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The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project

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CUNY Hunter College

The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project by

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Abstract

The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project is a character driven short documentary featuring Chicava Honeychild, a neo-burlesque¹ dancer who is unearthing a hidden Black burlesque history. As Chicava searches for her “stripper grandmas,” she mentors a new generation of burlesque performers who are of women of color.

Chicava Honeychild first meeting with Black burlesque Jean Idelle is interwoven with the burlesque journey of Henrietta, Chicava Honeychild’s burlesque student. As Henrietta is honing her burlesque craft in preparation for her first performance, we learn about Jean’s dynamic life as a burlesque dancer in the 1940s and 1950s.

Utilizing burlesque as a lens of interpretation allows us to discuss Black female sexuality while exploring Black bodies in performance. The film also allows us to see the making of a burlesque dancer. It is a rare look at the hidden past of Black burlesque and a contemporary look at the strides being taken to uplift a new generation of Black burlesque dancers.

¹ This is a relatively new term that was succinctly described on Wikipedia. **Neo-Burlesque**, or **New Burlesque**, is the revival and updating of the traditional American burlesque performance. Though based on the traditional Burlesque art, the new form encompasses a wider range of performance styles; neo-burlesque acts can range from anything from classic striptease to modern dance to theatrical mini-dramas to comedic mayhem.

Historical Background

In Susan-Lori Parks' play, *"The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,"* the continuous refrain from the cast is "You should write it down because if you don't write it down they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist." (Parks, 104) This is the definitive truth of people of color across the diaspora. Whereas our art has fed the world through our song and dance, we are still fighting for nuanced representation in film, music, art and television. Even when we appear, we seem more like caricatures— our bodies and lives are presented in troubling ways. For Black women, the constraints of both white supremacy and the patriarchy is a double injustice. Historically, the world celebrated presentations of the white female body while discrediting the Black female body. It is my goal, in this paper and film, to expand the understanding of the Black female body by looking through the lens of burlesque and American history.



Fig. 1. Make-up Lesson, *The Broad Squad*

In *Sister Citizen*, Melissa V. Harris-Perry says, "It is African American women, surviving at the nexus of racialized, gendered and classes dis-privilege, who mark the

progress of the nation.” (Harris-Perry, 16) The progress today is much slower and some may say that time has reset itself.

The 17th century arrival of the English colonists in the new world begins official documentation of falsehoods about Black women. William Bosman, upon his return from the African coast, describes the Black women on the coast of Guinea as "fiery." Further complicating the matter is the way Black women began their lives in America. Melissa Harris-Perry recounts “Black women were subjected to forced nudity during slave auctions. They often labored in fields with skirts hiked up. They were punished on plantations by being whipped in partial or total nudity.” (Harris-Perry, 55) Perry also notes that the “myth of Black women as “lascivious” helped to reconcile “forced public exposure and commoditization of Black women’s bodies with the Victoria ideas of women’s modesty and fragility.” (Harris-Perry, 55)

In *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*, the author, Winthrop D. Jordan, notes that the English settler William Smith described African women as "hot constitution'd Ladies who are continually contriving stratagems how to gain a lover." (Winthrop, 19) These ideas impose an insatiable sexual expectation on Black women without the opportunity for these women to be in control of their own sexuality. With these myths, not only are Black women’s bodies being devalued but society is convincing itself that they are naturally made for sex.

The genesis of anti-Black sexual archetypes enforced by American leadership is additionally problematic. In 1785, Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on State of Virginia* emphasized that white women have “flowing hair” and “a more elegant symmetry of form.” (Jefferson, 149) This begins the notion of ‘Black women’s inferiority.’ These

ideas, paired with the hypersexuality of Black women, create a complex imposed identity that has given permission for Black women to be treated as sexual commodities. As the discussion begins about Black women as burlesque dancers, we consider the following and the challenges they present: If a Black woman expressed her sexuality through burlesque would she be treated as an equal and would nudity or striptease be seen as special in a society where Black women are already viewed as oversexualized subjects?

Harriet Tubman, a revolutionary slave abolitionist, can be credited with recognizing issues of the adopted identity narrative of the Black woman. She reframed the Black women's narrative in America. In her address delivered during the 1851 Women's Convention, she calls for society to rethink their views on Black women. Her speech "Ain't I a woman" demanded America recognize the humanity of Black women. She states:

"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"

Truth's refrain is relevant, reflecting both historical and contemporary differences in which Black women and white women are seen in society. The complex start of Black womanhood in America doesn't allow Black women to express their sexuality in the same way as their white counterparts. Black women performing burlesque are seen as

lewd and crass, yet the comparable participation of white women is celebrated and viewed as sexy to the outside world. It is a constant debate. One that Chicava Honeychild notes in the film as “respectability politics.”

The history of burlesque is deeply rooted in “respectability politics” of the Victorian age. During this time, women were expected to cover up. Lauren Sherman notes in *Slut Shaming: A Brief History*, that “women wore stockings and very long skirts year-round to prevent even a sliver of ankle from peeking out.” In 1868, when the British blondes arrived in America revealing and reveling in their freedom of presentation, it was groundbreaking. Their boldness kicked off an era of burlesque. Robert C. Allen notes that “the first season of modern burlesque in America was disturbing...and threatening...because it presented a world without limits.” (Allen, 29). According to Allen, “women’s rights advocates and conservative cultural critics opposed it.” However, despite protest, burlesque started to become a part of acceptable entertainment. White women were allowed to present in bold sexual ways and be lauded despite “the prudishness of America’s self-appointed moral censors.” (Glenn, 103)

The white women burlesque pioneers are acknowledged for being a part of burlesque history but we must remember that they were operating within a racist framework. Many of these women, through burlesque, simultaneously advanced the freedoms of female sexual expression and promoted “racialized sex humor.” Eva Tanguay and Sophie Tucker wore blackface. In *Female Spectacle*, Susan A. Glenn notes that Black women remained symbols of illicit white sexual desire and minstrel performances allowed the white performer to be more “aggressive sexually.” (Glenn, 51) By clothing themselves in blackness, Eva and Sophie gave the audience permission to

distance themselves from the sexual shame associated with their exposure. It allowed them to be entertaining by exploiting systematic racism.

Despite the challenges, Aida Overton, a woman of color, made her presence felt and appeared in *The Creole Show*. The show, created by a white producer Sam T. Jack, featured a cast of Black women. Rachel Shteir, author of *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*, praised *The Creole show* for “presenting Black women as real people by discarding the plantation setting used in Black minstrelsy” but she noted that “the restrictions of race in the era’s theater nonetheless kept Black women in exotic roles.” (Shteir, 32)

The ladies of the show, Aida Overton Walker, Stella Wiley and Dora Dean became stars. *The Creole Show* broke the minstrel tradition of blackface. These women had thriving careers participating in two other shows *The Octoroons* (1895) and *Oriental America* (1896). Jayna Brown in *Babylon Girls*, acknowledges that these shows started to revolutionize the stage. She notes, “According to Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, these early shows “laid the groundwork for public acceptance of Negro women and Negro men on stage in other than burlesque fashion.” (Brown, 93)

Overton also made a name for herself by performing one of the most controversial dances at the time, “The Salome Dance” also known as the “Dance of Seven Veils.” She performed the seductive dance with restraint in comparison with the white women who had showcased the dance in earlier iterations. As an artist, Aida wanted to take risks but her skin color kept her from fully expressing herself. The public responded and the reviews praised Aida. She “gracefully performed” the dance. (Glenn, 114) If she would have performed the “Salome” dance with the same presence as her

white counterparts, she would have been crucified. Her reluctance to express herself was made very clear in her confession:

“The white public did not have the “faintest conception of the difficulties we must overcome, of the prejudices which must be soothed, of the things we must voice whenever we write or song a piece of music, put on a play or sketch, walk out in the street or land in a new town.” (Glenn, 133)

As Overton pushed boundaries, Blacks were migrating uptown in New York.

This movement encouraged the creation of The Darktown Follies, a Black revue. After seeing a performance, stage director Florenz Ziegfeld licensed their songs and contacted the lead of the Darktown Follies show to train his Ziegfeld Follies dancers. Ziegfeld went on to be written into burlesque history for his famous chorus girls. Meanwhile, “Black female dancers were barred,” from his stage “although their creative innovations formed the backbone,” of the performances. (Brown, 164)

This damage to the history of Black burlesque and chorus girls is obvious and can be seen today. In 2006, HBO created a documentary and book, *Pretty Things*, on the subject of burlesque history. In the book, Black women existed only in a footnote. A tiny description appears under a photo of an Asian burlesque dancer, Mei Ling, which reads, “In the 1930s and 1940s burlesque shows were officially segregated. It was considered exotic,” to include a performer of color on the bill. (Goldwyn, 64) The writer interviewed a burlesque dancer who she quotes was “insistent that there were no Black strippers.” In addition, the Ziegfeld Follies appears on six pages on the book with no mention of their influence by the Darktown Follies music and training. The absence of the Black female voice in this burlesque historical account is complicit with the history of erasure of Black women in America. It is imperative that a film be produced to reconstruct and write Black women of color back into burlesque history.

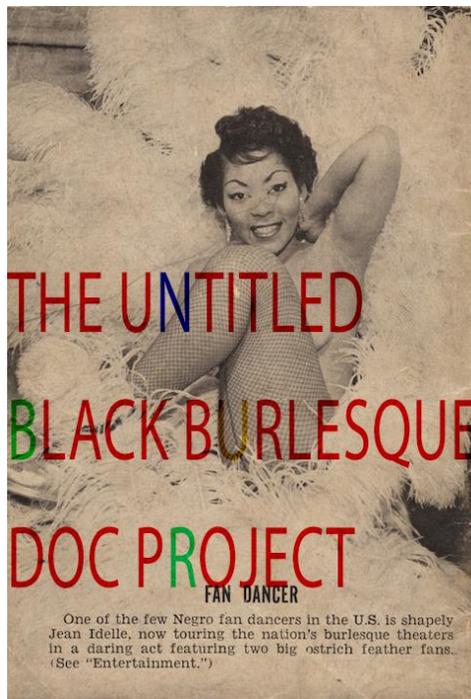
Burlesque in 1920s was thriving and striptease had just been introduced in 1917 by Mae Dix. In *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*, Michelle Baldwin recounts that striptease was “accidental.” Mae Dix, a white performer, “removed her collar,” and later she created an act where patrons tore pieces of the newspaper she was reading until there was just a “little newsprint preserving the last bits of her modesty.” (Baldwin, 8) The stage was being revolutionized with female sexuality and another woman of color was leaving her mark.

Josephine Baker began her ascension to international superstar in Paris, capturing her audience. When she returned to the U.S. she performed with the Ziegfeld Follies. It lasted only four days. Melanie Zeck discuss Josephine’s challenges in her article: *Josephine Baker, the most sensational woman anybody ever saw*.

“Some of the reviews attacked Baker specifically, by mapping current racial stereotypes and crippling expectations onto her and her performance.” While most remember the genius of Josephine Baker, we are also reminded of the challenges she endured to make a name for herself in America because of the racist framework of American society.

It was nearly impossible for Black women to be documented and treasured in the burlesque world by their white counterparts. The media response to Josephine Baker during her time with Ziegfeld Follies and Aida Overton’s Salome Dance confirmed that it was a challenge for Black burlesque performers to be taken into account. Until the creation of Black American publications, Black women were rarely documented as burlesque performers. In the 1950s, these women began to appear in *Jet Magazine* and *Hue Magazine*. Finally, Black women were getting the spotlight they deserved.

In the 1930s, New York was winding down from burlesque. In 1939, Mayor La Guardia officially shut down burlesque in New York. By the 1950s, burlesque began to dissipate with “adult movie houses replaced burlesque theaters.” (Shteir, 5) Most burlesque shows had moved to nightclubs and we are introduced to the Black “shake dancers” in the pages of *Hue* and *Jet Magazine* Black publications. Burlesque dancers like “Lottie the Body,” “Toni Elling” and “Jean Idelle” made their mark as top billed performers. This is where clear documentation begins for our film.



Jean Idelle *Jet Magazine* February 4th, 1953

The February 5th, 1953 issue of *Jet Magazine* features a stunning photo of Jean Idelle. A description underneath her reads, “One of the few Negro fan dancers in the U.S is shapely Jean Idelle, now touring the nation’s burlesque theaters.” She was 22 years old when she appeared, on multiple pages, in the magazine. Another stunning photo of her noted that “she was booked solid for the next 30 weeks on a coast-to-coast

tour with an otherwise, all-white burlesque unit, using \$1,000 worth of ostrich feather fans". (Jet Magazine, 53) Jean was living her dream as a dancer.

During the years she toured, Jean was often the only dancer of color featured. As she traveled during the period of segregation, she traveled with a bodyguard through the segregated South for her protection. During the interview for the film Jean reminisces and states: "There wasn't a lot of Black anything during those days."

Jean was featured in many magazines. In an article for *Sepia Magazine* in 1953, the writer states, "Curvaceous Jean, the Sepia Queen of Strippers is considered one of the sexiest interpretative dancers in show business. Currently touring the Canadian circuit, presenting her 'Exotic Paradis' dance." Jean's talents were lauded by audiences in United States and internationally in Canada. Jean appeared on one of the biggest stages of burlesque, The Minsky's Rialto Theater in Chicago. The *Chicago Sun-Times* shows an advertisement featuring Jean Idelle's photo and underneath they note that Lili St. Cyr will be performing. An important distinction to note that Jean performed on the same platforms with women who were lauded by the burlesque community. There is a clear inequity in the way Black burlesque dancers are framed in comparison to white dancers during the same time.

The inequity from the stage translated to the paycheck. A top billed *shake dancer* or *burlesque dancer* could expect to earn between \$500 and \$1000 a week. In comparison, Black dancers earned almost 50% less. (*21st Century Burlesque* article) The premium and value placed on the white body is evident to the detriment of the oversexualized Black body. Some wanted to have Black dancers for their "exotic appeal" but they did not see the value of what Black dancers were truly bringing to the

stage. Luckily for these dancers, there were publications that wanted to showcase their talents.



Fig 2. (Left) Jean and dancers posed after a show.

Fig 3. (Right) Jean on the Minsky advertisement in the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

In 1951, Jean got a personal letter from the Executive Editor, David Hepburn, of *Our World Magazine* inviting her to be on the cover. Hepburn, stated, “we want shots of you doing your fan dance, because I think it is a novel part of show business. There have never been any other Negro fan dancers before, and I am sure our readers will be interested in reading about your career.” Jean had made her mark officially. Many referred to her as the “Sepia Sally Rand.” Sally Rand, a white burlesque dancer, was famous for her fan dance in the 1920s. Jean’s fan dancing style had made her synonymous with a woman considered a legend. After a decade of work, Jean settled down to a life with a family. Jean’s son, Lamont Holliday, mentions that Jean retired at

the age of 30. Her son stated: “she didn’t want to be an old dancer.” Luckily for us, the Burlesque Hall of Fame brought her back to the stage at 82 to show us just what we missed during her heyday.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many women of color successfully made careers and some of those women have now been acknowledged by the greater burlesque community. The Burlesque Hall of Fame, the premier organization for preserving, sharing, celebrating, and inspiring the art of burlesque in Las Vegas, has honored *Toni Elling* and *Lottie the Body* as burlesque legends. Although the recognition is slow, women of color are gradually being acknowledged in the burlesque community. Ultimately, these women are inspiring the next generation. Our main protagonist Chicava Honeychild has been changed by discovering and speaking to these women she now refers to as her “*stripper grandmas*.” Their existence has changed her burlesque practice.

In a *Rolling Out* article, “Burlesque star Chicava Honeychild explains how nudity empowers her”, Chicava Honeychild speaks to the way in which burlesque has impacted Black women,

“African American women have a lot of ideas put on our bodies and what they mean and what showing them means and there’s a lot of other people’s influences on how we feel about ourselves,” she adds. “This gave me an opportunity express the love I have for myself and by extension, other women get to experience that, too. As you grow into it, you learn how to embrace the audience and audience appeal...while still keeping true to defining yourself and your beauty.”

The *Untitled Black Burlesque History Project*, will officially document the history of women of color in burlesque and ensure that their truth is heard. The goal is for more women to continue to grow and experience a deeper love for their bodies.

Synopsis

The *Untitled Black Burlesque History Project* focuses on Jean Idelle's life as told in her own words and the stories of her son Lamont Holliday who was committed to sharing his mother's journey in presentations across the country. Our entry point into Jean's life is through Chicava Honeychild, a neo-burlesque dancer and historian who has been searching for her past. Chicava Honeychild, born Roslyn Tate, was an actress living in Los Angeles ten years ago with a background in dance and fashion.

As with many actors, auditions had worn away at her spirit and she desired a new outlet for her talent. This is when she begins to redefine herself and began burlesque classes. She would later return to New York to join *The Brown Girls Burlesque*, an innovative women of color neo-burlesque troupe who wanted to diversify the burlesque landscape and produce shows that celebrated their politics and artistry. Like other women of the movement, they used:

“Retro striptease is a feminist act and social obligation, a way to wrest the art of stripping from the world of pornographer. These women argue that their work is a political reaction to twenty first century reform forces seeking to foil female sexual expression.” (Shteir, 3)

As she looked through all the burlesque books, Chicava rarely saw herself and started to research Black burlesque history. Her relentless pursuit leads her to Jean Idelle.

In the film, we meet Jean Idelle at her home. When Chicava arrives at Jean's door in Long Island, Jean's son, Lamont Holliday, meets her at the door. Then we cut to an interview with him as he tells the story of his mother as a little girl in Alabama discovering her love for dance. We cut to Jean in a wheelchair. It is the first time we see her in the film. She is older now, but as if it were yesterday, she tells the story about the

first time her mother tells the family pastor about her new career. “She said my daughter’s dancing butt naked. He said, go ahead Chile. Be another Lena Horne.”

Chicava and Jean laugh at the pastor’s reaction.

We are able to place into context the public’s perception of burlesque during this time because even the pastor seems excited about Jean becoming a big star. This is the first time we see Chicava interacting with one of her idols. She is delighted and leans forward, intently listening. The next time we see Chicava, she has transitioned in a new light, as a teacher of a new generation of burlesque dancers. It is make-up week in the burlesque class, The Broad Squad Institute. We are behind the scenes with the burlesque dancers in training. The students sit in front of the mirror learning stage makeup techniques as Chicava walks through tips on applying lashes. The camera follows her as we meet her new class. It is here that we meet Henrietta our secondary character.

Henrietta, a single mother by choice and chef, has decided to take the class to wade through her restrictive concept of sexuality. Because of her upbringing, Henrietta has felt that being sexy is shameful. Chicava’s class is her first step to accept her post-pregnancy body and reclaim a healthy and sex-positive mindset, i.e., “her sexy.” Henrietta is nervous about the process and apprehensive, but reveals that she desires this growth and wants to challenge herself. Throughout the film, we juxtapose Chicava’s lessons at The Broad Squad Institute with stories from Jean. In one instance, we see Henrietta struggling with her dance technique then transition to Chicava taking a lesson directly from Jean Idelle in her home. As the camera focuses closely on Henrietta she struggles through learning her dance moves; then we cut to Chicava holding the fans in

Jean's living room. First Chicava is teaching and then she is learning from Jean now. The teacher has become the student. Chicava asks: "Do I have to do this with one hand?" Now, it's Chicava that is nervous.

As the film progresses we learn more about Jean's rise to fame from a talented student in Katherine Dunham's class to stages across the country. We cut back to see Henrietta making her pasties while her daughter observes. The story is unfolding as Henrietta is loosening up. She appears to be enjoying her burlesque process. "These look good," she states excitedly. The film unfolds as Henrietta prepares for her first performance and Jean prepares for her first moment since her 30's in front of a burlesque audience. The film concludes with intercutting between Henrietta and Jean as they both reveal themselves to the audience and Chicava asks the important question: "What Black Burlesque did we miss?" The *Untitled Black Burlesque History Project* seeks to reclaim every story and ensure that no one's story goes unheard again.

Research, Approach and Style

I sat in the first pew in my Episcopal church restricted by the tight collar of my altar server's robe listening to the "virtuous woman" sermon. A "pure woman" who wore "strength and honor" as her clothing. As queer Black girl, I struggled to maintain the mask of purity. On the small island of Nassau, everyone knew your every move. Fortunately, I had been a nerd and earned the grades to obtain a scholarship and escape to university in New York City. It was in the '*Big Apple*' that my eyes were opened. New York was an entire new world that represented freedom but I had some deprogramming of my own to experience.

One of my turning points happened when a friend invited me to a burlesque show. I had never heard the term and when I researched it, I was apprehensive. I told her: 'I didn't want to go to a strip show.' According to my upbringing in the church, women were to be modest and modesty did not involve removing your clothes. Against my protests, my friend was able to convince me that I was not acknowledging the art of burlesque. I reluctantly decided to go. When we arrived, the room was packed. I took my position in the back so that I would leave if it was too much. I didn't leave. In fact, I was moved and encapsulated by the freedom of the women on stage.

As a filmmaker, I knew this had to be captured. I immediately contacted the leader of the burlesque troupe and asked for an interview. I sat with three performers from the newly formed Brown Girls Burlesque, an all women of color neo-burlesque dance troupe. It was there that I met Chicava Honeychild, now a ten-year veteran of burlesque. The interview left me feeling very empowered. Later that night, When I searched for burlesque and burlesque history, most of the images I found in books were white women. Where were the Black burlesque performers in the history?

The day I had the chance to speak with Chicava, she had shared the challenges of being Black in burlesque. She too had searched for Black women burlesque dancers. She dug deep and had finally started to unearth images in Jet Magazine. After the discovery, she had begun visits. She shared with me video snippets that she captured from her visits. In one home video, we see Jean Idelle, known as a famous fan dancer, showing Chicava how to hold her fans while sitting in her wheelchair. Where was this woman in the history books? Why hadn't I found her earlier. I was shocked that these women were relatively unknown or acknowledged. Their erasure reflects the

sequestering of Black women throughout this history. This film is an act of reclaiming Black burlesque history and my own sexuality. When Henrietta speaks about sex and shame in the film, I can relate. I felt the same way she did when I saw my first burlesque performance long ago. Now, I am championing for these women who have decided long ago to share their talents with us.

Documentary & Video Influences

To bring this documentary to life, I read numerous books and watched volumes of burlesque documentaries. I explored their approaches to archival footage and photos and learned about contemporary burlesque documentation. For literature, I utilized Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls*, Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-N-Grind* and *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* in addition to others. I spent hours in conversation with Chicava Honeychild who at length shared her experience in the burlesque community and her resource of photos and writings she had compiled. The first documentary I viewed was Leslie Zemeckis, *Behind the Burly Q* (2010) which contextually is closely aligned with my project. Leslie's documentary weaves stories from the older burlesque dancers in a seamless manner while being supported with archival material of their lives and burlesque history. The tightly framed interviews were intimate and engaging. I sought to replicate this experience in my project.

When covering scenes with Jean, my work is influenced by Fred Wiseman, particularly *Hospital* (1970). Wiseman's techniques forced me to challenge my pacing in new ways. He allows the camera to linger on faces. In my approach to capturing scenes in Jean's home, I wanted the camera to stay focused on her for long periods. In editing, I allowed the audience to sit with her. For example, we are watching Jean Idelle in her

wheelchair in the background as Chicava's body only is in the frame. We are focused on Jean's face and listening to her intently before we see the reverse shot of Chicava looking at her. It creates an opportunity for the audience to live inside these scenes rather than the scenes appear like a news report. I also used this approach for documenting the burlesque class.

My biggest challenge: Capturing the dance performances in a dynamic way. I was able to achieve the amount of movement I wanted because there were limitations with space. In these instances, I borrowed from *Pina* (2011). I placed the camera to follow the movement. I was also inspired by the movie *Rize* (2005) to slow down the performances to emphasize the movement and expression of the dancers. While we didn't use a Phantom camera for this production, our camera was able to allow for slow motion which added a dramatic nature to the pieces. In the conclusion of the film, we are really able to see the immense joy on the faces of the dancers through this process. Focusing on their expressions allows the audience to connect and extend beyond innate voyeurism.

Inspired by Leonard Retel Helmrich's, *Position Among the Stars* (2010) in which he uses "single shot cinema" style. This style he says, "emphasizes camera movement and long takes." In an article in the *International Documentary Association*, he notes that this method allows the filmmaker to "cover a scene from the inside is to be part of the event itself." I was able to incorporate this technique when Chicava introduces us into her class. We follow her behind the curtain and into the class as she stays seated talking with her students. It helps us to focus on her connection to the students and behind the scenes. Leonard notes that it allows you to "capture all the nuances in

between the different moments and elements and objects that are interacting with each other.”

In preparation for behind the scenes with Henrietta, I watched *First Position* (2011). I resonated with Michaela, one of the featured dancers from Sierra Leone. The documentary’s approach of introducing us clearly to characters and checking in on them until the final performance at the Grand Prix is one that I utilized in dealing with the Henrietta storyline. The film inspired me to make the final performance of Henrietta the big moment and check in with her as the audience learned more about Jean. I hope that I have been able to create the tension for the audience through that approach.

Production Process

The production on *The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project* began three years ago. After Chicava and I sat down to talk about her journey to find Black burlesque dancers. As director, I decided that the entry point would be her Chicava. She would be the one to frame burlesque through the lens of a woman of color and she would serve as the thread to connect our foremothers to each other. The woman that stood out to me while watching home video from Chicava was Jean Idelle. Jean seemed feisty and I was mesmerized by her use of the fans. I knew that if we could capture it professionally, we would have a dynamic interaction.

I wanted the scenes to be dynamic. Therefore, I ensured I used an additional camera on most shoots. I contacted Martyna Starosta, a former Integrated Media Arts graduate, and we journeyed to Jean’s house and spent the day with her. I interviewed Jean crafting questions that would guide her story authentically and we shot a session

with Chicava learning a fan dance from Jean. It was challenging as Jean was quite different from the footage I had viewed before. Her interview was a little more scattered. There were some stories that she repeated but nevertheless, she still remained spirited. I shot using 4k and Martyna shot on her C100 to capture the process.

With Jean's interview, I was able to map the groundwork for Jeans' story. Watching Jean teach Chicava was a powerful moment and I wanted to see the teaching moment connected. I realized then that I needed to capture more of Chicava's role in building a burlesque future. I planned to film at her class called The Broad Squad Institute a Black women's burlesque group. During the class, I spoke with a few of the women and then interviewed the three I felt had good stories. From that interview, Henrietta emerged as a strong character to follow. She was vulnerable and honest when other women appeared to be holding back. She also was the only dancer that allowed me to film with her outside the class.

Research for the film began in 2016 and production on *The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project* began with Toni Elling, a foremother who did not make it into this shorter iteration of the film in November 2016. I filmed with Jean Idelle and Henrietta in February through June of 2017. I wanted to capture Henrietta in her home and get a glimpse into her life as a single mother. I also wanted to chronicle her in preparation for her first performance. The access she afforded, allowed us to build a good rapport. For example, during one of the scenes she asks my opinion in the wig store as she asks my opinion regarding her purchase. A year prior I had tried filming with another burlesque dancer and there was not the same access that Henrietta had afforded.

Filming burlesque is a privilege and one I did not take lightly as it is a vulnerable practice. I am always aware of my perspective as a queer woman throughout the process and ensure that I consistently challenged the way in which my framing would not isolate body parts focusing on sexuality but more on expression and faces. While striptease is core to burlesque, the real joy is in watching the response on the women's faces who are performing. There is something about their expressions that reinforce the way in which the dance is more for the performer than the audience. I was fortunate to have two cameras on seven out of the eight shooting dates which created a dynamic edit. I had many challenges shooting with the Sony A7s. The camera handles low light but I remained frustrated by limitations on sound and also overheating which occurred more than once.

The post production process started in June of 2017. I transcribed each interview as I went along. In January 2017, I met with my primary advisor Tami Gold. I wanted to share a rough cut featuring the two of the foremothers, Toni Elling and Jean Idelle, at that time, I did not have an interview with Chicava or any footage from Henrietta. I explained to her that I was very worried about Jean's story.

After shooting with Henrietta and Chicava, I still felt that Jean's story was missing. At that time, I did not have any photos of Jean and I was having issues contacting her son to set up another time to interview him and scan the photos. After meeting again with Professor Gold, she instructed me to solidify my producer relationship. I used the next month to work on my producer relationship ensuring that schedule for shooting was back on track. At that time, I had two weeks of shooting planned with two new foremothers in Detroit. I also planned additional production time

with Jean and her son Lamont Holliday. The shoot with Jean was successful. We scanned over 100 photos of Jean's life before and after burlesque and got a chance to speak with Lamont, who then shared some poignant stories. I started to integrate his words into the new edit. Unfortunately, shooting with additional foremothers had to be cancelled due to an emergency health crisis but I was still able to craft a story between Jean and Henrietta without those additional voices.

As I began editing, the biggest concern was to ensure that I stayed within my vision and tell a compelling story. I didn't want to end up making what Barry Hampe calls, "talkumentary" which he describes as "interview after interview where people tell you what they think". I wanted to add gravitas to every moment and keep this cut visually stimulating from beginning to end (Hampe, 13).

After I presented my first cut, Professor Gold encouraged me to 'show not tell' and explore starting in a more cinematic way. She also encouraged that I pushed to weave my storylines looking for connections between the women. In *Documentary Storytelling*, Sheila Curran Bernard talks about the "problem solving" that must occur when you are working on your first cut. My biggest challenge was "Not Enough Breathing Room." Bernard notes that "you need the energy that real people bring to a film and the enthusiasm they bring to storytelling." (Bernard, 202)

When I began interweaving the story, I did not have the 'beats' that I needed to have my story flow the way I desired. On my second cut of the film, I really used the energy of the storytelling to allow the film to breath. Another challenge I had was the opening bite. My first approach was to make my opening moment humorous. I tried a bite from Jean where she asked the question, "What are the secrets of a burlesque

dancer?” Something about that bite seemed premature. The audience shouldn’t meet Jean right away. Also, I wanted to ensure that I started with a strong statement that would prepare the audience for what to expect. I felt that setting up the thesis would help to frame all the scenes that followed.

Chicava is a strong personality and I knew she would set the tone for the film. Because of her teaching background, I also knew having her voice at the beginning would help us to understand her role in the film and ground us theoretically. Henrietta as a student of Chicava would represent the future and Jean Idelle would connect the audience to the past. My biggest challenge was creating tension. Professor Gold kept pushing me to ensure that each scene would leave the audience wanting for more. I knew that I needed to have the story unfold more powerfully. Henrietta would also provide our conflict and tension as the audience watches her work toward her first burlesque performance and I would keep the audience waiting to see Jean’s performance.

Finally, I was challenged by placement of my title cards. I needed to ensure that the audience understood Henrietta’s timeline. I started to place lower thirds over footage so that the action would not stop. (i.e. I placed “Henrietta has her first show in 5 days” over her walking away) However, after much discussion with my advising team, I decided to make them bold and have them intercut between scenes to mark time and make a bolder statement rather than place them over the footage. I also redesigned my titles to have more of a ‘burlesque flair’. I shot sequin back plates and integrated an elegant but clear font. This approach would leave the audience with a bigger impact.



Figure 4. Henrietta During Dress Rehearsal

Audience and Exhibition

Burlesque has an engaged audience of women and men, progressives and people of all ages. With screenings, I will engage the audience through demonstrations, talkbacks and meet & greets with the legends. The ultimate vision is to tour the film with the dancers, and to host screenings and performances. All screenings will include moderated conversations with feminist and activist voices around themes or artistic practice, Black female sexuality, artistic performance and womanhood.

The final feature film will also have an academic life as Chicava travels with it on tour hosting workshops around her project Sacred Burlesque. Sacred Burlesque makes burlesque accessible to the broader community through a combination of exercises and lessons that incorporates classic burlesque, modern striptease, pinches of Kundalini Yoga, dance, sacred sexuality, and energetic healing exercises.



Figure 5. Chicava teaches students in her Sacred Burlesque class

The final film will require additional clearance of all images from *Jet Magazine*. We have permission to use Jean's photos but we will need an agreement if the final film is sold.

The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project will become a feature documentary unearthing all Black burlesque foremothers. Most films that cover burlesque feature history from a white perspective. This is the first time that Black burlesque is the primary focus. Rather than a Black performer being used to fill a quota of "inclusion", the film celebrates and acknowledges that a community of Black burlesque dancers exist.

Previous documentaries have failed to show the development of a dancer. They usually feature more established neo-burlesque dancers. The final project will see someone starting from beginning to becoming a realized performer. I am a visual artist and activist² who strives to celebrate women and people of color in new ways. This project is the first part of a feature documentary that will expand to follow three

² Artivism is a relatively new term (and one not officially recognized) that describes a civilization-old phenomenon: the coordinated workings of art and activism. An activist is one who practices artivism.

additional forgotten Black burlesque heroines. This 27-minute film will serve as a sample for investors as we secure funding for the feature film. When the feature film is completed, *The Untitled Black Burlesque History Project* will be distributed internationally and submitted to festivals focusing on character driven stories, dance, women's issues and people of color. These festivals include: Sundance Film Festival, Urbanworld Film Festival, Athena Film Festival, American Black Film Festival, South by Southwest and Dance on Camera Film Festival and Cucalorus Film Festival.

This project has allowed me to reach deeper in developing my story crafting skills and managing and building story themes. I am beyond grateful for the counsel of my advisors Tami Gold who was able to push me through the arduous task of managing producer relationships and setting expectations. I am also grateful for my advisors Rachel Stevens and Ricardo Miranda who ensured that I stuck my vision.

Being a part of the IMA program broadened my confidence in making documentary film. My film library and knowledge of documentary greats have expanded and most notably my style and approach. My background is in television marketing promotions so I have a very commercial approach to storytelling at times. The IMA program has allowed me to reclaim my artistic approach to storytelling. This project has allowed me to bring my video production, editing and producing skills together to craft a story that I hope will make an impact inspiring a new generation of Black burlesque dancers that will know one fact- black burlesque has always existed.

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