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2019): <https://doi.org/10.28968/cft.v5i1.29607>, 2.

A methodological note about Hamraie's citational practice which grounds my own practice of reading performance as theory: in Hamraie's practices of citation, they make clear that crip technoscience emerges from queer disabled people of color's survival strategies. Hamraie cites Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's formulation of "crip science," which in turn is based on Kim Katrin Milan's "femme science" based on "femme skills, technologies, and intelligences."¹²⁶ This flow of queer crip of color exchange of ideas grounds crip technoscience as intimate disruptive grassroots strategy, one that refutes scientific systems grounded in histories of racist and ableist harm and reimagines science as an epistemological project as well as an empirical one, emerging from femme cultures of mutual aid and survival. In this way, theory emerges directly from the object of Jacqueline Boxx's work, as a queer disabled femme of color. Crip science functions as an alternative to "the deficiency model," which Piepzna-Samarasinha explains is the view most people hold where disability is only seen as "a lack, a defect, damaged good, in need of cure."¹²⁷ She continues, "the idea that we have cultures, skills, science, and technology runs counter to all of that."¹²⁸ In representing disability as glamorous, Boxx is deconstructing the deficiency model of disability, employing desire as an activist tool to reroute perceptions of disability through affective shifts in disability's erotic possibilities.

Jacqueline Boxx's re-working of her chair reveals how through femme practices of making, crip objects can become time machines that open up passages between past and futures. As Aimi Hamraie explains in their book *Building Access*, wheelchairs were developed for the specifications of white male veterans toward the purpose of returning them to work. The end goal of wheelchair development was the "able nationalist project" of the rehabilitation of the labor force.¹²⁹ Boxx uses her chair in classic burlesque to rescript this history, replacing the imagined body of the white soldier with her disabled bisexual Puerto Rican body in her own crip science fiction fanfic (which is literalized in her Star Trek and Batman nerdlesque). She both inscribes her body into the historical frame of disability and simultaneously re-writes the mandated labor of the chair toward glamorous, anti-productive ends; in the process of reclaiming disability history, she resists the scripts imposed on disabled bodies that hold that disabled lives are only worth living if they can approximate the labor and productivity of nondisabled people. Her choreography in this piece follows the classic burlesque pattern of promenading and posing, a style that the chair lends itself to effortlessly, allowing for a seamless slippage between history and fantasy.

There is something biological, breathing and oozing desire and sparking rebellious energy, about Jacqueline Boxx's wheels in her pieces. Whether it's sparkling "Boxx" in rhinestones across the back, supporting her in circus inversions, or popping a wheelie that gives her an extra two feet of height for a leg extension, the chair is an integral part of Jacqueline's performance. Julia Watts Belser writes that "[w]heelchairs occupy an intimate space: simultaneously an expression of our own body-forms and a distinct, independent entity—a vital, vibrant being."¹³⁰ Belser draws out how anonymous blogger Wheelchair Dancer describes the pleasure of moving with her chair, describing the feeling of stroking the ridges of the tires as "a

¹²⁶ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, Arsenal Pulp Press, (2018), 69.

¹²⁷ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 69.

¹²⁸ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 69.

¹²⁹ Aimi Hamraie, "Making Access Critical: Disability, Race, and Gender in Environmental Design," Lecture at University of California Berkeley, (February 25, 2019) and Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2017).

¹³⁰ Julia Watts Belser, "Vital Wheels: Disability, Relationality, and the Queer Animacy of Vibrant Things," *Hypatia* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2016), 7.

sexy feeling.” Belser writes, “The tire ridges as they pass beneath fingers, the caress of a wheel as it rolls beneath hand express a queer animacy: a practice of living and loving across the human/nonhuman divide,” emphasizing not only functional inter-thing-body-dependence, but also care, pleasure, an economy of erotics that link the functionality of a medical device to a pleasure in its use, the aesthetics of its function.¹³¹

The relationship between performer and chair is marked with associations that must be combatted through choreographic narrative workarounds in order to avoid being caught in a trope, reduced into an archetype. In the first piece I performed in a wheelchair, I wanted to show myself tangled in yarn, strands of yarn glued to my skin with liquid latex and tied to the wheelchair, in a creepy feminist knitting circle fever dream where I become my own craft project. I consulted with Jacqueline Boxx in our skype lesson about the materials of this piece. I worried that the audience would read my entanglement with the yarn as a desire to escape the chair, which I absolutely did not want. I wanted to refuse the interpretation of chair as “an active, sinister agent: the one who binds, traps, and constrains the human within its medicalized embrace” as Julia Watts Belser describes it in her unpacking of the animacy of the phrase “wheelchair-bound.”¹³² Jacqueline Boxx suggested that the yarn weave its way into the wheels of the chair as well, while being careful to avoid unnecessary mobility limitations. This way, the chair appears to be constrained by the yarn as well, binding us together in our shared need to escape our yarn prison. In shifting the placement of this extra-bodily prop-like material, tugging between body and prop, we changed the story of the chair, away from narratives of wheelchairs limiting mobility toward the freedom from pain possible through the use of a mobility device. I am wheelchair-bound in my piece, engaging with the ways that the chair is also bound to me, a shared entrance toward a matrix of dominance that levels us, our kink, yarn play, locating deliciousness, strength, pleasure in the act of being bound together, in our interdependence. The intentional work with stage materials in combatting reductive narratives is a form of eroto-technoscience, mutating a device’s appearance to change its signification onstage. In addition, the virtual mentorship I received is one methodology of eroto-technoscience, a crip relational strategy where disabled people connect and dream toward art for a more accessible future. Crip glam exists in a communal network, working toward and resulting from community care as a mode of subverting paradigms of healthcare systems and state-based social services that fail disabled people.

Jacqueline Boxx’s reconstruction of medical devices provides an alternate method of medical device that diverges from “as prescribed” to purposefully point to that which is not present in popular conceptions of both the erotic and the medical. Jacqueline’s vintage chair, fairly useless in the everyday, plays a vital role in the choreography of erotic fantasy. The ambiguity around medical devices’ use that ripples into performance can be traced through state-delineated ambiguity around devices and their use. The Federal Food Drug and Cosmetic Act is a set of laws which governs the US. Food and Drug Administrations’ policies including regulations of drugs and devices (and of course cosmetics, another essential tool of crip glam).¹³³ According to the FFDCA, a device is: 1) approved by the state (the National Formulary or the U.S. Pharmacopeia); 2) used toward diagnosis, cure, treatment, or prevention of disease; and 3)

¹³¹ Watts Belser, “Vital Wheels,” 9.

¹³² Watts Belser, “Vital Wheels,” 6.

¹³³ “Federal Food Drug and Cosmetics Act,” *U.S. Food & Drug Administration*, <https://www.fda.gov/regulatory-information/laws-enforced-fda/federal-food-drug-and-cosmetic-act-fdc-act>, (Last updated March 29, 2018).

intended to “affect the structure or function of the body of humans.”¹³⁴ The active verb “affect” contrasts with the verb “used” speaking to mobility devices’ multiplicity: as they are used by bodies, and they also affect bodies. In this way, the FDCA acknowledges the multi-directional activity of devices: they are used, but they also work. Crip burlesque performers invoke burlesque’s second glance to make explicit this generative ambiguity of devices’ animacy. In addition, Jacqueline Boxx’s use of her vintage wheelchair (along with the adjustments she made to revitalize it) place it outside of the legal definition of medical device. It is not used for diagnosis, cure, treatment, and prevention. However, it does perform work, and it makes possible Jacqueline Boxx’s performance of her work. Its labor, in collaboration with its user, is the construction of fantasy. The FDA’s definition cites a relationship between objects and the state, where medical devices are deemed so only if they are approved by the state. Stage devices in this way, exceed the state, which means that crip burlesque performance can work as an extra-legal as well as “extra-productive” affair, offering a usage that deliciously evades surveillance and disturbs normative borders around commodities and their erotics.

Jacqueline Boxx performs similar rerouting work on visibility, from her position as a person who often gets seen “badly.” She wrote recently on Facebook, “it’s hard for me to be recognized as a performer of color, as a Puerto Rican. I often have passing privilege. [...] There’s also some unique intersections between my heritage and being both queer and disabled.” She cites these tensions between visibility and passing as the reason for needing to “become [her] own aesthetic inspiration.”¹³⁵ Jacqueline passes as white; however she implements performance strategies that are in line with the black femme methodologies of performance detailed in Chapter One, building community resistance and support into the structures of her work. In Jessica Pabón-Colón’s presentation, “Bisexual Boricua: A Performative Testimonia on the Limitations of Feeling (Brown and Queer) and of Feeling Limitations,” the author used a rubber band to represent the limitations of binaristic thinking, which can stretch to a point but at the limit might snap.¹³⁶ She suggests that the idea of a spectrum of oppression reinforces binaries of white/black and straight/gay, and that being Brown and bisexual means being in the middle of the “spectrum,” the place where the rubber band can no longer abide the tension. Pabón-Colón’s work with the concept of elasticity and the material of the rubber band could also be a way to think through what Jacqueline describes as “unique intersections between my heritage and being both queer and disabled.”

For Jacqueline, elasticity is an embodied materialization of her daily management of disability. She has Ehler’s Danlos syndrome, a connective tissue disorder. EDS impacts the connective tissue of the body. Connective tissue, made up of the fibers elastin and collagen, is responsible for allowing tissue to be stretched and then returning that tissue to normal. Image 2 shows Jacqueline Boxx in her custom zebra print finest, an aesthetic response to the common refrain among those with EDS, “Doctors are told, if they hear hoofbeats, to suspect horses. The issue is that we are zebras.”¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Gail A. Van Norman, “Drugs, Devices, and the FDA: Part 2: An Overview of Approval Processes: FDA Approval of Medical Devices,” *JACC: Basic to Translational Science* 1, no. 4 (June 1, 2016): 277–87, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacbts.2016.03.009>.

¹³⁵ Jacqueline Boxx, “Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome,” Facebook, (April 5, 2019), https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2008089296152717&id=100008549979877.

¹³⁶ Jessica Pabón-Colón, “Bisexual Boricua: A Performative Testimonia on the Limitations of Feeling (Brown and Queer) and of Feeling Limitations,” *Performance Studies international* 25, University of Calgary, Canada, (July 2019).

¹³⁷ Jacqueline Boxx, “Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.”

[Image Redacted]

[Image 3: Snapshot of facebook post: Jacqueline Boxx in custom zebra print in her wheelchair, enthusiastic comments abound amidst 585 reactions of “love,” “like,” and “wow.” Photo Credit: Stereo Vision Photography.]

This refrain refers to the difficulty many people with EDS have with acquiring a diagnosis in a medical world where the norm is to associate symptoms with the most common possible diagnosis, with the result that doctors do not take care to deeply listen to patients’ experience. Jacqueline transforms this dehumanizing experience by embodying zebra in all of its fabulous difference. She transmutes the contents of her diagnosis into an aesthetic, in an intervention that glamorizes the diagnosis of her connective tissues into the fabric covering her body, suggesting that despite the resistance many people with EDS face when trying to get a diagnosis from medical professionals, there are possibilities for re-framing that diagnosis and re-emerging glittering. The materials of disability, down to the cellular structures of difference, are a creative device with which to snap the so-called rubber band of binaries and construct alternatives to both ableist norms but also norms of race, sex, and sexuality identity. Jacqueline indeed “becomes her own aesthetic inspiration,” disrupting normative modes of visibility to create a spectacle and using her own loose joints as aesthetic fodder.

Jacqueline Boxx’s integration of the science of diagnosis into her aesthetic choices manifests the crip science strategies queer disabled performers perform on the normative gaze. Artist and scholar Sandie Yi reflects on how the “evaluative gaze” shapes social hierarchies as well as identities, working as the site of judgement of beauty, normality, and perfection.¹³⁸ Yi suggests the possibility of art as a site for shifting the ways bodies are visually categorized. “Art offers an embodied means for reclaiming identities that have been distorted, marginalized, and rejected. It provides the opportunity to be seen not through the lens of oppression, but through a reconstructed identity authored by the one who had previously been the object of the gaze.”¹³⁹ The self-administered materials that function as the lens through which disabled bodies are seen—for example, Jacqueline Boxx’s microbiological aesthetic reclamation of diagnosis, and other crip eroto-technologies of the gaze—create the possibility for crip glam to intervene in perceptions of the disabled body.

Chaos X Machina: Infectious Performance and Nurturing Devices

Burlesque performer Chaos X Machina, who produces the all-disabled Seattle burlesque show, “Criptease,” employs a different kind of eroto-technoscience, one that in combination with blunt vulnerability and medical device choreography conjures an arsenal of affective audience experiences. Chaos, whose tagline is “the pinup with the port,” is a white sick and disabled queer performer who creates pieces that involve eroticizing and representing aspects of her life associated with chronic illness.¹⁴⁰ Fans can purchase an enamel pin of her face with her bright red hair streaming, her tagline swirled vibrantly across the surface. I first reached out to her after seeing her post on Facebook that included a selfie featuring pouty made-up lips and the port on her chest connected to an IV with the text “I came here to infuse 1 L of lactated ringers solution and turn your girlfriend gay,” with the hashtag “#portpinup.” In Chaos’ social media and live

¹³⁸ Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, “From Imperfect to I Am Perfect: Reclaiming the Disabled Body Through Making Body Adornments in Art Therapy,” *Materials and Media in Art Therapy*, (2011), 104-105.

¹³⁹ Yi, “From Imperfect to I Am Perfect,” 106.

¹⁴⁰ Chaos X Machina, Interviewed October 16, 2019, Facetime.

performances alike, she evokes pinup glamour while sharing the ways her body deviates from “normal” and “healthy.” Her port, she explained, is “a little reservoir under my skin. And so what happens is that when I’m going to get an infusion, they access it, which means there’s like a needle that goes into my chest. And it gets covered with a dressing.” I suggest that we can consider Chaos’ port as *portal*, following prop studies scholar Andrew Sofer’s theory that props are sites that open up into different worlds upon activation by actors.¹⁴¹ Chaos’ device works as a portal into her body, but also as a site of exposure, physical and emotional. The reveal of her port deviates from a traditional burlesque reveal. It is located on her chest, a primary situated location of the reveal, but it creates an unevenness along the lines of her body, a clear reminder that the borders of her body are penetrable. Burlesque bodies often choreographically suggest and occasionally embody genital penetration. But Chaos’ work to incorporate her port into sexual performance suggests there are other non-genital sites of sexual penetration, asking us to question what sex is and can be, while also disrupting ideas of the body, especially the white body, as finite, bordered, independent, and separate from environment. Chaos’ use of eroto-technoscience, manipulating her port toward erotic reveals, means using it against medical guidelines, offering an example of eroto-technoscience that employs technology actually working against health, cure, and even safety, holding that sometimes a device’s performance value may trump its medical value when the two dangerously conflict.

Chaos’ piece “Fuck Inspiration Porn” [Image 4] implements a classic burlesque formula to intervene in the ableist narrative that living while sick and disabled is inspirational.¹⁴²

[Image Redacted]

[Image 4: Chaos X Machina in 2018 performance “Fuck Inspiration Porn,” screenshot from video of performance that shows Chaos crossing off the words “Inspiration Porn” written across her stomach with a syringe of her own blood. The blood drips down the letters, obscuring them. Photo credit Max Shaw.]

Through choreography, fragmentation, and radical vulnerability, the piece disrupts the linearity of both classic burlesque choreographic structures and of the trope of the “inspirational disabled person.” The MC introduces Chaos and then defines inspiration porn for the audience, saying, “Inspiration porn is using someone else’s body to feel better about yourself,” then encourages the audience to boo, invoking their energy toward dismantling this nonconsensual use of disabled bodies. Chaos describes the action of the piece:

It’s a classic act, doing my classic burlesque, but the song keeps cutting out and I hear voices saying various inspiration porny things. And so when it starts out, stuff that sort of seems like it’s kind of innocuous like, “Oh you’re such an inspiration,” and then, the last thing that’s said is, “Oh I think if I were you I would just give up and die,” which is a thing people have said to me before. And so for the last reveal, I take off my dress and I realize that “inspiration porn” is written across my stomach. I try scratching at it and rubbing at it and I can’t get it off. So the last thing I do is I have a syringe hooked up to my port and I pull blood out of my port and I cross it off in my blood.

¹⁴¹ Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁴² Note that the image of this piece and the video contain blood. Chaos X Machina, “TFU6 Sunday Chaos X Machina,” (November 26, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAwRxBFthjE&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR11Kk_fveWSEd93nLPZe_gB0o8vhnHfGCEIAUm5k0qOV_fM7qNXped_ZpU.

In the second of these choreographic disruptions, where the music dramatically cuts out, Chaos is about to remove a front fastening corset. A voice cuts in, “I don’t think I could do what you do, you know, live like that.” The music then starts up again. Though Chaos stops dancing when the music cuts out, she doesn’t start back again when the music starts. Rather, the audience watch her stop, listen to the voice, and react. Her hands close nervously around her middle as she looks down, losing track of her steps, as if the phrase “inspiration porn” on her stomach is a wound in itself, distracting her. It takes her a few seconds to shake off the voice and return to her classic burlesque strip, pasting a smile back on her lips, and returning to unfastening her corset.

Chaos’ piece uses a multiplicity of voices layered across the piece to reveal the damaging message layered over her body. Chaos uses her acting skills, disrupting her choreography to react with vulnerability to the messages she hears. She then uses her own blood to obscure the sign across her stomach. Chaos confirmed that the emotional vulnerability she expressed onstage emerged from her own experiences. The recorded voices belong to her friend, her partner, and herself, and they connect inspiration to an assumption of her own proximity to death. Chaos states, “I just allow myself to really genuinely feel that somebody, that somebody thinks this should happen to me and somebody who I care about um and uh and just allowing myself to feel as much of that onstage is powerful.” From this space of channeling and expressing the effect that inspiration porn has on her emotional self, Chaos also noted the intense physical vulnerability of the piece: “those are my literal insides onstage. You know, it’s my actual blood, and [...] I’m really letting the audience visually and viscerally see how this is harmful.” The layering of Chaos’ blood across the narrative of inspiration porn is part of a more general approach to undoing oppressive narratives around disability through queer burlesque. Rather than erase these narratives, Chaos cites and re-enacts them, making them explicitly visible. She shows their accumulation and in doing so force a re-consideration of how damaging these narratives are.

Reflecting on how the piece made her feel to perform, Chaos expressed her vulnerability, and then added, “But I also feel a tiny bit, just a little bit gleeful. Like I hope some people were fucking grossed out. I hope they were grossed out and upset by this because that’s how upset I am about ableism.” This glee at the audience’s presumed repulsion shows another unique way that burlesque can intervene into normative tropes. It suggests a sense of revenge, of punishment, of cruel yet joyous satisfaction in the audience’s experience of the piece, that somewhere within that affective experience of witnessing Chaos’ body gore, there is a sense of getting even. This delight in the impact of one’s freakery does important work for disabled people witnessing the piece. Watching the piece, I experienced a sense of disgust, but also a satisfaction seeing Chaos’ thick blood ooze over the words, making them unreadable.

Chaos transforms inspiration porn into a literal wound. Accessing her port involves accessing her vulnerability, the port functioning as a metaphorical and literal portal between internal and externally visible harm. She asserts, “it’s a biohazard,” mourning the fact that she doesn’t know when she may be able to perform the piece next. Her blood literalizes the contamination possible in her disabled performance, the fear of queer and disabled contagion traveling across the fourth wall to an audience who may fear for their bodily safety. Petra Kuppers explains that disabled artists’ subversive tactics “embrace not containment, but infection: they dissolve the stability of categories, and posit openness and change, instead.”¹⁴³ Chaos can’t erase narrative tropes like inspiration porn, but she can add more meanings and associations to it, allowing her choreographic and biological material to coagulate on audiences’

¹⁴³ Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

perceptions of her body, opening herself up to possibly being interpreted differently. It is important to note that Chaos' assertion that her piece is a "biohazard" presents a tension between this particular piece and the way that Chaos' body exists in the world on a day-to-day basis. The presence of blood in the cultural imaginary has far different connotations for white cisgender people than it does for racialized queer bodies, especially for black trans and queer people. For racialized queer and trans people, the imaginary surrounding contagion of blood elicits so much fear, that even the presence of an HIV positive diagnosis serves as justification for violence, segregation, and forced isolation.¹⁴⁴ The veil of safety of Chaos' whiteness makes her work to eliminate inspiration porn possible. This presents the possibilities as well as the limitations of this type of body art. The racialized textures of the threat of bio-contagion mean that a sense of repulsion has higher stakes for Black and trans bodies to the point where the "biohazard" is deemed criminal and dangerous.

As Chaos' blood becomes usable a theatrical object, exiting her body's borders and adorning the text costuming her belly, it adds further confusion to the lively tensions of reading disabled devices as props, a concept explored more fully in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. There is an ambiguity in performance about whether Chaos' device would be considered body and/or prop. We can also find this ambiguity reflected in medical policy. According to a 2016 study on the FDA, "some products that contain biological material are inert ... and can actually be considered devices."¹⁴⁵ According to the FDA, a device's inertness (when inertness is often defined as an inability to move on its own) is what makes a device a device. From Mel Y. Chen's critical work on animacy, we know that a lack of movement need not, and indeed should not, be linked to lack of animacy due to the ableist implications of such an idea of what constitutes life. Animacy can be thought of as on a continuum, where an inert object such as a stone, for example, may rest near zero on the animacy hierarchy, but is not completely excluded from it, a theory which has vast implications for sick and disabled people who are immobile or less mobile.¹⁴⁶ Less mobile need not mean less human. Chaos' piece exemplifies the problem of categorizing biological matter that flows between body and device, between costume and prop. When Chaos' blood leaves her body and becomes a tool of costume construction or costume annihilation, her blood's ambivalent relationship to objecthood is representative of her own disabled body's objecthood or the nonconsensual use of her body toward perpetuating an objectifying narrative of inspiration.

The threat of infection alongside the fear of the spread of disability is a motif present in Chaos's piece. As I write now, deep into COVID-19 quarantine, surrounded by a near-universal fear of infection and an explicit eugenicist presence in media, social and otherwise, I find that my use of infection as metaphor must shift, and perhaps even reveals internalized ableism in myself. Infection must not be used as a metaphor for liberatory spread of queer affect or politics without attention to the danger of infection for immunocompromised bodies. As COVID-19 most

¹⁴⁴ Michelle C. Velasquez-Potts, "Regulatory Sites: management, Confinement and HIV/AIDS," Stanley, Eric A., and Nat Smith, eds. *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 125 and Steven Thrasher, "A Black Body On Trial: The Conviction Of HIV-Positive 'Tiger Mandingo,'" (BuzzFeed News, November 30, 2015), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/steventhrasher/a-black-body-on-trial-the-conviction-of-hiv-positive-tiger-m>.

¹⁴⁵ Van Norman, "Drugs, Devices, and the FDA."

¹⁴⁶ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2012), 5. Robin Wall Kimmerer and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro also discuss the animacy of rocks from the perspective of Indigenous knowledge systems.

immediately impacts those with compromised immune systems and creates longterm immune effects in others, there is a rising imperative for taking care with the ways we discuss infection. In response to the overwhelming ableism surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the artists interviewed for this project posted on social media not only about their fear and grief of being into a world where they are explicitly and repeatedly understood as disposable, but also about the impact of losing the majority of their income as cultural workers. Chaos reflected on Facebook about the piece described above, after in her words, “I had a seizure last night and today there is ableism on my feed.”¹⁴⁷ She re-crafted the frame for her piece in order to activate virtual audiences of her Facebook feed, using the tool of memory as a call to action:

Remember that time I pulled blood from my own port on stage
to try and show the harm ableism does
and that having to constantly fight it like this
causes so much pain.

Were you watching?

How many times do I have to open myself up and make myself vulnerable to show you
how much damage this does? How much more blood do I have to give?

This invocation was accompanied by several images that told the story of the piece, one of which is pictured above. Even out of work and off the stage, disabled burlesque performers are laboring as health educators and advocates, employing a theater of pain to provide the collective care of undoing ableism in the COVID-19 crisis. In Chaos’ poetic configuring, her emotional and performance labor is materialized as the blood that she spilled during this piece. This aids us in understanding this labor as both precious and finite, a visceral extension of the spoon metaphor so commonly used to explain capacity limitations for disabled and chronically ill people.¹⁴⁸ She cannot perform infinite educational labor, and the labor she does do matters. This invocation asks nondisabled people to internalize this metaphor and speak back to ableism where it appears, this work of allyship essential and potentially life-saving.

The performance of disability objects onstage can blur sedimented ideas of identity, unravelling subject/object dichotomies and skewing the experience of viewing burlesque beyond reductive (if ever-present) claims of personal empowerment. Chaos X Machina performs a piece with her IV pole including line and bag that eroticizes and complicates the separation between her body and the medical devices she is intimate with.¹⁴⁹ In this piece, Chaos dances to a rock and roll version of “Feeling Good,” the 1960s musical hit popularized by Nina Simone. She enters slowly, locking eyes with her IV as one would with a lover across a crowded room. She meets it and slides her hand up and down iv pole, caressing it, then looking knowingly at the audience, immediately developing a tension between the pole as object of affection and pole as part of her costume as “sick person.” She starts to strip and a quick reveal shows us that under the first hospital gown is another gown, much shorter. After a much longer, slower tease, we discover that second gown has an oval cut out over the ass, which Chaos’ hands lovingly caress and bounce by jiggling the thin strip of hospital gown stretched over her upper thighs. As she dances, she uses the pole as mobility support and caresses the pole with affection, at one point

¹⁴⁷ Chaos X Machina, “I usually want to focus on positive narratives surrounding disability,” Facebook, (April 15, 2020), https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2543553499295208&id=100009217481726.

¹⁴⁸ Miserandino, “The Spoon Theory,” April 25, 2013..

¹⁴⁹Chaos X Machina, “06 Chaos Machina,” (April 26, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E5AwAePI5A&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3KICgtN_Pfu9O0wEzR5II7xXmZiyke3JtCyPesGOBnlQmVCO6-2Vn-4h4

stopping moving to slowly lick it. Eventually, on her knees, she strokes the pole, pleasuring it. After a shimmy facing away from the audience and toward the pole, Chaos removes her bra, swings her legs to the side and slowly lies back down. As she reclines, her reveal of her chest also shows she that she has an IV tube connector attached to her pasty, which we see her then connect to the IV tube. The last 30 seconds of her piece involve her lounging, enjoying being fed by the IV through the tube connected to her chest.

The IV stand fulfils many roles throughout the piece, functioning as Chaos' object of affection, erotic interest, life source, extension of her body, and supportive medical device. Sometimes she waltzes with the pole as if it is a partner, caressing it like she would a lover's cheek and stroking it repetitively as if it were a sexual organ. The IV is used aesthetically, not medically, an eroto-technoscience fixture hooked up to Chaos' pasty, not inserted into her port. However, Chaos' performance does not necessarily make this obvious. Her body visibly relaxes after her IV makes connection with her body, and she reclines and smiles with satisfaction, which could equally be interpreted as achieving a sexual release or acquiring a reviving medicine. As the tube emerges from her pasty, which is an altered tassel, where presumably her nipple lies underneath, Chaos reworks narratives around breasts and nourishment. This flow of nourishment from IV to breast disrupts the repronormative expectation of passage of fluid from breasts to babies. Rather than giving nutrients from her breast, she is receiving nutrients, creating an oppositional flow, suggesting the pleasure of receiving care as opposed to giving it. This prop is a crip glam object with a presence, an object that can provide ease, support, nutrients, and indeed pleasure.

For Chaos, this piece addresses the narrative that "sick is sad." She acknowledges that grief often accompanies diagnosis, but states that "living constantly with a grief narrative is really really harmful for people who are chronically ill." Chaos wanted to address the expectation that she would strip off her illness, that underneath her hospital gown is a beautiful "normal" gown and body and that she can simply "pull[...] off [her] illness." In her nesting dolls of hospital gowns, she re-writes a story about chronic illness, addressing the expectation that sickness and sexiness cannot coexist or indeed cooperate. This piece works against a linear narrative of cure that points to healthy bodies as the only bodies that experience the breadth of human emotion, whereas sick bodies are expected to dwell perpetually in sadness and grief. This narrative disruption happens through Chaos' creative use of intimate disability objects. Through the shimmering and shifting animacy of her IV, the pole begins as separate from her body, is eroticized as a lover, and eventually becomes connected to her, both separate from and a part of her, involved in a nourishing and erotic exchange.

Disabled artists tug at the crosshairs between object and human with their mobility devices, imbuing devices with vibrancy that ripples into the bodies holding devices, bodies socially constructed as less than human or not long for this world. Julia Watts Belser asserts that disabled activists and performers take "sensuous pleasure" in the devices they perform with, which "queers conventional conceptions of how humans should relate to things."¹⁵⁰ According to Belser, "disability activists use alternative animacies to raise up a devalued and discounted portion of humanity."¹⁵¹ In animating the erotics between human and object, disability activists also unravel ideas of the boundedness of the self, a myth of bodily independence that while

¹⁵⁰ Watts Belser, "Vital Wheels," 5.

¹⁵¹ Watts Belser, "Vital Wheels," 5.

functioning as the central tenant for capitalist neoliberal productivity, simultaneously upholds ideas of white supremacy.¹⁵²

These methods of disrupting objecthood, challenging the gaze, and presenting the body with radical vulnerability shift cultural perceptions of disability, all results of crip eroto-technoscience at work. Disabled bodies represented through the lens of crip glam demonstrate wide capacities for pain, beauty, horror, pleasure, and glamour. These expansive constructions of disability affect and aesthetics have repercussions for the way that disability is understood in policy, education, and social services, while simultaneously forging a subcultural vortex for queer crip rage and joy. When disabled people have to squirm into disability tropes to acquire social services, to simultaneously educate and advocate, to hold our rage beneath our tongues because we need them to continue to pay us, eroto crip-technoscience innovation in burlesque is a release, a teaching tool, a breaking point that destabilizes the logic of cure. Crip glam does not heal bodies toward cure. In fact, often performance inflames, hurts, and aggravates. However, crip glam heals toward a more collective cultural wound. In the roars of affirmations of non-normatively beautiful bodies, in crip smiles across a crowded room, in the gleeful satisfaction of truly horrifying an audience, this work is revenge of the most delicious order, crip glam as intimate activism.

¹⁵² Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance*, (Oxford, UK ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32.

Chapter 3 Anti-capitalist Re-use and Refuse: Rhinestones, Wigs, and Compost

It begins. A glimpse of glitter down the crowded block. And I am hit with it. It is sequins and eyeliner and suitcases full of costumes and tinctures and treasures. It is wrapped in a leopard print scarf and is shoving a man out of the way to get to me. It is femme-ily. (Andrea Glik “This is the moment,” *Glitter and Grit*, 38)¹⁵³

Heels on Wheels was a working class-led, multi-racial troupe of survivors, queer people of color, sex workers, immigrants, and mixed race people who came together between the years of 2010 and 2016 to produce a show of “radical extravagance and thought provoking glamour” asserting “art can change our world.”¹⁵⁴ Their collection of essays, *Glitter and Grit*, chronicles Heels on Wheels’ journey temporally and geographically through the groups’ transitions. The above passage is written by Andrea Glik, who cites her experience selling merchandise for Heels on Wheels. She is taken in by a “wolf pack of powerful femmes” and feels the subsuming magical, protective energy of supporting and being supported by this group. Glik, from her black hoodie in the merch booth, describes the “It” of queer femme aesthetic, following the trails of eyeliner and sequins, the short moment that it takes for glitter to catch her eye, drawing her in and pushing away any obstacles in the way of “femme-ily.” What is clear from Glik’s account is that queer femme aesthetics forge material after-effects, accumulating a sense of safety, power, and protection toward the building of belonging and community.

Through examination of aesthetic tools used by queer burlesque performers, including wigs and rhinestones, I argue burlesque’s crip glam and queer world-making is constructed beyond, beneath, and through the visible through aesthetic strategies of invoking desire for and fantasies of touch in the audience. These strategies are not possible without the communal networks of exchange that build “femme-ily” as they build beautiful shimmery pieces to be used in performance. Wigs and rhinestones are two examples of disruptive queer objects desirous of touch, and under the broader frame of communal costume design and exchange, they are portals into queer modes of making and knowing that reveal how queer burlesque has the potential to do disruptive political community-building work. I call these objects on the borders of the queer crip performing body that thwart conceits of productivity in their entwinement of labor and objecthood *perverse commodities*. Through examinations of rhinestones and wigs across the lives and work of performers Versace La Bismalva, Sweet Lorraine, Ruby Slicteur, and the collective brASS (Brown RadicalASS Burlesque), I track the perversion of visual and tactile erotics invoked by both and the possibilities for social shift that are called upon in their material choreographies.

Slow-tracking Rhinestones: The Queer Crip Labor of Sparkle

A costume acquires its life when it meets the right performer. Versace La Bismalva describes their path to their white lace robe, used in their piece “Diamonds:” it passed from one

¹⁵³ Damien Luxe, Heather María Ács, Sabina Ibarrola (eds) and Heels on Wheels Group. *Glitter & Grit: Queer Performance from the Heels on Wheels Femme Galaxy*. 2nd Edition, 1st printing, (Publication Studio, Portland, 2016).

¹⁵⁴ Damien Luxe, Heather María Ács, and Sabina Ibarrola, “Glitter and Grit are our Gay Agenda: The Heels on Wheels Story,” *Glitter & Grit*, 19.

performer who commissioned it from a costume designer and never ended up using it, who sold it to another performer, who sold it to Versace, who experienced an embodied recognition upon acquiring it, knowing they needed to build their act based on this piece. Building a costume, for most performers, requires ingenuity since buying off the rack is so costly. Performers engage in intentional networks of exchange, trading items and labor instead of purchasing costumes flat out, or they need to be constantly expanding their skillset to involve additional aspects of costume creation. A costume design structures an act: burlesque requires innovative clothing design for a quick or lengthy, skillful, choreographed removal. Most performers, even if they do not craft their costume piece, need to have skills for altering ready-made pieces, adding Velcro, snaps, or easy access fasteners, extending the pulls for zippers, and adorning their pieces with glue, tape, and thread. Julia Bryan-Wilson writes about the transformative power of costumes in the DIY gender-fucking self-fashioned world of The Cockettes, a San Francisco drag performance art burlesque troupe from the 1970s.¹⁵⁵ She cites both the individual self-creation and communal countercultural world-making involved in the Cockettes' use of "the power of costumes to change them and the people who saw them."¹⁵⁶ In these hand-crafted outfits, made with recycled and shared materials, performers, according to Bryan-Wilson, were reworking ideas of ownership and altering the boundaries of the body.

Building on the concept of crip glam, which I framed as an epistemology in Chapter 2, I want to draw attention to the ways that crip glam labor disrupts norms around productivity and flow of capital. Desire works. Scholarship on sex work, burlesque, and stripping articulate this clearly.¹⁵⁷ However, the commodities desire produces, what I call *perverse commodities*, are relatively illegible. Perverse commodities are the material "things" that create desire and that desire creates, including the biological material of arousal (hormonal shifts, wetness, increased blood flow, cum) and ephemeral shifts in perception and thought. These "commodities" result from perverse modes of production and exchange that allow for desire's affective spread. They are incoherent and unpredictable, difficult to surveil and easy to hide. The perverse commodity evades capitalist surveillance and is invoked through the use of aesthetic tools, such as crip glam. Burlesque performers engage in anti-capitalist aesthetic practices by scattering commodity through the shattering of the gaze in their sparkling aesthetics.

Crip glam, in its sparkly multitudes, understands abundance in a distinctly anti-capitalist way, following Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's conceit of "crip wealth," which subverts the hoarding of monetary resources as the definition of wealth, by instead understanding wealth, unexpectedly, as kindness. Piepzna-Samarasinha states, "Crip kindness is the wealth and skill where we notice each other's pain face and offer a chair, ask in a low-key way if we can help with a service task, sit without speaking, drop a bottle of tincture next to someone having a panic attack, raise thousands of dollars for someone to buy an accessible van, or mail a stranger our extra prescription. It's collective noticing and collective hustle. It's being witnessed. It's being allowed to relax, expand, just be."¹⁵⁸ Piepzna-Samarasinha understands wealth as support, collectivity, and presence: the multitude of resources that are offered through a mutual understanding that support for disabled people mainly comes from other disabled people. Crip

¹⁵⁵ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹⁵⁶ Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray*, 6.

¹⁵⁷ See Melissa Gira Grant's *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, Annie Oakley's *Working Sex: Sex workers Write about a Changing Industry*, Laura María Agustín's *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, and Jessica Berson's *The Naked Result: How Exotic Dance Became Big Business* among many others.

¹⁵⁸ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, (Arsenal Pulp Press 2018), 251.

wealth comes not from producing something, but from witnessing and being witnessed; from manifesting care, not from being compensated for it. Perverse commodities can pervert wealth, urging desire for crip wealth instead. If crip kindness is wealth, a self-owned and self-produced example of a perverse commodity, then exchange for perverse commodities involves compensation in the form of care, an economy so far from capitalist understandings of wealth that they function in their own crip economy. Crip glam exists in a communal network, working toward and resulting from community care as a mode of subverting failing paradigms of healthcare systems and state-based social services. The modes of exchange necessary in low income, queer and disabled burlesque economies exist within this network, where exchange of goods is entangled with relationality.

A material example of small nodes of anti-capitalist resistive practice embedded in queer crip burlesque is inlaid in the tiny tools of adornment, rhinestones. Burlesque performers' work with rhinestones offers insight into how burlesque style multiplies and refracts the audience's gaze, shifting performance's relationship with the visual and thus with various visually oriented systems of oppression. While all burlesque highly values sparkle, queer performers' relationship to the appearance of excess offers a critique of mainstream burlesque economies and an alternative to the supposition that more sparkle equals a more valuable performance, a norm in the mainstream burlesque world.¹⁵⁹ Queer burlesquers do the most with what they have access to, creating glorious sparkly masterpieces from bed, constructing networks of exchange to get what they need, and pushing back on the idea that low income burlesque performers will never achieve stardom. Rather than focusing on creating the most perfect performance product, queer burlesquers often pour more energy into community-building and investing in their own and each other's processes of creating.

The trauma time framework I establish in Chapter 1 is useful here as well in unpacking the costume elements of performer Versace La Bismalva's piece "Diamonds:" both the "duration of creation" of their look and the audience's temporal experience of their movements.¹⁶⁰¹⁶¹ Versace la Bismalva is a Toronto-based burlesque artist whose work asks audiences to confront their ableist expectations about disability as static, visible, unmoving, and marked only by the presence of mobility devices, as well as expectations around the desirability of disabled bodies. Versace identifies as a white agender asexual disabled fat performer; thus their relationship to futurity is queer in multiple ways. Versace's asexual identity adds a dimension to their performance in crip time. As an asexual person working in the genre of sexual performance, their identity offers a refusal of norms around the construction of desirability and the presumed availability of desirable bodies for erotic consumption.

I met Versace in the grungy bathroom of Big Buddies in Toronto at the *Fierce! Queer Burlesque Festival*. They came up to me saying as a daily cane user, it was so good to see so many cane users at the festival. Then, they watched me slowly making my way back up the stairs, my cane tucked precariously under my arm and offered to run up and grab the key to the elevator for me. When I declined, they walked slowly with me up the stairs, talking about their dream of an accessible burlesque venue in Toronto where all the disabled queers could be campy and naked together. When I reached out to Versace later, I related this moment of gratitude and relief for being seen by another disabled burlesque performer, being offered this moment of

¹⁵⁹ Ruby Slickeur, Interview over Facetime, (June 26, 2018).

¹⁶⁰ Versace La Bismalva, Interview over Skype, (July 11, 2018).

¹⁶¹ "Duration of creation" is a catchy phrase I picked up from my colleague Randi Evans.

dreaming together, what felt like caretaking. In a way, this moment precipitated this chapter's exploration of the ties between femme-ily and visible markers of difference.

I want to draw in the way that medical devices circulate as commodities, holding the claims from Chapter 2 that crip eroto-technoscience is responsible for much of the labor that makes medical devices usable. There are large gaps in the ways that medical devices are devised, innovated, and mass-produced, where what is marketed as the most useful innovation is actually outdated or even dangerous.¹⁶² Fast-tracking processes create incentives for manufacturers to develop new devices that are only slightly different from their predecessors rather than actually changing devices significantly for the better, based on user experience. While spending as little as possible to make minimal changes, companies can still increase prices for their "new" device.¹⁶³ Hand-made, community-devised crip eroto-technoscience for the purposes of both art-making and survival can point to the gaps in the capitalist science of production and offer alternate methods of invention. In the crip labor of soliciting desire for disabled bodies, crip glam artists are simultaneously creating desire for alternate modes of producing and imagining fantasies of futures outside of capitalism where communal care for disabled bodies is valued. In reworking this market-driven gap between object, function, and use, disabled artists employ disabled gestures and practices of making. This work fills in some of the space between mass-produced objects and art objects, enriching public experiences of disability culture by disrupting expectations of inert-ness and filling the functionality gap with feeling, affectively creating the conditions for crip science to work magic. Scholar-activists working in the field of critical design such as Sara Hendren explore this space between object, use, and body as an area impacted by both art and functionality that works in-between use and aesthetics.¹⁶⁴ Hendren argues that critical design is about playing with functionality, drawing from the fine arts, but creating work outside of the museum that can become an "un-ignorable spectacle," allowing for art to do its work of defamiliarizing and allowing questions to linger unanswered.

Queer disabled burlesque artists work against the imperative for fast-tracking devices, instead *slow-tracking* their making process, placing every rhinestone, reinforcing hand-stitched seams. This approach rejects mandates of capitalist productivity and offers a different way of thinking about use. I consider Versace La Bismalva's preparation for their piece "Diamonds" a form of slow-tracking [Image 5].

[Image Redacted]

[Image 5: Versace La Bismalva stands gazing out at the audience with tearful eyes just after lifting their veil. They wear a white gauzey dress, a rhinestoned cane hooked into their rhinestone bra. The lyrics "shine bright like a diamond" are projected behind them.]

According to Versace, "I glued each individual rhinestone onto a white bra [...] It took me...I think I estimated it at 80 hours of work to do that one."¹⁶⁵ This one costume piece was created in the time of two complete 40-hour work weeks. Versace's work with this rhinestoned bra involves a value system that corrupts capitalist time. Sabina Ibarrola co-editor of the *Heels on Wheels Glitter Roadshow* anthology writes about the need for femme burlesque performers to

¹⁶² Gail A. Van Norman, "Drugs, Devices, and the FDA: Part 2: An Overview of Approval Processes: FDA Approval of Medical Devices," *JACC: Basic to Translational Science* 1, no. 4 (June 1, 2016): 277–87, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacbts.2016.03.009>.

¹⁶³ Van Norman, "Drugs, Devices, and the FDA."

¹⁶⁴ Sara Hendren, *What Can a Body Do?: How We Meet the Built World*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2020).

¹⁶⁵ Versace La Bismalva, (Interviewed July 11, 2018 over Facetime).

be “time witches, stretching hours and days to pack them so densely: part necessity, part pure desire to juice this life for all it’s worth.”¹⁶⁶ When performers put such intricate detailed labor into developing their aesthetic and still make time for social media promotion, prepping their choreography, working their day jobs, and performing necessary body and self care, this is a way of working magic with time. Versace also completely covered their performance cane with rhinestones. This crip eroto-technoscience labor would have been illegible to entities such as device manufacturers, contributing to the way that burlesque’s work remains obscured and difficult to surveil. Versace remembers how long it took them to rhinestone their headphones by measuring a length of their shift at work (four hours), clearly having done their work of rhinestoning while at their desk job. This is a sort of queer crip method of being two places at once, performing two types of labor at the same time, at once magicking the sparkle into a pair of headphones and holding down a day job.

Versace cites their bed as a place where the labor of rhinestoning usually takes place, which echoes Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s writing on the disabled bed as workplace. She unpacks how this is a need but also a resource, providing not only time, but also a dreamscape backdrop. Writing in the place where dreams also happen allows vital imaginative work to take place, which refutes the ableist assumption that people who must spend their days in bed are useless, without value.¹⁶⁷ Versace told me, “I guess the relationship with glitter, rhinestones, bling... I have a very close relationship with all three things. They sleep in my bed with me. I do all my rhinestoning in bed so I’ll wake up and I’ll have gems stuck to my butt.”¹⁶⁸ Versace’s sparkly attachments lie queerly with them at night, adhering to their body. The labor of prop-construction here becomes a part of the performance of luxury, where they lie in a bed littered with jewels that flicker between signifiers of wealth and minuscule relics of craft.

Explaining their process of acquiring their discount rhinestones, Versace asserts, “my stones sparkle, the bra that I use in ‘Diamonds,’ that entire bra is covered in Alley Express AB crystals and it looks better than most things most people make around here so, no shade to them, but it doesn’t have to be Swarovski to look good.” According to *The Rhinestone Guy*, an authorized reseller of crystals who created an online learning center to educate wearers, the brilliance of a crystal depends on the quality of the glass, its cut, and whatever specialty coating it might have.¹⁶⁹ Foil back stones sparkle both from their surface and their mirrored interior. Stones, like the AB crystals Versace references here, are coated in lacquer and have an increased surface sparkle because of that. So, while Versace’s point that stones don’t need to be Swarovski to sparkle bright is certainly true, they also are reflecting their knowledge-base for costume production: that Alley Express AB crystals on eBay is the more economic option, and these stones are coated with an extra sparkly crystal topper.

Versace describes the cane they use for performance as their “show cane,” which creates visual disruptions through sparkle and in doing so, enhances performance. In describing the process of creating their piece “Diamonds,” to Rihanna’s song of the same name, Versace noted they created the piece for the tenth anniversary (often known as “Gem” anniversary) of leaving an abusive relationship. They emphasized the resonance between the sparkling stones on their

¹⁶⁶ Luxe, Damien, Heather María Ács, Sabina Ibarrola, (eds) and Heal on Wheels Group, *Glitter & Grit: Queer Performance from the Heels on Wheels Femme Galaxy*, 2nd Edition, (1st printing, 2016. Publication Studio, Portland), 32.

¹⁶⁷ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 180.

¹⁶⁸ Versace, Interview.

¹⁶⁹ “Introduction to Rhinestones and Crystals.” Rhinestone Guy: Sparkle up with Style. <http://www.rhinestoneguy.com/allaboutrhinestones.html>. (Accessed January 17, 2019).

body and the diamonds in the lyrics, citing how important it was that they shine bright just like the diamonds in the song, these small objects offering their own choreography. Their “show cane” is “a little longer than my daily cane. It’s bigger so it can be seen. I also covered it in rhinestones [...] I pull it out somewhere, someone’s like, holy shit!” Rhinestones extend from the surface of a costume. They are protruding, desiring of touch, so in rhinestoning their cane, Versace increases its haptic possibilities of the surface, stretching its surface area to pull and bend light in thousands of directions. In decorating, aestheticizing, eroticizing their disabled body, to raucous audience applause, they reshape disability as desirable and desired. Versace’s asexual self takes this desire into realms outside of the sexual, a desire for disability beyond sexuality, desired through sexuality but without it. Versace’s rhinestoning practice could be considered what queer and disability studies scholar Alison Kafer terms “eccentric economic practice,” a queer crip practice of refusing capitalist modes of productivity to make space for deviant strategies of pleasure.¹⁷⁰ Here Kafer is citing and reformulating Jack Halberstam’s definition of queer as “an outcome of temporality, life scheduling, and eccentric economic practices.”¹⁷¹ Crip eccentric economic practices work in queer ways to distort time, bend wealth, and create a sense of extravagance. Kafer expands that “to refuse the regimentation of economic imperatives across the terrain of one’s body, or one’s time, is, to reimagine what public time and social relations can look like.”¹⁷² This work with time is a refusal of the imperatives of ableist productivity, using the body as grounds for establishing this refusal, and it also works to imagine a future where “public time and social relations” are not pre-established based on productivity, what Kafer terms an “elsewhen.”¹⁷³

Added sparkle and shine changes the nature of the rhinestoned object, alters its surface, its interaction with light, its feel, and its appearance of value, seizing upon a capitalist construction of value and cutting it into sparkly pieces. The time it takes to sparkle and shine an object involves crafting a relationship with that thing and crafting relationships with other artists in the field. This different relationship to time, valuing rhinestoning as important and relational cultural work refuses capitalist temporal modalities and substitutes shimmer, surfaces that amplify the visibility of a body a hundred-fold, allowing it to reproduce queerly in the light. Clare Croft in her introduction to her edited volume on queer dance reflects on the use of sequins as indicators of queerness in her analysis of a piece by Kyle Abraham. She explains that the use of contradicting elements of performance—tension between costume, sound, movement—can be indicators of queer dance, these contradicting elements echoing in her exploration of Abraham’s sequined outfit. She argues that sequins are an “almost obvious symbol of gay subculture,” but also that they themselves do queer work, refracting light from body to body, between dancers and moving body parts, revealing in themselves the tension of contradiction.¹⁷⁴ She performs a close read using movement analysis to explain the way that the choreography of light on Abraham’s body in the spotlight actually takes the place of sound, sparkling from limb to limb. She writes: “The light, now set into motion courtesy of the sequined body, invites a sensuous kinesthetic absorption that speaks volumes even as the microphone’s presence underscores the absence of sound. Here is ‘queer’ in dancing terms: at once legible, but also refusing exact

¹⁷⁰ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 40.

¹⁷¹ Jack Halberstam, “What’s That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives,” *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, no. 2.1 (Summer 2003). <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/ps/printjha.htm>.

¹⁷² Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 40.

¹⁷³ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Clare Croft, “Introduction,” *Queer Dance*, Clare Croft, ed. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 15

referent; at once overwhelming and unmarked. Abraham's body will not speak into the microphone, but will speak otherwise with light, motion, and a gentle fabulosity."¹⁷⁵ She highlights the use of contradiction to create productive anti-productive tensions that combined with the cultural signifiers of queerness suggest a deviance, a displaced sensorium where sound is communicated through sparkle, where culture is read all at once but remains untrackable through the archives of the textual. Croft uses Abraham's performance to build a construction of queer dance, which in her conception, holds space for multiple clashing meanings and intersections, but which is simultaneously fluctuating temporally between history and future, "a desiring at the edge of visibility."¹⁷⁶ Visibility functions as a precipice, pointing to a world beyond what can be seen, informed by past and future worlds beyond capture. Thus the sparkle of crip glam is distinctly queer, helping to explain the seeming ubiquity of queerness across burlesque subcultures.

Krista Thompson's analysis of the racialization of light situates work with shine as a black technology of glamour that also speaks to a re-organization of time, productivity, and consumption. Thompson connects the aesthetic of reflecting light to a creative re-working of objects into surplus capital, which serves as a key connection to the way queer communities of color survive and thrive in spite of marginal economic positions. Thompson describes the way "consumerism is based on luminous effect—on the intangible and ephemeral visual qualities of commodities."¹⁷⁷ Commodities spread past the borders of their material selves. They contain meaning that extends into cultural imaginaries and hold value that radiates past any direct relationship between the thing and its worth. Thompson's framework allows us to conceptualize objects in terms of their ineffable spread and helps us understand how people in dire economic circumstances are able to creatively use the little they have to create the feeling of surplus from not enough. Literally luminizing these commodities, in rhinestoning mobility devices, performers are implementing racialized aesthetic technologies that allow the intangible and ephemeral effects of these objects to shimmer into another feeling space. Importantly, the application of Thompson's work here helps to situate crip glam as a strategy interwoven with and borrowing from black aesthetic traditions of shine, further tying objects like Versace's cane to their textured and racialized pasts. Crip glam can disrupt and respond to the inequities and models of productivity and permissible desire created by capitalism through "luminous effect," adding to the techniques discussed earlier such as slow-tracking and crip technoscience.

Thompson's work helps to illuminate the ways that aesthetic technologies of glam are rooted in black visual culture. In "Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework," Bailey and Mobley point to a blatant disconnect between Black Studies and Disability Studies in need of repair, citing how blackness is legally and scientifically constructed in relationship to disability and pointing to the undeniable ways in which "race and disability are mutually constitutive."¹⁷⁸ Crip glam exists in direct relationship to aesthetic techniques developed by people of color in response to oppressive systems to transform limited resources into the appearance of excess. Noting the reliance of crip glam on black aesthetics is an essential citational practice and shows the ways that disabled, queer, and black practices of refusal and re-

¹⁷⁵ Croft, *Queer Dance*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷⁷ Krista A. Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015), 25.

¹⁷⁸ Moya Bailey and Izzeta Autumn Mobley, "Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework," *Gender & Society*. 33, (October 12, 2018), 24.

appropriation are deeply imbricated. In burlesque however, this relationship often goes unnoted. The absence of black bodies onstage, of black performers, producers, and MCs, together with the presence of black visual practices is a violent erasure, not divorced from burlesque's early history of blackface and appropriation of black dance, as I detail in the Introduction. This reading, therefore is an intervention into this failure to cite black dance and aesthetic practices, a failure which reflects the racism inherent in burlesque as a genre and which continues to result in material consequences that further marginalize artists of color in terms of casting, payment, and reception.

Further, technologies such as rhinestone-ing are tools for intercepting, deflecting, and disturbing the normative gaze that falls on disabled performers of color. Nonbinary East Indian disabled burlesque performer Pansy St. Battie discusses the way that their adornment of their devices evokes attention that has a different quality than the gaze they normally attract. They assert, "With burlesque, I don't have to worry about being stared at — that's what I'm going for."¹⁷⁹ Much feminist discourse and critique of burlesque performance has to do with the objectifying male gaze that reduces the performer's onstage body¹⁸⁰; however, it's clear from Pansy St. Battie's ironic comment that the burlesque stage is one of the only places where they are able to direct the ableist gaze agentially, locating a type of freedom from the objectifying ableism of staring by reclaiming the stare. They describe their process of adorning their chair and the ways that they believe this practice of adornment shifts the social narratives around disability. "I just got this new chair a couple months ago and right when I got it, I spent three days painting and rhinestone-ing it. When the sun hits it, it looks like a disco ball. When you go out and use a chair, people will look at it like, *Oh that's sad, this person must not be doing things with their life*. When you give them something else to look at, like rhinestones, it's like, *OK, if you're going to stare at me, here's something interesting that you should appreciate*."¹⁸¹ Rhinestones here work as a reclaimed technology of the gaze. They redirect onlookers' stares, scattering them, multiplying them, bouncing them from surface to surface through an infinity of glass prisms. Pansy St. Battie's assessment of how their crip glam redirects narratives of disability by way of the gaze emphasizes the resonance of this particular strategy of intervening in normative ways of seeing and being seen across difference.

Anne Cheng examines how surface aesthetics such as those painstakingly crafted by Versace and Pansy St. Battie can reflect cultural and political shifts. Performing a cultural history of shine, Cheng explains how modernist sculptors and artists were enthralled with shine, believing that shine evoked an element of art beyond the material. Cheng describes how shine "lead[s] the eye around," functioning as a force that compels action from the viewer, forcing a relationality.¹⁸² Josephine Baker's shine in representations, which Cheng argues is melded with a plastic aura, an impenetrable artificial glow associated with ideas of the modern art object. Cheng records ways that the construction of the modern was contingent on women of color performers, performers like Baker profiting off of their impenetrability. In wearing their nakedness like a second skin, they shifted beliefs around accessibility to the black female body.

¹⁷⁹ Pansy St. Battie, "I'm A Burlesque Dancer With A Disability — & Makeup Helps Me Own My Sexuality," *Refinery 29*, (August 26, 2019). https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/08/238819/burlesque-dancer-wheelchair-disability-pansy-st-battie?fbclid=IwARlwJSxonhKw6cTZo55hFDokfGsdYdhhoMr_zCebJ3OTdFXOO2fi4bC6tyQ

¹⁸⁰ Alison Carr details this legacy of feminist dismissal of onstage erotics in *Viewing Pleasure and Being a Showgirl: How Do I Look?* (Routledge, 2018).

¹⁸¹ Pansy St. Battie, "I'm a Burlesque Dancer With A Disability," *Refinery 29*.

¹⁸² Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface*. (New York, NY Oxford University Press, 2013), 115.

Cheng writes that "Baker's ability to escape into surfaces paradoxically allows her image to deflect misogynist and racist logic," and in this way conceptualizes Baker's particular use of visibility as a resistant tactic, a mode of escape, and a profitable business model.¹⁸³ Cheng suggests that the visual effect of "[s]heen, as that which both attracts and repels vision, plays hide-and-seek with visual satisfaction and produces a sexy interplay between the scopic and the haptic: are we looking or are we feeling?"¹⁸⁴ Cheng's use of sexual language to point to this intersection of sensorial approaches is a glance toward the entanglement of sense and desire. Sheen, a texture established in the visual realm in dance through costume and lighting, interweaves attraction with repulsion, seeking to both satisfy the gaze and hide from it, looking, feeling, and desiring all deeply entangled. These passages also point to the possibilities of the space in between the scopic and haptic, that the ambiguity between sensory experiences serves to provide alternatives to racist and misogynistic frames that surround femme bodies onstage.

Sparkle in burlesque has a tenuous relationship to the economics of burlesque performance. Vancouver-based clown Ruby Slickeur unpacks what the attention to sparkle has meant for burlesque performers historically, that "the sparkle of your costume did make a difference on whether you got accepted to perform" at places like the Burlesque Hall of Fame, resulting in more classical performers' being hired and getting gigs.¹⁸⁵ Classical burlesque is the more traditionally glamorous retro burlesque style that necessitates flamboyant historical citations (fans, boas, fringe, rhinestones). In queer burlesque, sparkle may be thought of as more of a method than an end result of a strictly shiny aesthetic of perfection. More often than not, the glitter is present with the dirt and sweat of effort, "glitter and grit" tightly and often visibly interlaced. Ruby pushes vehemently back on the assumption in burlesque that "professionalism is conveyed by how expensive you look." They remember how people in their community celebrated when the Burlesque Hall of Fame's competition for queen was between two performers whose "costumes were essentially one piece of fabric that was ungilded," arguing that this sets a hopeful precedent for lower income performers, for whom an expensive costume means deciding between, "Do I pay my rent or do I buy my costume?" Many performers I interviewed, Versace and Ruby included, described the way that acts emerged out of particular costume pieces they acquired or inherited, the performance becoming a further iteration of the object's significance, evolving out of unraveling spools of communal connections.

Though Ruby applauds the emphasis on costume in burlesque community as a platform for immense creativity as well as being many performers' (and their own) secondary and more consistent form of income, they raise concern about how sparkle is used to judge a performers' work. They claim that in burlesque spaces historically "your value was held by how many rhinestones that were on your costume," and that this valuation of performance motivated many artists to, as they progressed as performers, indicate this by placing more and more rhinestones on their costumes. This analysis resonates with the self-published autobiography of Camille 2000, often credited with being the first out queer Burlesque Legend.¹⁸⁶ A Burlesque Legend is a burlesque performer who has been performing since before the neo-burlesque turn, around the mid-1990s. Camille writes that as she grew to prominence in the burlesque circuit in the 1960s and began to develop a more extravagant and sparkly costume collection, her costume designer would come around every Monday to collect on her payment installments. She describes her

¹⁸³ Cheng, *Second Skin*, 119.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 116.

¹⁸⁵ Ruby Slickeur, Interview conducted over Facetime, (June 26, 2018).

¹⁸⁶ Camille Sands, *The Cosmic Queen of Burlesque: My Life As Camille 2000*, (Self-published, 2017).

intricate expensive costume with an enormous rhinestone diamond in the middle and her gratitude that the designer let her pay it off over time. Camille consistently went into debt to pay off her sparklier and sparklier costumes in the service of becoming a star. Camille's account itself lives in the realm of myth-making, her story wrought with inconsistencies. However, the presence of this historical imaginary reverberates in Ruby's historical archive, informing their description of a day-to-day crisis for performers: "A lot of more low income performers were starting to say, I hate feeling like the quality of my performance is not going to be respected if I'm not dropping money I don't have on costumes and glitter." This difficult to capture "illusion of class" is embedded in classical burlesque looks and referential to a time where burlesque stars indeed had opportunities for class mobility, when the burlesque circuit was a more profitable opportunity for employment and becoming a star was equivalent to a significant promotion.¹⁸⁷ Without the opportunity for well-paid stardom, which is near-impossible for most burlesque performers, I believe the pressure to sparkle in mainstream burlesque has more to do with fantasies of tradition and nostalgia. Queer crip performers can conjure something else with crip glam, those who instead reclaim signifiers of capital with a difference, fantasizing about a world where workers are not reduced to what they can produce but rather what kind of tensions they can dramatize on their decorated surfaces.

"Hair Therapy"¹⁸⁸: Healing through "Strategic Artifice"¹⁸⁹

"Hair therapy," coined by burlesque performer Sweet Lorraine to describe her wig-making practice, exemplifies how queer black femmes in burlesque community create profitable business models, creative responses to racist modes of looking and touching, and modes of imagining alternate structures of intimacy across difference, where cultural workers are not only compensated for their work, but experience it as life-giving and genuinely healing. Audre Lorde writes in "Uses of the Erotic," "[t]he principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal . . . reduc[ing] work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love."¹⁹⁰ adrienne maree brown follows this stream of thought in their text *Pleasure Activism* and asserts that finding pleasure in the midst of the economic pressure to produce is an anti-capitalist act of activism.¹⁹¹ Sweet Lorraine's wig work is further proof that to find pleasure in one's work can be an act of transformative healing.

Sweet Lorraine is a black queer femme performer, producer, actress, and MC in New York who does an enormous amount of community building labor, especially for queer and trans performers of color. Sweet Lorraine and I met at WOW Café theater in New York City, a women and trans theater collective where we worked each other's shows to produce our own through the theater's system of "sweat equity."¹⁹² She created two monthly shows: *Shades of Burlesque* and *SafewordNYC*. *Shades* is an all-black burlesque show created to counter the tokenism women of color experience in the mainly white burlesque shows and the shadeism that black performers

¹⁸⁷ Sands, *Cosmic Queen* and Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*.

¹⁸⁸ Sweet Lorraine, Interview over Facetime audio, (June 27, 2018).

¹⁸⁹ Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/ Style Politics." *New Formations* 3, Winter, (1987).

¹⁹⁰ Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic." In *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 55.

¹⁹¹ adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, (AK Press, 2019).

¹⁹² Through working on other producers' shows, members build up enough sweat equity to produce their own.

experience in POC burlesque shows. Sweet Lorraine's second show, *SafewordNYC*, is a kink-themed burlesque show meant to provide a safe and educational environment for performers and audiences of color to explore kink and consent. In the summer of 2017, she began creating wigs and has since grown so successful, this practice functions as her primary source of income.¹⁹³ Her work has been featured in prominent burlesque and drag shows, including Ru Paul's Drag Race. Sweet Lorraine's interlocking identities as black queer woman, a child of the foster-care system, and a survivor of abuse are embedded her wig-making practice. These identities inform her process of making and also construct it as a space of healing, the therapy in hair therapy.

[Image Redacted]

[Image 6: Nine tiles of Sweet Lorraine NY Wigs displayed side by side with various shades of backgrounds. Sweet Lorraine is in the bottom middle tile, gazing down and to the right, wearing a bright teal wig that matches her eyeshadow.]¹⁹⁴

Sweet Lorraine experiences her work with wigs as deeply intimate, both in locating intimacy with herself spend time caring for these pieces and also in developing her relationships with artists she does work for. The time she pours into these pieces flows backwards, into her own personal history, filtering tenderness inward, as well as outward through her fingers into the high quality pieces she creates. Sweet Lorraine asserted, "My favorite wigs to work with are the ones that people think are throwaways. They're just like, 'Oh I've had this for years. Nothing can be done with this wig, or it's completely tangled. And you know they're just like, if you want it you can have it, but I don't think you can do anything with it.'" Sweet Lorraine explains, when she first started performing burlesque and could not afford a full price wig, she would take people's "throwaway" wigs and work with them to make them usable for her different acts and "do what I need to do to preserve the life of this wig." Her language around the wigs is careful, discussing the wigs like they are full of presence. Having grown up in the foster care system and experienced abuse and neglect as a young person, Lorraine thought of herself as a "throwaway child." "So I really like just taking this wig that people think there's nothing more you can do with it and just putting in that time ... It just felt like a metaphor for my life." In working with these wigs, she felt a deep connection to the objects. "[P]eople think these are throwaway things but they just need some time. They just need you to take them home with them." She describes taking the time to wash, detangle, steam them until they look like new and then styling, curling, and setting them in a brand new beautiful, usable look for some lucky queer or queen. This aesthetic work, so often undervalued, can be considered both cultural labor and care labor, crafting art pieces to be worn and treasured in the making of performance as well as imbuing these objects with a caring intention. In the process of being set and styled, the wigs hold a memory of how they were touched—the care of brushing every hair into place, every precise curl—without this attention to detail the look would not have the same kind of perfect gloss about it, the sheen so deeply coveted in burlesque. In creating a valuable usable object from someone else's trash, Sweet Lorraine pushes back on the messages she received as a young person and continues to hear the echoes of: "everyone thinks if you're femme and you're into beauty or anything like that you're automatically an idiot."¹⁹⁵ However, the process of asking for

¹⁹³ Sweet Lorraine, Interviewed in person and over Facetime audio (June 23, 2017 and June 27, 2018).

¹⁹⁴ "Sweet Lorraine NY Wigs." *Sweet Lorraine*. <http://sweetlorraine.com/sweet-lorraine-wigs/>. (Accessed February 20, 2019).

¹⁹⁵ Sweet Lorraine, Interviewed in person and over Facetime audio (June 23, 2017 and June 27, 2018).

and receiving adequate compensation and accolades for her pieces has helped unembed some of these toxic narratives about femme investment in aesthetics.

Applying Amani Morrison's frame of "Black Hair Haptics" to Sweet Lorraine's work helps to connect Sweet Lorraine's wigmaking practice to her work creating queer black-centered performance community in New York. "Black Hair Haptics" unpacks the way that black women's hair moves people (often white women and often nonconsensually) to touch, while it also serves as a site of interpersonal social conflict and resistance. Morrison writes that "Black hair is not only scriptive, in that it hails and prompts performances laden with sociohistorical meaning; it is also haptic, in that it moves people affectively."¹⁹⁶ The impulse from white women to touch black women's hair, as Morrison unpacks, is informed by long legacies of touch as a mode of assessing black bodies and from a perception of black women's availability for bodily transgression. However, when black women do each other's hair, this practice can be a site of intimacy and connection-building. Employing Morrison's understanding of black hair haptics as a site for unpacking interpersonal transfer and relationality, Sweet Lorraine's wigs function as a haptic site of exchange. When Sweet Lorraine creates her wigs, she is doing the hair of her queer community, building family, reinforcing webs of connection. Sweet Lorraine's care, intention, and cultural labor with these objects works as a type of intimacy, with the potential for building networks of solidarity. The invocation of Black Hair Haptics toward touch is reminiscent of the way that nonconsensual touch is disallowed in burlesque performance, especially in sites that so explicitly emphasize consent such as SafewordNYC, provoking an impossible desire in the audience that they must contend with throughout a performance.¹⁹⁷

In citing their looks on social media and tagging Sweet Lorraine as artist, performers reveal the black cultural labor that goes into creating a look in burlesque and drag. In a social media moment where looks for Instagram are citations that can provide material gain for the artist, social media has been an excellent way for Sweet Lorraine to build her client base, especially when tagged by famous performers, a kind of reparative work of the sort that burlesque as a whole ought to be building toward. When black cultural capital so rarely transforms into economic capital due to systemic racism,¹⁹⁸ Sweet Lorraine's success in marketing her wigs and supporting herself through their sale, is powerful evidence that perverse commodities can have materially beneficial consequences, or said a different way, that her commodities are perverse because she is able to create livable income out of a creative outlet that gives her pleasure. Kobena Mercer's 1987 piece "Black Hair/ Style Politics" offers a reading of black hair styling as "a popular art form articulating a variety of aesthetic 'solutions' to a range of 'problems' created by ideologies of race and racism."¹⁹⁹ He writes that "hair is never a straightforward biological 'fact' because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally 'worked upon' by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it the medium of significant 'statements' about self and society and the codes of value that bind them, or don't."²⁰⁰ All hair is worked upon and exists in a field of relationships to flows of power.

¹⁹⁶ Morrison, Amani. "Black Hair Haptics Touch and Transgressing the Black Female Body." *Meridians* 17, no. 1 (September 1, 2018)

¹⁹⁷ Of course, nonconsensual touch certainly occurs in burlesque spaces, but there are many spaces, Sweet Lorraine's SafewordNYC included, that use burlesque explicitly as a tool to teach that consent is a mandate not a suggestion.

¹⁹⁸ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

¹⁹⁹ Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/ Style Politics." *New Formations*. 3, no. (Winter, 1987), 34.

²⁰⁰ Mercer, "Black Hair/ Style Politics," 34.

Black hair styling is a set of skills that can do powerful political work that forges a kind of counter-appropriation (as opposed to imitation) in response to Eurocentric hair styles. Mercer offers that the "strategic use of artifice" is a site for communal remaking of the self.²⁰¹ Sweet Lorraine's wigs are inherently political as black hair styles, invoking "strategic artifice," a political strategy for undoing racism on intimate and communal levels. This glance into the style politics of wigs is fleeting because, as Maxine Craig models in her text that breaks down how black women's hair as a cultural site has been a social location where movement-building, racist systems, and misogyny coalesce, this archive is incredibly varied and complex, with enormous ramifications for those who live the daily reality of holding these complexities, and I do not have the experiences or resources to be an authority on this subject. However, I think Sweet Lorraine's work serves a pivotal function, integrating healing from trauma with the specificity of embodied identity, the communal power of queer reuse and the impact of pleasure in work as anti-capitalist activism.

Sweet Lorraine's wigs are objects that are a site of potential re-making and multiplicity within queer community. The wig Lorraine pours her care into is not one object with a single purpose, but rather spreads out to become a fantasy that has life in movement, a node of relational transfer between fingers and scalps. Berlant and Edelman write that "an object is not one but a scene or fantasy setting that is living, moving, and available for multiple kinds of encounter."²⁰² An object is a mobile, imaginative space, a relational space, with both a historically informed and futurally-oriented register. The wigs' previous lives and afterlives are animated in performance. The wig's style exists as an imaginative collaboration: Lorraine immerses herself in connective transfer into the style of the queer who commissions her to create the wig, so the object, like so many sparkly collaborations in burlesque, exists in the creative connective tissue spread across time between artists.

From unraveling the strands between Morrison's, Mercer's, and Berlant and Edelman's texts, we can understand Sweet Lorraine's wigs as sites where time, space, and relationships become woven creatively together. The time, process, and care that Lorraine spent healing these revitalized wigs connects performer to maker intimately, in a way that does healing work for both maker and performer. Finally, they exist as relational scenes of potential, as fantasies, citing their own history as they perform their liveness, urging a futural sense of their possibilities of crip glam.

Casting Spells in *COMPOST BIN!s*: the Rhythm of Recycling

Julia Bryan-Wilson describes the "queer textile handmade aesthetic" as "exist[ing] where grit and glitter meet, ostensibly right on the surface of things yet also profound."²⁰³ This idea of the simultaneity of surface and profundity echoes in the Heels on Wheels text, titled *Glitter and Grit*. Damien Luxe, Heather María Ács, and Sabina Ibarrola write in their anthology of their queer femme burlesque troupe "The Heels on Wheels Glitter Roadshow," "[m]aking art that actively complicates what it looks like, sounds like, IS like to shamelessly and lovingly represent femininity, dandyism, fey, femme, queer, and beyond, confronts misogyny and can shift sexist assumptions. And that, my friends, is called social change: our Secret Gay Agenda, covered in glitter, powered by grit."²⁰⁴ According to Luxe, Ács, and Ibarrola and their Secret

²⁰¹ Mercer, "Black Hair/ Style Politics," 49.

²⁰² Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 79.

²⁰³ Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, 72.

²⁰⁴ Luxe, Ács, and Ibarrola, *Glitter and Grit*, 19.

Gay Agenda, the type of social change they seek to invoke is about complicating easy normative assumptions about femininity and other marginalized gender positions. This process of complication is “covered in glitter, powered by grit,” but could just as easily be covered in grit, powered by glitter. Both meanings of grit, the fierce tough femme determination cited in Luxe, Ács, and Ibarrola’s account, and the idea of grit as dirt and muck, emphasize the stickiness of gendered and racialized expectations that surround the performing body.

Queerness has a specific relationship to the sensory. Queer archives are ephemeral, constantly escaping policing, and live perpetually in the realm of unusual objects, memories, feelings.²⁰⁵ Queer identities are linked to desire, embodied fantasy, and to read desire requires imaginative work, the type of work that might be done through the vectors of metaphor and the material tracking of ephemera over objects and through memory. Touch and smell invoke a richness of memory through which much of our disappeared histories can be communicated. Deborah Vargas suggests “lo sucio” as a Latino queer analytic, a way of tracking queer excess via bodily traces, considering scent and taste an archive through which lingering traces of queer experience can be accessed within a hetero and homonormative neoliberal frame that wishes to disappear and cleanse all traces of racialized queer existence.²⁰⁶ By looking at the textures of sensorial experiences of burlesque, we can take into account the microtears in queer culture, the frayed edges, the conflict and hierarchies without glossy generalizations. When much of the work in burlesque worlds has been done by queer femmes of color and subsequently appropriated by white cis nondisabled women, archiving the cultural labor of the black femmes and disabled queers I reference in this chapter aims to undo this erasure.

A show that exemplifies choreographies of queer and racialized contagion is *COMPOST BIN!*, a monthly show at queer-owned Bushwick bar Starr Bar produced by the collective brASS (Brown RadicalAss Burlesque), a group of femmes of color performer/producers who aim to “encourage a disruption of the passive consumption of art and use performance to re-imagine our society.”²⁰⁷ The description of *COMPOST BIN!* from brASS’s webpage frames the show as a practice, claiming “It can be much easier to put on a show about empowerment and love than to actually practice it on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment, person-to-person level. *COMPOST BIN!* is our space to work and live the same values and visions that we perform: liberation, justice, love.” *COMPOST BIN!* is a space for working and living the values of performance, not just performing. It works to create a “visual and visceral experience,” “a space where we hold each other, share resilience, and reconnect with what gives us the force to keep living, fighting and loving this world, each other and ourselves.” The methods that *COMPOST BIN!* uses to forge a visceral experience as well as a visual one involves using performance techniques that make their way inside audience bodies. At the show I attended on July 19, 2018, I ate bright blue jelly beans from a jar labeled “Truvada” to a musical number called “The Truvada Whore Song” and experienced an extravagant group number about the gentrification of the East Village where plants in the audience suddenly got up onto the stage and set up laptops as if it were a recently gentrified café. The MC, exHOTic other appeared in full head-to-toe paper maché orca drag,

²⁰⁵ See Munoz, Jose Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press, 2009 and Rodriguez, Juana Maria. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. New York: NYU Press, 2014.

²⁰⁶ Deborah R. Vargas “Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic”. *American Quarterly* 66 n. 3 2014 p 715-726, 715.

²⁰⁷ “About brASS: Brown RadicalAss Burlesque.” brASS. <http://www.brassburlesque.com/about-brass>. Accessed February 20, 2019.

claiming to be exHOTic orca in order to protect us from the poison ivy on her ass.²⁰⁸ The show used a number of techniques to get inside our bodies as audience members, finally culminating in the ritual performed at every *COMPOST BIN!*, where members of the audience were asked to expose our insides and send all of the worst energy from the last month (the worst political moments, bacteria, farts, glitter “because we need beauty in the pain”) into a genuine New York compost bin, to be transformed into the life-giving energy “to keep living, fighting and loving this world, each other and ourselves.” The tagline of the show, “The world gives us bullshit we turn it into gold,” is reflected in the sparkly gold stars pouring out of the trash bin in the show’s poster. From within the stars, the faces of that month’s featured artists gleam. The show takes the idea of excess, trash, waste, and celebrates the creative power of remaking, especially by “people traditionally on the margins, queer people of color.”²⁰⁹ As is demonstrated through the work of brASS and other queer burlesque performers, especially those experiencing multiple forms of marginalization, this form of queer world-making offers a space for taking the world’s waste and transforming it back into that which gives life, through “strategic artifice,” time magic, “eccentric economics,” composting, and other shimmery strategies of forging sparkle out of trash.

Queer burlesque performers create alternate ideas of stardom that take into account sparkle but filth, shine and also pain, transforming lived experiences of marginalization into a sparkly fantasy space that is simultaneously a “critical utopia,” a space where performance reimagines the passage of time, peeling apart capitalist logics of productivity to reveal tender, vulnerable, messy realities of queer crip creative life, imagination, and survival.²¹⁰ In considering the time of style-making as part of the queer world-making we can understand how by building and accumulating their costumes, queer disabled artists re-work the choreography of capitalist surplus.

As an autoethnographic end-note that draws together various claims from this chapter, I want to share my experience integrating practice as research. Processing my own feelings of femme crip disposability, as well as the residue of researching objects such as those described above, I devised a piece to perform at F8 nightclub in San Francisco, performing a slow, lyrical dance wearing multiple layers of adorned trashbags. I created a strapless top synched in the middle of my chest and a high waisted asymmetrical skirt that could be torn off midturn via a Velcro side fastening. I wore a big unfitted upside down trash bag over my fitted costume, punching armholes in the sides and tearing long slits up the legs. I found in rehearsal that this bag created its own sound and texture to the performance, billowing and catching around me like a plastic bag in the wind and oddly adding to the ethereal feeling of the piece. Cramming as always, I was busy up to the minute of the show gluing big cheap rhinestones onto the outside of my creation. Suddenly backstage, everything started to go wrong. My Velcro wasn’t sticking, and I was sweating profusely into the plastic. My partner/ backstage assistant gaff-taped me into the plastic bag immediately rendering my trash costume one-time use. I had missed the note on the bottle of GemTac that urged users to “Let dry overnight,” so as I started dancing, rhinestones slowly slid down the trash bag costume only to be flung into the audience as I turned and kicked. My collapsible cane, also adorned with hefty trash bag streamers, suddenly collapsed in the middle of the performance. However the satisfaction of tearing a trashbag open only to reveal more sparklier trash bags and then pulling apart my painstakingly crafted trash costume to

²⁰⁸ *COMPOST BIN!* monthly performance. Starr Bar. Brooklyn, NY. (July 19, 2018).

²⁰⁹ brASS. <http://www.brassburlesque.com/about-brass>. Accessed February 20, 2019.

²¹⁰ Munoz, Jose Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press, 2009.

enthusiastic applause from the small audience stays with me, and I can still feel the tingling effects of this moment of emergence, one of my first times using a mobility support in performance. Despite its uselessness, the destroyed costume still lives on in my costume box.

In considering my sweat clinging to the plastic and the glue sticking my hand to my cane, the rhinestones slipping off of me as I turn, congealing on the gritty club floor, these sticky sites between body, object, and place, I'm reminded of artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work categorizing trash, differentiating the undifferentiated, a form of feminized maintenance work.²¹¹ While burlesque might make a mess, the borders of things and flesh dissolving, queer and crip practices of reading burlesque might serve as that maintenance work of unpacking this garbageification, and building in the space for further questioning of how categories around identities coagulate and dissolve.

²¹¹ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. (London: Routledge, 2011), 76.

Chapter 4

Object Choreographies and Gestural Attitudes: A Biography of The Cane

Imagine (or perhaps you don't need to imagine) the feeling of hard smooth wood under your fingers. Sturdy but mobile. When you think of it as a cane, it can feel jarring, pain shooting up your arm into your shoulder, bones jagged on wood. You must think of it as an extra-long arm or a third leg, imagining flesh surrounding it, enveloping it into yourself so that it only holds an easeful amount of weight, balanced. You must swing it gently as you walk, adjusting its movement to your own rhythm. When you use it, your fear eases. Fear of a fall, fear that there will not be seating or that you won't get into the building. You feel powerful, like if anyone fucks with you, you can easily defend yourself. You are a spectacle. You are seen and then quickly unseen out of the corners of eyes. She is a companion and a support, and she has her own kind of beauty, this cane, shiny and dapper. You feel crip pride.

The above is a snapshot of my relationship with my cane, which I use but not always, which I dance with but not always, which changes the way I am seen, spoken to, and touched. I started my dissertation research without a source of mobility support. Over the course of this research, I located community as I located disability identity: crip femmes, disabled dancers, crip burlesque performers and sex workers; they taught me “asking is femme magic,”²¹² that building collective access into movements is building collective liberation,²¹³ and that we can build entire worlds together.²¹⁴ As I touched my cane, my cane touched my research. This chapter is a biography of the crip femme cane, but it's also a biography of crip femme care, the type of care that is exchanged between person and thing, between those who are multiply marginalized. So for this last chapter, I ask you to listen with me to this cane story, perhaps even with a “cane attitude.”²¹⁵

This chapter tracks histories of canes in sexual performance, circulating ways stage canes have been theorized in disability studies and highlighting complexities of the sticky ways that canes in performance are used and read. In this chapter I will cite examples from my research and will supplement these with autoethnographic notes from my own experience as a daily cane user, drawing also from theater history, prop studies, and theorizations of mobility devices through new materialist and disability studies lenses. Here I wish to bring prop studies, an underdeveloped field especially in relationship to dance, together with critical disability studies, to explore *object choreographies*, a term I am using to consider the ways things move (in all senses of the word—the way things are moved, the way things move through space, and the liminal space of movement between objectified person and personified object) in order to put into words the summoning work done by props and medical devices. Objects have permeated many chapters of this dissertation. In Chapter 2, I discussed how crip eroto-technoscience transforms devices to make them perform differently. Chapter 3 looked at objects on the peripheries of bodies as perverse commodities, queering ableist capitalist mandates of

²¹² Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Tonguebreaker*. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 43.

²¹³ Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Our Movement Is Our People, A Disability Justice Primer*. 2nd ed., (2020).

²¹⁴ Bay Area Disabled Dance Collective, Chronic Crip Femmes (a support group of disabled femmes in academia, strategizing, writing, reading, supporting each other).

²¹⁵ Gerda Taranow, *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art Within the Legend*, (Princeton University Press, 2016), 130.

productivity in performance. This chapter draws together historical sources and prop theory to expand props as a generative category to include disability stage objects neither to reduce disability devices to their theatrical purpose nor to presume that all objects that represent disability onstage are useful for disabled bodies but to place these objects in an in-between category. As extensions of human bodies (or because human bodies are extensions of these objects), they are items worthy of closer consideration than they have thus far broadly received in the studies of theater, dance, and sexual culture.

Drawing on historical sources, voices across disability studies, and three cane-user performer experiences (including my own), I assert that canes point to both the ways burlesque's histories of racial violence have been invisibilized as well as the collusion of disability culture in the evacuation of race from sexual culture histories. I also argue that the tension between canes' uses as medical device and theatrical stage object, that is, the tension between device and prop, evokes the legacy of cripple drag that is ever-present in burlesque while simultaneously invisibilized. This prop/device tension causes problems for disabled performers and audiences, while also offering possibilities for reclaiming and reimagining.

Shine Bright Like A Show Cane

An expectant audience explodes in preemptive support as the next act is announced in the Toronto Burlesque School's graduation performance.²¹⁶ The lights come up on Versace la Bismalva kneeling and glittering. The first line of Rihanna's song "Diamonds," "Shine bright like a diamond" echoes through the space like the light gleaming off of Versace's rhinestones and lace. Versace's face is veiled, their pink hair crowned in a garland of white flowers, and their body is covered in a floor-length white lace robe. Their cane is covered in sparkles, and they use it to rise to their feet. They lean to the side, allowing their hand to slide down the length of the shimmering object and then caressingly drawing it back up. They gently let the cane reside on the chair upstage and swoop back around to remove their gloves, one finger at a time. The cane does not move very much at the beginning of the piece, and simply swings by their side to support their locomotion. However, just like a body covered in glitter, under stage lights, the tiniest movement of the cane sets off an infinite cascade of choreographies of light reflecting from tiny mirrored surface to surface.

As the bright spotlight tightens on Versace, we see the tender care in the choreography of their hands, which pulse to music as they move lovingly over their body, their parted lips visible from under the veil covering their face. After they remove their robe, the cane performs its own expressive notes in the air, spinning wildly above Versace's head as they march to the beat back and forth across the stage. Then they slide their cane through each of their shimmering bra straps. They caress their chest with the cane a few times, bending their knees for a slight body roll that ripples into their mobility device. They turn and unhook their bra, finally facing the audience and sliding their cane forward until very gently their bra releases off their body and slides lightly to the floor. They end the piece standing, facing us, cane on the ground stabilizing them.

Versace La Bismalva, whose presence has already graced chapter 3 of this dissertation, uses their cane in their act, not only to support their movement and their aesthetic, but to support their inner self, to give them the strength to be able to confront the challenges of dancing while disabled onstage. Versace uses the cane as a tool of the reveal, employing it to unleash their chest from their bra. It accents the choreography and lighting effects, extending sparkle to the far reaches of the stage with its movement. It rests and is still on the back of the chair, guaranteeing

²¹⁶ Versace La Bismalva. "Diamonds." Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/259695939>. (March 12, 2018).

Versace that it will be there if they need it for support. Versace invokes the cane's historical aesthetic connotations, using it as marching band baton, as flashy gender-thwarting show piece.

Versace stirs histories of cane use with their choreography and tells a story of care between medical device and disabled body. Performance work with objects is an example of engaging disability as methodology, allowing us to hold multiplicities, contradictions, histories, and futures, all embedded in the work of historical rewriting and the construction of fantasy key to burlesque performance. Crip glam makes way for expansive possibilities for creative praxis with disabled resources around performance, replacing lack with abundance and offering alternatives to capitalist constructions of experiencing glamour.

A Brief History of Cane-ography

An analysis of stage objects is missing from the canon of dance studies, especially a consideration of the unique role played by disability devices in performance. Attention to the choreographies of these objects, the way that they are both manipulated through choreography and move through audience perception, illuminates the work of disabled performance in upending normative ideas of human/object dichotomies. Through crip glam, a type of femme magic and crip science, performers aesthetically induce alternate imaginings of compulsory heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and whiteness. This chapter pays special attention to disabled objects onstage, noting that, as Julia Watts Belser articulates, "alternative relationality with 'crippled things' is a widespread, politically potent aspect of disability culture."²¹⁷ For disabled performers, mobility aids, audio aids, visual aids, are all objects and technologies that ensure our creative futures, technologies that merge with body to make not only creating art but surviving possible. Burlesque is marked by its characteristic repetition with a difference, its campy side eye. The deployment of disabled devices in burlesque functions as a commentary on everyday use. This second look is often characterized by adornment that deviates from the everyday, marking these objects as disabled, and activating them to talk back, holding a story and critique. Objects like Versace's show cane, whose construction was detailed in Chapter 3, exist in tension between everyday medical device and theatrical stage object. Tracking disabled stage objects' stories is an opportunity to cite dance performance in the context of its political genealogies, following dance historian and Black Studies scholar Jayna Brown's imperative to track the political lines of gestural exchange.²¹⁸

To trace how Versace's "cane-ography" makes meaning, we must reach back into the history of burlesque and trace the lineage of the cane. According to Andrew Sofer, "no recognizable object arrives on stage innocent. Objects bring their own historical, cultural, and ideological baggage on stage with them."²¹⁹ He claims that "props are haunted mediums."²²⁰ If objects are non-innocent and bring with them far more than the most obvious associations, what ghosts does Versace's cane evoke? What choreographic methods have been crafted by Versace and other dancers for activating ghosts through canes? Allowing Versace's cane to be examined apart from "innocence" also means that we can peel apart the affect of whiteness, a presumed innocence in the face of racial hierarchies, one that protects white bodies and sustains white

²¹⁷ Julia Watts Belser, "Vital Wheels: Disability, Relationality, and the Queer Animacy of Vibrant Things," *Hypatia*, 31, no. 1, (Winter 2016): 8.

²¹⁸ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 7.

²¹⁹ Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 17.

²²⁰ Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, 27.

privilege.²²¹ Rather, study of the cane reveals that racial drag is intricately bound in gendered drag and crip drag, and the constructions of each of these categories of identity can be charted through objects onstage. Sofer explains that stage objects can play multiple roles: "precision tools" "material ghosts," and "time machines," summoning offstage histories, invoking symbolic use onstage, and functioning as a portal between worlds.²²² The perception of a cane onstage for viewers, through its accumulation of associations, can fulfill Sofer's idea of props as time machines by evoking queer, racialized, and disabled histories of burlesque. Histories of class, disability, gender, and racial drag are stirred up through the cane's onstage use. Increased attention to these histories has the possibility to change the way audiences interpret burlesque and the ways performers construct their pieces.

In this section of this chapter, I dive into the associations with canes as stage objects that invoke histories of minstrelsy in burlesque. By close reading the cane's associations throughout theater history, we can tease apart some of the modes through which disability and race have been culturally coproduced. As discussed in the Introduction, burlesque evolved out of vaudeville, which was modeled after the performance genre of minstrelsy. Racial appropriation and exotification decorate its most basic gestures and costumes, lining the genre with the specter of histories of racial violence that continue to influence contemporary performance. Despite vaudeville's gradual loss of its preoccupation with blackface, objects like the cane maintain an affective, haptic resonance, representing a racial and gendered fluidity.²²³ The cane, despite and through its use by white bodies, does not lose this residue in performance, transferring this discomfort to the audience while swirling under the surface with a dual sense of suspicion around the disability of performer while simultaneously noting the presence of racial drag: questioning the appropriateness and safety of disabled performers dancing, while also questioning the authenticity of the disability with the lurking and racialized threat of the performance of disability for the purposes of economic swindle hovering under the surface. In this way the cane is a stage object that invokes complex histories of racial drag and crip drag.

Over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and the US, the cane was considered a potential weapon. Swords were often hidden inside of canes, along with a plethora of other useful objects: compasses, perfume, medicines, etc,²²⁴ and canes themselves were also used in self-defense.²²⁵ In the 17th century, canes were considered handy in dismounting from carriages and were helpful for balance, since the fashion of the time mandated high heels for people of all genders, functioning as support for disabling fashion.²²⁶ During the 18th century, walking sticks became elements of more universal style, conveying elegance, a symbol of wealth.²²⁷ The etiquette of canes used to portray class status demanded that canes not be used to lean on, suggesting that these canes were not meant to be used as mobility devices. However many depictions of cane users would show them leaning on their sticks, suggesting that these devices were indeed used to support daily function, this elegant asymmetry of leaning

²²¹ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

²²² Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, 12,3.

²²³ Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things Material Culture and the Performance of Race." *Social Text* 27, no. 4 101 (December 21, 2009): 67–94.

²²⁴ Kurt Stein, *Canes & Walking Sticks*, (York: Liberty Cap Books, 1974), 17, 125, 19.

²²⁵ Walters, Jonathan "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner, (1997).

²²⁶ Stein, *Canes & Walking Sticks*, 17.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

functioning as disability aesthetic.²²⁸ Canes of the 17th-18th centuries would often be constructed with “a characteristic ridge running along its entire length, resembling in a way the shin of a human leg, lending a great deal of strength and stiffness to the cane.”²²⁹ This aesthetic of cane as shin, constructed in resemblance to a human leg while supporting the leg’s function, offers a historical citation for the blurred point of departure between body and support device.

Early blackface performance cited the trope of the cane as a symbol of wealth in its racist imagery depicting the character of the black dandy, free and outfitted spectacularly, often carrying a walking cane. Monica Miller, who details this character’s cultural role in *Slaves to Fashion* writes, “the dandy on stage, a white performer in blackface, often cross-dressing in terms of race, gender, and class, comes alive in the pursuit and performance of these anxieties, in the production of a queerness that lingers after the curtain goes down and the burnt cork is removed.”²³⁰ By anxieties Miller refers to the possibility, stage-crafted as threat, of an upwardly mobile, sexually desirable free black masculinity. Miller theorizes the use of the monocle in blackface performance as performing a type of second look, and I speculate that a close-reading of the cane in minstrelsy might interpret the cane as the materialization of a sense of threat, referencing canes’ history of use as weapons. Miller describes the costuming for one of the first blackface acts, Long-Tail Blue from 1827, featuring “tightly fitting pantaloons, a lacy jabot, a silk hat, baubeles dangling from his waistband, a lorgnon, which he held up with an effeminate gesture, and occasionally a walking cane,” associating through the use of costume sexual threat and class critique.²³¹ Canes call upon the effeminate masculinity of the dandy, signaled through the use of so-called “fluffy accessories.”²³² Miller features illustrations of other blackface characters including Dandy Jim, Long-Tail Blue, and Philadelphia Swanky, all of whom hold canes as symbol of class and gender mobility, presumably also participating in the construction of a costume that conveys inappropriate sexuality, the “production of a queerness that lingers.”²³³ The threat of miscegenation was intimately tied to the visibility of sexuality, of which the cane was an indicator. In contemporary contexts, the cane’s queerness and erotics can never be disentangled from its racialization. Reflecting back on Versace La Bismalva’s performance, the case’s use as a part of the tease and thus an erotic indicator by a white performer is meant to deploy a sense of erotic thrill. Attention to the lineage of this stage object can help to untangle the flow of feeling resulting from its use, how the cane’s tease can invoke a sense of impending danger alongside an incitement of desire, while whiteness, or the use of the cane by a white body, seeks to erase these lineages, leaving audiences with a citationless questioning of why the cane evokes erotic threat.

As the genre of vaudeville evolved out of minstrelsy, tropes of class-based, gender, and racial transgression persisted. Canes remained an accessory to vaudevillian character acts and dance numbers. In vaudeville, an emergent use of the cane was titled the “Vaudeville Hook.”²³⁴ This hook, a large Shepherd’s crook, would be used to remove people from stage, becoming a

²²⁸ Ibid, 19.

²²⁹ Ibid, 15-17.

²³⁰ Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2009), 102.

²³¹ Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 98.

²³² Ibid, 9.

²³³ Ibid, 100, 101, and 107.

²³⁴ “Vaudeville Hook,” *TV Tropes*, (Accessed February 1, 2019), <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/VaudevilleHook>.

trope after its use was popularized in the Apollo theater.²³⁵ When the hook appears in cartoon form, it often acts of its own accord, disconnected from a user. It is a disembodied cane, one that decides who should stay onstage and who must go, which acts are allowed to continue, functioning as a cane that curates. This is an example of a prop that holds meaning apart from its actor, a prop that is activated from within in its gesture of dictating the length of performance, functioning as an extension of an invisible critic or audience. In this way, the cane plays a supportive function of the audience, imbuing the audience with the agency to dictate the path of the performance. Along with a sense of threat and class, gender, and racial transgression, the cane also is a punctum of power, a representation of the possibilities of audience intervention in nightlife.



[Image 7: Animated image from unknown source depicting a dandy with tails and striped pantaloons suspended in a leap supported only by his cane as disembodied cane reaches from the side of the stage to sweep him away]

A Brief Theory of “Cane Attitude”

Through these interpretations of the cane’s conflicting meanings as provocative, judgmental, satirical, violent, there are also ways that the presence of a cane persists through gesture without the object’s presence onstage. In Ilmar Taimre’s assessment of how reproduction changes, amplifies and ensures the survival of artistic work, he examines representations of theatrical icon Sarah Bernhardt posed with and without her cane.²³⁶ Bernhardt used a cane after she was injured in a stage accident, and as the representation of her disability shifted over the course of different theatrical representations, it was still identifiable in Bernhardt’s poses, which Bernhardt scholar Glenda Taranow referred to as a “cane attitude:” “[c]onsisting of one arm fully or partially extended, and the other arm fully extended, this attitude grounds the gesture of the

²³⁵ “Vaudeville Hook,” *TV Tropes*.

²³⁶ Ilmar Taimre, “Andy Warhol, Sarah Bernhardt, and the ‘Original Copy,’” *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture*, 3, no. 2, (2018): 188–233.

fully extended arm with the vertical or diagonal line of the cane,” discussing how sometimes the line of the cane would be an umbrella or a particularly long draped sleeve.²³⁷ As shown through Bernhardt’s representations, disability can be signaled without visible markers, through gesture or choreography, or, as Taimre and Taranow note, through costuming, props, and aesthetic. In this way, the invisibilization of disability in theatrical performance can be combatted through the tracing of a “cane attitude” in disabled performance, a way to work against crip drag and toward the historical and contemporary valuation of disabled performance. Queer disability studies scholar Melissa Cole writes about the role of “ugly gestures,” detailing how a disabled way of movement, including a limp, could be used as evidence in the service of criminalizing disabled bodies.²³⁸ So the ugliness of a mobility device spreads to a body in need of a mobility device, and these gestures indicative of disability are a part of a disability aesthetic. A cane attitude points to the liminal and continuous space between disability device and body, but it also serves to forge an additional intervention in performance analysis, asking that artists and critics take notice of the indication of disability not only through a disability device, but also through the presence of a “cane attitude,” those gestures that indicate disability aesthetically. This intervention forces a more critical eye toward identifying the appropriation of disability aesthetics, identity, and gestures. In postmodern dance, when disabled gestures such as stimming, spastic movements, limps, and unexpected “pedestrian” movement are employed aesthetically to make a performance “edgy,” critics and theorists must pay closer attention to what gestures appropriate disability toward an avant-garde aesthetic, especially when the performance of disabled gestures so starkly contrasts with the incredible dearth of disabled performers and lack of accessible stages.

Mobility devices play a special role in crip drag as well as in the practice of dragging while crip. For a brief deviation into burlesque’s sister art form, drag, and into mainstream queer performance, I turn here to the appearance of mobility devices over the last few seasons of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. In Season 11, Episode 5, Brook Lynn Hytes’ “Milf Eleganza” runway look included a walking cane signaling both age and class, elegance and emergent decrepitude.²³⁹ The contrast was stark when in the following episode, Yvie Oddly, season winner, navigated walking with a cane due to an injury stemming from her connective tissue disorder EDS. Yvie’s cane, shiny gold for the “All that Glitters is Gold” Runway Theme, is curved at the top with a rubber tip that slants outward slightly for stability, while Brook Lynn’s cane was extremely thin with a tiny tip and a large ball at the top, a cane that is ergonomically challenging to hold and can cause hand cramps (something I personally discovered when using a faux ivory goat head cane for my Satanic blood ritual piece).²⁴⁰ The use of both Yvie’s and Brook Lynn’s canes in consecutive episodes of *Drag Race* highlighted for me the entanglement of the specter of crip drag, and all of its proliferation of meanings as detailed in this dissertation’s “Introduction,” alongside the complications of drag as disabled performer, in the context of gender performance and transgression. Unlike nondisabled contestant A’whora’s use of a rhinestoned wheelchair and IV

²³⁷ Gerda Taranow, *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art Within the Legend*, (Princeton University Press, 2016), 130.

²³⁸ Melissa Cole qtd in Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. (New York; Chesham: New York University Press, 2010), 10.

²³⁹“RuPaul’s Drag Race (Season 11)/ Queens’ Looks,” *Drag Race Wiki*. Fandom.com, [https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race_\(Season_11\)/Queens%27_Looks#Yvie_Oddly](https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race_(Season_11)/Queens%27_Looks#Yvie_Oddly). (Accessed April 17, 2021).

²⁴⁰ The cane, which I found at a prop store in midtown Manhattan was hollow, perfect for filling with red food coloring and chocolate syrup, but not perfect for using for mobility support. I brought my foldable medical cane to use getting on and off the stage.

as prop in RuPaul's Drag Race UK Season 2 in March of 2021, I find Brook Lynn's nondisabled use of a cane less clearly a form of crippling up, because though Brook Lynn uses a cane, she does not employ a cane attitude, vying instead for a clearer reference to drag across age and class.²⁴¹ Still, when contrasted with Yvie's cane, which was much more effective for walking and dancing support, and compounded with the harassment Yvie received throughout the season when she attempted to ask for her access needs to be met, these two uses of canes in mainstream drag culture signal that ableism is an ever-present facet of queer sexual culture, and the rage and pain I detail here and in previous chapters stem from many years of accumulated harm done to sick and disabled performer body-minds. As articulated by the performance group Heels on Wheels, "Until people who are truly on the fringe are able to take center stage, consistently, sustainably, and with respect, there is still work to be done. So we make our own stages."²⁴² This labor of constructing purposefully inclusive and nondiscriminatory stages is the work of crip glam, the work that queer and disabled performers and performers of color have done to (often literally) remake burlesque stages to construct them as accessible sites of reclaiming power and sexual agency, despite and because of the long legacies of burlesque stages as spaces of theft, exotification, ableism, and exploitation.

The question of disabled stage objects' ambiguous position between object, accessory, medical device, and body that a cane attitude raises is an intimate one as many disabled people often already consider ourselves cyborgs. Our bodies are supported by objects that enhance or supplement body systems, senses, chemicals, and mobility. The Toronto-based disabled circus troupe, the Cyborg Circus, creates work to test limits of cyborg bodies using the pedagogy of the circus, a space where disabled and nondisabled performers complete superhuman feats, testing the border between human and posthuman, haunting the difference between liveness and death, a space disabled bodies always already inhabit.²⁴³ If we examine Haraway's conceit of the cyborg closer, we find that disabled burlesque performers fulfill functional roles of cyborgs in more ways than one. "The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence."²⁴⁴ Through burlesque's commitment to camp, and thus, rewriting normal with a difference, disabled performers enact myriad cyborgian qualities. Haraway's employment of women of color as less effective cyborgs limits her analysis. Jasbir Puar writes that Haraway's intent to thwart binaries in considering animal-human and machine as "leaky" effectively reinstates dichotomies between human and machine.²⁴⁵ Rather queer crip burlesque performers perhaps closer approximate "cyborgian goddesses," as Puar suggests, a "becoming-intersectional assemblage." This term might more approximate the churning nature of associations that vibrate between bodies, histories, and objects in these performances: the ways bodies and things are constantly appropriating and

²⁴¹ Meg Fozzard. "RuPaul's Drag Race and its Complex Relationship with Disability," *The Unwritten: Disabled stories. Not inspiration.* <https://www.theunwritten.co.uk/2021/03/18/rupauls-drag-race-and-its-complex-relationship-with-disability/>. (March 18, 2021).

²⁴² Damien Luxe, Heather Maria Ács, Sabina Ibarrola (eds) and Heels on Wheels Group. *Glitter & Grit: Queer Performance from the Heels on Wheels Femme Galaxy*. 2nd Edition, 1st printing, (Publication Studio, Portland, 2016), 17.

²⁴³ Shay Erlich, "Welcome to The Cyborg Circus Show: Imagining Disability Futures Beyond Normative Bodies A Manifesto," *Performance Matters*, 4, no. 1–2 (March 20, 2018): 147–50.

²⁴⁴ Donna J. Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 157.

²⁴⁵ Jasbir K. Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,'" *Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory*," *philoSOPHIA*, 2, no.1 (2012): 49-66.

reappropriating, across race, gender and disability, becoming other, which is constantly fluctuating with affect and ideas of authenticity, emotional vulnerability, and expressions of personal truth.

Disabled performers establish queer relationships with their objects, which are integral to not only performance but also daily life, disrupting borders between performer and stage, prop and device, and indeed object and human. Shannon Jackson further draws out the relationship between prop and body: "The vitality of the prop comes in the precarious realization that the object you hold is also one that holds you."²⁴⁶ Jackson references an interdependence between prop and actor, made apparent through a sense of being figuratively held in the act of physically holding. This is never truer than in the case of medical devices onstage. For disabled performers our embodied technologies hold us offstage as well, so they do not, like most props, lose their meaning in the return to the prop house.²⁴⁷ They involve a different kind of use, one that is intimate off and onstage. Stage medical devices are ghosts that never disappear, time machines that never turn off, tools that never lose their function. A medical device that supports the performer's body exists in an object-human interdependence, and this blurs the borders of the stage.

In disabled performance, props are loaded with historical significations, while simultaneously playing important roles in supporting the body's movement and senses. Petra Kuppers explicates Merleau-Ponty's case study of disability and embodied perception using the example of a blind man and his cane. She cites Merleau-Ponty: "The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight."²⁴⁸ Kuppers asserts that Ponty is evoking this cane-body interrelation as cyborgian, that "appropriating fresh instruments" constructs the body as malleable, subject to change, able to expand to incorporate new technologies.²⁴⁹ Kuppers' disability culture analysis of cane/body relations is reminiscent of work by Shannon Jackson on the etymology of prop and its supportive function. Jackson cites the definition of prop: "A stick, rod, pole, stake, or beam used as temporary support or to keep something in position, especially one not forming an integral part of the thing supported; (in extended use) anything that serves to support something or keep it in place."²⁵⁰ By definition, a prop is actually related to the use and purpose of a cane. A cane literally props people up and figuratively serves as support. It can physically support a performers' movement, while the presence of a mobility device onstage can emotionally support a performers' state of mind, so that if they anticipate needing physical support, they can reach for it at any time. Confronting a history of disabled objects appearing onstage without disabled bodies, where nondisabled actors indicate their disability through the use of disabled stage objects, when disabled performers eroticize their medical devices, these devices tell a complex and intimate story bridging multiple meanings of and uses for props.

In burlesque where props must express narrative clearly and efficiently, disabled stage objects play theatrical roles, supporting character and plot development. Darren Harbour,

²⁴⁶ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2011), 80.

²⁴⁷ Jackson, *Social Works*, 76.

²⁴⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Translated by Donald Landes, (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 1

²⁴⁹ Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 106.

²⁵⁰ Jackson, *Social Works*, 80.

founder of Imagine Blind Players, explains that his all-blind theater company usually does not use canes onstage; rather they craft the set so that it is less dangerous for blind and visually impaired people to move around on it. However, if he needs a cane, he uses an object that is a part of the character and facilitates the characters' development. He cited the example of a dapper character who uses an umbrella instead of cane.²⁵¹ Examining Harbour's use of character-driven props as mobility devices within the context of Merleau-Ponty's incorporation of "fresh instruments" into the disabled body, it is clear that disabled performance involves a subsuming of disabled theater objects into the body, transforming both body and prop.

So how does this theory of cane attitude further animate Versace La Bismalva's burlesque piece? Understanding disabled stage objects as multifunctional politicizes the way we read disabled dance, combatting the ableist assumptions that disabled devices only serve a singular medical function and that all disabled people use their devices in the same way. In "Diamonds," Versace brings both their cane and a chair onstage, and their choreography and use of these objects offers a further exploration of the possibilities of crip time machines, props interwoven with trauma time through improvised performance. Versace described how rather than preventing stumbles and falls, the presence of their cane onstage made them feel safer, more stable to face the fear of the fall. "[I]t took me a really long time to even accept the fact that I needed a cane. I found that by bringing a cane onstage it gave me more confidence."²⁵² Both the cane and the chair act as potential mobility support, but Versace's words ask us to reconsider how mobility devices may act as forms of emotional support as well, in the possibility of a last minute shift in capacity necessitating improvisation.

Part of my chronic illness issue is that my legs like to give out on me for no reason. And as a dancer it's one of my biggest fears that it's gonna happen onstage. Having a cane and having a chair, having both items onstage for me in this act especially, means that I can do movement without fear of if I do lose my footing or my legs go out from under me, I have something I can grab. I have something I can grab. I can hold onto it and I can make it look like part of the act if I have to do it. But if [...] it's going to happen, I'm going to embrace it and let it happen. The falling.²⁵³

The type of planning and improvisation required in Versace's piece involves a crip relationship to time since they are simultaneously performing and planning for the possibilities of falling, of suddenly sitting, or of needing to grab their cane. The chair and cane are not used to actively prevent a fall in Versace's piece. Rather they serve as fortifying presences that can be incorporated into an act in the event of a fall. The audience watches Versace set their cane down and stand and walk without it. In watching this performance, the audience is complicit in perhaps letting them fall, agreeing to witness a fall without intervening. The potential fluidity between standing and falling hangs over the audience, forcing them to contend with the ableist impulse to "help." In the "curative imaginary," as detailed by queer crip theorist Allison Kafer, a disabled body not in need of intervention is unimaginable.²⁵⁴ Versace's choice to forsake stability to perform standing up does disruptive work to this imaginary by asking the audience to contend with their knowledge of the possibility of the fall.

²⁵¹ Darren Harbour, "It's Right in Front of You" Keynote Presentation, EMU Disability Arts Symposium. (December 2, 2019).

²⁵² Versace La Bismalva, Facetime, Interviewed July 11, 2018.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

Versace's performance with and without their cane does queer work with time in that their work refuses the capitalist logic of preserving the body for productive means and instead crafting space for pleasure, for reworking care, for healing from trauma, with the emotional support of their cane. Drawing again on Shannon Jackson's breakdown of the different uses and definitions of prop, the word prop is used to convey "a person or thing that is a major source of support or assistance; a provider of help or comfort."²⁵⁵ This definition activates prop in its capacity for support. Versace's performance encourages us to look at medical devices beyond physical support and toward possibilities of co-presence.

During our interview, Versace recalled that a disabled person from the audience approached them after one show, treating them with suspicion and chastising them for the way they used the cane in performance. She told them their act was a "slap in the face to daily cane users," refusing to give more constructive feedback.²⁵⁶ This reception tells us that for at least some disabled viewers, a deviation from the scriptive role of the cane onstage is perceived as having damaging consequences for other disabled people. When I asked Versace about the tension between medical device and prop in their use of the cane, they responded that their cane "is not a prop because [they] use it as a usable thing in [their] act."²⁵⁷ Versace's response is linked to the idea of prop as thing that is useful onstage but loses its use offstage, animated when it is touched by the performers' hands and then stored in the prop closet until the next show. Even though their self-described "show cane" is amended from everyday use through their painstaking rhinestoning process, it is still used to support their disabled body to navigate the stage space, the same purpose for which an offstage cane is used. Though I am of the mind that if a disabled performer chooses to use their device off-script onstage, this can do powerful reclaiming work for the performer and audience in milking joy from an object so often considered "ugly," I also see where this audience member might be coming from. Exuberant or erotic use of a cane onstage could possibly contribute to an audience's ableism, justifying discriminatory views of disabled people as "acting disabled" in order to game the system for social security benefits and seats on crowded public transit. Both disabled performers and audiences are suspended between the change-making potential of theatrical re-scripting of disability devices and a mandate of respectability, born out of fear, to use devices in a way that shows they are necessary, not luxuries.

Returning to Sofer's assertion that "no recognizable object arrives on stage innocent," I want to connect the lack of innocence of stage objects to a lack of innocence of stage performers. Despite growing awareness of burlesque's history of racial violence in public memory, burlesque, like many forms of American performance, is often accompanied by a cultural amnesia that whitewashes its history, evacuating it of the memory of the violence of appropriation and exotification. This purposeful forgetting or willful ignorance accompanies individual acts and entire shows with a casualness that makes this art form deeply unsafe for many marginalized people. Importantly, the three performers I discuss in this chapter, Versace La Bismalva, Robyn Swing, and myself are all white, so it is necessary to unpack how whiteness is affectively stirred up or simmered down in burlesque performance through the vessel of the cane.

Allowing identity-based associations with the cane to remain invisible is a result of privilege, but an infusion of citation can give texture to their reception. The cane can invite or

²⁵⁵ Jackson, *Social Works*, 79.

²⁵⁶ Versace La Bismalva, Facetime, Interviewed July 11, 2018.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

hide stories around race and disability when used onstage, off-script or not-as-prescribed. The frame of crip glam holds space for the activation of these questions and for the performer and audience to become entangled in their response. In *White Innocence*, Dutch scholar of gender, sexuality, and race Gloria Wekker connects innocence to whiteness as a layered and contradictory phenomenon.²⁵⁸ Innocence often refers to soft, harmless, childlike, feminine qualities, while simultaneously pointing to privilege, entitlement, and violence. “Loss of innocence, that is, knowing and acknowledging the work of race” rather than invoking “guilt, repentance, restitution, recognition, responsibility, and solidarity” often instead results in racist violence and the “continued cover-up of structural racism.”²⁵⁹ Burlesque performers and audiences work hard to maintain a sense of innocence re: burlesque’s racist past, and even when innocence is lost and recognition of this harm is highlighted, reactions by performers and audiences can be defensive, protecting their participation in the art form they have invested so much in. Signifiers that invoke memories of these origins such as canes, are quickly subsumed back into the vast churning archive of innocence. For white disabled performers, the cane sometimes functions as a prop, invoking the historical archive cited above, but also, as discussed, functions as an extension of the disabled body. Thus canes’ loss of innocence opens a portal into how whiteness becomes embedded in our disabled bodies: revealing the entanglement of whiteness with the neoliberal structures that dictate disabled peoples’ access to services, health insurance, and mobility devices, all inseparable from racial capitalism. In this way whiteness impacts the shape of our gestures quite literally, protecting Versace from their fall, supporting Robyn Swing (who I discuss in the following section) in her backbend, and eliminating my limp. Is it possible for a medical device to make a person more visibly disabled with less visibly disabled gestures? And what is the impact of white supremacy on making disabled gestures and aesthetics less clearly crip? Eliminating innocence and exposing ignorance is one pathway toward addressing the harm present in burlesque spaces. Observing the entanglement between ableism and racism in theater spaces and even in the conceit of theatricality should be an enormous motivation for white disabled people to move toward undoing racist burlesque tropes and appropriative practices. If we want an end to crip drag and for disability art to be cited and compensated, we must also upend the culture of innocence that protects white supremacy, as it is wound up in ableism and in all of its overt and insidious forms.

Stick-y (S)ob-jects: Canes’ Conundrums

In the following section, I unpack stick-y situations, where canes’ complicated position between props and medical devices have caused tension and conflict, their existence as an extension of the disabled body and position as stage object causing a messy and often emotional (s)ob-ject position. My interest in this tension between medical device and prop stemmed from a backstage experience I had at one of my first burlesque shows. The MC came up to me after my piece to offer some unsolicited feedback. There was a lot he could have said about this piece—I was a postmodern dancer just learning the norms of burlesque and the piece I had performed, an abstract and gestural dance reflected this. However, he focused his critique on my use of the cane, telling me I needed a stronger narrative with my prop since it was unclear how the cane was related to the story of the piece. I explained that the cane was not a prop but rather a medical device that I use daily and thus have incorporated into my acts as I do the rest of my body. I was

²⁵⁸ Wekker, Gloria. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 18

²⁵⁹ Wekker, *White Innocence*, 18.

stumbling over my words, shaking with fury. The MC's personal story about me infiltrated the audience's experience of my piece, as he introduced me with a fabricated narrative about how I had overcome a very sad disabling injury, emphasizing the inspiring nature of my story. I don't see my disability as something I've overcome, and I resent the framing as inspirational, both of these preconceptions at best eye-roll-worthy and at worst violent disability tropes. Based off of advice I received from my interlocutor and mentor Jacqueline Boxx, for the next show I wrote a script of my intro and insisted the host read that instead of improvising. I continue to reflect on how the MC's mind was so full of fictions about disabled bodies that he could not help but impose them onto my body. The presence of my cane, in his interpretation, must have been a prop because the presence of a disabled body on the (inaccessible) stage was impossible to imagine. The cane conjures these fictions and carves them into material consequences, which I felt in my bones, unsure whether the pain of the next few days was a consequence of dancing or the imposition of the MC's narrative on my body and erasure of my own. In a performance genre where canes directly communicate vaudevillian tropes and are often used without a medical purpose, where wheelchairs are frequently used as props for able-bodied performers,²⁶⁰ the space between disability and theatrically is slippery and perhaps only visible to those who look for it.

Disabled burlesque artist and costume designer Robyn Swing had a different interpretation of my cane-ography. I met Robyn Swing at BurlyCon 2019. My interlocutor Chaos X Machina introduced us when we paused at Robyn Swing's booth at the vendor fair. I immediately fell in love with a gorgeous black satin slip that Robyn Swing had amended, fitting it with two shiny incandescent hanging baubles and a Meribou feather trim, and it currently hangs splendidly in my closet. She included a burlesque piece of mine in her presentation for BurlyCon 2020 following a call for pieces involving mobility devices on Facebook. A rare opportunity to look at each others' performance work in a noncritical format, Robyn's presentation, "The Beat Goes On: Expression Across Mobility," highlighted the opportunities and obstacles afforded disabled burlesque performers through the use of mobility devices onstage.²⁶¹ The space was a virtual room of about twenty disabled burlesque performers, sharing anecdotes, advice, and affirmations of each other's work.

In her workshop, discussing albeit a different piece than the one referenced above, she notes that I don't use my cane as a prop, but rather as support and aesthetic tool. She discussed how I use my cane to support myself while balancing on one leg and extending the other, during turns and kicks [See Image 8]. She also pointed to how I sometimes integrate my cane into arm gestures when I pose, giving my lines asymmetrically double the length. The dichotomy between prop and support device as experienced by myself and Versace points to legacies of trauma around crip drag. It is possible that my early experience of having my disability story so thoroughly misread around my performance onstage changed my use of my cane, forcing me to communicate more clearly the message that my cane is a mobility device, not a symbol. Though not an intentional shift, the difference between these two experienced burlesque performers' interpretations of my cane-ography makes me consider how messages around crip performance infiltrate my cane attitude, changing the way I move without my consent.

²⁶⁰ Jaqueline Boxx Panel on Microaggressions, Burlycon 2017.

²⁶¹ Robyn Swing, "The Beat Goes On: Expression Across Mobility" Burlycon 2020, <https://www.burlypod.com/courses/expression-across-mobility?fbclid=IwAR3-38LJlgtADQav3acN3M2T2XykrQ-uG-7a8c9gtw5IGdragg7LvBOXRQjs>. (November 14, 2020).

[Image Redacted]

[Image 8: Facing away from the audience, I use my cane to perform a considerable backbend such that the audience can see my face upside down. Strands of a torn trash bag are clutched in my hand from where I just tore my top off. If you look closely you can see the heavy black eyeliner I watered down to run down my cheeks as if I had been crying, (s)ob-ject of my own sob story.]

Robyn's use of her cane resonates with Versace's account of implementing their cane for both physical stability and emotional support. As is visible in [Image 4], an illustration based off of a photo from a December 2019 performance "Two Evils," Robyn grounds herself with her cane, using it to stabilize her weight so that she can bend one leg and straighten the other, supporting an asymmetrical, elegant burlesque aesthetic.²⁶² The piece is performed on a precarious thin tall, table-like platform in front a glass window, and Robyn discussed the ways her cane supported with practical logistics of performing in such a dangerous space, helping to support her in performing the choreography but also to ground her emotionally when she felt afraid. She explained, "I don't need to suffer to perform burlesque" as she described other ways she's navigated mobility in performance, sometimes performing an entire piece on the ground, a thick fur rug softening the hardness of the floor, or using a wheelchair to stabilize her hip joints for extensions.²⁶³ Robyn also employs the support of another person to hold her cane at moments in "Two Evils," passing the cane to them and then retrieving it. After using the cane to displace some of her weight as she performs a long swooping backbend, she hands her cane off in order to remove her elbow-length gloves. The cane is gracefully handed back to her so she can promenade across the small stage space, switching it from hand to hand as she slowly removes one arm at a time from her gauzey floor-length robe. Robyn's piece is an excellent example of the ties between *crip femme canes* and *crip femme care*, her friend's arms briefly coming into view in the performance video as they pass the cane up to the stage. This interpersonal support allowed Robyn to navigate the challenges of the swooping train of the costume and the danger of damaging her cane while continuing to performing a smooth and compelling piece. Another presenter at Robyn's workshop, Fire Hazzard integrated their "Stripper PCA," VaVa Vashti, in their piece, who supported with both choreographic reveals and mobility. These two examples of mobility support occurring interpersonally as well as the workshop more generally as a virtual site for communal exchange among disabled burlesque performers link object-dependence to interdependence, where *crip performers* create microcosms of *crip femme care* within the framework of a three-minute strip.

[Image Redacted]

[Image 9: Illustration by artist @DandyDoodlez of Robyn Swing based off of a performance photo from "Two Evils." Robyn Swing stabilizes herself with her cane, planted in this image in yellow flowers. The text at the top of the image reads, "The Future of Dance is Accessible."]

It seems like an obvious and overdetermined point, but I want to end this chapter with a straightforward plea for access. The group of disabled burlesque performers who form the Disability Caucus at BurlyCon began to assemble a guide for creating accessible shows in 2019

²⁶² Robyn Swing, "Two Evils-Robyn Swing (12/19)" Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QLLpxWr3Kk&t=29s>, (December 16, 2019).

²⁶³ Robyn Swing, "The Beat Goes On."

that we continued to develop in the context of the virtual turn of 2020 performance.²⁶⁴ This group considers access broadly, from physical and sensory accessibility to emotional and economic accessibility (and the ways all forms of access are intertwined), providing suggestions for educating MCs and producers about ableism. In this guide, the group provides practical options for producers regarding mobility devices, “Offer a variety of seating options, including space for mobility devices towards the front, and an easy way to purchase each” and urges them to “Have storage available for those with mobility needs and devices.”²⁶⁵ These suggestions stemmed from discussions the group had been having for years about the unique challenges of being a disabled performer and audience member. Though discussions of creating accessible theater spaces are ever-present, I will take a moment to join the leagues of scholars, artists, and participants bemoaning the pain (often physical) of lack of accessibility and describe how physical accessibility has impacted my own (s)ob-ject position as a researcher. The challenges that are addressed in the google doc resonate with me as they have impacted my research over the years: the struggle of navigating limited seating and having to leave a show early when only standing room is available; stairs in the audience seating area and stares from the audience; the only seating at a show consisting of the exorbitantly expensive “VIP section;” dragging a chair from the bar into the back of the performance venue only to have my view completely obscured by people standing in front of me and to have the seat immediately taken when I get up to use the restroom; not to mention inaccessible restrooms down or up a flight of stairs. Night life is often inaccessible to disabled people, and it is methodologically of note that the types of shows I was able to see were limited by extreme lack of physical accessibility of venues and lack of forethought of producers. It is also noteworthy that lack of accessibility plagues not only nightlife but daylife, the theaters at my own research institution, UC Berkeley, having such limited accessibility that myself, my interlocutors, and most importantly disabled students have little opportunity to perform or even attend shows on campus. With few disabled people in the audience and even fewer disabled bodies onstage, gains toward truly inclusive sexual culture and theater culture are slow, making the object choreographies of medical devices that facilitate the strategic maneuverings of crip bodies, essential toward putting our bodies where they their presence was never imagined. Crip object choreographies do radical imaginative work as well as physical, supporting us as we support others in expanding their conceptual frames of what is possible and also what is just.

²⁶⁴ Disability Caucus, “Creating accessible shows: burlycon 2020/ 2019,” BurlyCon, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/19GQBfVP9NUdKzD7oEHgOZ1cav14WR8FQfL8nL5V2BA/edit>, (Accessed April 20, 2021).

²⁶⁵ Disability Caucus, “Creating accessible shows.”

Conclusion

Concluding and Beginning Again: Burlesque as Pedagogic Process

At the September 2017 *SafewordNYC* show, Sweet Lorraine kicked the night off by teaching the audience the meaning of a “safeword,” a word with the power to stop the action of a sexual or kinky act.²⁶⁶ Her pedagogy drew the audience into the performance, allowing us to explicitly engage in and consent to the sexual material onstage. She sauntered up to center stage with graceful banter, casually revealing that she was not wearing any underwear, and then told us the story of how she came up with the safeword of the night: she was taking a luxurious shower and glanced up at her shampoo bottle to see the words scripted across the side, “coconut butter,” which she whispered hoarsely to us, her head tipped back, foot beveled, casting us a piercing look through her long lashes. Those words, she explained, resonated throughout her body, and she knew they were the right ones for the show tonight. She asked us all to practice using the safeword together, an experience that, with Lorraine’s story flowing through us, felt energizing and irresistible; the audience was buzzing with whispers and laughter. We glanced around as we collectively chanted the safeword, making awkward, giggling eye contact. I felt as if we were entering into something new together, a performance where we had the power to stop in case of triggers but also to play, embodying a desire for consent, not as a legal contract, but as a collaborative practice. Sweet Lorraine made education about sexual safety into a flirty, community-building experience, a creative method for consent to turn us on. In making the safeword sexy, Sweet Lorraine inducted safety into the realm of the erotic, no longer excising consent to the realm of the legal, bureaucratic, or punitive but allowing it to flow into the sexual, becoming an integral piece of erotic and kinky experience.

Sweet Lorraine created *SafewordNYC* as a space for exploration of and education around kink, in an environment that is femme, BIPOC, and survivor centered.²⁶⁷ She built this space not only to create a safer container for exploring sex and kink through burlesque, but to educate audiences about the tools and practices of sexual safety, endowing audiences with methods they are encouraged take home and embody themselves.

Over the past decade of exploring the worlds of burlesque, a central takeaway for me has been the impact of embodied pedagogy. Like so many scholars, I believe teaching is the way that we embody our critical utopias, the way that our research can circulate in community and beyond the walls of the academy.²⁶⁸ Through the process of getting cozy with burlesque’s values and frameworks, belief systems and methods, I see many moments of alignment with the radical pedagogy I and many others research, write about, and believe in.²⁶⁹

Pleasure is often banished from the classroom as erotics are banished from the academy, which as scholars of sexual culture point out, only signals that pleasure and erotics are ever-present grounds upon which higher education is built and constructed to obscure.²⁷⁰ Pointing to

²⁶⁶ Sweet Lorraine, *SafewordNYC*, September 2017.

²⁶⁷ Sweet Lorraine, Interviewed June 2017, In person.

²⁶⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

²⁶⁹ Together with the Radical Decolonial Queer Pedagogies of Composition Working Group (2016-2018), I co-edited an issue of *Radical Teacher Magazine* in 2019 that catalogues ways the revolution can infiltrate the classroom. The Introduction to this issue catalogues only a few of the deeply inspirational scholars who have been crafting radical pedagogy long before I ever entered my first classroom.

²⁷⁰ Two sources that come to mind here are Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*. adrienne maree brown’s *Pleasure Activism* includes many examples of how bringing pleasure to the forefront of analysis strengthens movements politically and personally.

the elisions of education work and sex work does not, as some would suggest, contribute to abuse of power in classroom environments. Rather it strengthens cultural awareness of and practices of boundary setting, nonviolent communication, the prioritization of access needs, and the undoing of unspoken hierarchies in the classroom environment, all things that work against the sexual violence and harassment that percolate at all levels of the academic workplace and indeed most workplaces.

In this dissertation, I work to articulate how participants in neo-burlesque movements, especially those who work to queer and crip more mainstream burlesque, create cultural ripples through the pedagogy of erotic performance: the circulation of burlesque's affect of joy, rage, pleasure, desire shifting associations with tropes surrounding the lives of marginalized performers, the power of radical vulnerability to invoke a desire for liberation and equity, and re-reclaiming that which has been used against performers to show the power of embodied theory to rewrite personal and political histories. But I also want to point to the fact that burlesque has expansive applications the context of education. It is widely thematically accessible, taking difficult to understand political concepts and re-routing them to make them humorous and digestible, translating social phenomenon into an instantly identifiable image, costume, gesture, or prop. At the same time, this performance style is layered and creates meaning differentially based on who is in the audience, grabbing widely accepted norms and twisting them with complexity, teaching high theory through "low culture."

Over the past seven years, I've rehearsed some of these pedagogic techniques in my classrooms. Sweet Lorraine employed an exercise in a Sissy Bounce workshop where she passed out balloons, encouraging participants to send all of our associations with our tushies into the balloons as we blew them up and then finally all popped them together—I've used this exercise to create a material way for students to expel their preconceptions about pornography before we have in-class screenings. Performer Vera of Oakland's Rebel Kings visited my Reading and Composition course to teach drag history as they applied their drag makeup, tangling history with practice. Burlesque performer and activist Jadelynn Stahl visited my class as well, bringing a headdress constructed from an art installation, unfurling ribbons inscribed with audience members' dreams for a future without sexual violence. Students reflected that being able to hold this sacred object and experience Stahl's accompanying performance description broke open their assumptions around sexual violence prevention and allowed them to hold more nonnormative and indeed queer visions of a world without rape. Burlesque provides tools for the body and the senses to be a central component of teaching and learning, an ideal dear to Performance Studies, but far from being consistently implemented in the classroom. So often those of us who study pedagogy are working to consider how classroom teaching applies beyond the walls of the academy. However, we also need to consider how pedagogies across cultural forms including night life can inform our classroom pedagogies and to open ourselves to the possibility that they may offer revolutionary shifts for classroom structures and teaching methods.

While in this dissertation, I've spent time examining the queer crip relationship between object/body and glamour/mess, interviews that did not make it into this draft tell a further development of this story, one that engages performances of animality and monstrosity as claiming power through performance at the edges of the inhuman. In further iterations of this research, I plan to examine the performance of monstrosity and human-animal hybridity in burlesque as a project that illuminates and reshapes categories of human as they have been delineated through political, legal, and scientific systems. As the category of the inhuman has

been used to justify violence against transgender, disabled, and racialized people, the reclamation and eroticization of monstrosity creates a churning mess of desire, shame, rage, revenge that shatters binaries around race, gender, and disability. I believe that the citations of monstrosity that are ever-present in queer, trans, and disabled neo-burlesque are very much linked to performances of more and less than human in burlesque's early history, detailed in this introduction, deeply intertwined with burlesque's racist and orientalist origins. Further research will strive to unembed the crystals of past from present. I heard myriad stories of animality toward very different ends in my interviews, including performances depicting choreography through trauma via cross species transformation, such as Poison Ivory's growing wings to perform a fan dance flying away free from slavery (described in chapter 1) and Ruby Slicteur's shark horror revenge fantasy as femme survivor of violence. These were accompanied by performances of emergence, such as Jean Batt's and Tender Furiosa's separate performances of spider and hawk where each performer embodied the animals as they came out as transgender onstage. As this project continues to develop, I plan to point to, as Pickles LaVey termed in an interview, performances of "tender monsters:" sparkly insects, wondrous human-animal transspecies beings that animate *freak* in all of its tentacular possibilities and offer an anti-binary map toward care across difference.

Without dreaming, fantasizing, and desiring different and more liberatory futures, we lack the tools to rewrite our worlds. This is femme labor, this work of creating alternatives to state-controlled systems of dominance and subordination,²⁷¹ and it is often done by queer and trans black and indigenous disabled femmes of color, who hold the smallest amount of institutional and systemic support. I hope to have highlighted some of the value in this vital work. May we all craft frameworks for the work of fantasy to enact its magic in our own lives, for the sake of all of our interdependent futures.

²⁷¹ Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007).

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