

# A History of Desire Industries in New York City

## *Burlesque, the Public Sphere, and the Construction of Morality*

The club was very working class, most dancers had kids; some were on drugs . . . a lot of grinding and touching. There were all kinds of women: light-skinned Italian women, Black skinny busty women. There were actually more White women at that time than women of color. I feel that in 2003 the market started going down; that was the summer I got hired at Conquest—when they started to hire more women of color, and bend a little on their image. The image now is White women with skinny bodies, blonde hair, and big boobs.

—Cristina (24-year-old Puerto Rican dancer at Conquest)

In order to discuss the current status of stripping and exotic dance clubs in New York, it is important to understand the history of stripping in New York, as it evolved from burlesque, and larger theater movements, ranging from associations with high- and lower-class entertainment, gentlemen's clubs of the 1950s, to racial- and class-based associations with poverty, and social deviancy in the 1970s, to the current stratification of exotic dancers based on race and class.

An examination of desire industries in New York City pertaining to dancing dates back to 1868 with the rise of burlesque entertainment performed by English entertainer Lydia Thompson and her female troupe, the British Blondes. During this time, New York City was a thriving place for theatrical entertainment, with burlesque being one of many types.

According to Robert C. Allen (1991) burlesque was

One instance of nineteenth-century American theatrical culture, burlesque must be considered in light of the fundamentally ambiguous and contradictory place that theater—as social institution

and abstract concept—occupied in American culture from the colonial period almost to the Civil War. (p. 45)

Burlesque was part of a radical cultural transformation of U.S. theater culture, especially in New York. In New York City, popular theaters during the mid-19th century included the Bowery, Astor Place Theater, Broadway Theater, and the Academy of Music. The advent of burlesque challenged Victorian expectations for urban women in public space regarding appearance and behavior, as well as women's presence on stage.<sup>1</sup> Historically, burlesque originated in the 1840s during the Victorian era and underscored class tensions between the working classes and the rules of respectability dictated by the aristocracy. Theatrical performances (which became popular in the 1820s) of any kind were looked down upon by the aristocracy because of the association between actors on stage and exchanging their talent for money—which also was associated with prostitution.

Allen argues that burlesque transformed from a theatrical form in which women entertainers challenged middle-class norms regarding female sexuality, thus creating a spectacle centered on the sexual display of women. Thus, the display of women on stage created anxiety for Puritans concerned with proper gender roles, whereas the role of men as audience members and onstage was slowly becoming more accepted.<sup>2</sup> Women were allowed to perform on stage as long as they did so in ways that did not challenge dominant gender ideologies (i.e., performing in melodramas and ballets). In the pre-Civil War era melodrama was the dominant mode of theater performance.

The melodrama consisted of a hero and a heroine and revolved around romantic love, thus illustrating notions of acceptable heterosexual gender roles and a contained female sexuality. Women in melodrama usually were displayed as virtuous and spiritual, and their bodies were fully covered by long dresses exuding elements of true Victorian womanhood. The ballet, which originated in Europe, involved dance and the exposure of women's bodies unlike that of melodrama. This exposure created anxiety for bourgeoisie audience members who were still invested in Victorian values regarding the female body on stage and traditional gender roles; many reformers encouraged women to boycott ballets, thus resembling vice reformers of the late 19th century.

One way ballet was made acceptable to moral reformist was within the realm of romanticism—its association with high art, and a highlighting of stage plots, and

portraying evanescent sprites and bewitched shepherdesses—unattainable and in some cases nonhuman ideals of beauty and grace. Ballet became morally and socially acceptable . . . by containing the

ballerina within a silent, removed world; within plots that alluded to the settings of high-art literature and painting; and within a body that promoted rather than detracted from the illusion that the audience was watching a creature with the same materiality as a fairy. (Allen, 1991, p. 91)

The next mode of performance during the 1830s involving women being onstage was living pictures, which was viewed as the prelude to burlesque,<sup>3</sup> and consisted of performers imitating paintings and/or statues surrounded by scenery and stage props. Eventually, nudity was included with stage managers representing statues and paintings of nude (often male) subjects. However, in the 1840s, a shift from male to female subjects occurred, making living pictures more condemned in the eyes of the public—the explosion of humanized art augmented the numbers of female models. Similar to efforts made from anti-vice squads to remove prostitution from urban streets, city officials attempted to suppress living picture exhibitions, but they were able to survive by blending into the lower-tier working-class venues of entertainment such as storefront windows, museums, and concert saloons.

The final prelude to what Allen refers to, as “Thompsonian burlesque,” was the 1861 performance of Jewish actress Adah Menken in the play *Mazeppa*,<sup>4</sup> who according to Allen was “the first American theatrical star not to run away from the charges of moral and social transgressiveness that were almost sure to attach themselves to a popular actress” (p. 97). Menken was known for her independence and for combining feminine sexuality and speech, and succeeding within mainstream theater. In addition to *Mazeppa*, the 1866 musical, *The Black Crook*, which opened on Broadway in New York City and was considered the first musical, also featured women on stage in ballet attire, which by this time was association with high-art, but the play was still viewed as pushing the moral boundaries of respectable images of womanhood because the dancers wore flesh-colored tights.

### Theaters, Space, and Morality

The acceptance of theater as a respectable form of entertainment resulted from tensions between the upper-class that had built and controlled theater performances and audience behavior during the post-revolutionary era, and lower-class audiences who rebelled against bourgeois taste (Allen, 1991, p. 66). One method of making the theater acceptable to the bourgeois, and removing the moral stigma, was to open fine art galleries and museum

theaters that consisted of paintings and sculptures appearing as an educational institution—all appealing to elite taste. The geographic space of the theater also was organized by class distinctions and consisted of the following three areas: the ground-level pit, the boxes, and the gallery.

The gallery was not only reserved for prostitutes, but in the South was reserved for house slaves, and in the North for free Blacks (Allen, 1991). It is interesting to note that Blacks<sup>5</sup> were associated with White prostitutes, reflecting their lower status compared with White propertied men and elite White women.

An event that intensified the class divisions among theatergoers was the 1849 Astor Place Theater riot, which underscored class tensions especially felt by the predominately working-class audience who attended performances at the Bowery Theater. The riot was provoked by the presence of actors William Charles Macready and Edwin Forrest, who were symbols of class rivalry along national lines. Allen (1991) states that the two actors:

Represented antithetical approaches to acting and to the theater. Macready stood for the integrity of the dramatic text, the actor as scholar, and the theater as cultural shrine. Forrest was Jacksonian masculinity personified: bombastic, direct, flamboyant. To the Bowery pit, the rivalry had come to symbolize a contest between the democratic and popular native son and the aristocratic Englishman. (p. 59)

The Astor Place riot resulted in greater management control, audience submission, and performances geared less toward a diverse audience; it also meant a more socially conservative environment for burlesque performances. Hence, the emergence of the concert saloon during the 1860s became the venue for shows that appealed to working-class men and included alcohol, female sexuality, and variety shows. Tim Gilfoyle (1992) describes the concert saloons in New York City as “the precursor of modern urban nightlife—the model for vaudeville and the cabaret. Concert saloons were New York’s first nightclubs” (p. 224).

Similarly, Allen’s (1991) study of concert saloons equated them with immorality and prostitution, stating that the “the focus of bourgeois objections to concert saloons was the waiter girl<sup>6</sup> and her actual possible connection to prostitution” (p. 74). Thus, the location of burlesque performances and affections with prostitution added to the moral disapproval of it as a legitimate art form. Andrea Friedman (2000) also contends that burlesque catered to a more sex-oriented audience, whereas vaudeville attracted a family-oriented audience.

## Transformation of Burlesque: Race, Gender, and Genre

During the post-Civil War epoch, burlesque represented two subgenres based on use of humor and parody mocking the middle class and displaying the female figure. The humor in burlesque developed in large part from minstrel shows featuring female minstrels, and also involved racial representation of people of color as the "Other." Burlesque and minstrel performances both involved mockery of bourgeois values,<sup>7</sup> and an embodiment of what was publicly considered "grotesque." In discussing the class critique of minstrel performances, literary critic, Jules Zanger (1974), argues that in minstrel shows the interlocutor was a caricature of upper-class U.S. society.

This racial representation of blackface in minstrel performances combined with the portrayal of [White] women's bodies in burlesque<sup>8</sup> creates an opportunity for observing racial hierarchies and positioning in burlesque. The representation of racial "Others" is critical in constructing desire; whereas burlesque performers did not perform in blackface, the White female performers did perform caricatures of non-White racial groups, such as Native Americans. During the late 19th century and into the 20th century, the creation of world exposition tours (such as the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893) and the field of anthropology, influenced burlesque, especially concerning the sexual display of women's bodies (Allen, 1991).

The expositions displayed a cornucopia of people from "exotic places" and a place where White U.S. citizens could compare their culture to other villages from around the world. However, the fairs also were seen as a way to represent the non-White world as savage, supported with scientific evidence (i.e., anthropology, eugenics) of racial inferiority (Rydell, 1984). Similarly, Anne McClintock (1995) argues that the world fair expositions and exhibitions represented a globalized form of consumerism, in addition to colonial conquest.

Race and gender spectacles emerged along with national and global consumerism<sup>9</sup>; however, these forms of spectacles are represented differently along race and gender categories. According to Allen (1991), "reliance on sexual display in burlesque greatly increased after the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. It was here that the 'cooch' dance [belly dancing] was introduced to American audiences" (p. 225). The cooch dance was the prelude to the striptease, and was part of the exposition, which contributed to a colonial hierarchy of race. Gail Bederman (1995) argues:

The exposition was based on turn-of-the-century assumptions about White supremacy and manhood; indeed, the grounds were divided into two racially specific areas: the White City and the

Midway Plaisance. Whereas the White City depicted the millennial advancement of white civilization, the Midway Plaisance presented the undeveloped barbarism of uncivilized dark races. (p. 31)

Therefore, the cooch dance was associated with the Midway (Jarrett, 1997). Thus, the association with freak shows, race, and lower-class status became apparent with the display of female “primitive” exotic others. Allen (1991) discusses the phenomena of the freak show consisting of human curiosities, such as cooch dancers, Siamese twins, hermaphrodites, and people with skin disorders, the most famous being the Elephant Man (John Merrick). Racialized advertisements of burlesque illuminate the fact that bodies of color experience a different type of objectification than White women—which is true of contemporary exotic dancing and other types of sex work. One example of this is in posters advertising burlesque shows; one poster entitled, “The Beautiful Indian Maidens,” where “a tribe of Amazonian Indian warriors gather at a riverbank. In the background a stag flees for his life from his spear-hurling female pursuers, while in the foreground one of the huntresses hold her catch by neck, displaying it for the viewer: a tiny, duck-headed, tuxedo-clad man” (Allen, 1991, p. 206).

Similar to the way minstrel performances provided an avenue for Whites to reinforce White supremacy and to project hidden desires, ideologies, and fantasies via the performance of blackface (Roediger, 1999), this burlesque advertisement uses race to reinforce the transgressive nature of the White burlesque dancers via an exotic other, in this case Native Americans, who were seen as savage and barbaric vis-à-vis the civilized White ruling elite. Hence, this creates a stratification based on race (and class) of ways women in desire industries are positioned differently based on these variables—a point that is explored in more detail later in this book.

In 1893, the cooch dance moved to New York after the exposition closed, and was more sexualized since becoming a part of burlesque performance; it was largely associated with working-class male audiences until 1916 when it spread to upscale Broadway cabarets (Erenberg, 1981; Friedman, 2000). During the 20th century, burlesque continued as a form of entertainment and with industrialization in the 1900s, consumer patterns became more upscale and tied to taste and consumer identity<sup>10</sup> (Bernstein, 2007; Frank, 2002). According to Katherine Frank, these developments “positioned women as both consumers themselves and as objects to be consumed, and as women increasingly entered the workplace and leisure sphere in this context, entertainment styles were transformed” (p. 43). However, Kevin Mumford (1997) argues that this process was racialized with White women gaining the most access to the public sphere, especially as prostitution became associated with Black women.

During this time, the Ziegfeld Follies<sup>11</sup> represented an acceptable form of feminine sexual display and “blended into the ideology of bourgeois consumer culture” (Allen, 1991, p. 245). In the mid-1910s, stock burlesque formed as a result of movie theaters and cabarets, where the performance of burlesque was stripped down to its bare essentials, incorporating striptease. According to Lucinda Jarrett (1997), in the 1920s class “increasingly became an issue in theatre licensing” as upscale cabarets were granted liquor licenses, whereas venues that housed burlesque were not (p. 107). Friedman states that striptease developed from burlesque during the 1930s and involved new ways of performing that included the stripper taking off most of her clothes while on stage. She would have her breast covered and wore a G-string and/or panties or a leotard.

In the 1930s, while surviving the economic downfall of the Great Depression,<sup>12</sup> burlesque received opposition from anti-vice groups in New York. As a result of social crackdowns from middle-class anti-vice groups, burlesque eventually disappeared and strip clubs came on the scene (Allen, 1991; Friedman, 2000; Jarrett, 1997).

Burlesque theaters were seen by the 42nd Street Property Owners’ Association as lower property values because they attracted undesirable customers to the Times Square area, despite the fact that customers of various class backgrounds attended burlesque performances (Friedman, 2000). Burlesque theaters were in jeopardy of losing their licenses if the performances were believed to be obscene. Thus, in order for burlesque to continue and to be approved by city officials, the sexual style and humor associated with it and with striptease was banned, especially during World War II, when it was viewed as undermining the virility of the men who had the responsibility of defending the country (Friedman, 2000).

### Gentleman’s Clubs, Strip Clubs, and Zoning Laws in New York

In the 1950s, during the consumer boom of World War II, strip clubs came to represent, as they did in the early 20th century, a symbol of upscale consumer status. The 1950s introduction of *Playboy Magazine*, and its advertising to a middle-class male, influenced the presence of gentleman’s clubs, or Playboy clubs, in the 1960s, starting in Chicago (Frank, 2002). According to Frank, Playboy clubs featured “scantily clothed women and offered somewhat respectable, upscale, masculinized entertainment that had links to other forms of consumption—plush atmosphere, steaks, liquor, pornography—and indeed, to a mythologized lifestyle” (p. 50). Playboy clubs eventually were pushed out of the market; however, aspects of these clubs were recreated in what is now called “gentleman’s clubs,” referring to upscale strip clubs.

The racialization of the term *exotic dancer* was prevalent during this time (probably because stereotypes of people of color were still very popular in the media); hence, dancers used “jungle themes” during their performances, which mirrored the eroticization of people of color during the world exposition (Jarrett, 1997).

During the 1970s, more women began working at strip clubs because of the recession and thus, these clubs increasingly became associated with moral vices, such as drug use, prostitution, and crime<sup>13</sup> (Delany, 1999; Frank, 2002). In the 1980s, as more women worked in the exotic dance industry, and the service-sector expanded, club management, starting with San Francisco’s Mitchell Brother’s Theater, began charging dancers a stage fee that ranged anywhere from \$40 to \$250 depending on the club. Dancers were expected to pay the fee out of their tips at the end of their shift. The instituting of stage fees led to the economic pressures for dancers to prostitute in order to make the stage fee, thus adding to this image of deviancy and crime.

According to anthropologist Judith Hanna (1998):

because of their working-class associations and the persistent, perhaps erroneous belief that they are indelibly linked to prostitution, crime, and negative secondary effects, establishments that feature forms of striptease have already been subject to more severe regulations (especially regarding alcohol and nudity) than other kinds of entertainment and some municipalities have attempted to use restrictive regulation to close down the businesses altogether. (p. 62)

This association with deviancy is underscored in continued zoning regulations and the closing of strip clubs in urban areas, such as New York City. Samuel Delany (1999) examines this connection with strip clubs, porn shops, and vice in New York City’s Times Square area during the beginning of the AIDS crisis stating, “The threat from AIDS produced a 1985 health ordinance that began the shutdown of the specifically gay sexual outlets in the neighborhood: the gay movie houses and the straight porn theaters” (p. 5).

In 1995, as part of a plan to make Times Square “family-friendly” for middle-class White property owners, Giuliani enforced zoning laws forbidding strip clubs from being within 500 feet of schools, churches, day-care centers, or residential buildings.

The criminalization of desire industries, along with intersections of racism, classism, and geographic location, adds to isolation of people and the disruption of communities. In *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs (1965) describes what happens to communities when buildings are torn down and people displaced. According to Jacobs, lack of street-level



business and diversity produces lack of human traffic, and self-policing, so that strangers are mixed in with long-term residents, and social networks begin to break down. Delany further reinforces this point by stating, “such turnovers produce the dangerous neighborhoods: the housing project, the park with not enough stores and eating spaces bordering on it, the blocks and blocks of apartment residences without any ameliorating human services” (p. 154).

This last point is critical to understanding how zoning laws, along with systemic disinvestment in low-income communities of color, affects workers in desire industries, and the larger community that surrounds them. It also affects how customers view strip clubs and the value placed on the women who work in them regarding safety and wages.