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Baring Identities

QUEER WOMEN OF COLOR IN NEO-BURLESQUE



FIGURE 1—*La Chica Boom*, Tapatio. *Kaleidoscope Cabaret*, 2009

Introduction

IT IS SEPTEMBER 2009 AT KALEIDOSCOPE: THE THIRD ANNUAL National People of Color Cabaret. A dancer sporting black heels, fishnets, a black knee-length skirt, a white peasant blouse, and an apron enters the stage with measured, deliberate steps. Her long, wavy black hair is swept to one side and topped with a blossoming red rose. After striking a few seductive poses she pulls something out of her apron. It seems at first that it might be something sexy, but soon we realize that it is a small ball of dough. She proceeds to flatten the dough, smacking it from one hand to the other until she creates a tortilla that she places on a table. The audience's expectation of something sultry is met with disappointment as she pulls yet another ball of dough from her apron and repeats the process. Once she finishes the two tortillas, the *tortillera* finally begins her strip tease, first removing a pair of red panties, and then a pair of green ones, from under her skirt and laying them on the fresh tortillas. After removing two pairs of undergarments she has yet to reveal any flesh. Anticipation is heightened.

She proceeds to remove her blouse and skirt, always giving and taking, teasing her audience, making them want more. Stripped down to a black tasseled shelf bra and her apron, she gives the audience her backside. Her skin is bare, save for a series of straps from her bra,

apron, thong, and thigh-high fishnets. Facing the audience again, she unties her apron but lets it hover over her pubic area. After a torturous moment that causes the audience to roar with demands for her to quench their thirsty eyes, she finally tosses the apron aside, revealing a leather strap-on with a bottle of hot sauce where the phallus would be. She takes her place behind the table, and standing above the tortillas she slowly strokes the bottle of hot sauce, building speed until she excitedly empties the contents onto the panties. She concludes the act by folding the tortillas into panty-tacos and eating them (fig. 1).

Close readings of several works by La Chica Boom, along with the accounts of several members of the New York-based troupe Brown Girls Burlesque (BGB), reveal the power of performances by queers of color to create sites of social and political transformation. Given that burlesque is historically a white-dominated form of entertainment that encourages heterosexist practices, what is transgressive about performances by queer women of color?¹ Burlesque's entanglement with minstrelsy and the omission of women of color from historical narratives of burlesque as well as from accounts of the contemporary movement complicate the reading of this art form as a productive space for feminist critique. Works by La Chica Boom and BGB, however, illustrate the efficacy of burlesque as a discursive tool with which to investigate the politics of the body.

La Chica Boom's *Tortillera*, described above, was written and performed by the self-proclaimed Xicana Marimacha² Mistress, who "organizes with communities of color to destabilize the white heteropatriarchy by day and by night seduces audiences with her witty drag performance."³ In a matter of minutes, La Chica Boom delivers on both fronts. Using props and layered symbolism, she responds to and contests various aspects of her identity, including her sexuality, gender, class, and ethnic culture. Her highly coded performance

simultaneously speaks the language of several marginalized communities. A *tortillera*, for example, is a woman who makes tortillas, but it is also a slang term for *lesbian*. Add to this the strap-on that speaks to non-normative sexual practices, the phallic nature of the bottle of hot sauce, the sexual innuendo suggested by the tacos—La Chica Boom's visual content is saturated with cultural and political overtones.

In order to understand the subversive nature of *Tortillera*, one must consider the history of burlesque, an art form that has been fraught with racial and political tensions from its very beginnings. A promotional photo of Lydia Thompson, the mother of burlesque in the United States, famously features Thompson in all white, dressed as a Robinson Crusoe figure toting a long shotgun (fig. 2). In this image, taken from her first U.S. tour in 1868, Thompson is accompanied by Friday, another character from the eighteenth-century novel, appearing here in blackface as a savage creature kneeling at her feet, somewhere between animal and human.⁴ Despite the blatantly racist depiction of Thompson's companion, one of many such instances in burlesque, the field's entanglement with minstrelsy is never questioned by scholars. In fact, many excuse this troubling aspect of burlesque's history. In one of the most comprehensive surveys of burlesque in the United States, historian Robert C. Allen claims that "it would be simplistic to regard the minstrel show simply as a spectacle of racial hatred rendered palatable to the audience through comedy."⁵ Jacki Willson, a scholar of contemporary neo-burlesque, similarly reasons that burlesque served as "a great leveller at a time when difference and hierarchy could so clearly have been a source of acute tension."⁶ Although early burlesque openly critiqued politics, class, and even gender, commonly featuring women in drag, it remained uncritical of the attitudes toward people of color held by white spectators, who were the primary audiences of these shows.⁷

FIGURE 2—*Lydia Thompson, Robinson Crusoe and Friday, ca. 1865*



Scholars' aversion to discussing Thompson's companion in blackface is emblematic of historians' and white feminists' failure to recognize the interconnected nature of oppression. Thompson's photo, ubiquitous in studies of burlesque and yet most striking for the lack of criticism attracted by its depiction of the character Friday, stands as a testament to racial tensions of the time that are still present today.

This crack in the foundation of burlesque's historical narrative is precisely where my investigation gains its footing. Women of color have been edited out of most historical narratives, and today's women of color in the field, especially queer women of color, are subject to the same erasure. The denial of their presence is an oversight that is directly linked to the very roots of burlesque in the United States and to its entanglement with minstrelsy and curiosity shows that are founded on making spectacles of difference. Unfortunately, this lack of criticality has extended to contemporary records of the neo-burlesque movement that began in the 1990s. Willson, Baldwin, and the majority of the burlesque world just as easily accept the contemporary practice of white performers "wearing" or playing the roles of ethnicities other than their own. Some of the more popular tropes that are commonly seen are Hula Dancers (from the Pacific islands), Gypsies (that is, Roma women), Geishas, and Native Americans. My field research established that the use of such characters, who embody what burlesque scholar Xandra Ibarra calls "neo-minstrelsy," is rampant.⁸

In contrast to such anachronistic role-playing, there is an artistry to the way in which queer women of color defy simplistic reiterations of common visual tropes, folding their political awareness and social criticism into layers of rhinestones, glitter, and glamour. *La Chica Boom* and *Brown Girls Burlesque* cover ground that mainstream neo-burlesque does not tread. This study explores the vitality of their work, and the ways that the intersectionality of their identities creates

a site of self-exploration and transformation that heals personal and historical traumas. My essay proposes that queer women of color infuse their acts with humor, sensuality, sass, and political savvy in order to create productive spaces for exploring new possibilities in the politics of the body.

Dominatrix of the Barrio

WHEN NEO-BURLESQUE CAME BACK INTO FASHION IN THE 1990S, its revivers were most interested in the vintage aesthetic and in reclaiming the feminist potential of early burlesque. The 1990s also saw the reinvention of the female image in the media. In response to feminism's calls for modesty, professionalism, and resistance to the hypersexualization of women during the sixties and seventies, third-wave feminists reveled in reclaiming female sexuality. During this time Madonna became a household name. Transcending boundaries between art, sex, and the profane, her video "Justify My Love" featured the singer in a number of sexually explicit scenarios—including various S and M scenes, hardcore leather, and people who were ambiguously gendered—all of which rarely appeared on the pop music scene. The video's highly erotic nature was criticized, and Madonna was reviled for her over-the-top sexuality and accused of veering from art to porn.

It was in this context that revivalists gave burlesque a second life. It first became popular in the rockabilly subculture, an offshoot of the punk scene. What set rockabillies apart from their hardcore punk rock counterparts was their preference for the vintage style, a grittier iteration of the 1950s aesthetic. The first performers of neo-burlesque looked to starlets of burlesque's Golden Era such as Mae West, Gypsy Rose Lee, Lili St. Cyr, and Sally Rand, whose costumes were filled with glitter and glamour, feathers, and sequins. Sheer robes, long satin

gloves, corsets, and fishnets were obligatory elements, as homages to these famous women's acts. In keeping with the classic form from that period, performers of neo-burlesque typically remain silent during their strip tease.

Many performers reason that their practice is rooted in the feminist potential of the movement. Jacki Willson's book *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* examines neo-burlesque as a platform for exploring the post-feminist condition. Willson is interested in this art form as an expression of liberation and a site of gender, sexuality, economic empowerment, agency, power, and class, as well as in the politics of viewing and pleasure. Although she admits that burlesque teeters between reclaiming female sexuality and perpetuating patriarchal power dynamics, in her view the relationship between strippers and their viewers must be understood as "neither wholly about empowerment nor wholly about exploitation, but somehow [holding] both positions."⁹ This simultaneous embodiment and disavowal is key to negotiating complex political terrain. Although satire and political commentary were central to early burlesque, commentators have primarily focused on class and gender inequalities without acknowledging the pervasiveness of race in the form.

While these conversations are almost completely absent from mainstream burlesque, there are many queer performers of color who take on the issue of feminism and its complications by exploring the intersections of identities. It is La Chica Boom's acknowledgement of such complexities that makes her acts so unforgettable. Born and raised in the border town of El Paso, Texas, her existence has been defined by issues of power and privilege. Since she was a young adult, La Chica Boom has been dedicated to organizing in immigrant and queer communities. She has worked for a number of social justice or-

ganizations in her hometown of El Paso and in Seattle, and she currently works with communities of queer people of color in the Bay Area. Not surprisingly given her background, La Chica Boom's burlesque material is often related to questions of identity and power.

During her performance in 2009 at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), La Chica Boom presented *Dominatrix of the Barrio* as part of Mama Calizo's Voice Factory's month-long residency. The mood was high as museumgoers milled about the YBCA lobby. The main stage was empty when all of a sudden the 1940s rumba music began. Wearing a black ruched cape and a red-and-blue *lucha libre* mask, the star approached the platform. When she reached the center she threw back her cape in time with the beat, dramatically revealing her tantalizing ensemble: red fishnet from ankle to wrist that failed to conceal her blue glittered pasties. She was also adorned with a red silk corset and blue satin gloves that extended to her elbows. Untying the cape's bow at her neck, she slowly opened her arms, revealing her torso once again (fig. 3). Letting the top of the cape fall below her shoulders, she gave a few shimmies à la Carmen Miranda as she crossed the stage. Finally, victoriously, she threw down her defeated robe and looked at the audience in defiance.

Following her victory over the cape, La Chica Boom's act took a turn toward the absurd. She carefully removed a black crop from behind her head. Maintaining her battle stance, she gave a few practice whips in the air (fig. 4). Since she was alone on stage, the viewer might have wondered who or what she would whip with her crop. She approached a mysterious object that until this moment had remained conspicuously concealed under a black cloth. Seductively, she removed the covering and revealed a colorful donkey-shaped piñata.

She made a few laps around piñata, surveying it from all angles, then put her ear to the donkey's mouth and quickly jumped back,

FIGURE 3, FIGURE 4, AND FIGURE 5—*La Chica Boom*, *Dominatrix of the Barrio*, performance at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2009



adamantly shaking a finger at the animal, pantomiming refusal. After a few compulsory stretches, she relented and gave the donkey one solid “whap!” that echoed through the gallery halls. Then another! And after slowly dragging her tongue along the length of the crop, another and another—slowly building intensity as her performance progressed, typical of an S and M scene.

After a few whacks, she walked around the front of the piñata, asked it a question, and carefully listened. The request seemed to take even La Chica Boom by surprise. She waved her arms as if completely taken aback by the request, before finally making the sign of the cross and proceeding to carefully remove her right satin glove, revealing a smaller latex one underneath. Supplying a generous amount of lubrication from her mouth, she inserted two fingers into the piñata, then three, then four . . . and finally, her whole fist (*fig. 5*). The audience went wild. The scene concluded when, after a series of thrusts, the piñata climaxed, exploding candy into the crowd.

La Chica Boom’s costume takes seemingly distinct elements and marries them to create the *luchador/a*/dominatrix. She is hyper-feminine with her fishnets, corset, pasties, and black stilettos, each element of her costume representing signifiers that communicate her womanhood or femininity. These features underscore her *Latinidad*: When La Chica Boom shakes her shoulders, she conjures images of sultry, sexpot Latinas, such as Carmen Miranda, whose signature shoulder-shimmy joined the tropes of Latina stereotypes. Yet La Chica Boom covers her head with the utmost symbol of machismo, the *luchador* mask. Worn by fighters, or *luchadores*, in *lucha libre*, a style of professional wrestling that is especially popular throughout Latin America, such masks represent fighting personas and have become icons of Mexican popular culture. In wearing the mask, La Chica Boom is not claiming a masculine identity but rather juxta-

posing images, revealing the impurity of all the categories her ensemble references. The mask not only symbolizes a male-dominated sport but also covers La Chica Boom’s face, concealing one of the primary points of identification from her viewers. In doing so she forces spectators to become subjects of her own cultural production.

To the seemingly contrasting gender signifiers in her costuming, La Chica Boom adds the piñata, iconic in the lexicon of Mexican popular culture. Widely familiar as a party entertainment for children, it is here recontextualized twofold. First, La Chica Boom takes the mundane, everyday object and brings it to the stage of a fairly highbrow gallery event. This could be considered an instance of what cultural scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto has called *rasquachismo*: the repurposing of objects as a means of survival. “Limited resources mean mending, refixing, and reusing everything. Things are not thrown away, they are saved and recycled, often in different contexts.”¹⁰ Because *rasquachismo* is a taste that manifests in the lives of the disenfranchised, reclaiming objects and imbuing them with value in spite of the constructions of mainstream society, the *rasquache* is a perspective from the bottom up.

What is most poignant about La Chica Boom’s use of the piñata, however, is that in addition to moving the colorful paper-mache sculpture from the everyday context into the art gallery, she transforms the donkey piñata into an object of sexual desire. Ybarra-Frausto explains that artworks can display *rasquachismo* by evoking “a rasquache sensibility through self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography.”¹¹ This use of the piñata is a complete turning on its head of its function and cultural significance. Piñatas are typically beaten with a stick, and hitting the piñata is usually about taking pleasure in inflicting the blows; La Chica Boom, however, carries the scenario into the realm of S and M.

In *Dominatrix of the Barrio*, La Chica Boom's character performs an identity that is otherwise invisible in many identity discourses, including the history of burlesque and the mainstream media. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz claims that "the important point is that identity practices such as queerness and hybridity are not a priori sites of contestation but, instead, spaces of productivity where identity's fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated."¹² By asserting her own possibility and validating her existence, La Chica Boom uses burlesque to reinvent herself on stage, redefining these ideological constructions as she dismantles them.

Usually audiences come to burlesque shows expecting classical pieces with feathered boas and glittering sequins; perhaps they even have fantasies of the Latina vixens that are so ubiquitous in popular media. As a solo artist, La Chica Boom is often the only person of color in a line-up of white performers who subsequently attract white audiences. She admits that although she has not conducted an ethnographic study, she has come to terms with the fact that much of her message is lost when she performs for straight, white viewers. "They see me using symbols that to them represent... [a] big, undifferentiated mass of "Latino." And they are just seeing that with... a hot girl doing something about sexuality and out of the norm, and so they think it's creative."¹³ As a queer Chican@ femme, she at once embodies the images that she expects her audience to project onto her and, when the viewer indulges in seeing her body with their desire for the exotic, disrupts their fantasies with words that implicate them as participants in her oppression.

While my readings of her work rest on presumptions and speculations about the viewer's experience, what is most pertinent is that her performances inspire critical dialogues about gender, race, and sexuality—whether out of confusion about her stage personas or out

of a deep connection to the ways that she manipulates cultural iconographies. In deciding what piece to perform at a particular venue, La Chica Boom takes into consideration her audience, but rather than conforming to pressures from event producers and other performers to edit the political content from her repertoire she stays true to her message at the risk being misread, objectified, and stripped of her subversive essence.

Brown Girls Burlesque

A MYSTERIOUS ROBED FIGURE WALKS DOWN A SNAKING PATH made of paper leaves. Miss America strips down to her underwear, removing her dress, followed by her false breasts and augmentative buttocks pads. A traditional Indonesian dancer unravels her bustier, revealing the inscribed message: "The Dutch colonialist forced me to wear clothes and held me captive for 400 years." A package delivery service drops off a bride (fig. 6) who removes the layers of her bubble wrap dress to the beat of Beyoncé's "Ego," until she is wearing only a strap-on and wielding a golden dildo.¹⁴

These are just a few moments from "Culture Classics," Brown Girls Burlesque's 2010 mainstage performance. Established in 2007 in New York City, BGB is one of the nation's few burlesque troupes boasting a cast that is exclusively women of color (they describe their group as "all women of color").¹⁵ Founded by Miss Aurora BoobRealis, Chicava Honeychild, Dame Cuchifrita, BGB now has a line-up that includes exHOTic other, Sunshine Fayalicious, Grandma Fun, and Deity Delgado. Working as a troupe offers the artists a safe space where they are less likely to be tokenized or exoticized by producers and spectators. This is particularly important within the predominantly white, hetero-patriarchal world of neo-burlesque, where the dancers are encouraged to enact fantasies for the satisfaction of the male viewer

FIGURE 6—*Grandma Fun, Culture Classics, 2010. Photo by Vishnu Hoff*



without troubling the power dynamics between the male gaze and the female object of desire. The group's mission is to utilize reflections of themselves to "[take] their rightful place on the stage to celebrate their cultures and their sexuality with fierceness, artistry and humor."¹⁶

The oral histories of four members of Brown Girls Burlesque reveal the impact the troupe has had on its members' artistic growth and personal empowerment. In stark contrast with the audiences at mainstream burlesque shows, BGB's cast of performers—all women of color—attracts predominantly queer people of color. Where viewers from outside the dancers' communities are likely to read their bodies as racialized or hypersexualized when they perform for white audiences, having viewers who are also people of color and who are queer creates new relationships between viewers and performers. Although BGB does not promote itself as a queer troupe, their productions have an unmistakably queer sensibility, including dildos used as gender play, comedy aimed at queer viewers, and illicit content that is not explicitly for the male gaze. The first-hand narratives of Aurora *BoobRealis*, Chicava Honeychild, exHOTic other, and *Grandma Fun* offer insight into the ways that their coalition of artists incites in-group dialogues about race, gender, and sexuality. Because these topics are so vital to sustaining bonds within and among multiple and intersecting communities, BGB's productions are transgressive in that they invert the minoritarian status to which the performers are typically ascribed, particularly as women of color in burlesque.

Founding member and co-producer Aurora *BoobRealis*'s love for the stage and her interest in exploring exhibitionism and public displays of sensuality first drew her to the sex industry. Admittedly, she was not a great stripper because she was more interested in wearing costumes and creating choreography than in working for tips. Eventually she began working at upscale clubs that gave her the

creative freedom to perform what she calls “structured improv acts,” which she claims were her first burlesque pieces.¹⁷ Attending shows regularly in New York, she was in awe of the variety of body types and the confidence the performers exuded in their sexuality, however she could not ignore the predominance of white dancers and audience members. It was the lack of representation of brown bodies that inspired Aurora BoobRealis to create Brown Girls Burlesque. “I never wanted to be solo burlesque artist . . . I don’t want to be somebody’s token.”¹⁸ Through BGB, she was able to explore her curiosity about sex and sexuality without the pressure to solicit money from male clients.

For “Culture Classics” in 2010, Aurora BoobRealis began with a dark stage illuminated only by the title of the performance, *Death of the Myth... (... of the Tragic Mulatto)*, projected onto a screen behind her. Walking down path of paper leaves that snaked across the stage floor toward the audience, she took the stage cloaked in a black robe that partially concealed her solemn face. As she proceeded down the path she somberly peeled off layers of clothing, revealing garments in progressively lighter shades of brown until she stood in a dress made of brown paper bags. Behind her, the screen flashed the words “Oreo, blender, mud people,” and other such pejorative terms used to discriminate against people of color based on the shade of their skin. With a pained look on her face she tore the dress from her body as the music transitioned into high-energy, bass-driven house music (fig. 7).

In this work Aurora BoobRealis was concerned with addressing shadism and the politics of skin color. Both the path that she walked and her final dress were made of brown paper bags, a reference to the “brown paper bag test,” wherein paper is used to measure the whiteness of people of “mixed” heritage. While she recognizes that her work is inherently political, that her body will always be subject to the politics of the body, and that she participates in that system by

FIGURE 7—Aurora BoobRealis, “Death of the Myth... (... of the Tragic Mulatto),” *Culture Classics*, 2010. Photo by Vishnu Hoff



benefiting from her light skin, she had never specifically discussed the racialization of her body through her performances. In exposing her skin and having the audience read the changing shades of her body, she also invited the viewer to witness a ritualized stripping away of emotional baggage.

Whereas mainstream burlesque favors classical pieces, Aurora *BoobRealis* creates work that challenges viewers to consider the performer's ideas and thoughts rather than simply objectifying their bodies. She has explained: "I'm not just going to be a pretty, light-skinned face for [men] to be fantasizing about. More and more I'm interested in finding these juxtapositions of almost even grotesque with beauty." The troupe builds a supportive community of artists that fosters in-group conversations that may not take place in other venues. By working together, Aurora *BoobRealis* and troupe members are encouraged to discuss relevant politics with their communities that might challenge viewers in ways that are not encouraged by mainstream burlesque.

What Grandma Fun finds unique to burlesque is the breadth of content that is acceptable in the form. "I enjoy that it touches on sexual freedom. You are to able convey whatever preference you have to whoever you want."¹⁹ Although she does not identify as queer, Grandma Fun explores complexities of sexual expression and identity that are seldom seen in mainstream burlesque. The mail-order bride piece that she presented for "Culture Classics," for example (she was the one in the bubble-wrap dress, stripping to Beyoncé), was the first time that I saw a dildo used as a prop in a show that was not explicitly advertised as queer.

Like many other members of her troupe, Grandma Fun claims, "burlesque found me, I didn't find burlesque." At the age of twenty-two Grandma Fun was a fairly typical twenty-something New Yorker. Her friends first began calling her Grandma Fun when she went into

seclusion following the death of her boyfriend, a firefighter who lost his life fighting a blaze. Through her grieving process she preferred staying home while her friends went out and socialized. This earned her the nickname that ended up carrying over to her career. BGB offered Grandma Fun a space of healing and of exploration that would not be available in the mainstream.

In another piece from their mainstage show, *exHOTic other* interprets the conflict between Israel and Palestine, a cause that is especially close to her, being what she calls a "self-loving Jew."²⁰ In her final "reveal," her pasties and panties spell out the initials BDS, which stands for the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement, a cause that she is heavily involved with (*fig. 8*). What she finds liberating about burlesque, specifically as performed by BGB, is that she can create pieces with the support of like-minded artists that she is not allowed to explore in her professional creative career. With BGB, *exHOTic other* is encouraged to bring characters to the stage that represent her whole self without compromising aspects of her identity.

One of BGB's co-directors, Chicava Honeychild is also a trained actor. From her experience as an artist working in a variety of fields, she believes that one of the greatest benefits of working with BGB is their year-round group workshops, where they explore their pieces from concept to completion. In her opinion, what truly sets BGB apart is "[j]ust having something on [our minds] beyond beauty, because the beauty is a given."²¹ This method allows artists to develop their presentation and storytelling techniques, and in process the artists draw out the root of their inquiry, delving into the deeper emotional and intellectual interests that inspire their projects.

In her piece for "Culture Classics," Chicava Honeychild explores *plaçage*, a practice common during the French and Spanish colonial periods in the Southern United States whereby white men courted



FIGURE 8—*exHOTic other*, *Culture Classics*, 2010. Photo by Vishnu Hoff



FIGURE 9—*Chicava Honeychild*, *Culture Classics*, 2010. Photo by Vishnu Hoff

and married women who had been born into slavery, thus granting them their freedom for the duration of the marriage (*fig. 9*). In her mind *plaçage* “isn’t so different from prostitution, it isn’t so different from what a woman does to have a house and feed her kids and be with a man that you feel... there’s a lot of trade off that women make. Some of them cross the legal line.”²² While she is aware that this particular history is not part of her own family lineage, she is interested in facets of the African diaspora that implicate her broadly. For *Chicava Honeychild*, this piece bears the mark her of ongoing academic inquiries, enacting a historical moment that traces a lineages of female empowerment that mainstream burlesque fails to address.

Together, the members of *Brown Girls Burlesque* design shows that reflect complex identity discourses. As a result, their performances delve into topics that are deeply personal and that have far-reaching effects for audiences and performers. By working together, these artists develop their craft individually so that when they come together as a troupe, their annual mainstage performances cover a range of topics that represent people across their umbrella definition of “brown girls.” While presenting a breadth of people, cultures, and histories, “*Culture Classics*” inspires dialogues among artists and audience members that reach viewers from their own communities more directly than they could as solo artists. Their shows recognize

the individual as interconnected with communities that are multiple and intersecting.

Conclusion

Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world. —HOWARD ZINN, *THE NATION*, SEPTEMBER 2004

WHILE USING THE SAME FORM, LA CHICA BOOM AND BROWN Girls Burlesque practice distinct modes of rebellion. Their differences are largely due to the structure of their performances and their relationship to their viewers. Where La Chica Boom's audiences are predominantly white and straight, Brown Girls Burlesque attracts queer audiences from communities of color. Together, these artists illustrate a range of possible ways to impact viewers.

Every time they take the stage they embody alternative narratives and assert themselves in defiance of hegemonic pressure to self-police. In so doing, Brown Girls Burlesque and La Chica Boom also interrupt the white, hetero-patriarchal narratives of neo-burlesque. Because their work is not accepted by peers in the mainstream, because women of color have been continuously written out of burlesque's history, and because the form has a long-standing practice of exoticizing and objectifying non-white bodies, these artists are truly revolutionary. Their work both articulates their current mentality and projects visions for the future. This study is a celebration of the brave souls who take a stand against pressures to assimilate despite forces that continue to ostracize, oppress, and drive non-conformers to desperate ends. When asked about the political efficacy of burlesque and performance art, artist Keith Hennessey described the power of "art as ritual." Because their practice is rooted in the repeated reenactment of their work, these artists can be understood as performing ritual acts of resistance, survival, and self-determination.

Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this paper the term "women of color" signifies people who self-identify as such. This is a political position usually claimed by people who have not descended from white, European ancestry.
- 2 Translation: tomboy/butch/dyke.
- 3 La Chica Boom Biography. La Chica Boom website, accessed July 2, 2010, <http://lachicaboom.com/index.php?/biography/>.
- 4 Although I have not yet found any scholarship on this photo in particular that explains the ethnic background of the Friday character, based on the preponderance of photos of Caucasians in blackface, I can conclude that Friday is not a person of color.
- 5 Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 170.
- 6 Jacki Willson, *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2008), 12.
- 7 Early burlesque refers to the period that ranges from its arrival in the United States in 1865 to the 1930s, which was followed by the Golden Era (1930-50).
- 8 Xandra Ibarra, interview with author, Oakland, CA, June 8, 2010.
- 9 Willson, *The Happy Stripper*, 12.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 12 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 79.
- 13 La Chica Boom, interview with author, January 7, 2011.
- 14 In order of appearance here, these pieces were written and performed by Aurora BoobRealis, Sunshine Fayalicious, Dame Cuchi Frita, and Grandma Fun.
- 15 About Brown Girls Burlesque, Brown Girls Burlesque Home Page, accessed July 6, 2010, <http://browngirlsburlesque.com/>.
- 16 *Ibid.*, accessed March 30, 2011. <http://browngirlsburlesque.com/>.
- 17 Aurora BoobRealis of Brown Girls Burlesque, interview with author, New York, NY, October 25, 2010.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Grandma Fun of Brown Girls Burlesque, interview with author, New York, NY, October 26, 2010.
- 20 Read from the introduction that was projected onto the stage at the start of her piece.
- 21 Chicava Honeychild of Brown Girls Burlesque, interview with author, New York, NY, October 26, 2010.
- 22 *Ibid.*