Live! Nude! Girls! Representations of Female Nudity in the Fluffgirls Burlesque, Girls Gone Wild, and Suicidegirls

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LIVE! NUDE! GIRLS! REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE NUDITY IN
THE FLUFFGIRLS BURLESQUE, GIRLS GONE WILD, AND
SUICIDE GIRLS

By

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A Thesis submitted to the
School of Theatre
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2006
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ABSTRACT

In the United States, performances of female nudity have a long history of transgressing and challenging socially constructed understandings of gender roles. This history stretches from burlesque performances just before and after the turn of the 20th century to the more contemporary work of performance artists like Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle. Instead of focusing on these solo performance artists, who use their nude bodies to raise troubling questions about gender and sexuality, this thesis breaks new ground. I investigate uses of female nudity in three contemporary examples of popular performance: the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society, Girls Gone Wild, and the SuicideGirls.

By looking at these three examples and the ways they each use different mediums of representation, I explore possible answers to the following questions: Can the representation of female nudity take place from a subject rather than an objectified position? Can performing “femaleness” based in the image of the nude female body signify an ownership and display of her own sexuality? Is female nudity always only a commodity for appropriation by the male or desiring spectator? Can women intervene in an economy of sexual desire by using the very images that are the stock and trade of such an economy? Who is in the power position if a woman chooses to have the desiring gaze directed at her? In addition to investigating the answers to these questions, this thesis also explores the possibility of an ethical heterosexual male desire in relationship to representations of performed female nudity.
INTRODUCTION

LIVE! NUDE! GIRLS! REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE NUDITY IN THE FLUFFGIRLS BURLESQUE, GIRLS GONE WILD, AND SUICIDE GIRLS

Introductory Narrative

He’s just another man to me.

--Mae West in My Little Chickadee

I have stood nude on stage in front of a live audience. I am an actor, and one of the greatest roles of my acting career involved me standing on stage nude. My nude body was the first thing the audience saw when the lights came up. I stood on a chair placed center-stage with my closed fist covering my genitals. As I stood there nude, a fully-clothed woman—my mother in the play—sucked make-up sores that I had applied to my body an hour earlier in the dressing room. She sucked my bare arms, my bare legs, and my bare stomach. The sores were supposed to represent the marks left on my body after swimming in a leech-infested pond. The sores were fabricated, but my nudity was not. I was performing Ghosts In the Cottonwoods, written by Adam Rapp, in a small theatre in Chicago during the middle of winter. The heating system was not the state-of-the-art affair one would have hoped to have in place when appearing nude on stage. Especially since, being a male, the cold air wasn’t most flattering to my genitals that would be on display to an audience of strangers. “Hi, nice to meet you, I promise my penis isn’t really this small. Well it is, because it is, but you see, well, yes, you see, it’s really cold in here….” There was no time for such introductions or rationalizations. The play moved on, and I needed to get dressed. I had to dress on stage in plain view of the audience. Putting on my pants required the use of both hands. The shield that my closed fist provided between the gaze of the audience and my genitals had to be removed.

I stepped off of the chair and put my pants on. For a moment I stood completely exposed in public. It turned out to be one of the most freeing things I had ever done. I felt invincible. I felt like I could do anything. Once that taboo had been broken, once I had put myself literally

1 The incestuous image was intentional on the part of the playwright as incest was an essential element of the play’s plot.
naked before an audience of strangers, there seemed nothing left that I couldn’t do. I didn’t feel powerful in the sense that I was going to go start a revolution and topple any government, but I did feel powerful in the sense that at that moment of complete nudity I felt as if I could do anything. I was, however, “just another man” and not a woman. Nor was the impetus to display my nude body originating from my own desire. The script dictated the nudity. It had to do with one of the circumstances of the character I was playing and not any of my own life circumstances of choice or self-expression—not at least any more so than the choice I had already made to express myself through the creative art of acting. The difference between these two particulars of my nude performance—man vs. woman and dictated by script vs. personal choice—were brought to my mind last year and again a few months ago when I saw the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society perform live at the Beta Bar in Tallahassee, Florida.  

As I watched these Fluffgirls sing, dance, strut their stuff, and systematically remove their clothing, in what they have called a “neo-burlesque” style, certain thoughts began to roam through my mind. I was a little disappointed with myself that these thoughts didn’t involve fantasies of any of the Fluffgirls and myself committing the sort of acts that if I wrote about them here would call my scholarly integrity into question. No, the thoughts that I had roaming through my mind were more in line with my role as theatre scholar than my role as scopophiliac. I was fascinated by the seemingly empowered position of the female performers. Contrary to certain schools of feminist thought, these female performers did not appear to me as blank screens of flesh upon which I could project my desiring male fantasies of domination and submission. These performers were vivid and in control. These Fluffgirls seemed to be fully aware of their charisma—that quality or essence essential in a performer that is so hard to define other than knowing it when you see it—and of the fact that the gaze of the eighty or so evenly split male and female spectators was fixed on them.

It appeared to me that the gaze of the spectators, however, was not pushing them, not controlling them, not limiting them, not defining them. Rather, the gaze was following their strategically planned and choreographed maneuvers across the stage—their every shimmy and shake. They led; the spectator’s gaze followed. As I watched their nearly naked bodies move

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2 The Beta Bar is a local rock-and-roll venue that showcases local and national rock bands, as well as, on at least two occasions, the Fluffgirls.
3 I will examine the phrase “neo-burlesque” and its implications more closely in Chapter One.
through the smoke-clouded performance space a series of questions began to form in my mind:

Can the representation of female nudity take place from a subject rather than an objectified position? Can performing “femaleness” based in the image of the nude female body signify an ownership and display of her own sexuality? Is female nudity always only a commodity for appropriation by the male or desiring spectator? Can women intervene in an economy of sexual desire by using the very images that are the stock and trade of such an economy? Who is in the power position if a woman chooses to have the desiring gaze directed at her? Can a woman experience that feeling of power that I myself experienced, no matter how artificial or theatrically dictated my circumstances were, by standing on stage as a nude performer?

Description

Using the questions outlined above as a springboard to propel my research, this thesis is an exploration of the fields of possible answers to these questions. I do not assume that I will find any hard and definite answers. I will explore the fields of possibility by analyzing three different, but related, examples: the already mentioned neo-burlesque performance of the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society; the wet t-shirt contest/performance hosted and recorded on video by Girls Gone Wild; and the Internet “artistic nude” website SuicideGirls, which also produces a traveling live burlesque performance. I will investigate both the presentation and reception of these performances that revolve around the primary event of females undressing in public and on stage. In my investigation, I will pay particular attention to how each of these examples of performance is successful, or not, at creating a space of agency or intervene in the sexual economy through the attempted ownership of the presented image of the performer’s nudity.

As I recognize and explore each of these examples of female performance in their singularity, there is a reason I am purposely choosing to investigate them together: they are all examples of popular performance. By “popular performance” I do not mean that these are examples of performance that are all immediately recognizable to a mass audience—though two of them, Girls Gone Wild and SuicideGirls, arguably are. I mean instead that these are examples of performance that are not taking place inside the often perceived-as-elitist cultural realm of popular performance.

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4 I say nearly naked because at the very least the Fluffgirls had on pasties and G-strings. Usually it was pasties and G-strings accompanied by stockings, a feather boa, or a precariously positioned hat.

5 Besides stating the obvious fact that all three of these examples of performance are structured around the event of females undressing.
conventional theatre and performance art, rather they are examples of performance that take place within the realm of popular culture.

My use of the word “culture” throughout this thesis will follow the example of Clay Calvert in his book *Voyeur Nation*. Calvert himself borrows a definition of culture defined by the Australian cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner as, “the place ‘where meaning is generated and experienced’ and the location where ‘social realities are constructed, experienced, and interpreted’” (Calvert 22).  The material places, locations, or venues for the three cultural performances that I’m exploring in this thesis are not conventional theatres, art galleries, or other haunts of the social elite. Instead, they are performed in sports-bars and dance clubs, in rock-and-roll venues, on beaches, or other sites commonly associated with popular culture—places that allow access to the general public.

It will be important in my analysis of these events to describe the physical places of general public access as part of the material context in which the three examples of performance take place. These performances are intended for the lower and middle class majority. All three may be considered popular performances partly because they are easily accessible by a live audience of spectators that need not belong to a certain social or economic class of high standing—an audience that is in no way socially elite. They are performed in places where people who belong to the working classes have access and often go to hang out, socialize, and enter into popular discourse. Although her comment is in reaction to a performance by the Fluffgirls specifically, what Leah Sottile writes for *The Pacific Northwest Inlander Online* provides insight into the possible class make-up of the audiences attending performances by all three of my examples. Sottile writes of the burlesque tradition, invoked intentionally by the Fluffgirls with their self-imposed moniker of “neo-burlesque,” that, “Burlesque is rooted in early Victorian days, when the cultural divide between the working class and the aristocracy was gaping. […] Burlesque became a sort of Saturday Night Live for the working class—laughing at the foibles of the rich and famous” (3). All three performances—the Fluffgirls, Girls Gone Wild and SuicideGirls—are classifiable if not as popular art then at least as popular entertainment and popular performance.

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6 From the Australian University of Queensland’s website: “Graeme Turner is Professor of Cultural Studies and Director of the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies since 1999. He is one of the key figures in the development of cultural and media studies in Australia and has an outstanding international reputation in the field.”
As part of my project, I will also investigate ways in which each of these popular performance events uses media and the liveness of the performers in slightly different ways. The Fluffgirl Burlesque is a traveling live burlesque show that originated in Vancouver, Canada. It is now based out of Toronto and frequently travels to the United States. The Fluffgirls, following the tradition of burlesque performance in the United States, perform skits, tell jokes, sing, and dance as they reveal their nearly nude bodies, ultimately clothed only in pasties and G-strings, in front of a live audience. There is, at this time, no media recording of a Fluffgirl performance that is available for purchase by the general public. It is only possible for the general public to have access to a Fluffgirl show by participating in their live performance events as live spectators.

Spectator participation is taken to an extreme in the case of Girls Gone Wild. The performances are comprised entirely of spectators crossing the line between spectator and performer. Some of the female spectators at the live events become performers/contestants in wet t-shirt contests. These contests are judged by the live mobs of screaming male spectators who are present at the venues where the Girls Gone Wild camera crews have set up shop. The girls, generally, begin their performances rather tamely by timidly flashing their breasts or thong underpants to the eager male majority of spectators. Encouraged and provoked, however, by the chanting mob of the male majority, the girls’ tame flashing often turns quickly into more explicit actions. These less-than-tame actions sometimes include stripping off all of their clothing, getting completely nude, and simulating sexual acts. The live nude contest/performances are recorded by the Girls Gone Wild camera crews onto video for future late night tv-telemarketing and Internet distribution. For a price, anyone who wasn’t present at the live event can purchase a recording of these seemingly-drunken displays of young college co-eds gone, well, wild. Once purchased, they can be watched from the privacy of the purchaser’s own home either on video, DVD, or via streaming Internet images.

Finally, like performers for Girls Gone Wild, the SuicideGirls both perform live and have these performances recorded for wide distribution via the Internet and on DVD. According to the popular magazine _TimeOut NY_, SuicideGirls has “become a grassroots phenom” that uses the Internet to display artistic nude photo sets of the SuicideGirls. Once they have appeared in these nude photo sets displayed on suicidegirls.com, they are then eligible to meet their public face-to-face as performers in the live traveling burlesque. Like both of the previous two examples, the SuicideGirls live show has as its centerpiece females undressing. The SuicideGirls live
burlesque follows a format that is similar to, although not exactly the same as, the Fluffgirl shows. SuicideGirls also incorporate skits, humor, and simple narratives as they strip down to the punk-rock equivalent of pasties and G-strings: electrical taped nipples and still the ever-present G-string.

The nude or nearly nude bodies of the performers in these three events become more than just the image and representation of their female nakedness. Their bodies become the actual material sites for their performances of agency. As Rebecca Schneider writes in her book on feminist performance art, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, “much explicit body performance replays, across the body of the artist as stage, the historical drama of gender” (3). The nude body of the females itself becomes the staging ground for agency to happen or not. My thesis asks the questions: what does agency look like? Does agency take physical shape in the nude body of these performers?

As I explore the answers to these questions that may reveal possible effective strategies for enacting female agency, I hope to also uncover potential expressions of ethical heterosexual male desire. That is, my personal stake in the issue of female agency and representation explored in this project is to find possible answers to the question: how can straight men exercise their desire for women in a way that allows for an inter-subjective exchange? Is there the possibility of an exchange of desiring gazes between two active subjects instead of the oppressive unidirectional gaze commonly associated with theoretical models of men as desiring subjects and women as passive objects of that desire? The highly sexualized associations of the nude female body that are present in all three of the examples I’m exploring will draw this issue of heterosexual male desire into sharp focus. Laying it bare, so to speak.

As should be quite clear by now, much of my analysis will involve images and representations of nude or nearly nude females. With these particular images and representations forming the basis of my analysis, it is inevitable that a discussion of pornography, and whether or not any of these performances fall under its purview, will factor into this project. In Chapter Two, I take up the issue of pornography directly and examine the Girls Gone Wild performances through the frame of pornography with its multiple and varied definitions. If from the outset the performances are labeled as pornography, they shouldn’t encounter the sort of censorship that transgressive female performance artists, such as Karen Finley, encountered as she pushed the boundaries of the label of “art” with her nude performances. Of course, the stigma and danger
that goes along with being labeled pornographic might outweigh any of the advantages to be gained by it.

To summarize, through this exploration of possible answers to the questions that formed as I watched the Fluffgirls shimmy and shake at the Beta Bar, I will analyze the specifics of key factors of each of these three examples of live female performance. In addition to discussing the performances and performers themselves, other objects of analysis will include: the venues these performances take place in; the spectators that view them; and the different mediums of presentation and distribution that allow them to be viewed. I hope to show that while these three examples of popular live performance are similar, they have amongst them differences that modify the reading of the events for the spectators, the performers, and myself as investigator as well. There are different ways for females to be naked in public. Those that I’m investigating reveal different meanings, different exchanges of power, different discursive and cultural structures, and different strategic tactics for enacting agency. Likewise, there are different ways for heterosexual males to desire. As I investigate these performances of female nudity, I hope to simultaneously open up a possibility for male desire that moves it towards a more ethical and less oppressive form.

**Methodology**

Part of my methodological approach to this project has already been described: I am choosing to focus on these popular culture representations of nude female performance rather than more artistic cultural examples because of their potential for mass appeal and therefore potential for mass impact. As it has already been shown, in a discussion of female nude performance, however, I cannot completely ignore the work of female performance artists such as Karen Finley or Annie Sprinkle.

Karen Finley’s work and the reactions to it will prove especially useful in my project for two main reasons. First, Finley’s work crossed over from the artistic cultural realm to the mass popular cultural realm. The crossover happened when her nude image appeared not only in conventional performance art spaces but also in the iconographic men’s magazine *Playboy*. Second, Finley’s performance illustrates that no matter the effect hoped for in presenting a representation, the reception of that representation cannot ever be completely controlled or
managed. Through her performances, Finley attempted to represent and enact her female subject position. In the enactment of this representation, she was attempting to use her nude body as a site of intervention into the power dynamic operating when the male gaze is directed at the performing female body. Even though representing her subjectivity was part of these nude performances, she was still, however, objectified by some male spectators. Men would come to her performances only to see a conventionally attractive woman “smearing canned yams across her bare buttocks” (Lockford 10) and throw beer cans or lit cigarettes at her. No matter how she attempted to present her active subject position she could not ultimately control the reception of her nude performance—she could not fully prevent becoming the object of some spectator’s desire.

The purpose of my project is not to retread ground. The work of Finley, Sprinkle, and other female “performance artists” has already generated a large amount of interesting scholarly conversation. They may enter my discussion, but they will not be my focus. Keeping in mind the lessons learned from Finley’s work in regard to the disconnect between presentation and reception, through my focus on Fluffgirls, Girls Gone Wild and SuicideGirls, I will try to determine if female performers who have emerged in recent years are able to open up moments of non-objectified female subjectivity through the intervention of their performed nudity.

To look at the relationship between performer and desiring spectator in these performances from a psychological standpoint, it would be tempting to label these desiring spectators as voyeurs. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, voyeurism is defined as a sexual disorder or paraphilia, which “involves the act of observing unsuspecting individuals, usually strangers, who are naked, in the process of disrobing, or engaging in sexual activity. The act of looking (‘peeping’) is for the purpose of achieving sexual excitement” (qtd. in Calvert 49). Based on this definition, there is at least one major flaw in labeling the relationship between the spectators and performers in the Fluffgirls, Girls Gone Wild and SuicideGirls live performances as that between voyeur and watched object of desire. For the Fluffgirls and the SuicideGirls the part of the definition that is lacking is the observance of “unsuspecting individuals.” The Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls are not only suspecting they are expecting to be watched. They hang up fliers, and they put advertisements in

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7 I have borrowed the notion of this disconnect between the presentation and the reception of a representation from conversations I’ve had with Dr. Mary Karen Dahl, my advisor throughout this project.
newspapers and on the Internet to ensure it. It is more complicated to determine whether or not the girls who get up on stage at a Girls Gone Wild event are suspecting or not. It is my assumption that they are often drunk, and they may not have premeditated getting up on stage until they find themselves there—coerced by friends and the male mob acting as audience. There is a certain amount of “unsuspecting” in their performance that is in agreement with the *DSM-IV* definition of voyeurism.

The writings of Foucault and my understanding of his conception of power will have a great impact on this project and provide a theoretical underpinning throughout. Foucault posits a notion of power that is not based on a simple hierarchy of top-down domination. He describes what I’m for the moment going to call a liberating aspect of power—production. Foucault articulates the workings of power when he says:

> If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (61)

I say this productive aspect of power, as Foucault would have it, is liberating because through the power of production individuals are able to produce subject positions that have the potential to resist oppression. Part of my assumptions about the Fluffgirls, Girls Gone Wild and SuicideGirls is that the performers are seeking to represent themselves as they believe they are or to rehearse identities that they hope to become. To follow Foucault’s notion, they tap into the productive network to pull power, redirect it, and produce their subjectivities through conscious choices of various modalities of representation—in this case their femaleness made undeniable through the representation of their nudity. As Karen Finley’s example has shown, however, the subject positions that are opened up by these kinds of representations are still open to the possibility of objectification. The power that is drawn on an individual basis does not negate the power that is always held in place by cultural institutions. As I read Foucault then, power circulates continuously between both individuals and institutions in a both/and situation rather than an either/or situation.
As the performances of the Fluffgirls, Girls Gone Wild and the SuicideGirls are not text-based, I will not be undertaking any conventional close reading of a written text. I will conduct a close reading of the performance texts of the three groups. To do this, I will have to rely on my own memories and impressions of the live Fluffgirl performance I attended and recorded documentation of the other two performances. I have seen the Fluffgirls perform live twice, and I have extensive notes taken from the second performance. I have access to recorded versions of both of the other live performances, and I will also rely on reviews from the popular press as documentation of all three of these live performances. I have also had the opportunity to conduct interviews via e-mail with Cecilia Bravo from the Fluffgirls and Missy Suicide from the SuicideGirls. These interviews will provide valuable “inside” information into the workings of the two groups.

**Literature Review**

There are generally considered to be three waves of Feminism. The term first-wave, according to an article in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, “was not used during the time of the movement and was instead coined retroactively after the term second-wave feminism began to be used to describe a newer feminist movement.” The first wave was mainly concerned with getting women the right to vote, and was an incredibly focused and ultimately successful movement. The second- and third-wave movements are not so focused and have had less clearly quantifiable successes. Second-wave feminism was largely concerned with economic equality between men and women, and third-wave feminism was concerned with who is allowed to represent the body including the sexualized body. In this project, I will not try to present the history of feminism or focus on the nuances of these different waves. Yet, there are two important issues that are relevant to my project: that of the struggle for economic equality that was part of the second wave that has been folded into the third and the third-wave concern with representations and construction of the meanings of “femaleness.”

One specific voice from this third wave of feminist criticism that will enter the conversation of this particular project is the voice of Jill Dolan. In her 1987 article “The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance” published in *Theatre Journal* she argues that the notion put forward by “cultural feminists” that the female
body, “stripped of its ‘essential femaleness’ communicates an essential meaning recognizable by all women,” is flawed, “They see the nude female body as somehow outside the system of representation that objectifies women, free of the culture’s imposed constructs and constrictions” (159). The implication of this stance for my study is to stress the cultural and societal constrictions imposed on individual subjects’ efforts to exercise agency unfettered.

Jeanie Forte engages Dolan in this discussion in her essay “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism” published in the collection of essays Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre edited by Sue-Ellen Case. In her essay, Forte concludes that “Dolan’s argument ultimately condemns nudity in performance” (261). Dolan instead offers up non-nude resistant female performances performed by members of Split Britches that use lesbian performance techniques of cross-gender costuming as a more effective and liberating way of dealing with the issue of female subjectivity through performed representation. Forte, on the other hand, argues for the subversive power of female nudity in performance and writes, “Performing nude has, for some performers, provided an opportunity for deepening the critique of centuries of cultural laminations of the body. Far from a ‘purist’ or ‘self-righteous pose’ in service of an asexual philosophy, most female nude performances have dealt quite specifically and blatantly with female sexuality and its cultural suppression” (262). Both of these views of female nudity in performance will be illuminating when applied to my case studies. Girls Gone Wild serves as a hyperbolic example of the failure of performed female nudity to set women free from the objectified gaze of the male spectator. I intend to argue that the Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls performances, at least to some extent, do manage to strip away some of the “cultural laminations of the body” and work to undermine the objectifying power of the male gaze.

Another article written by Jill Dolan for Theatre Journal, “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performance’” will prove useful in my project. In this article, Dolan writes:

How can performance, in itself, be a utopian gesture? Why do people come together to watch other people labor on stage, when contemporary culture solicits their attention with myriad other forms of representation and opportunities for social gathering? Why do people continue to seek the liveness, the present-tenseness that performance and theatre offer? Is the desire to be there, in the moment, an expression of a utopian impulse? Certainly, people are drawn to theatre and performance by fashion and by taste, by the
need to collect the cultural capital that theatre going provides. Live theatre remains a powerful site at which to establish and exchange notions of cultural taste, to set standards, and to model fashions, trends, and styles. (455)

She goes on to discuss the idea of community built around these performances—a community built of both spectators and performers sharing space. I explore Dolan’s notion of community most directly in Chapter 3; however, all three examples, to some extent, work to build or exploit a sense of community. Having been present at two performances of the Fluffgirls, it is apparent to me that their performances are working in this utopian community-building manner. One way in which the Fluffgirls actively orchestrate this sense of community is that on their website they give advice to their potential spectators on how to dress for one of their performances, “there is no strictly enforced dress code; however, we encourage people to dress to impress in swellegant attire: vintage, formal or costume. By complying with this request, you as a patron can help us create a surreal atmosphere” (fluffgirlburlesque.com). By only encouraging spectators to dress in a certain way and not requiring it, they leave room for someone like myself who didn’t dress up to still feel comfortable. Those who did dress up, and there were plenty, added to the atmosphere of the overall performance. Both groups, those like myself who didn’t dress up alongside those who did, were welcomed and had their part to play in the event.

The community that gathers for Girls Gone Wild performances consists mainly of college students. The years between childhood and adulthood spent on college campuses are a contemporary rite of passage, and engaging in these performance/contests is part of the ritual for some young people. The action of the performance and the presence of the live spectators directly feed and influence one another. The dancing and prancing of the girls instigate cheers from the male crowd that further provoke the girls to perform wilder and wilder acts that cause more cheering from the males in a feedback loop that falls just short of breaking into an orgy. The co-presence of performers and audience members at a Girls Gone Wild event illustrates how volatile and even potentially dangerous the co-presence of performers and spectators can be. Each group works the other up into a frenzy. The sexual dynamic between the mob of male spectators and the female performers becomes so unbalanced, at times it feels as if the male mob is holding sexual power over the performing females in a way that is similar to the power a rapist holds over his victim. The threat of physical violence lies just below the surface of the male mob that could easily turn into an angry male mob if it is not appeased.
The SuicideGirls website is evidence of where the community being built around their live performances intersects with an online virtual one. The website allows those who join to create their own profiles, upload their own pictures that can be viewed by the other members of the site who are also paying to see the nude photos of the SuicideGirls, and keep their own “blogs” or online journals. The SuicideGirls also keep blogs on the website and comment on each other’s and their own photos. As a viewer of the website, you get to know the SuicideGirls to some extent beyond seeing their nude photos. The performers in the live show that are documented on the DVD *Suicide Girls: The First Tour* also all have profiles on the website. It would be possible for someone who had viewed the live show to go home and via the internet continue to keep a link to the community that was created initially by participating in the liveness of the original performance event.

Such communities offer opportunities for conservative or transgressive actions. In this regard, Robert C. Allen’s book *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* provides a useful history of burlesque in the United States. He argues that burlesque is by its nature a transgressive art form. This book will be very helpful in placing the SuicideGirls and the Fluffgirls in a historical trajectory of live burlesque performance in the United States. As my project is centrally concerned with gender issues, Allen’s arguments presented in the book will provide backing for why burlesque is an ideal mode of performance to study when dealing with gender issues. He writes, “Burlesque is emblematic of the way that popular entertainment becomes an arena for ‘acting out’ cultural contradictions and even contestations and is exemplary of the complexities and ambiguities of this process. It is of particular historical import because its organizing problematic is gender” (27).

The acting out of cultural contradictions organized by problematics of gender is not a trait unique to burlesque. In her book *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Rebecca Schneider explores radical female performance artists from the time period spanning the 1960’s-90’s, such as Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, and Karen Finley. The arguments that she constructs around these solo artists will be applicable to the groups I’ll be studying in my project. Schneider writes about how the explicit nature of these performances worked to disrupt and resist the “invisible barricades which had, for so long, kept women marginalized as subject seeing, central as object seen—marginalized as artist producing, central as art produced” (38). *The Explicit Body in Performance* leaves the discussion of female explicit performance with the solo artists of the
1990’s, I will pick up the threads of this conversation and see how Schneider’s observations and arguments about representations of female nudity have advanced into the new millennium. Instead of exploring the work of solo performance artists, however, I will be investigating contemporary modes of popular performance.

As an aid to differentiating between what can be considered art and pornography, Karl Toepfer has outlined nine “strategies” of nude performance in order to “present a comparative analysis of nine such strategies and show how they perceive nudity, not as a transcendence of textuality, but as a disruptive mode of textuality which compels the spectator to ‘read’ the body in some new way” (Toepfer 78). His article titled “Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance” is problematic because it is so reductive, but it provides a basic vocabulary that I employ in my own discussion. His nine “strategies” are: mythic nudity, ritual nudity, therapeutic nudity, model nudity, balletic nudity, uninscribed nudity, inscribed nudity, obscene nudity and pornographic nudity. I use Toepfer’s nomenclature specifically in Chapter Two when I discuss Girls Gone Wild and definitions of pornography.

In addition to books, journals, and other written texts, I have access to DVD recorded versions of the performance texts of both SuicideGirls and Girls Gone Wild but not the Fluffgirls. These recorded versions of the live events give credence to Dolan’s argument that the female nude cannot ever fully get outside of “the system of representation that objectifies women, free of culture’s imposed constructs and constrictions” because the spectator is able, like a voyeur, to watch the females as unsuspecting objects of watched desire. With the use of a remote control, the spectator of the recordings is able to direct the action in a way that spectators of the live performances cannot. I think it is interesting that in order to see the Fluffgirls perform a spectator has to be willing to go out in public and find themselves face-to-face with the performing female nudes. What people watch in public and what they watch in the privacy of their own homes are often quite different. The fact that spectators can see recorded versions of the other two performances is also of interest. Do some spectators prefer the live experience to the recorded while others prefer the recordings? If so, why? Who is making money from the distribution of these recordings? How are they distributed? The answers to these questions will factor into my analysis of both Girls Gone Wild and the SuicideGirls in Chapters Two and Three, respectively.
Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1. Everything Old Is New Again: Form In Flux And The Fluffgirl Burlesque Society

I will begin with the Fluffgirls because that was where my thinking on the questions raised above began. When talking to my mom about my thesis topic, the only one of the performances that I’m investigating that doesn’t make me flush with embarrassment when I mention it is the Fluffgirl performance. I bring this personal reaction up because I think it points to a certain quality in the Fluffgirl performances that is as Leah Sottile describes it in her article “Vintage Va-Voom,” “risqué-but-not-too-risqué” (1). Of the three examples, the Fluffgirls draw most heavily on “traditional” burlesque. By invoking this traditional form and calling themselves neo-burlesque, they evoke a certain dignity and charm but also a certain safeness. As Erin Ryan writes in an article for the Boise Weekly:

The garter belts and pouty red lips are somehow tasteful, even elegant. Their smoldering eyes and mischievous smiles recall a time when women relied on their beauty, as well as revealing the real driving force behind burlesque—pure, unadulterated fun. “There is stripping involved, but in a tasteful, teasing way; there’s an art to it,” Bravo said.  

For first-timers, she provided a list of elements that sum up a traditional burlesque performance. First and foremost is the tease. Their repeated invocation of the “dead” art form burlesque is one of the details specific to the Fluffgirls that I want to explore in this chapter. What is to be gained for performers in the 21st century by insisting on the parallels drawn between their performance and a mode of performance that packed Broadway houses in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries?

I have seen their live show twice, and each time it was a different experience. What was the same both times was that the women exhibited an air of polish and intent that signaled they knew exactly what they were doing. It signaled a type of control. A type of power. These were definitely not drunk, impressionable “barely legal” co-eds at the mercy of a male mob. The

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8 Cecilia Bravo is the founder of Fluffgirl Burlesque Society and one of the traveling performers.
9 Burlesque is pronounced dead in Rachel Shteir’s article published in the magazine American Theatre: “Stormy Weather: how a climate of rebellion, in theatre and society, wrought the death of burlesque in 1969.”
Fluffgirls are women who know what they like and actively work to own their consciously displayed images of sexuality. A Fluffgirl performance is divided into three sets with an intermission or pause to buy beer in between each set. Each of the women who are there to perform that night will perform once in each set. A typical performance begins with a woman in an elaborate costume. She may sing, tell jokes, or just dance a choreographed dance as she systematically removes the elaborate costume. This pre-planned choreography provides further evidence for my earlier argument that the relationship of Fluffgirl to spectator is not one of watched object to voyeur because their choreography demonstrates their attempt to direct the viewing of the spectator. This viewing is then expected, not “unsuspecting” or improvisatory. Once the Fluffgirl has stripped down to pasties and G-string, never less than this that I’ve witnessed, she quickly darts off stage. The moment of nearly full exposure is extremely brief. After the three sets, there is a final segment that involves actual audience members—oftentimes including a male audience member—participating in a shimmy contest. The winner of the contest is awarded a secret prize that can range from a free drink from the host bar to being whipped by one of the Fluffgirls.

In this chapter, I will look at the history of burlesque as a subversive form of performance in the United States, especially as it has disrupted and perturbed notions of gender. I will consider what implications are found in the term “neo-burlesque” and if it is an accurate one to describe the Fluffgirl performances. I will also discuss the venues they perform in, the audiences who attend their performances, and how these aspects of their performance help in constructing the meaning and understanding the effects of their performances.

Chapter 2. Girls Just Want To Have Fun: Subjectivities In Flux And Girls Gone Wild

Girls Gone Wild is probably, for most readers, the most popular and easily identifiable of the three performance events I will explore. Girls Gone Wild is also the one that caused me to blush the most when talking to my mom. Additionally, it is the most hyperbolic example of the way the co-presence of performer and spectator can directly affect each other.

As part of the “ritual” of going away to college, some young co-eds, presumably under the heavy influence of alcohol, get up on stage in wet t-shirt contests. These contests are sponsored by products like Corona Beer or Captain Morgan’s Rum (often these events are co-sponsored and promoted by what is now the multi-million dollar corporation of Girls Gone Wild
itself), the same alcohol producing companies that have lowered the girls’ inhibitions to begin
with. The young women looking to assert some sexual freedom in these contests are instantly
objectified by the live male-mob urging them into more and more provocatively licentious acts.
They are also then further commodified, not only by the alcohol companies who so strategically
place their banners framing the public display of naked young female flesh, but more overtly by
the Girls Gone Wild manufacturer and distributor Mantra Entertainment. In this economy of
sexual objectification, however, some of the girls feel as if they’ve freely expressed themselves,

enough so that there seems to be no end to the number of girls who are willing to put on the
GirlsGoneWild t-shirt and get up on stage and dance under the streaming water of a hose.

The performers in the Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls are paid. The girls who participate in
the Girls Gone Wild performances are not. The only people making money from the Girls Gone
Wild contests are the people who work for Mantra Entertainment and possibly the corporate

sponsors and hosting bars and clubs who may see an increase in their alcohol sales due to their
participation in these events.

The audiences at the Girls Gone Wild events don’t seem, from what I can tell watching
the videos, to be as diverse as the audiences at a Fluffgirls show or a SuicideGirls show. The
Girls Gone Wild audiences appear to be made up of mostly male spectators; any girl in the venue

seemingly is urged onto the stage to bump and grind with the rest of them. I assume these are
straight males who are screaming so intensely to see nude female flesh.

I will explore in this chapter why it is that when I discuss the three examples I’m using in
this thesis, it is the mention of Girls Gone Wild that always prompts the reaction, “Oh, you’re
writing your thesis on porn.” I will also examine this event closely to see if agency in any way
looks like a naked co-ed cutting loose in front of a screaming male mob and whether the
probable coercion of the performers leaves a possibility for any sort of ethical heterosexual male
desire.

Chapter 3. Living DeadGirl: Bodies In Flux And The SuicideGirls

I don’t think I told my mom about the SuicideGirls portion of my thesis because it was
too complex to explain in our brief conversation. She already had pretty much gotten the basic
idea of where I was going with this anyway, and she wouldn’t be interested in the details and
nuances of my argumentation. Besides that, I think I was still recovering from the
embarrassment of saying I was writing about GirlsGoneWild to my mom. Anyway, it is the
complexity of the interaction between live performance and Internet-based community that
makes the SuicideGirls such a useful addition to this project.

The suicidegirls.com website says there are 997 SuicideGirls with 97,753 pictures. The
website is really very interesting, complex, and itself worthy of an entire study. It is not a free
site. It costs $48 for a year subscription, and you don’t have to check any box saying that you
are 18 years old as would be typical for an Internet porn site. The fact that you don’t have to
check such a box implies that, at least legally, the SuicideGirls are not pornographic in nature or
content.

The performers are selected and included on the website by first showing a willingness to
be included. They demonstrate this willingness by submitting test shots that are reviewed by the
operators of the website which includes the female founder/photographer Missy Suicide. The
performers are paid for their photo sets once they are displayed on the website.

The SuicideGirls are, for the most part, heavily tattooed and pierced. Through these body
modifications, they are intentionally redesigning their bodies to signal their individuality. These
are not cute little tattoos of flowers or dolphins at the base of the SuicideGirls’ spines. Many of
the SuicideGirls have huge tattoos that cover large portions of their flesh: entire sleeves on their
arms, complete backs, tattoos that begin at the ankle and continue up to the base of the neck.
The piercings are also more extreme in nature than ears and include the nose, tongue, and belly
button. There are nipple, labial and clitoral piercings, and there are pictures of one SuicideGirl
who has a series of piercings along both sides of her spine. She then placed hoops into them and
was able to use a ribbon put through the hoops to make it look as if her back had been laced up
like a pair of shoes.

Based on the DVD recording of the live burlesque performance, the SuicideGirls’
dancing is executed with less precision choreography than the Fluffgirls but lacks the Fluffgirls’
tastefulness. One of the specific SuicideGirl acts I discuss, and likely the most striking, involves
a SuicideGirl representing and rehearsing an extreme individual identity role through a live
performance. The audience shown in the DVD recorded footage of the performance, unlike the

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10 These numbers of SuicideGirls and photos increases daily. By the time this is being read, the number will already
be out of date and there will be more than 1,000 SuicideGirls.
audience for GirlsGoneWild events, does not appear to be mostly male but like the Fluffgirl audiences is about an even mix of male to female.

It has also recently come to light in the popular press that certain assumptions about the website being a female run organization may be false. It appears that as several of the SuicideGirls have become disenchanted with the group and left it, they are calling attention to some of the previously hidden aspects of the administration that controls and operates the website. The debate provides an excellent example of how a space for female agency is created and then enacted even if it means opposing that very same space.

I end this chapter with a discussion of Jill Dolan’s notion of performance opening up the possibility of utopia and how the interplay of the website and the live performance event work to reinforce each other in an act of community building. It is through such active constructions of community that the greatest possibility exists for an ethical exchange of desire on the part of both female performer and male spectator. That exchange requires awareness and full disclosure; however, as the debate mentioned above makes clear.

By focusing on the representations produced in the three examples of public performance described above, my project contributes to the academic discourse on nudity. As Ruth Barcan writes in the introduction to her book *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy*, “There have been many academic studies of ‘the nude,’ but very few of nudity” (4). The power of nudity enacted through the presence of the body in live performance has a long history in the United States. I will begin investigating the power of nudity in the first chapter by looking at aspects of this history and then continue exploring, throughout all of the chapters that follow, the potential of drawing individual power for contemporary women performers through their choice to “take it all off.”
CHAPTER ONE
EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN: FORM IN FLUX AND THE FLUFFGIRL
BURLESQUE SOCIETY

burlesque n.: 1. A literary or dramatic work that ridicules a subject either by
presenting a solemn subject in an undignified style or an
inconsequential subject in a dignified style.
2. A ludicrous or mocking imitation; a travesty.
3. A variety show characterized by broad ribald comedy, dancing,
and striptease.

--dictionary.com

Today, the term ‘burlesque’ has no meaning as a contemporary phenomenon to
most Americans. The associations the term provokes—if any at all—are likely to
be of a slightly naughty (but ultimately innocuous) theatrical diversion occurring
in a vaguely situated past time: somewhere between the 1890s and World War II.

--Robert C. Allen

In October of 2005, the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society performed their “neo-burlesque” at
the Beta Bar in Tallahassee, Florida. The Beta Bar is Tallahassee’s premiere venue to see
nationally recognized rock and roll acts that were popularly labeled as “Alternative Rock” in the
1990’s or more recently, in the new millennium, as “Indie Rock.” In addition to its main staple
of Indie-rock acts, The Beta Bar also books the occasional hip-hop act or special event. The
stripteasing Fluffgirl burlesque is exemplary of the sort of touring special events the Beta Bar
hosts. To supplement the stipend I earned as a Graduate Assistant during the fall of 2005, I had
a part-time job at the independent and locally owned music store, Vinyl Fever. In addition to
being the only music store in Tallahassee that carries CDs on independent record labels that can’t
be found at Best Buy, Vinyl Fever also serves as a box office outlet for The Beta Bar and sells
advance tickets to many Beta Bar shows including the Fluffgirls performance.

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1 According to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, “Indie” is described as: “in popular music, indie music (from
independent) is any of a number of genres, scenes, subcultures and stylistic and cultural attributes, characterized by
(real or perceived) independence from commercial pop music and mainstream culture and an autonomous, do-it-
yourself (DIY) approach.” At Vinyl Fever, a Tallahassee locally owned independent music store, bands that are
considered “Indie” are filed alongside Punk bands in one unified “Stick-It-To-The-Man” section.
Due to their name, and the prominence of Indie-rock acts booked at The Beta Bar, there was some confusion about the Fluffgirls tickets being sold. I overheard the following conversation between one of my female co-workers (20 years old) and a male Tallahassee Indie-rock “Scenester,” who was a frequent costumer at Vinyl Fever (he appears to be in his early 20’s):

Customer: So, Fluffgirls, is that like a super-indie, Indie band that even I haven’t heard of?
Co-worker: No. It’s some burlesque thing.
Customer: What’s that?
Co-worker: You know, like girls stripping and stuff.
Customer: Strippers? Sweet. Do they get totally naked?
Co-worker: I don’t think so. It’s like old-fashioned or something. I think they might sing and do skits or some shit too.
Customer: Should I check it out?
Co-worker: I don’t know. I guess. If you’re into that sort of thing?

In addition to evidencing the confusion in understanding just what the Fluffgirls are, this brief exchange resonates interestingly with the definitions of burlesque that began this chapter. While striptease is the last attribute mentioned in the dictionary.com definition of burlesque, stripping was the first marker used to define burlesque by my co-worker. She also seemed to associate burlesque with Allen’s “vaguely situated past time” in describing a performance she hadn’t even seen yet as “old-fashioned.” Upon first hearing her call the performance “old-fashioned,” I assumed she believed burlesque to be, as Allen has it, “ultimately innocuous,” like youthful understandings of grandmothers, rocking chairs, and rotary dial telephones that don’t fit into pockets. It appeared that for my co-worker, burlesque was just another relic associated with a perceived-as-innocent past. Her saying, “If you’re into that sort of thing,” however, complicated my initial assumption. Was she referring to the singing and skits by “that sort of thing,” or was she referencing the stripping?

I didn’t ask her, so I can only speculate, but saying, “that sort of thing” in place of identifying by name the acts she was asking the customer if he was “into” carries with it sexually repressive connotations that suggest the Victorian attitude toward sex that Foucault explores in his “We ‘Other Victorians.’” Foucault writes of the Victorian attitude toward sex, “silence became the rule” (292). The fact that she didn’t say, “If you’re into songs and skits and shit,” but...

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12 With names of bands such as: The Dollyrots, Tegan and Sara, and The Morning After Girls in the Indie-rock genre, the Fluffgirls were easily mistaken for an Indie-rock band.
instead said, “that sort of thing,” leads me to believe that she was speaking the Victorian silence on the sexual subject of striptease. Encased in the antiqued frame of burlesque, did the act of striptease as performed by the Fluffgirls—the female nude body slowly and seductively revealed in public while singing, dancing, telling jokes or “some shit”—carry significant controversial punch to challenge the prurient interests of this seen-it-all and done-it-all twenty-year-old independent music store employee?

Historically speaking, burlesque has always carried a controversial punch in the United States, although that punch has not always been centered on the spectacle of the nude, undressing, or even fully clothed female as popular contemporary associations would indicate. Long before the focus of burlesque shifted to spectacular performances of femininity and the complexities of representations of gender, the term “burlesque” was applied to many popular entertainments in much the way “mime” is used in theatre history as an umbrella-term over similar popular entertainments in Ancient Greece (Brockett 42-43). Burlesque was a catchall term for a variety of popular scripted and unscripted entertainments: singing, dancing, comedic skits, juggling acts, etc. Initially, what qualified these entertainments as burlesque was not a focus on female spectacle but rather that they contained a critique of some sort. These critiques were usually aimed at “a type of theatrical entertainment, style of acting, or dramatic fashion” (Allen 102). While a discussion of the history of burlesque in the United States will certainly factor into this chapter, my intent is not to write another history of burlesque.13 There are, however, two key events that bear on the history of burlesque in the United States that I will highlight to help situate the Fluffgirls within the complex historical trajectory of this popular mode of performance: the historical moment that gave burlesque its gender-based intelligibility and the moment of emergence of the striptease.

Situating the Fluffgirls in such a historical trajectory is necessitated by their naming and promoting themselves on their website as “North America’s most accomplished neo-burlesque company” (fluffgirlburlesque.com). By naming themselves neo-burlesque, the Fluffgirls imply a linear relationship between themselves and an earlier form of burlesque that is not “neo.” In this act of self-identification, the Fluffgirls position themselves not only in relation to the historical form of burlesque but also to all of the popular cultural associations that go along with that form.

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13 Two wonderful such histories have been incredibly helpful in my research and I draw heavily upon them in this chapter. If interested in the detailed history of burlesque in the United States, see: Robert C. Allen’s Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture and Rachel Shteir’s Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show.
Using the strategy of invoking a dead mode of performance (Shteir *Stormy Weather*) in marking their identity, the Fluffgirls resurrect the transgressive associations of traditional burlesque but also run the risk of claiming the negative attributes for themselves that have long been tied to burlesque performance.

This doubling of associations that results from the Fluffgirls’ invocation of historical burlesque resonates with a central concern of my over-all project: can a performance of female nudity that allows the objectification of its performers also be employed as a strategy on the part of the performers in claiming subjectivity and intervening in the male-dominated economy of sexual representation? In this chapter, I will “read” the October 2005 performance of the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society at The Beta Bar in Tallahassee, and I will see what possibilities for agency are opened up for the performers in choosing to represent their femaleness in this very specific and intentional mode. In doing so, my focus will be directed primarily at the categories of “whiteness,” “heterosexuality,” and “femaleness.”

By focusing on these categories, I will make more readily visible their cultural construction that is often transparent and taken for granted in the hetero-patriarchal cultural hegemony of the United States. I hope to make these categories feel “strange” in a way that is similar to the way ethnographer Katherine Liepe-Levinson has made them strange in her book *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire*. Her book is a study of representations of female sexuality and agency in strip clubs—yet another mode of contemporary nude female performance. While her project does briefly explore male strippers, various gender positions, and marginalized sexual orientations, her decision to focus primarily on heterosexual, white women strippers was influenced by a challenge posed to a group of female scholars at an annual Women and Theatre Conference. She explains:

In this forum, it was suggested that women who defined themselves using the various social categories of white, middle class, and straight should investigate the ‘strangeness’ (or ‘queer’ aspects) of their own political and personal spheres, particularly with regard to the concepts of ‘whiteness’ and ‘heterosexuality.’ To make dominant heterosexuality ‘strange’ in this sense became a major goal of the project. (4)

In this chapter, through an exploration of “femaleness” as represented by the performers of the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society, it is not only dominant whiteness and heterosexuality that I hope to
make strange but also the concept of my culturally dominant “maleness.” In researching burlesque—“neo” or not—I have found that it has traditionally been considered a mode of popular performance in the United States that works to challenge and make strange all of these dominant culturally constructed categories.

The Show

In order to begin this process of strange-making, I would first like to give a description of the Fluffgirl neo-burlesque performance I saw at The Beta Bar in October of 2005. As if they were a headlining rock band, the Fluffgirls had a band open for them—the Tallahassee local rockabilly group, The Bullnecks. After they finished playing their set, The Bullnecks cleared their equipment and prepared the stage for the Fluffgirls, leaving it bare. There were four Fluffgirl performers that night—only three of which would nearly bare it all on that bare stage, and only three of which were actually women. The fourth member of the troupe was the male candy butcher who was dressed in a red Zoot Suit. He introduced each of the performers, the first of which was The Indra. The Indra is a curvaceous blonde that I estimate is in her late twenties. In her first performance of the night, she was dressed in a men’s white button-down shirt, black slacks, and had a red scarf tied around her neck. She sang a song in German that is also sung by Marlene Dietrich in the film Blue Angel. I read her choice of emulating Dietrich as a direct reference to the perception of female sexual empowerment often associated with Dietrich and later notoriously mimicked by Madonna. The Indra did some slight-of-hand magic tricks and told jokes about aliens. As she spoke and sang to the spectators, she stood with her back very straight and strong. Her posture was like a ballet dancers and gave off the impression that she had as much control over her bodily movements as a prima ballerina. She made direct eye contact with the spectators as she sang and told her jokes before she began removing any of her clothing. The spectators were confronted eye-to-eye with this singing, dancing, German speaking, and fully in control of her body woman magician before they were granted even the

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14 The Bullnecks are an all male three-piece band. Two of the members that night wore cowboy hats and cowboy boots and played a rockabilly set. According to Wikipedia, rockabilly is, “the earliest form of rock and roll as a distinct style of music. It is a fusion of blues, hillbilly boogie, bluegrass music and country music, and its origins lie in the American South.”

15 The candy butcher in a burlesque performance was historically “the man who gave the spiel about strippers in between numbers and sold cheap gifts” (Shteir Striptease 84). He serves as a Master of Ceremonies for the show and is usually a comic.
slightest peak of her exposed flesh. As she began singing the final chorus of the German song, she took off her shirt revealing her full, natural breasts. They were fully exposed with the exception of her nipples that were covered with glittered pasties. For a moment that lasted less than a minute, The Indra sauntered around the stage with her pants still on and topless. Then, as the song ended, she left the stage. This pattern of the revealed nudity lasting only a brief moment in comparison to the rest of the length of their choreographed routines would be repeated by all three of the female performers in the show that night.

Next, in the night’s lineup was the founder and artistic director of the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society herself, Cecilia Bravo. She began her performance by doing the over-done street mime routine of pretending to be trapped in a box while the song “You Don’t Own Me” played on the sound system. Her face was not covered in clown white, nor was she dressed in all black wearing short white gloves. No, her face was framed by long straight hair with curled bangs that were red like a candy apple and surely not a color mixed by Mother Nature. She wore a sparkly gold, low-cut, floor-length gown that clung to her body and a pair of matching, elbow-length gloves. These were not the gloves of the street mime or the gardener, and they were not being worn for warmth but rather for style. These gloves screamed of glamour. When “You Don’t Own Me” neared its end, Bravo broke out of her invisible box, and she then performed the more publicly acceptable task of slowly removing her gloves. She seemed to ignore the spectators’ pleas to “Take it off.” She was calling the shots, and they would have to wait until she was ready to reveal the flesh they wanted to see. As she peeled the gloves off her hands, she shook her hips causing the less publicly acceptable loss of her gown as it fell to the floor revealing a gold bikini bottom over flesh-colored tights with gold sparkles on them. The spectators howled in appreciation. Unlike The Indra, Bravo didn’t just have pasties covering her nipples but tassels. They swayed as she bent down to grab her golden gown, and she dashed off the stage.

Finishing the first set of the night—each girl would perform three routines that night—was a special guest of sorts for the Fluffgirls, the fetish model Angela Ryan. 16 Ryan is an Internet fetish model who has also appeared in such magazines as: Skin Two, Gothic Beauty, and Tattoo Savage. Like Bravo, she too had red hair of a less-than-natural hue. She danced to the song “I Go Out Walking After Midnight.” She wore a corset, stockings, and panties that had a removable back panel. If the panel was removed, which it eventually was, then her bare butt was

16 www.angelaryan.com
exposed through the little peep window. I would guess that Ryan was twenty-five years old and apparently the youngest and skinniest of the three performers that night. According to the abundant images in popular beauty magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, she arguably could have been considered the most conventionally attractive of the three women because of her age and weight. Her good looks aside, she seemed to be the least skilled performer. Most of Ryan’s routine looked improvised around a general idea, and it didn’t have the specificity of movement and action that the choreographed routines of the other two women had.

There was then an interlude in the performance to allow the women to change costumes and prepare for their second set. During the interlude the candy butcher performed the sideshow act of sword swallowing. I used the break in the action to make some observations of the audience. I felt incredibly conspicuous with my notebook. I didn’t get an exact count, but I estimated that there were about eighty spectators at the Beta Bar that night, and it appeared to be an even mix of male and female. As is typical for the Indie-rock crowd that the Beta Bar usually draws, the majority of the spectators were white with a handful of spectators from racial minorities disbursed throughout. The absence of more racially diverse spectators reinforced the fact that all of the Fluffgirl performers were also white and that the representations of “female” being presented were from an extremely narrow racial perspective.

Angela Ryan started off the second set of performances by singing “What Lola Wants,” and she took off another corset to reveal her tassel-covered breasts. Following Angela was Cecilia Bravo, wearing another low-cut, form-fitting gown. For her second routine, Bravo’s gown was made of red lace, and she had on another pair of elbow length glamour gloves. She blew the audience a kiss as she exited after revealing her red-tassel-covered breasts. Finishing the second set was The Indra, in the most theatrical performance of the night. I say most theatrical, because the previous costumes of the night seemed to highlight aspects of the performers’ own personalities, and they looked as if they could have been pulled from their own wardrobes. In this routine, however, The Indra engaged in a more extreme form of role-playing, donning a costume that was more “Halloween” than the other costumes worn that night. She physically adopted a demon character, and she moved about the stage in her understanding of how a demon would move. She had on a silver cape and a demon mask on the back of her head. She stood with her back to the spectators as “Shout At The Devil” blared over the sound system. With her back to the spectators and the mask on her head in this manner, it appeared that a
demon was confronting the crowd from the stage. Eventually, she turned around and revealed her own face to the audience as well as a very short and clingy red dress that she wore underneath the silver cape. She ended up stripping down to red pasties—sans tassels—and a red g-string. In this nearly fully exposed state of undress, she then balanced a sword on her head and swallowed fire. The spectators crowded themselves up against the edge of the stage in a frenzy to get a closer look at the nearly nude, fire-eating, demon-woman, and so ended the second set. Once again the candy butcher came out to vamp while the women changed costumes and prepared for their grand finale.

The Indra started things off, in the third and final set of the night, by singing in German again as she slowly undressed. She ended up dressed only in pasties and two pairs of panties. She took the top pair of panties off and threw them into the crowd. The spectators had a polite skirmish over who would be the triumphant recipient of the souvenir. Angela Ryan was up next, and she rivaled The Indra’s demon performance for generating spectator excitement by using scissors to cut herself out of the tight shirt and stockings she was wearing—revealing a bright red g-string that matched her hair. The last dance to be danced by any of the Fluffgirls that night, was left to Cecilia Bravo. The candy butcher introduced her this last time as “a performer who eats, drinks and shits glitter and sequins.” For the third time, she appeared in a full-length gown and elbow-length glamour gloves. She then did a sort of comic magic trick where she pretended to cough up a feather boa and needed to enlist the help of one of the Beta Bar bouncers at the edge of the stage to dislodge the boa from her throat. Finally, she danced with the boa, removed all her clothing but panties and pasties, gave the spectators one last look at her exposed body, and exited stage right. That was the last of the Fluffgirl choreographed routines that night.

It was not, however, the last performance of the night because the Fluffgirls ended the show with a little audience participation. After taking her curtain call, Bravo liberated the microphone from the candy butcher, and she announced that there would be a shimmy contest with spectator volunteers as the contestants. She explained what was expected of the contestants, “Swoon them with the movement…it’s nothing to do with nudity.” Four women and one man got up on stage to compete. None of them removed any clothing, though one of the women did flash her breasts to the other contestants as she faced upstage. I don’t think the male contestant noticed, as he was busy waving at his friends in the audience who were watching him on stage.
He was actually the best at doing the shimmy; however, this didn’t make him the crowd favorite. Bravo made fun of him much to the delight of the spectators who laughed at him along with her. In the end, it was contestant number 5—the pretty blonde college student who had flashed the other contestants—who was determined by uproarious applause from the crowd as the winner of the contest. Her prize was a drink “on the house,” and so it was time to drink one last beer and call it a night.

While the description above is brief and limited in detail by my fading memory and scribbled notes, what should be made apparent by this description is that central to the Fluffgirl burlesque performance is the spectacle of femaleness revealed through the striptease. This centrality of femaleness has not, however, always been the case with burlesque performance. Robert C. Allen credits Lydia Thompson and her “British Blondes” arrival in the United States as the primary event that ruptured the previously held notions of what burlesque was and sent it on the trajectory that would lead to burlesque’s contemporary visibility and intelligibility evidenced in the neo-burlesque of the Fluffgirls. George Wood brought Thompson and Company to the United States to open his recently refurbished Broadway theatre in August of 1868 where they were a smash hit with audiences (Allen 12-13). It was their performance at Wood’s theatre that galvanized the loosely defined burlesque performance form around the spectacle of performed femininity.

As Thompson and Company’s performance did not involve undressing, the spectacular aspect of their female performance came in another guise: cross-dressing. Females played all of the male roles in their first U.S. performance of *Ixion*, while the one male comedian in the troupe played the female roles.¹⁷ Unlike later burlesque performers, who used the art of striptease to draw audiences away from the competing “legitimate” theatres, or recent female performance artists, such as Karen Finley or Annie Sprinkle, who used their performed nude bodies to disrupt, resist, and critique gender-based power structures, Thompson and the British Blondes used cross-dressing, which in effect destabilized binary notions of gender and produced an implicit gender critique. After their successful first theatrical season in the United States, commentator William

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¹⁷ *Ixion* was a play that “was a general lampoon of classical culture and mythological allusion” (Allen 10). No complete text of *Ixion* is extant.
Dean Howells articulated the anxiety caused by the collapsing of the gender binary and the fluidity that Thompson and Company used to represent gender in their performances:

"[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which put to shame. (qtd. in Allen 25)"

Howells’s shock at the horrible prettiness of the women dressed as men suggests Vivian Patraka’s notion of “binary terror,” which Rebecca Schneider describes in her book *The Explicit Body in Performance* as “the terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self-fashioning (that) is directly proportionate to the social safety insured in the maintenance of such apparatus of sense” (13). The shock or binary terror that Howells expressed comes from the collapsing of the distinct notions of the gender binary—male/female—into one another. Females should dress as females and males dress as males. When the gender-identified garb was misplaced on the “wrong” biologically defined bodies, violating the accepted binaries, the gender binary of male/female collapsed and terror resulted for Howells. The performance of *Ixion* by Thompson and Company disrupted the foundational understandings and representations of male/female through the presence of their female bodies performing in male-gendered garb.

Thompson and Company’s cross-dressing transgressed their own contemporary culturally understood notions of gender and sexuality in a way that Jill Dolan proposes is effective now. In her critique of the cultural feminist strategy of representing resistant femininity through the performed nude body of the female in such performances as Karen Finley’s, Dolan suggests lesbian performers at the WOW Café deployed a more effective strategy:

"The concern with costuming in the construction of character and personae in *Chit Chat* is important and elaborate, as if to acknowledge that people’s carefully constructed ‘looks’ have much to do with the way they are gender coded. The gender-specific costumes, however, assume new meaning through the performer’s sexual and gender role-play. (*Dynamics of Desire* 165)"

By placing a contrary gender “look” on a body, the notions of gender associated with that body are disrupted and brought under scrutiny. If a female looks like a male, does that make her male and therefore entitled to the privileges associated with the male gender? Can “male” and “female” be so casually constructed by simply putting on a pair of pants or a dress? It was the
answers to questions such as these that Thompson and the British Blondes intentionally or inadvertently raised by performing in drag; thereby, causing great controversy and anxiety. This anxiety is evidenced in Howells’s essay and also remarks made by Olivia Logan, a thirty-year-old actress, woman’s rights activist and contemporary of Howells. According to Allen, Logan:

Launched her campaign against burlesque on May 12, 1869, as a speaker at the convention of the American Equal Rights Association, held at New York’s Steinway Hall. Logan spoke for eighteen minutes to an audience that included Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, Henry Ward Beecher, and Susan B. Anthony. (122)

Allen goes on to quote Logan’s anxiety ridden speech in response to the performances of Thompson and the British Blondes:

I can advise no honorable, self-respecting woman to turn to the stage for support, with its demoralizing influences, which seem to be growing stronger and stronger day by day; where the greatest rewards are won by a set of brazen-faced, clog-dancing creatures with dyed yellow-hair and padded limbs who have come here in droves from across the ocean. (122)

It is this anxiety and negative attention from activists that the Fluffgirls risk claiming for themselves when they represent themselves as neo-burlesque and invoke the traditional form of burlesque that garners its intelligibility at least partially from these drag performances of Thompson and Company.

Anxiety about gender aside, the performances by Thompson and her British Blondes did not keep audiences out of the theatres, and the gender-bending ladies sold a lot of tickets. As Allen reports, Wood’s theatre where *Ixion* was performed, “took in more than $46,000 in October, nearly twice its gross the previous month and more than any other New York theatre for the month, outpacing the second-place theater by nearly $15,000” (13). Beginning with the controversial, although incredibly popular *Ixion*, Thompsonian-burlesque marks a shift in focus to female representations that propelled female spectacle to the center of the loosely defined mode of performance that was burlesque.

Why Thompson and her troupe performed in drag can now only be guessed at. No matter their intent, it was their extremely well-attended performance of *Ixion* in drag that shifted burlesque from its generally comic critiques of other theatrical forms and gave burlesque its
intelligibility as a mode of popular performance that focuses on representations of femininity. Even prior to the addition of the striptease in 1917, beginning with *Ixion* in the United States the trajectory of burlesque has been one that challenges notions of gender, sexuality, and specifically, what it can mean to be “female.” As Allen notes:

> From *Ixion* on, burlesque in America was inextricably tied to the issue of the spectacular female performer, and from then on burlesque implicitly raised troubling questions about how a woman should be ‘allowed’ to act on stage, about how femininity should and could be represented, and about the relationship of women onstage to women in that outside, ‘real’ world. (21)

Cross-dressing is one aspect of traditional burlesque that the Fluffgirls borrow when they represent themselves as neo-burlesque. Like Thompson and Company before her, The Indra performs in male drag. When she began her Marlene Dietrich number, she was dressed in male formal wear—white button-down shirt and black slacks. Unlike the British Blondes, however, The Indra has at her disposal performance trends that developed in burlesque after Thompson and Company disappeared from the burlesque scene. An aspect of the burlesque tradition that came about half a century after Thompson and the British Blondes appeared on stage in the United States is the striptease. While there may be some confusion of gender when The Indra is dressed in her male garb, once she takes it off and her natural breasts are exposed there is no denying her femaleness.

Without the exposing reveal of their actual bodies, it could always be assumed that the burlesque performers dressed as men were in fact men. Therefore men, such as Howells, could rest easy imagining that the gender roles were actually placed on their “proper” biological bodies. In the quote above, he writes, “[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both.” He cannot seem to admit that they are either men or women. Because they are dressed like men, he wants them to be men, and if Thompson and Company were never revealed undeniably as women, Howells possibly could have convinced himself that they were men; therefore, no gender rules would have been transgressed and the normative understandings of gender would remain stable.

With her very feminine body revealed under the masculine garb, it appears to me that The Indra transgresses the limits and destabilizes the normative understandings of gender roles. She
demonstrates that the understandings of gender roles associated with styles of dress are behavioral or constructed, and they can be placed on any biological body. These constructed meanings do not change the material reality of her body; however, by layering them on top of each other she makes transparent some of the workings of gender construction. By combining the elements of both cross-dressing and striptease, I see The Indra’s representation of her subjectivity in her performance critiquing understandings of gender in a way that Thompson and Company or Dolan’s lesbian performers using drag only do not. I see in her performance the type of individual pulling of power that has prompted the sort of institutional behavioral control that has assigned normative gender meanings to specific modes of dress. There is nothing inherently or naturally occurring “male” about pants. The male associations with pants have been culturally constructed. I interpret The Indra’s double action of wearing pants and revealing her nude feminine body as a disruption of these constructions and an example of the sort of power individuals possess that Foucault articulates when he says:

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a form of power comes into being that begins to exercise itself through social production and social service. It becomes a matter of obtaining productive service from individuals in their concrete lives. And, in consequence, a real and effective ‘incorporation’ of power was necessary, in the sense that power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behavior. (66-67)

One way in which the incorporated power has gained access to individual bodies is through the socially constructed norms of fashion. In dressing her female body in male garb and then exposing her female body beneath it so there can be no denying this mixing of genders, The Indra is an acting agent in the web of power, and she pushes against the normative pulls of the cultural understandings of gender roles. The norm is not over-turned or completely displaced, but, for a moment in the live performance, it is at least challenged. The Indra is the acting agent of that challenge.

The Indra was the only one of the Fluffgirls who dressed in drag. The rest of the Fluffgirls—intentionally or not—raised troubling questions about femininity by representing it in an exposed state. The Fluffgirls, appropriating another aspect of traditional burlesque, perform femininity in a state of near-nudity revealed through a style of dance that Cecilia Bravo has called the “art” of striptease. In an e-mail interview I conducted with Bravo, she describes
striptease as, “an artful combination of both stripping and teasing,” and these she defined as, “Stripping- taking your clothes off. Teasing- arousing or building hope, desire, curiosity by playfully seducing them (spectators) with certain movements, actions, looks, but never taking things further than that. It’s like smelling fresh baked cookies but not being able to eat them!” The invention of the striptease is the next event in the historical trajectory of burlesque that I’d like to report on to illuminate the resonance between the Fluffgirls and the traditional form of entertainment in order to position the Fluffgirls in a trajectory that makes sense of their self-identification as neo-burlesque.

As with burlesque, the broader mode of popular performance of which striptease is a part, it is difficult to ascertain with any authority the precise moment of the invention of striptease. As Rachel Shteir writes, “Striptease so differs from any extant form of popular entertainment that historians have not really known where to look or what to look for” (Striptease 6). The performance of Little Egypt at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair “Streets of Cairo” exhibit, is worth noting; however, because it is where the “cooch” dance was brought into the popular imaginations of the men and women of the United States. Now popularly known as the “bump and grind,” the cooch was originally described by a minister in July of 1893 as a, “muscular contraction of the abdomen with certain peculiar motions wholly improper” (qtd. in Shteir Striptease 42). The bump and grind, as well as the “shimmy”—which jazz historian Marshall Stearns says incorporated “‘hair-raising quivers and shakes’ of the shoulders and often the entire body” (qtd. in Shteir 74)—are listed in Liepe-Levinson’s ethnographic study of contemporary strippers as two of the six “basic moves” employed by contemporary strippers in their dance routines. Performers at the turn of the 20th century who incorporated Little Egypt’s cooch into their burlesque routines became known as “coochers” (Liepe-Levinson 110).

No historian knows with certainty which of the coochers first combined the sexually suggestive style of dancing with the act of disrobing, but Allen, Shteir and Liepe-Levinson all recount the legend of Mae Dix, a Minsky Burlesque star (Allen 248; Shteir Striptease 65; Liepe-

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18 “Every erotic dance conjures its primal figure that becomes mythical because she allows us to reimagine ourselves in a new and different way. Little Egypt emerged, in true American style, from nowhere, and yet she managed to become the putative grandmother of modern striptease. Upon being named, she came to stand for more than just one loose woman: she also conjured the Nile Delta’s fertility. In addition, she was said to have given Mark Twain a coronary and to have invented the zipper” (Shteir Striptease 43).

19 In the chapter titled “Choreography I: The Basic Moves” Liepe-Levinson describes the shimmy, the bump and grind and four other basic moves. The four other basic moves are “body-stroking,” “facial choreography,” “eye-dancing,” and “sexual strutting.” (115-126)
Levinson 110) as the goddess central to the creation myth of striptease. Of the three accounts, I think Allen’s has the most flair, so I’ll include it here in its entirety:

In 1917 they constructed a runway into the auditorium so that patrons could examine cooch dancers more closely. During the same season, at least as Morton Minsky remembers it, they also launched striptease by exploiting a dancer’s ‘accidental’ strip. Mae Dix did her dance act in a short black dress with detachable white collar and cuffs. At the end of her song one hot summer night, she removed her collar as she walked offstage, trying to forestall the next laundry bill. Someone in the audience demanded an encore, at the end of which she removed her cuffs as well. ‘Between the heat and the applause, Mae lost her head, went back for a short chorus, and unbuttoned her bodice as she left the stage again.’ Thus, we are told, was the striptease born at Minsky’s. (248)

Dix’s removal of her costume as she bumped, ground, shimmied and shook seems too neat and tidy a point of origin for something as complex and fluid as a popular form of entertainment. Her dirty dancing, however, does serve as an event in the history of burlesque that can be, and often is, pointed to as the birth of the striptease. Whatever were the complex threads of performance that clashed and commingled to bring the striptease about, from the end of the 1920s onward the stripper was fully ensconced as the main event of the burlesque show in the United States up to and including the 2005 touring performances of the Fluffgirls.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, for your reading pleasure, this truncated (and admittedly reductive) historical trajectory has led us from Thompson and her gender-bending British Blondes, to Little Egypt and her whirl-wind hips, to Mae Dix and her accidental invention of the striptease, to the intentional striptease at the center of the performances of the—drum roll please—Fluffgirl Burlesque! The term neo-burlesque implies a “new” burlesque and, so I have taken the time to explore two key aspects of historical burlesque—the moment of shift when burlesque performance became centered on representations of femininity and the “invention” of the striptease—in order to position the Fluffgirls in relation to the burlesque tradition and to see what is repeated and what is “new” in the Fluffgirl performances. I will begin the grand finale of

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20 The Minsky family was heavily influential in shaping burlesque into the form we recognize it as today. The Minsky brothers owned and operated several of the most successful burlesque houses in New York and in addition to the striptease they are often credited with the invention of such elements of burlesque as: the runway in 1917, which allowed the performers to get closer to the spectators; and Billy Minsky was “the first to pay women two dollars extra weekly for the ‘take off,’ ‘as Variety’ sometimes called the breast flash” (Allen 248; Shteir 101).
this chapter by looking at aspects of the Fluffgirl performance itself that could be considered new, and then I will move into a discussion of shifts in discourse, ideology and feminist theory and how these shifts create different interpretive frames for how a burlesque performance, “neo” or not, is read and given contemporary intelligibility.

The first “neo” aspect of the Fluffgirls burlesque performance I would like to examine is the individuals who organize and manage the performances. Traditionally, female performers on the burlesque stage had greater opportunities for agency, by acknowledging their sexuality and having direct contact with the audience, than did performers of other forms of popular entertainment (Shteir Striptease 141). The owners of the traditional burlesque theatres in the United States and the organizers of the performances who profited the most from the ticket sales, however, were for the most part all men: George Wood, Florenz Ziegfeld and the Minsky brothers to name but a few of the most successful. The women performing traditional burlesque striptease in the male-owned burlesque houses had the opportunity to enact agency and intervene in sexually based power structures. This opportunity was made available through their co-presence with spectators that involved the “meeting of two subjects” and created the “potential (though not always actualized) for a space of intersubjectivity to be opened up” (Frank 24), or as Allen describes this relationship between burlesque spectator and performer, “Instead of whirling about in a removed realm oblivious of the audience’s presence […] the burlesque performer addressed the audience directly, aware, as one of Thompson’s characters put it, of her own ‘awarishness’” (129). This co-presence or awarishness opened up intersubjectivity by keeping the performers from simply being “looked-at” and exploited their ability to look and talk back to the desiring male spectators. In the end, however, it was the Ziegfelds and the Minskys, in other words the men, who called the shots and profited financially from the female performers’ labor, making it difficult to ascertain who actually “owned” the performances on the traditional burlesque stages. This is decidedly not the case with the Fluffgirls.

Since 1996 when she began performing burlesque in Vancouver, Cecilia Bravo has been not only the founder, but she has also been the Artistic Director of the Fluffgirl Burlesque Society—she calls all the shots both on and off the stage. On stage, she keeps the power dynamic tilted in her favor by reminding the audience that she is the star of the show and not them. As Michel Peterson of The Daily Eastern News reports of her performance, “After a man yelled at Bravo, while she stood on the stage, she replied by announcing to the audience, ‘Excuse
me, everyone. This man in the front is offering free blow-jobs” (1). She evidenced her power-position with the Fluffgirls offstage in her reply to my question about how a woman becomes a Fluffgirl. She wrote:

Ideally, an interested performer can inquire and audition for me, or I approach established performers that I have seen and feel suit my vision and the process continues from there. Unfortunately, there have been a few occasions where we have had to work with people that have not had a lot of experience or haven’t quite suited my vision as a last minute resort. (Interview)

I think it is quite telling that in her two-sentence reply she uses the phrase “my vision” twice. There is no Wood, no Minsky or Ziegfeld pulling the strings who profits from a Fluffgirl performance. Bravo makes all of the final artistic and business decisions for the Fluffgirls. This sort of control is certainly a “neo” aspect of the Fluffgirl burlesque because the sort of ownership and power that the Ziegfelds and Minskys wielded at the turn of the century was not available to females as it is to Bravo today, or in her words, “I’m fortunate enough to be born and raised in a time and place where I haven’t had to face any barriers in accomplishing my goals as a woman” (Interview).

Another aspect of the Fluffgirl performances themselves that could be considered “neo” are the venues in which they perform. Traditional burlesque was performed in theatres. Sometimes these theatres housed a variety of performance events, but in its hey-day in the early parts of the 20th century, many theatres were built across the United States specifically to house burlesque performances. In 1931 Billy Minsky opened the Republic theatre and:

Implemented his ‘highbrow’ ideas about how to put burlesque striptease across. At a time when most other burlesque theaters offered shabby interiors, Billy tempered honky-tonk with luxe by redecorating the Republic’s interior in red and gold plush in the style of an upscale movie palace. (Allen 134)

The Republic’s attempt to gain a mainstream audience by mimicking the representation of a mainstream theatre worked, and it was a success at moving burlesque and striptease back into the mainstream culture, at least temporarily (Allen 137). The Fluffgirls, however, rarely perform in a “theatre” of any sort. When I asked Bravo if The Beta Bar is typical of the type of venue they perform in when they tour, she wrote, “It is. […] These types of places are easily accessible to obtain bookings without having to pay a rental fee and (they have) a built in audience, they also
want us there” (Interview). The Beta Bar is located just about halfway between the edges of the two major Universities that call Tallahassee home: Florida State University and Florida A&M University. Next door to The Beta Bar is a twenty-four hour coffee shop that is a frequent hang out of Tallahassee’s Indie-Rock Scenesters, and The Beta Bar is located within short-walking distance from Railroad Square—a park that is made up of several art galleries and studios of local artists. Around the corner from The Beta Bar are a skateboard shop, a small recording studio, an oxygen bar, and two tattoo parlors. There is no red or gold plush in The Beta Bar. Instead, the walls are covered with black paint, and the floor is covered with gray carpeting that is itself covered with a layer of cigarette ash and beer stains. Unlike traditional burlesque, which was fraught with tension between being pushed to the margins by mainstream culture and the desire to be a part of that same mainstream action, the Fluffgirls seem content to hang out in the same spaces as the other tattooed, artistic, and Indie members of the subcultures that make up the majority of their audiences. As Bravo says of her audiences, “they tend to live an ‘underground/alternative’ lifestyle” (Interview).

A final reason that the Fluffgirls should be considered neo-burlesque is because they define themselves that way. In addition to calling their style of performance neo-burlesque, Bravo has also said in an interview from April of 2005, “We’re in a different time. Burlesque from the 20’s and 30’s is not going to be the same now because there are different points of references...politically, socially...the humor back then just doesn’t work” (Java’s Bachelor Pad). This invocation of and interest in a mode of performance popular in the past seemed to me to make the Fluffgirls retroactive or “retro” instead of new or “neo.” I asked Bravo why she has identified the Fluffgirls as neo and not retro. She answered:

Because the burlesque performance today is neo/nouveau burlesque and should be classified as such since we are in 2006 and not 1936. I am only paying homage to a culture/era and performing my interpretation of traditional burlesque based on my research through reading, video footage and speaking with old burlesque stars from that era. (Interview)

Ironically enough, I think the most convincing argument for why the Fluffgirls performance should be identified as neo is in contradiction to something else that Bravo has said about her performance. She writes, “You know there doesn’t always have to be a message behind performance, whatever happened to just entertaining people so that they can forget their worries
for a while? If I need to make a statement against something, I don’t feel that I need to take my
clothes off to do that” (Interview). While it is not a requirement for a female to take her clothes
off when making a statement, when she does so in public it certainly does make a statement.
Exactly what statement is made depends on the spectator’s interpretation of the public
undressing, and it is this that I see as the most “neo” aspect of the Fluffgirls’ neo-burlesque—the
interpretive and theoretical frameworks that have entered into discourse since the death of
traditional burlesque in 1969.

In the last twenty years alone, there has been a tremendous amount of scholarship written
by feminist scholars who have produced different ways of reading the representation of the nude
female performer on stage. Adding the “abject body” (11) to her “representative rather than
exhaustive list” (158) of the “variety of terms with which to catalogue transgressive
representations in women’s performance art” (10) feminist scholar, Lesa Lockford, has
summarized these terms in such a fast and furious manner that, for efficiency’s sake, I will
reproduce her list here in its entirety: “Elinor Fuchs has considered the ‘obscene body,’
Catherine Schuler and Jill Dolan the ‘pornographic’ body, Joanna Frueh the ‘erotic’ body,
Shannon Bell the ‘prostitute body,’ Peggy Phelan the ‘unmarked’ body, and Rebecca Schneider
the ‘explicit body’” (10). To thoroughly unpack any one of these categorizations is beyond the
scope of this project. Each is incredibly complex and useful in their singularity for discussing
female performance. What they show as a group and what is important in relation to this project,
however, is that each of these terms have been used to name either a critique or strategy
associated with female performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle and
Karen Finley—all of whom have used their nude female body to “make a statement against
something.” The “something” in the case of all three of these artists is the dominant cultural
perceptions of sexuality and gender roles. There is now an awareness (not in all but possibly in
some of the spectators at the Fluffgirls performance) that the performance art produced by these
female statement-makers often used nudity as a tactic of resistance against oppressive normative
controls. This awareness of female resistant performance entering into the discourse of
performance after the death of traditional burlesque in 1969 but prior to the emergence of the
Fluffgirls in 1996 means that, whether Bravo intends for it to or not, the nudity of the Fluffgirls
striptease can be read using the same interpretive lenses that developed around the performed
nudity of the performance artist statement-makers. As these interpretive strategies had not
entered into discourse before the death of traditional burlesque, they are therefore certainly a “neo” aspect associated with the Fluffgirls’ performance. Given the contemporary ideological and discursive cultural climate, it is nearly impossible for Bravo and Company’s striptease acts to not make a statement.

Bravo’s insistence that she isn’t making a statement provokes questions about what we mean by power in contemporary society. In response to my question asking her what she thought of my thesis project, Bravo wrote, “I don’t perform burlesque to make a statement against male-dominated power structures” (Interview). Her response suggests a view of power exchanges as the top-down, oppressive hierarchal model, which in this instance would have men on top and women on the bottom. She goes on to say, the reason she performs burlesque is “to entertain people and this makes me happy when I can do this successfully” (Interview). In her pleasure that comes from entertaining, Bravo is inadvertently making a statement about power structures, because, here again I turn to Foucault’s understanding of power, “it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse” (61). In producing her burlesque productions, Bravo is drawing power for herself—a female who performs nude. In placing power in that representation, she is contributing, intentionally or not, to the transgressive power that the nude female on stage can and does wield.

I know that I wasn’t the only one present at the Fluffgirl show that read their performance as empowering. A female friend of mine, in her extremely eloquent way, said of the Tallahassee Fluffgirl performance, “They’re so fucking hot up there! They’re sexy because they’re so in control. They’re working it baby! They’re working it!” I couldn’t have said it better myself.
CHAPTER TWO

GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN: SUBJECTIVITIES IN FLUX AND GIRLS GONE WILD

Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word’s root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores, or in our language, sluts…the word has not changed its meaning and the genre is not misnamed…the graphic depiction of the lowest whores.

--Andrea Dworkin from Pornography: Men Possessing Women

I shall not today attempt further to define [hard-core pornography]…; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.

--Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s opinion on the case, Jacobellis v. Ohio

I have lost track of how many times I have now been asked the accusing question, “You mean you’re writing your thesis on porn?” This question now inevitably follows my response to another question I’m often asked in casual conversation, “So what is your thesis about?” I begin to answer this question briefly, by first saying that my thesis is about female representation and agency as evidenced in the Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls burlesque performances. Upon hearing this the next question that I get asked nine times out of ten is, “What’s burlesque?” I then give a brief explanation akin to the definition that my co-worker at Vinyl Fever gave in her interaction with the Indie-rock aficionado I transcribed in Chapter One. I figure this sort of definition will suffice in casual conversation, as it is not really the forum to delve into the intricacies of my research. Rarely do I feel like giving an on the spot American popular performance history mini-lecture. Then, before the conversation is over, I usually add that one of my chapters will also be about Girls Gone Wild. I don’t have to go through the same identification process with Girls Gone Wild as I do with the Fluffgirls or SuicideGirls burlesques because most of the people I encounter on a daily basis are a part of the Florida State University community, and they have at least a passing familiarity with Girls Gone Wild. While I rarely need to identify Girls Gone Wild in these conversations, it is always the mention of Girls Gone Wild, and not the burlesques, that brings the accusation that I am writing my thesis on porn, and perhaps rightly so—perhaps not.
Depending on how one “see(s) it,” all three examples of female performance that I’m exploring in this project could be seen as pornography. For that matter, depending on who is doing the seeing, so could many MTV music videos, the Victoria’s Secret lingerie catalog, the infamous artistic nude photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, or even your local news broadcast. I think one of the aspects of the performance that so readily marks Girls Gone Wild as pornography is not the nudity of the women involved but the nudity coupled with the apparent enjoyment that the young women exhibit through their performances. In her book *XXX: A Woman’s Right to Pornography* Wendy McElroy interviewed many female performers and male producers/directors in the hardcore, hetero-mainstream pornography industry to try and determine the level of coercion exerted by the men against the women in the industry. One of the male producers/directors that McElroy interviewed, John Stagliano, explained a key factor in the success of making hardcore pornography that gives some insight into why the Girls Gone Wild performances, more so than the Fluffgirls or SuicideGirls, could be seen as pornographic. In her book, McElroy quotes Stagliano who said of the performances given by the women performers in hardcore pornography, “the important thing is not the orgasm, but whether the woman shows real pleasure” (emphasis mine 11).

Whether or not the women involved in any of the three examples of performance I’m exploring in this project are experiencing “real pleasure” in their performances is difficult to ascertain; however, the issue central to this project is representation. The experience of actual pleasure, while certainly relevant to this project, becomes less important than the representation of it. The word that gains the most significance in Stagliano’s quote then is “shows.” Both the Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls live events happen in the strict and rehearsed frame of a theatrical performance. Even though they are performed in non-theatrical venues, they are still rehearsed, choreographed, costumed, and the performers have an awareness of themselves as performers with the expectation of performing for an audience. For the Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls, they get paid for their performances and this makes their performances work rather than play. Spectators watch them perform labor activities instead of leisure activities, unlike the Girls Gone Wild “performers” who become performers by simply hanging out in a bar, on a beach, or other

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21 Mapplethorpe’s photographs, once at the center of a major legal battle, were ultimately deemed art in the view of the law because of the masterful technique used in their production—no matter what their content.

22 Although in my interview with Cecilia Bravo she did say that when performing she gets an “adrenaline rush or thrill from the audience’s reaction” (Interview).
leisure spaces where the Girls Gone Wild camera crews happen to be. There is no rehearsal, the dancing is improvised and based in social dance moves rather than choreographed stage moves, the costumes—other than the Girls Gone Wild t-shirts they receive as compensation for participating in the events—are their street clothes, and there is not the same awareness of themselves as performers. The apparent showing of pleasure—I assert, whether or not it is a “real pleasure”—is what marks these performances captured by the Girls Gone Wild cameras more readily as pornography than the other two examples explored in this project.

While the issue of pornography can hardly be avoided—and has proven not to be—in this project, my focus in writing this chapter is not to determine the accuracy of the accusation that the performances recorded on video and distributed by Mantra Entertainment under the brand name Girls Gone Wild are pornographic. Making this determination would require coming up with an accurate and final definition of pornography itself. The two definitions that began this chapter are only two definitions of pornography among many that have been offered by scholars and lawmakers alike. In her renowned feminist text *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Andrea Dworkin posits that pornography is not simply the depiction of acts of violence against women but is in itself an act of violence against women. As Simon Hardy explains Dworkin’s position in his book *The Reader, The Author, His Woman and Her Lover: Soft-Core Pornography And Heterosexual Men*, “Thus in Dworkin’s formulation pornography is violence, in the sense that, by paralyzing women with fear, it serves the same purpose for patriarchy as the sexual violence it begets” (12). Many feminists agree with Dworkin’s stance; however, Wendy McElroy challenges Dworkin’s notions, and McElroy writes that by reducing pornography to nothing other than an act of male violence against women Dworkin discounts the self-expressive power in producing pornography that exists for some women performers. McElroy critiques the feminist stance on pornography vis-à-vis Dworkin and writes, “It is a denial of a woman’s right to choose anything outside the narrow corridor of choices offered by political/sexual correctness,” McElroy goes on to say, “The right to choose hinges on the right to make a ‘wrong’ choice” (106).

In this chapter, I explore the ethics of heterosexual male desire specifically involved with the Girls Gone Wild performances and how that desire works in tandem with the self-expression.

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23 Or as Wendy McElroy calls Justice Stewart’s opinion “the most common nondefinition of pornography” (emphasis mine 41).
of the performers working to possibly construct moments of inter-subjectivity between performer and spectator. If, as feminist dogma would have it, the “personal is political” than the personal choice of self-expression—even if that choice is through a perceived-as-pornographic mode of expression—may have political implications making the flashing and nude dancing of the “wild” co-eds a much more complex act of agency than any restrictive definition of pornography would allow. As I look for potential positive enactments of agency and inter-subjectivity in these performances, however, the danger of pornography that Dworkin articulates cannot be discounted and has to be considered as I move forward in this exploration.

According to the creator/founder of Girls Gone Wild, Joe Francis, the Girls Gone Wild franchise boasts $100-million-a-year in profits (Lofaro C1). These profits are generated primarily through the sales of more than 100 video/DVD titles that have names such as Girls Gone Wild Endless Spring Break and Girls Gone Wild Doggy Style, the latter of which is hosted by rap super-star Snoop Dogg. While the videos/DVDs vary slightly in theme, their format is consistent across the various titles. Ariel Levy, a contributing editor to New York magazine, sums up the entire Girls Gone Wild catalog as “utterly plotless videos, composed entirely from footage of young women flashing their breasts, their tushes, or occasionally their genitals at the camera, and usually shrieking ‘Whoo!’ while they do it” (1). These wild antics all take place in “the party atmosphere of a wet T-shirt contest” (Navarro 1). To try and investigate the complete body of work that is presented under the banner Girls Gone Wild is beyond the scope of this chapter. While I will make some general references to aspects of the entire catalog of Girls Gone Wild videotaped performances and use them for additional background information, for the purposes of this chapter I will be closely investigating only one of these performances: Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off.

I’ve chosen to focus on Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off for two reasons. The first of these reasons is that unlike some of the other Girls Gone Wild videos, Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off is composed almost entirely of only one event: a wet t-shirt contest. The majority of the other Girls Gone Wild videos are compilations of clips that have been spliced together from a variety of events: beachside flashing, Mardi Gras flashing, nightclub flashing, snippets of wet t-shirt and booty-shake contests, and more explicit masturbation and girl-on-girl make-out

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24 Ariel Levy has written a book that explores the supposed rise of raunch culture in opposition to feminist ideology called *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. 
scenes videotaped in the “privacy” of the Girls Gone Wild traveling trailer. Trying to investigate any one of these compilation style videos with all of their variety would be incredibly complex, and it would require more space than this chapter will allow. While it does show some backstage flashing footage following the main event of the wet t-shirt contest, the *Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off* video will provide a manageable amount of material to explore the issues of the ethics of heterosexual desire and possible female agency through this particular form of performance.

The second reason that I’ve chosen *Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off* as the representative sample of the series is closely tied to the first reason above. As mentioned, some of the other videos/DVDs in the Girls Gone Wild series have segments that are filmed in the “privacy” of the Girls Gone Wild trailer or in a hotel room in front of an audience of the camera and its operator. While it could certainly be argued that these “private” scenes are still examples of recorded live performance, the contest central to the *Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off* video/DVD is recorded in front of a much larger audience, in a public space, and on a stage. These elements give the contest a more popularly accepted understanding of what constitutes a live performance event.

One of the difficulties I’m faced with in writing this chapter is that there are actually two distinct performances associated with this one video recording. There is the original live performance that was enacted in front of a live audience and the performance, as it now exists, on the video/DVD recording. Each of these modes of representation—live and mediated—has their own unique set of complications. It is especially complicated because, although in the past I have seen several of these sorts of contests live and experienced first-hand the dynamics at play between spectator and performer, the contest documented on *Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off* is not one of them. I am forced then to make my claims, assumptions and analysis about the live event as evidenced through the recording and not actually by having been present at the live event itself. I will begin by discussing the live performance event, and then I will move into a discussion of how the live event, once recorded on video, is marketed, sold, and how this transitioning between mediums of representation complicates the possibility for an ethical heterosexual desire and the potential for female agency.

The recording of *Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off* begins by showing the live contestants already on stage. They are lined up in front of a banner that has advertisements for
the club the contest is being filmed in, Floyd’s Music Store, and for a local promotional company called 43 Entertainment. Floyd’s Music Store is located in Tallahassee just across Tennessee Street from Florida State University. Floyd’s is one bookend of what is known in Tallahassee as the “Tennessee Strip.” The Tennessee Strip is made up of eight bars on one block. Unlike The Beta Bar, Tallahassee’s venue of choice for Indie-rock music fans, Floyd’s caters to a primarily mainstream rock and roll crowd by showcasing bands such as No Address and Uncle Kracker (on the Atlantic and Lava record labels respectively which are both subsidiaries of the mega label Warner Music Group). Whereas The Beta Bar is located in a part of Tallahassee where the businesses serve the local “progressive crowd,” with tattoo parlors, oxygen bars, piercing studios, vintage re-sale clothing stores, coffee shops and local artist galleries, the bars on the Tennessee strip appeal to the mainstream consumers of the mid-to-upper class Florida State University student body.

In the recording, visible at the far stage left end of the Floyd’s stage is a large, white male bouncer. On the stage right end of the stage is a Girls Gone Wild representative and emcee of the contest, an Asian-American woman named Donna Sun.\textsuperscript{25} Filling in the gap between the bouncer and the emcee are twelve young women in their late teens or early twenties. Eleven of the young women are visually identifiable as Caucasian and one as African-American. The presence of Donna Sun and this lone African-American woman clarifies the overwhelming context of whiteness that frames this performance event. All of the performer/contestants wear little “wife-beater” t-shirt/tank-tops with the Girls Gone Wild brand name printed across their breasts. It is interesting that while the t-shirt is the only required uniform for participants in the contest, the contestants for the most part have also coincidentally dressed uniformly in blue jeans. Of the twelve young women on stage, nine have on blue jeans, two are wearing skirts, and one has on a pair of brown-checkered pants. The few women that are shown on the spectator side of the stage in the audience area, having resisted the invitation for audience participation onstage as part of the contest itself, also wear blue jeans. I point this out to show the sameness and conformity in the fashion choices of the young women both participating in and attending this event evidencing once again Foucault’s “‘incorporation’ of power” through the institution of fashion that is “able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes

\textsuperscript{25} The Girls Gone Wild website identifies Donna Sun as “Miss GGW.”
of everyday behavior” (66-67). The contestants are all dancing onstage to loud music that fills
the club, and they are ready to get wild.

Before things get totally underway and out of control, two more blondes join the line
dressed in the uniform of t-shirt and blue jeans and hold their plastic drink cups in their hands as
they gyrate and sway to the music. Without having been there and administered Breathalyzer
tests, I can’t say with any certainty that the young women are inebriated. The freedom and lack
of restraint visible in their recorded body movements, the club atmosphere of Floyd’s, and the
plastic drink cups in their hands indicate, however, that it is highly probable that most, if not all,
of the contestants are to some extent under the influence of alcohol.

Even before the wet portion of the wet t-shirt contest begins, one of the blondes who
were the last to join the group of contestants on stage flashes her bare breast to the cameras and
live spectators alike. Donna Sun then asks the live audience, “Are you guys ready to see some
girls gone wild?” The response from the mostly male audience is a resounding “yes,” expressed
through screams, hoots and whistles. Donna Sun then introduces a group of three young women
by announcing their names, which are barely audible on the recording, and I’m guessing unheard
over the din of noise at the live event. The three are then sprayed with a hose and begin to dance
with one another, teasing and flirting with the crowd. Their breasts are now quite visible through
the wet white t-shirts but just to make sure that the crowd is seeing what they want to see, the
contestants pull their t-shirts up or down to give the spectators an unobstructed view of their
breasts. This flashing of their breasts begins the ever-escalating give-and-take between the
performers on stage and the spectators. As the young women show more, the young men scream
more causing the young women to show more causing the young men to scream more and on
and on in a continuous feedback loop.

By the end of the contest, most of the contestant/performers no longer continue the
pretense of keeping the t-shirt on and dance topless. Several of them also either have removed
their blue jeans entirely or have pulled them down exposing their thong-clad buttocks, and a
couple of them even expose their nude genitals in their entirety. One of these young women has
a tampon string visibly extending from between her labia, which I think evidences the
improvisatory and unexpected aspect of the girls’ participation in these events. While there are
certainly exceptions, I don’t think the common experience of college age males is to find
evidence of the female’s menstrual cycle sexually arousing. Most college age males show signs
of discomfort at the mere mention of this bodily aspect of women, let alone seeing the actual
evidence. Without the use of the close-up for the video recording, the tampon string may have
been unnoticed in the commotion of the live event because all of the nudity displayed—tampon
string and all—is greeted with corresponding screams of approval by the mostly male crowd of
spectators.

The girls sure go wild, and the boys follow right along with them. While we get close-
ups of the contestants’ nude genitalia on the video, we don’t get close-ups of the spectators’
genitalia—nude or otherwise. Without having visual evidence of the young men’s sexual
arousal, I’m going to have to make the assumption, based on the voracity of their screams to see
the nude bodies of the young women displayed, that the young men are not only in a state of
general excitement but are in fact sexually excited. These boys aren’t cheering for their favorite
football star to score a touchdown. These boys are cheering to see female flesh revealed for their
gazing pleasure. Grace Lau writes of the power of looking in her essay Confessions of a
Complete Scopophiliac:

The act of looking, however, is loaded—with power, with desire, with guilt and
with hope—and takes place within a complex and dynamic web of social rules
and behavior. In particular, the look is embedded in relations of power.
Historically, this power has belonged to men; consequently, they have, for far too
long, dictated our right to look, both in public and in private. (Gibson 193)
The social rules and behaviors involved in these contests are incredibly complicated. They
dictate that the male spectators must cheer, holler, and scream for more female nudity and
simulated sex acts for the males’ scopophiliac pleasure. If the males choose not to cheer, holler
and scream they may run the risk of being stigmatized as “abnormal”—possibly as homosexual
or at least uninterested in sex. As Lau points out, however, with the desire and power that is
often discussed in both film and performance scholarship and understood to be embedded in the
act of looking, there is also the possibility of guilt and hope. It is possible that some of the male
spectators are embarrassed by the behavior of their fellow spectators, but they get swept up in the
mob mentality of the moment. Some of them may even have hope that there is a way to express
desire for women that is in some way mutually self-expressive instead of one sex having to

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26 This is one essay in the collection of essays called Dirty Looks edited by Pamela Church Gibson and Roma
Gibson.
submit themselves to the oppressive desiring gaze of the other sex. As Girls Gone Wild videos have climbed in popularity and the expectations have been culturally fixed as to how young men are to behave at these events, the males start to play their prescribed roles. If you are a young man, then hooting, hollering and yelling, “Take it off!” has simply become what you do at this sort of event.

Dworkin’s understanding of pornography as violence is almost palpable and made materially manifest as actual physical violence at these events. In the *Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off* there ends up being fourteen girls on stage, and I would estimate ninety male spectators with a handful of female spectators disbursed amongst them. There is already an arguably inherent difference in physical strength between males and females on a one-to-one basis, but this unequal distribution of physical power is thrown even further into the favor of the males as the sheer number of spectators greatly outnumbers the contestant/performers. The only things standing between the mob of male spectators and the female performers are the physical presence of the large male bouncer at the edge of the stage and something that is far more intangible—the perceived separation between performer and spectator. The “fourth wall” actually works as a deterrent, and it keeps the males from bursting forth onto the stage and turning Dworkin’s ideological rape into the physical thing. I shouldn’t say the bouncer and the culturally conditioned understanding of spectator and performer roles are the only things preventing physical violence, because obviously there are also other social controls—such as morality or the threat of imprisonment—in place that keep the males from an all-out physical assault. Also, as mentioned, perhaps from within the group there is some possible dissention among the ranks. A male who was too embarrassed to risk the stigma of being labeled “abnormal” by his fellows may concede to hoot and holler but actually crossing the line to physical violence is hopefully a step they aren’t willing to take. At any rate, the danger is present, and yet it doesn’t manifest. Everyone present plays by the rules and plays their assigned role as desiring spectators and desired objects or possibly desired/desiring co-subjects.

In addition to the definitions explored so far, the theatre scholar, Karl Toepfer, offers another possible way to read performances as pornographic that involves mutual arousal on the part of both performer and spectator. He has identified nine different categories of nude performance: mythic nudity, ritual nudity, therapeutic nudity, model nudity, balletic nudity, uninscribed nudity, inscribed nudity, obscene nudity, and pornographic nudity (78-86). He says
nude performances can be categorized as pornographic “if they sexually excite the spectator,” and he goes on to say that, “Moreover, pornographic nudity excites the spectator because the performer is also sexually excited” (87). For Toepfer then, a performance is pornographic if there is an exchange of sexual excitement or desire between performer and spectator. This exchange is not then the usually understood unidirectional flow of power of looker against looked or acting subject vs. passive object. The girls on stage in Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off are smiling, dancing, laughing, cheering, touching their bodies provocatively and giving off several physical markers of excitement. Remembering what Stagliano said about successful hardcore porn, “the woman shows real pleasure” and so regardless if this excitement or pleasure is real, if it is shown to be then it should be enough to sexually excite the spectator. According to Toepfer, for the performance to be marked as pornographic the performers must also be sexually excited. If the female performers are not actually sexually excited but only giving a representation of what sexual excitement looks like, then the only ones gaining any sexual satisfaction from the performance are the male spectators. This would mean then that the females become only the males’ objects of desire simulating sexual excitement instead of co-subjects in an exchange of desire; therefore, according to Toepfer’s nomenclature, the performances would not be considered pornographic. Toepfer sees pornographic performance not as an act of violence of males against females but as an act of exchanged desire/arousal between performer and spectator.

When, and if, mutual arousal happens, however, Toepfer writes that this dynamic in a performance is pornographic and has “the performer treat the spectator as a sexual partner” (87). The notion that the performer is possibly treating the spectator as a sexual partner of some sort is a significant difference between the performed nudity of the contestants in the wet t-shirt contest and the work of Karen Finley or Carolee Schneemann. The expressed intent of these performance artists is not to sexually excite the spectator nor generate the sort of give and take of excitement of any kind that is part of the Girls Gone Wild performances. Although, because they cannot control the effect their nudity will have on every member of the audience, they may end up sexually exciting some of the spectators. Their performance still wouldn’t be considered pornographic, in Toepfer’s sense of the word, because the performer is not actually experiencing sexual excitement. Determining if the sexual excitement of the female performers in the Girls Gone Wild wet t-shirt contest is actual or only a representation is nearly impossible by just
watching the performance. Stagliano indicated, however, that sexual excitement for female performers in hardcore pornography is at least possible. McElroy writes, “He (John Stagliano) thought most women got involved in pornography to indulge a strain of exhibitionism within themselves” (11). Indulging a strain of exhibitionism and satisfying a particular type of sexual desire is one possible explanation of why the females cross the line from spectator to performer in the wet t-shirt contests recorded by Girls Gone Wild.

There are, however, other possible reasons why a young woman would get on stage and represent her nudity in a perceived-as-pornographic manner. According to Joe Francis it is willingly that they perform, “Everybody is doing everything by their own free choice” (qtd. in Navarro 2). Francis’s remark seems, perhaps, too idealistic and free of the possibility of coercion—especially when it is noted that Francis has several allegations against him and his company for including footage of girls who are under the age of eighteen in his video productions. Florida State Attorney, Jim Appleman has charged Francis with telling underage girls to say on camera that they were eighteen. Appleman has said that in 2003, “at least 35 minors were videotaped either in sexual situations or exposing themselves by Girls Gone Wild in Panama City Beach” (St Petersburg Times). Free choice? In her study of the hardcore porn industry, McElroy writes that almost everyone she interviewed acknowledges that coercion happens. Stagliano said, “This (coercion) happens in every business from Standard Oil to banking” (6). However, while they all admit that it happens, none of the male producers/directors McElroy interviewed felt they ever coerced anyone and none of the female hardcore porn performers she interviewed felt they had been coerced.

One way that producers of professional hardcore pornography avoid coercion where Girls Gone Wild producers risk it, is in the amount of time allowed to the female performers in making a decision as to whether or not they will actually go through with the nude performance. Professional hardcore pornography is not usually shot spontaneously. Women are cast, and at least told a time to show up for the shoot—even if it happens to be later the same day—allowing the performers time to consider and reconsider their actions. With Girls Gone Wild, there is very little time to consider the decision of whether or not to get nude. They are already present and hanging out in the leisure places, perhaps drunk, amongst friends, and the contests start and the cameras are rolling. The age of the girls and the influence of alcohol perhaps limiting the amount of “free choice” involved along with the pressure from friends who are aware of the
fifteen minutes of fame to be gained by appearing in a Girls Gone Wild feature, and of course
they also get the free t-shirt. Then once on stage, in the t-shirt contests at least, there is an
incredible amount of pressure placed on the performers to keep taking off clothing and to
perform more and more provocative acts to appease the aggressive desire of the male mob of
spectators. All that aside, they are technically free in the end to choose to get on stage and once
there how much of their nude bodies they will actually reveal. In some cases, there may be no
coercion, but there are too many external pressures at play to say there never is and that
“everybody is doing everything by their own free choice” is certainly problematic.

If not sexual excitement, if not coercion, if not the free t-shirt with the brand name Girls
Gone Wild printed on it, then what else drives the girls wild? According to Jolene, the winner of
the contest at Floyd’s, “I was dancing like crazy, but it was fun.” Jolene’s sentiment is echoed
by Debbie, called “Crazy Debbie” by the Girls Gone Wild camera crew, who appears in another
Girls Gone Wild video shot in Miami when she says, “People watch the videos and think the
girls in them are real slutty, but I’m a virgin! I just think this is fun” (qtd. in Levy 2). Likewise,
Jackie, a twenty-three year old who is studying to be a medical technician at Pennsylvania
college, said she happily flashed camera crews in Miami Beach and that, “It was fun. It’s one of
those thing that you never think you’d do” (qtd. in Navarro 3). Shannon, a 19-year-old from
Temple University who was captured by the Girls Gone Wild cameras in Daytona Beach adds,
“It’s a very freeing feeling” (qtd. in Navarro 3). As I myself watched the girls on the Girls
Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off video smile, laugh and dance I couldn’t help but think how
much fun it did look like they were having. There is certainly a pleasure that can be derived
from throwing off social restraints. There is a mischievous satisfaction derived from walking on
someone’s lawn that has put out a “Keep Off Grass” sign, running a red light at four o’clock in
the morning when no one is watching, or taking your clothes off in public and transgressing the
social norm that requires wearing clothing in public space. Katherine Liepe-Levinson quotes

27Jolene’s reaction was documented on Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off and Shannon’s in print by Mireya
Navarro, a New York Times reporter, immediately after they had participated in the performance events without any
time to reflect on their participation. Shannon went on to tell Navarro that, “I’m pretty sure I’ll see a downside
tomorrow morning.” Debbie’s remarks were also made immediately after a performance to Ariel Levy, who had
attended as part of the Girls Gone Wild production entourage. Levy was traveling with the Girls Gone Wild crew to
do research for her book Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture. Contrary to these
women who spoke “in the moment” and without having time to reflect on their actions, Jackie’s comment was
expressed to Navarro with sufficient time to reflect, “a couple of weeks later.” Jackie also went on to say, “If this
stops me from getting a job, that’s not the job I’m meant to have.”
Richard Schechner who states that nakedness always "implies a public event" because 'to be naked with no one watching is to adumbrate a process that needs another’s acknowledgement’" (94). In other words, the only way to really feel naked is to experience a state of undress in public.

There is a free feeling, which isn’t necessarily sexually exciting, that comes with feeling naked. I experienced it myself as an actor in the production I discuss in my introduction. It is empowering to feel that you are outside of the limits of socially acceptable behavior. Being naked is one of the most extreme, and yet harmless, ways to get that feeling. I say harmless in that being naked in and of itself doesn’t cause anyone or anything physical damage.

Another possibility for why the young women may choose to go wild, other than sexual excitement or the feeling of freedom in transgressing societal norms, is a notion I’m borrowing from Clay Calvert. He posits that self-disclosure is a possible reason that individuals would want to enact exhibitionistic performances like those of the girls gone wild. Calvert writes:

> Research and theory from social psychology suggest there are multiple functions served by self-disclosure. These may include (1) self-clarification, which occurs when individuals think about and focus attention on themselves in preparation of speaking about themselves to others; (2) social validation, in which individuals hope to obtain feedback and advice about the appropriateness or correctness of their beliefs or behaviors from those to whom they open up and reveal themselves; (3) relationship development, in which the disclosure of information as a commodity may occur as a form of interpersonal exchange; and (4) social control, in which the discloser essentially engages in impression management by selectively and strategically revealing certain pieces of information to influence others’ opinions. Any or all of these reasons may play a role in the exhibitionism that fuels much of our mediated voyeurism. (83-84)

What constitutes a ‘self’? While there are arguably psychological, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and other intangible aspects of a human being that could be considered to be the “self,” the only tangible, undeniable aspect of the self is the body. What the body means can be argued and debated (and is) by theorists, but there is no denying that there is a materiality to the body. Argue all you want but you can see the body, feel the body, smell the body, and taste the body. Disclosing the body in a public venue then, could be seen as an act of self-disclosure. By
performing their nude body, the girls who go wild can be clarifying for themselves, through an
act of social validation, what identifying part of themselves as physically female actually means.
These moments of self-disclosure or self-validation could easily feel both fun and freeing. By
asserting the bodily aspect of their self-hood in going wild the girls are claiming space for their
bodies and therefore themselves.

The assertion of self-hood happens differently for the females performing in the Girls
Gone Wild videos than it does for the Fluffgirls or SuicideGirls. The female performers of
Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls are for the most part older than the females in Girls Gone Wild. They
have likely already gone through the liminal phase between childhood and adulthood that is
marked in the United States by the “college years” age range of 18-22. Cecelia Bravo wrote, in
my e-mail interview with her, that the average age of the Fluffgirls is 25 and up—a considerable
difference compared to the barely legal females the Girls Gone Wild camera crews tend to target.
As evidenced in their rehearsed routines and modified bodies, the Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls
have already made conscious choices about how they want to represent their femaleness to the
world and then do so.28 These representations are sometimes in accordance with, but more often
contrary to, the culturally constructed mainstream ideal associated with the female body. The
females performing in Girls Gone Wild appear to be in the process of coming to grips with just
what it means to have a female body. They re-perform a femaleness that they see in the
meditated U.S. culture all around them—in MTV music videos, Hollywood “teen-sex”
comedies, and even, with their great and ever increasing popularity, other Girls Gone Wild
videos. Their exploration of self-expression begins by first identifying with these cultural
representations of femaleness, and then they try it out on stage to see if they can act like those
representations. As this plays out on stage in front of boys who have been inundated with the
same media images, the girls get instantaneous feedback as to whether or not they performed
their girl body in accordance with this media ideal.

In bringing their working-through of their understanding of their own sex, sexuality and
gender into the public sphere it becomes a personal as political act. Foucault says in the
interview Truth and Power, “I believe that the political significance of the problem of sex is due
to the fact that sex is located at the point of intersection of the discipline of the body and the
control of the population” (67). In rehearsing their female bodies—first by dressing the body up

28 The aesthetic body modifications of the SuicideGirls are discussed in Chapter Three.
uniformly in blue jeans and then undressing it—on stage and in public, the females in Girls Gone Wild are experiencing a mainstream or popular understanding of femaleness that they can then conform to and adopt as their own understanding of femaleness or reject and re-present it anew as the Fluffgirls or SuicideGirls seem to do. Rebecca Schneider eloquently articulates this problem of unpacking the tension between socially dictated understandings of a sexual-self and the expression of that self as an originary act from within the self. She writes, “The crack of this space between the personal particular and the socially inscribed is a fraught space. It is a space feminist performance artists, and cultural critical theorists writing on performativity have been approaching as deeply imbricated in the social dynamics of the marked body” (53). The working-through and rehearsing of their female bodies on stage is a material manifestation of their working-through of the intangible acting-agent subject housed within the body.

At this point I would like to complicate the discussion of the possibility for female agency within the live event by examining the way these events are recorded, marketed, and sold as recorded soft-core pornographic videos/DVDs. Any of the young women who do rehearse their subjectivities materially with their bodies in the wet t-shirt contests hosted by Girls Gone Wild are in danger of having the space they possibly claim for themselves in the live performances taken from them the moment they put on the t-shirts with the Girls Gone Wild brand name printed on them. Girls Gone Wild or other corporate sponsors already claim the space for their commercial gain, and at best the girls can rent that space for a few brief moments for the exchange value of their exposed flesh. As Simon Hardy writes, “It is often forgotten, amid the blaze of infamy generated by the debates over harm and censorship, that pornography also has a mundane existence as a product, and that, whatever social consequences it might have, at one level, its raison d’etre has always been to make money” (47). Joe Francis has not forgotten this raison d’etre of making money.

A major difference between the young women who appear in the Girls Gone Wild videos/DVDs and the Fluffgirls and SuicidGirls are that the Fluffgirls and SuicideGirls are paid for their performances while the Girls Gone Wild participants are not. The financial profits from the production and distribution of the Girls Gone Wild videos/DVDs go directly to the commercial enterprise Mantra Entertainment and the private funds of Joe Francis. Tracy Connor reports for the New York Daily News that, “He (Francis) owns two private jets, drives a Mercedes-Benz and a Ferrari and romances bold-faced babes like heiress gone wild Paris Hilton.
His yearly income is estimated at $5 million” (54). While I’m not certain what a young women entering the medical technician field, like Jackie from Pennsylvania college mentioned earlier, makes for a yearly salary, I’m going to guess that it is a far cry from Francis’s $5 million. Unlike some college co-eds who pay for their schooling by working as strippers in strip clubs, the performers in the Girls Gone Wild videos receive no financial compensation from the live event or sale of the videos and DVDs. Francis continues to get rich off of peddling the representations of the young women’s flesh and has said, “Girls Gone Wild is an entertainment franchise. I want to put that name on everything I can” (qtd. in Navarro 2). He not only wants to put the name across the chests of young women, but he also plans to start licensing the Girls Gone Wild name in deals with restaurants, clothing lines, and music and movie producers (Navarro 1). Any sense of self-actualization the girls who dance and flash in the videos may gain is immediately co-opted by Francis for his own personal financial gain and becomes a product of his franchise. The representation of femininity put forth in the live event and immediately recorded to video is clearly not owned by any of the girls gone wild, but instead it is owned and resold by Girls Gone Wild—it is quite literally an example of corporate sponsorship of boobs and butts.

As I’ve argued, it is possible that in the live event the girls who remove their clothing in front of the male audience resist objectification because they actively represent their subjectivities bodily in an act of inter-subjectivity with the males who are co-present in the performance space with them. If coercion hasn’t taken place, as Francis claims, and the girls are doing everything by their free choice, then they are free agents choosing a mode of bodily self-expression. This possibility, while slight in the live event, seems nearly impossible in regards to the recorded performances. Males who purchase the videos/DVDs are able to freely look at the nude bodies of the female performers, without the co-presence of the performing females and the ability to look back. In the videos/DVDs, however, it is a physical impossibility for the recorded image of the performer to look back at the gazing male spectator who now, in the privacy of his own home, not only dictates the right to look but also controls the action with his remote control. He has the ability to rewind, fast forward, and pause on images that he wants to look at longer.

It is unavoidable that heterosexual males are going to want to look at females. The question is, how to do this so that there is some equality in the exchange between looked at and looker without one having to submit to the power of the other. Susan Bordo writes of this
problem that is equally difficult to navigate for the heterosexual male who wishes to have an ethical desire as it is for the females who want to resist objectification. Bordo asserts, “Most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individuals did not create and do not control—and that they frequently feel tyrannized by” (28). What Girls Gone Wild offers is the possibility of an exchange of sexual excitement and fun between the female performers and the male spectators. How successful these performances are in achieving this exchange is debatable. If the performances are considered pornographic according to Toepfer’s definition, then there is an equal exchange of sexual excitement between the males and females—opening up a space for the meeting of subjectivities and desires. If the performances are considered pornographic according to Dworkin’s definition, then there is no exchange happening, and the subjectivities of the males violently turn the females into objects of their own desire. Heterosexual males that want their own subject positions to be expressed through an ethical desiring of female co-subjects rather than objects need to have an awareness of both Toepfer’s and Dworkin’s notions so that when an oppressive form of desire is enacted, they’ll know it when they see it.
CHAPTER THREE

LIVING DEADGIRL: BODIES IN FLUX AND THE SUICIDE GIRLS

Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.
--Pablo Picasso

Every single boob on every single woman is completely different and they’re all beautiful in their own ways.
--Tegan, SuicideGirl

For some reason unknown to me, the first time that I saw the Fluffgirls perform in Tallahassee a half-remembered website came to my mind. I had never visited it, and I couldn’t remember where I had first heard of it, but it was suicidegirls.com. I had vague images in my mind of naked, tattooed women dancing to a punk-rock soundtrack. The second time I saw the Fluffgirls perform in Tallahassee, I overheard a conversation in which a young man told his friend he was a freelance photographer for the SuicideGirls and was excited to finally be seeing the Fluffgirls perform. His presence at the show affirmed for me that there was some connection between the two groups, though I still didn’t know what that connection was. After this second Fluffgirls show, I went home and checked out suicidegirls.com. The connection between the two groups became clear. As I had felt that the Fluffgirls were creating a space for women to enact agency through their mostly-nude burlesque performance, upon viewing the website, this also was what the SuicideGirls appeared to be doing. In addition to the completely nude photosets of the SuicideGirls that are accessed online via personal computer or can be downloaded to an iPod, they also have a DVD, Suicide Girls the First Tour, for sale of their own SuicideGirls live burlesque tour. I subscribed to the website and ordered my copy of the DVD immediately.

Throughout this project, I have been exploring ways in which women may use the ownership of representations of their own nude bodies to enact agency and intervene in the patriarchal economy of sexual objectification. In other words—to borrow a phrase from racially based acts of resistance—the females in these performances are attempting to use the tools of the master to tear down the master’s house, or they at least are appropriating the master’s tools to build their own house. In the Foucauldian model of power that I’m using throughout this project,
the idea is not a teardown of existing power structures in total but rather finding intersections in the web of power relations that run through all of us. To quote Foucault once again, “It (power) needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body” (61). Exploiting these points of intersection between the productive network of power and individuals will allow individuals to pull and direct power for themselves as acting agents. The SuicideGirls pull power for themselves and then redirect that power to intervene in the sexual economy of objectification by disrupting the norms of nude female representations. They reject the mainstream, Pamela Anderson, *Playboy*-generated ideal of beauty, and they replace it with images in which the women are, according to the SuicideGirls website co-founder, Missy Suicide, “Not trying to be anyone other than themselves. That’s what sets them apart. Not trying to emulate any sort of media perception of what is beautiful. They know they’re beautiful. It’s their uniqueness that makes them beautiful” (*First Tour*). The SuicideGirls construct and enact their uniqueness consciously through their aesthetically modified bodies displayed online and then onstage in their performance of the live burlesque show.

I will begin this chapter by first discussing the website, then move into a discussion of the DVD documentation of the live burlesque show, and then once again return to the website. As with the Girls Gone Wild performance discussed in Chapter Two, I wasn’t present at the actual live SuicideGirls event, so I will use the DVD recording of it to make my assumptions about the SuicideGirls live performance. In addition to discussing these different mediums of performance separately, I will also examine how they work together to build and maintain a community of performers and spectators. In building this community the SuicideGirls open up and maintain the possibility of a space for enacting their own versions of sexualized representations of femininity. This enactment potentially begins, for the majority of the SuicideGirls, before they become members of the group. The majority of the SuicideGirls have undergone some sort of body modification—either body piercing or tattooing. It is the aesthetic modification of the body that leads me to assert an additional category be added to the list that feminist scholar Lesa Lockford has compiled and included her own term the “abject body” for cataloging transgressive
representations of femaleness in performance. Based on the work of the SuicideGirls, I would like to suggest the addition of the term the “aesthetic body” to this list.

As I continue to explore the possibilities of putting an ethical heterosexual male desire into practice, the aesthetic bodies of the SuicideGirls represent an attractive site for an interchange of desire negotiated between performer and spectator. Where the performers in Girls Gone Wild lose control of their images of sexualized femininity in the hands of the male corporate sponsors/producers of the videos, the SuicideGirl performers retain significant elements of control. This control is exercised through not only the production of the images of the SuicideGirls sexualized bodies by a mostly female staff but more strikingly through the aesthetic reconstruction of the bodies themselves. Males who have been conditioned by mass media culture to expect the nude bodies of women to be smooth and have the airbrushed quality of centerfolds in Playboy are confronted by the deliberately disguised bodies of the SuicideGirls and forced to deal with them on their own terms. By tampering with the pre-conceived mainstream notions of what kind of body will be revealed when a woman takes off her clothing, the SuicideGirls aesthetic body modifications disrupt the experience for the desiring viewer and assert an active subject where a passive object is expected. The male looker is then confronted with a choice of disregarding the images of these nude SuicideGirls and returning his gaze to the latest issue of Playboy or dealing with these SuicideGirls on the terms of sexual representation that they negotiate for themselves: tattoos, piercings, “unnatural” hair colorings and all.

In recent years, tattoos and piercings have encroached more and more into the mainstream, leaving some of their counter and sub-culture associations behind. There is a marked difference, however, between a tiny tattoo on the small of the back or shoulder and a tattoo that covers an entire arm from wrist to shoulder. There is a difference between the most mainstream of piercings—the ears—and piercings that run up and down both sides of the spine, or piercings in the lip, tongue, eyebrow, nipple, or genitals. The mainstream versions of these body alterations serve little more than an ornamental function akin to jewelry or fashion accessories. While the extreme versions serve this function as well, they go further in evidencing a desire to drastically modify the landscape of one’s body. Not all of the 997

29 I included this list in chapter one, but it is worth repeating here, “Elinor Fuchs has considered the ‘obscene body,’ Catherine Schuler and Jill Dolan the ‘pornographic’ body, Joanna Frueh the ‘erotic’ body, Shannon Bell the ‘prostitute body,’ Peggy Phelan the ‘unmarked’ body, and Rebeca Schneider the ‘explicit body’” (Lockford 10). 30 These “extreme” piercings still making corporations like Best Buy incredibly uncomfortable as seen when a friend of mine had to remove her tongue piercing before every shift at the mega-retailer.
SuicideGirls have undergone these more extreme types of body modifications, but a random sampling of the SuicideGirls profiles that make up much of the unique content of the website will show that most of them have modified their bodies in one extreme way or another. 31

Likewise, yet another form of body modification, the dying of women’s and now even men’s hair, in its more mainstream form has become an accepted practice in contemporary culture. The mainstream colors chosen for hair-dying are, generally, at least based on naturally occurring colors—perhaps a brunette wants to see if blondes really do have more fun, or a blonde who has grown tired of dumb blonde jokes will hide her telltale coloring and go incognito as a brunette. The hair color choices of many of the SuicideGirls, however, have more in common with an artist’s palette than with anything Mother Nature has mixed up. The colors range from bright pink to dark blue and everything in between.

Through the intentional modification of their bodies and hair through such extremely personal ways, the SuicideGirls mark their subjectivities in and on their skin. The discursive constructions of their subjectivities are made materially manifest through their own flesh and blood. They actively construct their bodies to express an inner, non-material sense of selfhood. This self that is physically constructed is not externally dictated by mainstream cultural norms but it is instead influenced from the aesthetics of counter and sub-cultures. As Missy Suicide explains how she came up with the name SuicideGirls:

SuicideGirls is a term my friends and I had been using to describe the girls we saw in Portland's Pioneer Square with skateboards in one hand, wearing a Minor Threat hoodie, listening to Ice Cube on their iPods while reading a book of Nick Cave's poetry. They are girls who didn't fit into any conventional sub-culture and didn’t define themselves based on musical taste like punk, metal, goth, etc. I think the only classifications right now people identify with are mainstream and outside of mainstream. (Interview)32

31 The number of SuicideGirls increases daily. It was 997 on March 19, 2006 when I was working on this chapter.
32 There are many understandings of “mainstream” and “outside of mainstream.” As Missy positions SuicideGirls as outside of mainstream, her notion of mainstream is critiqued by operators of other websites that also use female representations of nudity to disrupt the oppressive beauty ideals operating in what they perceive as mainstream culture. As Neva Chonin reports for the San Francisco Chronicle, SuicideGirls’ “critics charge that its range of alternatives is limited: tattoos proliferate, but excess body fat is scarce.” Chonin goes on to quote Lexi, whose not-for-profit Voodoo Dollhouse site features more “Rubinesque” women. Lexi says, “Some of my models had applied to SuicideGirls and were turned down, and I assume it was because of their size. I wanted something that resembled me and my friends and would show how larger girls who don’t fit mainstream ideas can still be sexy” (Chonin 14). In addition to the majority of the bodies represented on the SuicideGirls website being thin, they are also
Prior to this response from Missy, I had already read the rejection of mainstream cultural norms to an extreme degree as suggested by the name SuicideGirls. My interpretation of the name is that by re-envisioning their selfhood and then marking it materially through acts of body modification the women identified on the website as SuicideGirls destroy the normative cultural associations of “femaleness,” and they represent themselves anew. Killing the “woman” in themselves, they reconstruct a new gender identity that is a SuicideGirl—a living deadgirl.

There is a danger in invoking the image of death by suicide that has not gone unnoticed by Missy. She writes, “There are no dark sinister undertones. If I had known the site would be so popular then I might have thought the name out a bit more” (Interview). The act of committing suicide is a most serious matter and is undeniably an act of self-destruction—an ultimate act of violence. Unlike literal suicide, where the self is destroyed beyond return, the SuicideGirls use the notion of suicide symbolically to destroy aspects of themselves that have been culturally categorized to clear the way for their own individual reconstruction of their selves drawing from multiple sub-culture aesthetics. Picasso has said that in his act of creation, he must first always commit an act of destruction—the blank canvas is destroyed so that his imaginings may be made manifest. The SuicideGirls treat the normative understanding of “female” as their blank canvas upon which they create their self-portraits anew. This is evidenced on the suicidegirls.com website through their individual profiles. The website is made up of three main parts: the profiles of the SuicideGirls, profiles of the paying subscribers to the website, and a section that serves as a pop-culture online magazine with articles and interviews of mainstream and independent actors, directors and musicians. On both the SuicideGirls and the subscribers’ profiles is a place to list demographic information: name, age, location, etc. One of the fields that can be filled in by both subscribers and the SuicideGirls is labeled “gender.” For subscribers the gender options are “male,” “female,” and the ambiguous “exotic.” The SuicideGirls all have the same gender listed: SuicideGirl. So how exactly does a woman go about destroying her culturally dictated gender role and re-assembling herself as a SuicideGirl?

The first step in becoming a SuicideGirl is having the desire to be one and initiating the process. The final decision for inclusion in the newly constructed gender grouping, however, rests in the hands of the operators of the website. The individual women initiate the process of

predominately white, despite the claim on the website’s “model page” where instructions for how to become a SuicideGirl are printed. It reads, “SuicideGirls encourages women of color to apply. We aim to be a more diverse site, and we need your help!”
becoming a SuicideGirl after they've had a self-identification with the diverse group, and they fill out an online application for inclusion. This self-identification happens when a prospective SuicideGirl hears about or sees the website, and she decides for herself that it is an outlet of representation that she would like to use to express herself. Missy explains that the criteria for becoming a SuicideGirl is, “all about attitude and personality. We get over 1000 applications a week from women around the world who want to be SuicideGirls” (Interview). Snow, one of the ten SuicideGirls featured on the Suicide Girls the First Tour DVD, expresses the attitude and personality that Missy fails to elaborate. In an interview segment on the DVD, Snow discusses her initial encounter with the group and says, “When I first met some of the people from the website…the girls…I was so intimidated because they were so powerful to me. The way they represented themselves on the site, they were so strong” (First Tour).

I assert that at least part of the power of the representations that Snow identified as “so strong” is a sexually based power suggested through the boldness and daring of appearing unashamedly nude—a private act—in publicly displayed images. The SuicideGirls, however, represent themselves on the site not only in pictures but also in words. Alongside their nude images, the SuicideGirls have blogs and message boards in which they write about anything from their mundane daily activities to what they think and feel about topics that range from politics to music. In controlling how the images are contextualized, they are given voice when they would otherwise appear silent; thereby, creating a public forum for not only images of their self-modified bodies but also a public forum for their voices to be heard or at least read. These blogs and message boards on the SuicideGirls website differ from the interviews that accompany the centerfolds in Playboy because the SuicideGirls edit them themselves. They directly choose and type in the words that accompany their images, and they can update, change, or correct them as they see fit.

If there is, as there was for Snow, a perception of power associated with this public revelation of their subjectivities, a female desiring to join the site might perceive that she will be able to wield a similar power. As Jackie Randles (a.k.a. Rowan Suicide) says in an article in Bust magazine, “When I became a SuicideGirl it wasn’t about money. You can make more money modeling elsewhere. I thought they were about feminist empowerment. I wanted to support
that” (Sobczyk 78). Due to some conflicts within the organization that I’ll discuss later in this chapter, Randles ended up changing her mind, but her initial thoughts work with Snow’s perception to illustrate how women may see the group and then associate themselves with it.

Once a woman decides she wants to commit Suicide—symbolically speaking—even she fills out an online application she then uploads a couple of pictures (it is not required that they be nudes) and waits for the application and photos to be reviewed. The website instructions are very ambiguous about who will be doing the reviewing, only saying “If we like the set and have all your paperwork (two forms of ID and a completed W9), we'll set you up with an account and you are a SuicideGirl” (suicidegirls.com). If selected, SuicideGirls are paid three hundred dollars per photo set. The themes of the photo sets vary, but what is consistent in them is that the girls begin in some state of dress and end up undressed. SuicideGirls choose the theme, setting and outfit for their photosets themselves—if they want to dress up like a cat and have their picture taken as they undress like a cat, that is their choice. If they want to put on boxing gloves, duke it out with another SuicideGirl as they both undress and have photographs taken of the winner kissing the loser, that is their choice. If they want to get naked and stand in front of an American flag with the word, “Vote” spray-painted on it, that is their choice. Of course, if any of these options for photo sets were chosen now, they wouldn’t be unique or individual, as the sets I’ve described actually all appear on the website already. To photograph these sets, SuicideGirls hires several regionally based photographers across the United States. Internationally, they have photographers working in Canada, the UK, and Italy. There are ten photographers on staff and seven of the ten are women. The performers are not limited to using any of these professionals. They may choose to not have their photos taken by the SuicideGirls staff at all but instead have a friend shoot their pictures, or in the do-it-yourself spirit of punk rock they can shoot their own. The first and most renowned photographer for SuicideGirls is the goddess attributed with the creation of the website in the most widely circulated myth of its origins—Missy Suicide.

The myth of SuicideGirls origins has it that a young art student, Selena Mooney (aka Missy Suicide), started taking and using the internet to display pictures of her friends who were, in her own words, “girls that wouldn’t be featured in mainstream media…the girls that I

33 Bust magazine has a sub-title that reads, “For Women With Something To Get Off Their Chest.” Not being a woman, I have to disclose that I felt a little silly when I bought this magazine at Borders. Just a little.
know…the real girls” (First Tour).  

Like a female equivalent of one of Horatio Alger’s down-and-out boys, Missy’s story goes, the grassroots website run by women for the viewing pleasures of both men and women took off, and before long the website was an entrepreneur’s success story receiving an average of one million visitors a week and reporting a subscriber split of 56% male and 44% female (Sobczyk 78). These male and female subscribers pay only $48.00 for yearly access to the website. The perception held by SuicideGirls like Jackie Randles, until recently, was that Missy was the leader of an all-female crew running the ship. Like pirates assailing a merchant vessel, the SuicideGirls launched an all-out attack on mainstream, male-controlled pornography and showed that women can have an interest in sex, without becoming sexual objects—that one does not necessarily lead to the other. A group of women labor in the production and distribution of the sexually charged images, so it is women who should benefit from the gain in capital from that labor.

The perception that women call all of the shots is vital to the website’s success. If women are to symbolically kill off their gendered-self contained within the restrictive binary of male/female and reconstruct it as SuicideGirls, it is important that the risk involved in such an act of self-destruction be done in a safe space that they claim for themselves and is outside of male control. The act of destruction/creation must take place in a space that allows for the liberating destruction of cultural constraints and for the recreation of their selves as sexually powerful SuicideGirls. This safe space has been threatened; however, as troubling information has recently come to light and the perception of women calling all of the shots within the SuicideGirls organization has become more complicated than it has appeared to be for the first four years of the website’s operation.

The perception of women holding all of the power positions within the organization was not a complete misperception because Missy, while not the founder of the website, is a co-

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34 As the group continues to grow in popularity, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult to consider them as outside of mainstream. This is evidenced in the MTV video for Dave Grohl’s side-project: the all-male rock-band Probot. Once the drummer for Nirvana and his own band Foo Fighters, Grohl has become a huge fan of the SuicideGirls. He has hired several of the SuicideGirls as dancers in the video for the Probot song “Shake Your Blood.” This incorporation into more commercial venues for SuicideGirls garners mainstream attention and credentials thereby threatening their claim to a position outside of the mainstream and their potential for transgression. By comparison to Girls Gone Wild, however, there is still a long way to go before SuicideGirls has the same kind of instantaneous brand-name recognition.

35 The price range for most hard-core pornographic websites is $19.95-$29.95 a month. By comparison, the SuicideGirls website is a bargain. Of course, the SuicideGirls site doesn’t feature hard-core pornography.
founder and her current staff is for the most part made up of women.\textsuperscript{36} What has recently come under scrutiny, however, is that the other co-founder of the website is Missy’s one-time boyfriend and online community website pioneer, Sean Suhl. The February 2006 issues of both \textit{Spin} and \textit{Bust} magazines feature articles that expose this truth. Who actually wields what power within the enterprise is unclear. What is clear is that no matter how much women’s empowerment is foregrounded in the operation of the organization, a man lurks in the background. The article in \textit{Bust} reports that on an Oregon legal document, Suhl is listed as the sole owner of SuicideGirls, but then the article goes on to say that company ownership is still under debate (Sobczyk 79). Because it is a privately held company, uncovering conclusive data on who maintains ownership has proven to be incredibly difficult. The possibility that a male holds such an executive position in the organization, however, calls into question the extent to which an attack is actually being made on the patriarchal economy of sexual objectification by Missy and her SuicideGirls. Unlike his pornographic hustling predecessors Hugh Hefner, Larry Flynt, and Joe Francis, who often foreground their involvement in their respective enterprises, Suhl has remained in the background and unnoticed for four years of the SuicideGirls’ existence. His apparent absence may be an illustration of just how much power—in this case possibly coercive power—can be wielded by remaining “unmarked” as Peggy Phelan posits (6), or his apparent absence may be read as that of a progressively-minded male who wanted to help champion the cause of female empowerment and realized that his own gender could interfere with the process. He possibly stepped aside and left the fight to be fought by a group of women who were not only willing but also capable. It is even possible that his involvement was helping to open up a space—albeit a cyberspace—for the equal exchange of desire between men and women that is required for practicing an ethical heterosexual desire.

The likelihood of the SuicideGirls website being a cyberspace of equal exchange for desire is brought into serious question by the ex-SuicideGirls who feel betrayed by the non-disclosure of Suhl’s involvement with the organization and have taken their aesthetic bodies elsewhere. As part of their exit strategy from the organization, several ex-SuicideGirls have used popular media outlets to publicly challenge Suhl’s authority and mark his previously unmarked involvement with the organization on their way out the door. Many women who became

\textsuperscript{36} In my e-mail interview with Missy, she writes that of twelve staff members running the company, nine of them are women.
SuicideGirls, like Jackie Randles mentioned above, initially thought the website is about feminist empowerment because that is the image that the operators of the website, truthfully or not, crafted. As ex-SuicideGirl, Jennifer Caravella (aka Sicily Suicide) tells Spin magazine, however, “SuicideGirls is not a feminist-empowered site. It’s run by a raving misogynist” (qtd. in Hopper79). There will be no more lurking in the background for Mr. Suhl—he has been marked not only as a male but also outed as a male oppressor.

The main criticisms of Suhl seem to stem from his involvement in the production of the live burlesque performance tour and the subsequent release of the DVD recording that documents the tour. Caravella and other girls on the tour accuse Suhl of being verbally abusive. Kelly Kleinert (aka Shera Suicide) is one of Caravella’s co-stars in the live performance recorded and distributed on the DVD. Kleinert says “Sean told us we sucked so much that we made this banner for our costume kit that said SuicideGirls Burlesque You Suck” (qtd. in Hopper 79). The director of the DVD, another man given a position of authority, Mike Marshall, puts it somewhat differently, “Sean would call the girls on the phone all the time, telling them to pull their performances together or they were off the tour” (qtd. in Hopper 79). It is difficult to ascertain what accounts for the differences in interpretation of Suhl’s directions. Marshall’s description of Suhl’s interventions could be read as an impresario concerned with the quality of performance that he is either directly or indirectly responsible for. Or it could be read as a male coming to the aid of his fellow male who is under attack for inflicting verbal abuse on the SuicideGirl performers. Likewise Kleinert’s harsher description of Suhl’s directions could be read in multiple ways. Her position could be that of a woman who had transitioned into a SuicideGirl under the pretense of empowerment, only to find herself abused by a male from within the organization that had promised her empowerment against just such abuse. Or her description could be read as an inexperienced performer who isn’t accustomed to the giving over of power that often takes place between a performer and a director when putting together a live performance. Regardless of the multiplicity of readings and interpretations, in the self-empowering environment that the SuicideGirls organization appeared to foster, that self-power was aggressively threatened by an assertion of authority from an outside force. The fact that the force was materialized in a male body, and not a SuicideGirl or even a female body, made it all the more dangerous.
As an actor myself, it isn’t strange to me that an authority figure may check in on a show and ask that it be tightened up or pulled together. If a director told me I sucked, however, he or she would certainly meet with resistance. The giving over of some individually held power to a director through negotiations in the rehearsal process is something that experienced actors grow accustomed to through their training. The SuicideGirls, however, are not trained actors and, from what I can tell, neither is Suhl an experienced director. The dynamic between performers and directors, even the most experienced, is always a tenuous one that requires finesse. The asserting of selfhood that is so important to the appeal and to the success of the SuicideGirls website would make working on a collaborative performance like a live burlesque difficult with a sensitive director, let alone one who may tell the performers that “they suck.” One difficulty inherent in this dynamic is that individuals are asked to put aside their self-interest for the good of the group. Even though by joining the website, SuicideGirls identify with a group, it is a group that prides itself on the uniqueness and difference of its members—a confederacy of individuals. All that the individual SuicideGirls photosets require is a digital camera, the do-it-yourself punk-rock attitude of the website, and a woman willing to transform into a SuicideGirl. To complicate the negotiation between a group of self-interested performers and a director even further, unlike the Fluffgirls performances where the controlling force behind the aesthetic is a woman, Cecilia Bravo, for the SuicideGirls it appears to be Suhl. Even if Suhl is the progressively-minded male who stepped aside and let the women run the show with the website, it seems clear with the live show he asserted a male dominated aesthetic instigating further acts of resistance from the SuicideGirls that came in the form of their exodus from the organization. As Jackie, who wasn’t involved in the live show or subsequent DVD but decided to leave the group anyway, told Bust, “I wasn’t affected personally to the extent that some others were. But it is my body, and I had to take personal responsibility and not stay and watch my sisters being treated this way. That is empowerment and feminism to me” (qtd in Sobczyk 81).

If some section of cyberspace had truly been cleared for SuicideGirls to claim empowerment and ownership of their images, then it shouldn’t come as any surprise that Suhl would meet with extreme resistance if he suddenly stepped into the extension of that cyberspace—the space of live performance—and tried to exert some dominance in shaping the representation of the SuicideGirls images. This resistance should have been clearly anticipated since the decision to open the space for self-expression from cyberspace into live performance
space was, at least in part, an initiative of the SuicideGirls themselves. Missy wrote in response to my question about how the live burlesque performance came about, “The girls wanted a way to get the same feeling of self-expression they got in doing their (photo) sets in a more immediate live performance. The show that they do is very fun and personality driven” (Interview). In some ways, the sort of control exercised by Suhl in regard to the live performance was already enacted with the website because of the review process women are subjected to in order to be accepted as SuicideGirls. The assumption with the website application process, however, is that Missy Suicide or some other women conduct the reviews, and the power of decision is in the hands of fellow (sister?) SuicideGirls rather than in the hands of a man, which became clearly the situation with the live performance.

No matter what power may exist in remaining unmarked, the SuicideGirls experience with the website taught them how to wield the power that comes from being marked. By using media outlets like Spin and Bust magazine to get their story out into the public eye for scrutiny, the ex-SuicideGirls are using the power of representation to confront Suhl’s unmarked and privileged position. With his outing, they allow future women who consider committing Suicide to have, if not all, at least more information at their disposal in making choices about how they choose to represent themselves. As Caravella told Bust, “Just state what you are and what you do. Don’t pretend it’s feminism” (qtd. in Sobczyk 81). Choosing to identify with the female empowered foregrounded image of SuicideGirls that existed for the group’s first four years of operation still may be a valid choice for some women to express themselves regardless of Suhl’s recently discovered involvement. For some women, like Kleinert and Caravella, however, it decidedly is not an option. At any rate, according to the reports in the popular magazines, it has all degenerated into an ugly he said/she said legal mess with the live tour and the DVD at the center of it and the space for female empowerment that appeared to be opened up initially by the website fiercely contested.

It is the DVD recording of the live burlesque tour that I’d like to now examine. The format of the DVD is a life-on-the-road documentary that is compiled of footage of the offstage hijinks of the ten SuicideGirls who went on tour reminiscent of the Beatles Help!, footage of their burlesque routines recorded both live and specifically for the camera, video recordings of their website photo shoots that are a similar format to the video centerfolds seen on the Playboy cable channel, and interviews with the SuicideGirls. In one of these DVD interview segments,
Caravella has much more positive things to say about her experiences as a SuicideGirl than in her quotes above:

I know I’m going to look back on it (the tour) and think that it’s one of the most amazing experiences that I’ve had. I got to go on the road and be paid and have all of the mundane details taken care of for me. I got to perform on stage and express myself and have fun in front of an audience. I got to be sexual and confident. I got to be around an amazing group of people. I got to fly to England. That experience is not something that a lot of people get to have. I appreciate it. The idea of going to a nine-five job I don’t know if I could actually swallow it.

(Fist Tour)

There is no data available on how much money the SuicideGirls organization made from the live tour and subsequent release of the DVD. There is data available on how much the SuicideGirls performers who participated in the live tour, including Caravella, were paid. They received $100.00 for each of 61 performances in 45 cities over approximately 45 days, totaling $6,100 for about a month and a half of work (First Tour; Hopper 79).³⁷ Bust reports that the performers in the live show were further compensated financially for the DVD recording by signing contracts that entitled them to a flat $1,000 fee (Sobczyk 80). In addition to this flat fee, there was a verbal offer of a five-cent royalty to be paid to each of the ten SuicideGirl performers per copy of the DVD sold. Fueling Caravella’s change-of-heart decision to leave the organization was the fact that none of the performers were paid this royalty, and when she asked Suhl to have a contract drawn up that would hold him legally accountable, she says he “flipped out” (qtd. in Hopper 79). An unidentified publicist for SuicideGirls told Spin that “the women will be paid a royalty once the initial costs of the DVD are recouped” (qtd. in Hopper 79). Finally, Bust reports that the exact sales figures for the DVD are unknown, but in working to recoup the cost and profit from the DVD, the SuicideGirls organization has sold the rights to the Showtime cable channel that has been airing it regularly. From this deal with Showtime, the performers didn’t “see one thin dime” (Sobczyk 80). These numbers illustrate that while the performers were compensated financially for their live performance, once the performance was recorded and in

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³⁷ Calculating a yearly salary based off of $6,100 for 1.5 months would equal $48,800. These numbers do not take into account any income tax that would diminish the amounts.
the hands of the distributors keeping control of financial compensation became increasingly complicated.

This loss of financial control that resulted from the transition from live representation to recorded representation illustrates the difficulties in managing representations for individual performers across different mediums. In the live event, the means of production of the representations remain more securely in the hands—or bodies—of the female performers than they do once all of the technical elements of producing a mediated representation, like a film or DVD, get involved. The money the performers were paid, or not paid, for the performances becomes a material representation of the control they maintained in the different modes of representation.

In addition to some financial gain, it can be ascertained from Caravella’s words above that participating in the live tour, at least initially, held other non-material gains that were worth enduring whatever verbal abuses she may have had to withstand from the “raving misogynist” Suhl. Caravella’s transition from identifying with the group to disassociating with the group illustrates the fluidity of subjectivity and the possibility of forming and reforming alliances with, or in opposition to, groups to enact individual agency. Her position within and intersection with the SuicideGirls allows her to claim power at one point and then in leaving the group to shift that same power into another dynamic relationship of opposition to the group. Following her alignments and realignments traces the outline of the web of power that Foucault suggests is at play when he discusses an economy of power as procedures that allow, “the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted, and ‘individualized’ throughout the entire social body” (61).

Because in this project I am exploring the possibility of an exchange between active subjectivities or a co-presence of desires evidenced in the meeting of performers and spectators at live performance events, I am particularly interested in the DVD footage that shows the live SuicideGirl burlesque performances. Unfortunately, there is less of this type of footage on the DVD than the other kinds that make up the compilation. There are shots of some of the venues that the SuicideGirls performed in live. The DVD shows the exteriors of several venues like The Metro in Chicago that is a mid-sized rock-and-roll venue. Due to the musical nature of the acts that typically perform in these venues, a similar confusion that resulted for the Tallahassee audience when the Fluffgirls performed at The Beta Bar also occurred for the SuicideGirls’
audiences as they traveled from venue to venue. Stormy Suicide, one of the performers on the DVD says, “A lot of people come to our shows and they have no idea what the fuck they’re coming to watch. But I think they walk away satisfied. They come to see a band and they walk away having seen a show of like, bitches taking their clothes off in a synchronized, classy manner” (*Fist Tour*). Different from the Fluffgirls burlesque is the amount of clothing that is taken off in a synchronized, classy manner by the SuicideGirls. With the “tease” missing from their stripping, the SuicideGirls perform the sort of burlesque that Fluffgirl Cecilia Bravo often critiques. Bravo told the *Boise Weekly*, “I don’t like it when people come out with just a bra and panties on and then take them off. There’s nothing to tease with if you’re not wearing much in the first place” (Ryan). Where the Fluffgirls invoke traditional burlesque by both placing female performers at the center of the spectacle and practicing the art of striptease, the SuicideGirls, through their lack of “tease,” only employ one of these markers of traditional burlesque: performance centered on female spectacle.

In one of the live performances documented on the DVD, we see Snow performing a dance routine. The footage is a combination of a recording of a live performance in front of spectators, spliced with a recording of the same routine in an empty theatre specially recorded for the DVD. The venue is not identified, but it appears to be a mid-sized rock-and-roll venue. Missy Suicide confirms this in her e-mail response to me when she writes that, “The show was performed at rock venues exclusively,” such as, “Emo's in Austin, the Knitting Factory in New York and LA, The Great American Music Hall in San Francisco” (Interview). The importance of identifying the type of venues the SuicideGirls perform in is that these are spaces of popular culture; therefore, they draw a large audience allowing for more exposure to the SuicideGirls performances of resistance than perhaps their performance art predecessors managed to draw in the perceived-as-elite performance spaces of traditional theatres and art galleries.

The first shot of the routine is a recorded live shot that begins by showing Snow mid-way through her routine—already in a state of partial undress—and then quickly panning out into the audience and showing the masses that have assembled to participate in the live event. It is difficult to get an approximation of how many spectators are present. Both the main floor and the balcony of the venue, however, are packed with both men and women. Missy Suicide says that the audiences for the SuicideGirls live shows are “pretty evenly mixed male and female.
The people in attendance tend to have a piercing or tattoo. They tend to be college age for the most part” (Interview). It was impossible from the DVD recording to verify any of this.

The next shot is also of the recorded live performance, and it is from the point of view of the stage, looking out over Snow sitting in a metal folding chair downstage center. The audience looks eager and expectant. They cheer and applaud but with more restraint and not as aggressively as the spectators at a Girls Gone Wild performance do. There is then an edit and the footage switches to the performance staged for the DVD recording and Snow sits on a chair, holding a cane, and is dressed in a man’s suit coat, top hat, “boy-short” panties, black and white striped thigh-high stockings, a matching candy-striped glove and scarf set, and red electrical tape over her nipples.

Unlike the Fluffgirls whose routines are choreographed using moves that draw from many styles of dance, Snow employs only a couple of the basic moves that Katherine Liepe-Levinson describes for strippers in her ethnographic study of strip clubs. Snow begins with some slow bumping and grinding and then mainly sticks to body-stroking and sexual strutting. Liepe-Levinson describes body stroking as the act when a stripper, “portray(s) auto-erotic ecstasy on stage by running her hands all over her body” (115). She goes on to explain this rather self-explanatory maneuver by writing, “Today female and male dancers freely touch and massage their chests, stomachs, buttocks, legs, and genitals. […] These gestures may suggest the caresses of imaginary sex partners, the dancers’ ministrations to imaginary sex partners, or any combination of such scenes” (115). Through body-stroking Snow quickly undresses—taking off even her boy-short panties to reveal a skimpier pair of panties underneath—to nothing more than panties, stockings, and the electrical tape over her nipples.

Once she sheds what little clothing she wears, spectators see the aestheticized body underneath marked with tattoos and piercings. She has two piercings in her nose, one in her lip, and at least three visible tattoos. The most prominent of these tattoos is a large black star that is about the size of a dessert plate in the center of her back between her shoulder blades. She spends the rest of her routine sexual strutting, which Liepe-Levinson describes as, “each dancer’s signature sexy walk. Dancers use struts as entrances and opening segments; as pauses in the action to build anticipation; and as connecting steps” (121). Snow, however, uses sexual strutting as the main maneuver in her routine. Rather than stripteasing, she ends up performing semi-nude dancing or strutting dressed in nothing more than her panties, electrical tape, and
tattoos. For the Fluffgirls, the amount of time that they were in their most exposed nearly nude
state was comparatively brief with the amount of time for their total routine. The main action of
the Fluffgirls routines was the slow, seductive, controlled reveal of their nude bodies, while the
SuicideGirls main action is displaying what was quickly revealed. The focus of the Fluffgirls
performance is in the act of striptease that they borrow from traditional burlesque. The focus of
the SuicideGirls is on the display of their aesthetically altered bodies using a limited and select
range of burlesque performance strategies as another vehicle for this display.

The confusing of gender that was instigated by the drag performance of Lydia Thompson
and her British Blonde burlesque performances is echoed in Snow’s donning of the male gender
associated suit coat and top hat. Snow’s lower body being exposed in stockings, which are
associated with the female gender, while her top half is dressed up like a man allows her to
temporarily inhabit the representation of both mainstream gender roles. This doubling of gender
codes signals for the spectators the transgressive nature of her performance. It is neither of these
dominant gender codes, however, that is central to her display. She quickly removes the
signifying clothing and presents her nude aesthetic body with its modification vis-à-vis piercings
and tattoos. The expectation of seeing either a female or male body exposed as clothing is
removed is perturbed by the display of a SuicideGirl body. By disrupting the expectation of the
audience, Snow gets instant affirmation that she is expressing her gender bodily in a manner of
her own recodification. She represents herself not as a culturally marked and identifiable gender
but one that has been marked and enacted by her own choices. The spectators are then forced to
deal with her nudity on the terms she has materially constructed and presented before them.

Another performance on the DVD is made up entirely of live footage and doesn’t have
the cut away to a special DVD-only performance. Whereas Snow’s routine didn’t require any
interaction on the part of the spectators other than watching, Stormy’s routine is far more
dependent on spectator interaction. The first shots we see of Stormy’s routine are actually of the
spectators who have pushed themselves up against the edge of the stage in yet another rock
venue. The stage is bare, and the spectators that clamor against it beat it with the palm of their
hands in an attempt to entice the next performer out for their viewing pleasure. Stormy bounds
onto the stage, wearing skin-tight black leather pants and a black t-shirt that is ripped in such a
way that one of her red-electric taped nipples is exposed from the outset. She smokes a cigarette
and sits on a chair downstage center. She takes one last drag on her cigarette and then
aggressively tosses it off to the side. She then begins to whip her long blonde-streaked black hair around like a windmill. The crowd cheers ecstatically.

Next, she bumps, grinds and body strokes her way to the edge of the stage while she drinks a beer. She takes a swig from the bottle, shakes it up, and sprays the spectators. Then she takes another swig and spits it in the spectators’ faces. Her aggressive actions directly confront the spectators, disrupting any process of objectification that may be taking place. She is not being displayed as a passive object but rather as an acting agent.

She then works her way back to the chair, turns her back to the spectators, and bends over suggestively displaying her butt. The pants that she wears are held together in the middle by a zipper that goes from front to back. She reaches back between her legs and undoes the zipper, losing her pants and revealing a pair of black thong panties as well as two sets of tattoos on her legs. On the outside of her hips, she has tattooed the female silhouettes most commonly seen on the mud flaps of semi-trucks. Along the back of each leg, she has a line tattooed that makes it appear as if she is permanently wearing thigh-high stockings.

She then stands on the chair and rips off what remains of her black t-shirt, exposing three more tattoos—one of which is a yellow lighting bolt beside her right breast which I’m suggesting is somehow connected with her SuicideGirl name “Stormy.” It could be that she had the nickname Stormy, and then she got the lighting bolt tattoo to signify her nickname bodily or she had the tattoo first, and from the body image she took her nickname. In her nearly nude state of exposure, she then kicks over the chair and grabs another beer. She drinks some of the beer, then takes another swig into her mouth, and by spitting it she sprays several audience members who appear to laugh and smile. Her performance ends with her taking yet another swig of beer, grabbing a spectator’s hair, bending his head back, and spitting the beer directly into his mouth.

What is gained by the live performance for the SuicideGirls that isn’t already at their disposal through the use of the website? The answer to this question is central to all three examples of female performance I explore in this project. While the SuicideGirls website has blogs and message boards that the women can use to voice their subjectivities alongside their nude images, these could easily be as disregarded as are the articles in *Playboy*. What can’t be denied in the live performance event is the presence, liveness, and materiality of the performers. As in the website representations, the co-presence of performer and spectator in the live event is lost in the DVD recording. In just looking at Stormy’s chair-kicking aggressive live
performance, the DVD spectator doesn’t experience the threat or actuality of having beer spit in their face or having their hair pulled. Also, as in the Girls Gone Wild videos, the control of the live performance by the performer is lost to and appropriated by the remote control in the hand of the DVD viewer in addition to the companies that are financially benefiting from the sales of the DVDs. In the live performance, Stormy controlled how long she would remain bent over exposing her butt to the live spectators; however, with the DVD recording, a spectator with a butt fetish, and the ability to pause the action, could more readily objectify her—fulfilling his own desire and negating any possible enactment of hers.

In aesthetically crafting their bodies, the SuicideGirls show the importance of the body in grounding subjectivities in a material reality. The ease of objectification that comes from looking at a picture of a nude female that can’t really look back (looking is an active act and an image can “appear” to be looking, but without the active force, it is just appearance) or talks back is made incredibly difficult when brought face to face with an active subject. In the space opened up by the live performance events, the SuicideGirl performers are able to confront directly the spectators who would objectify them and actively push back at objectification. In Stormy’s routine, for example, we see a SuicideGirl not only look or talk back to the spectators, but she touches them, pulls their hair, and spits beer on them. Through the labor of their performance, the SuicideGirls are not passive objects at the mercy of the spectators’ gazes; they are acting subjects whose performance works to reinforce their self-constructed sense of identity. The live performances allow them to try on different identity roles and get immediate feedback from the live audience.

In the last recorded performance on the DVD that I will recount here, Sicily—now known as ex-SuicideGirl Jennifer Caravella—rehearses an extreme identity, and she comments on receiving just such immediate feedback. She does a routine where she says she is pretending to be a “mental patient in the hospital and I lose my shit” (First Tour). She wears a bloody smock, carries scissors, and has a large stuffed monkey attached to her back. After quickly stripping off the smock and standing only in panties and ripped stockings, she stabs the stuffed monkey to a stuffed death after she has it simulate giving her cunnilingus. She then shares, “I’ve actually heard someone in the audience look up and say, ‘What the fuck? What is this girl doing?’” If anyone can say for sure, it is only Caravella. Her performance resonates for me,

38 In Unmarked, Peggy Phelan argues otherwise. She argues that inanimate objects can and do look back.
however, with a comment that Wendy McElroy makes about women performing in hardcore pornographic videos:

If a woman enjoys performing sex acts in front of a camera, it is not because she is a unique human being who reasons and reacts from a different background or personality. No. It is because she is psychologically damaged and no longer responsible for her actions. She must, in effect, become a political ward of radical feminists, who will make the correct choices for her. (106)

I read her dressing up like a mental patient who loses her “shit” as a confrontation of this notion that a woman would have to be psychologically damaged to express herself in a way that could be perceived as pornographic. Not only is she resisting male objectification, but she is also troubling the forms of female resistance posited by anti-porn feminists. The familiar act in mainstream heterosexual pornography of a woman taking her clothes off is made incredibly strange in this routine. This strange-making requires a re-examination of the event and challenges pop-culturally held notions of what sexy is and how we make these determinations. She clearly is not concerned with conforming to a mainstream notion of sexy. She is demonstrating her control of her body and choices, and she leaves it to the spectator how they will deal with it. No matter how extreme, the heightened theatrical expectations of live performance allow a space for this sort of intensely individual acting out of imagined personas and role-playing.

The other gain of the live performances is something they have in common with the original SuicideGirls website. The website is not just a place to view nude images of the SuicideGirls. The website is interactive, and it allows subscribers to build profiles, upload pictures of themselves, post messages and write their own blogs. The website is an online, virtual community. The communal aspect is one of its major selling points. The website creates a cyber-public meeting place for like-minded individuals to share feelings, thoughts, and themselves. It is a similar sort of communal space that Jill Dolan posits can be opened up by live performances. Dolan writes:

Audiences are compelled to gather with others, to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements. Perhaps part of the desire to attend theatre and performance is to
reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other. I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture. I'd like to argue that such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us, if not expressly political then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like. (*Utopia* 454-455)

If one of the goals of the website is to create a community, it isn’t surprising that the group would work to engage community in other ways, one of which is through the possibility of opening up utopian space through live performance. Not having been present at an actual live performance of the SuicideGirls, I don’t have first-hand knowledge if such a moment of utopia was opened up. As evidenced on the DVD, there are large gatherings of spectators, both male and female, that gather to share a moment with the focused attention on the nude display of the SuicideGirls. What seems possible is that in modeling their own self-constructed identities through their aesthetically modified bodies, the SuicideGirls could be opening up the spectators consciousness to see ways in which they may actively work to produce their own subject positions.

Through the communities built both online and onstage by performing their individual aesthetic bodies in a resistant manner, the SuicideGirls demonstrate materially the strategy of pulling and redirecting power on an individual basis rather than a concern with toppling the entire network of power exchange in an attempt at liberation. As Foucault explains, “there are many different kinds of revolution, roughly speaking, as many kinds as there are possible subversive recodifications of power relations” (64). These recodifications of power relations are evidenced in the SuicideGirls handling of the revelation of Suhl’s involvement with the organization, as well as, in their own aesthetic construction of their bodies. Unlike artists who choose to express themselves through other mediums, the medium of choice for the SuicideGirls is their own flesh. Through the public display of their aesthetically modified bodies, the SuicideGirls demonstrate the possibility of enacting agency through the conscious choices involved in intervening in the process of constructing subjectivity and resisting objectification. They show that it is at least partially possible to die and live again in bodies and identities of their own choosing.
CONCLUSION

A painting is never finished. It simply stops in an interesting place.
--Paul Gardener

As I bring this project to a close, I feel it is like a painting: at an interesting stopping place and yet somehow unfinished. That is not to say it stands as an incomplete document. The issues that I’ve explored are just left open for further inquiry, further refinement, and further discovery. My initial research questions that began my exploration have led me to more questions and fewer answers.

I recently heard Anne Bogart deliver a keynote address at the South Eastern Theatre Conference in Orlando, Florida. She made many intriguing points, but one of particular interest to me as I write this conclusion is her assertion that as theatre artists (and I include theatre scholars in this group) we should embrace uncertainty. That to follow certainty to its extreme end is to follow a path to violence. It was certainty, she argued, that led the Bush administration into the debacle that is the Iraq war. Certainty, Bogart asserts, is incredibly dangerous. So, it is with great relief and relish in my own uncertainty that I conclude this project.

Many certainties I held as I began planning this project were challenged as I moved forward in its execution. I was certain that Cecilia Bravo was attempting to lead a feminist revolution with her neo-burlesque performance. In my interview with her I found out, however, that her expressed intent in performing is for no purpose other than to entertain. She insists that she performs to provide audiences with a form of escapism from problems instead of confronting them and working through them. I was certain that Girls Gone Wild performances held no value other than the titillating of drunken male college students. I found in reading responses from the young women who perform on the videos, however, that they believe they experience a sense of freedom, liberation or, at the very least, fun in exposing their young bodies. While the risks of objectification in these performances is ever-present and the threat of violence cannot be ignored, neither can be ignored the possibility, no matter how slight, that there is a sense of empowerment being enacted through them at least in the initial live event. I was certain that the SuicideGirls could stand as a prime example of women producing sexually charged images for consumption by male and female spectators alike that were completely controlled by women who were interested in this form of self-expression. Then Sean Suhl was outed in the popular press and my
entire perception of SuicideGirls had to be reevaluated. But that’s the point isn’t it—reevaluation? We must constantly reevaluate and develop awareness to the activities that we engage in, the materials that we look at, and the representations that we produce. Nothing we do is without consequence, either negative or positive or, most likely, some combination of the two. If reevaluation were no longer necessary than certainty would reign. Certainty is the foreclosure of possibility.

In the introduction, I recounted the story of my own staged representation of nudity as an actor. For male actors, the issue of nude female representations in performance has little practical interest. Without the aid of costuming it would present a near impossible challenge to a male actor to “realistically” represent a nude female in performance. I’m not even sure how a male actor would go about that—the joy of uncertainty continues. My theatrical practice is not limited to acting; however, I also write and direct. For male writers and directors, the issue of female representation becomes incredibly relevant. For a writer or director, there are a series of privileges that come with these positions of authority. Male writers and directors must work ethically to avoid coercion and limit the possibilities of objectification of the female performers they work with. This is not to say that nudity or sexually provocative representations need to be avoided at all costs, but there must be open channels of communication and a willingness on the part of the writer or director to negotiate with the female performer so that her ability to be an acting agent is not stripped away, and she is coerced into passivity. Having a consciousness of the possible repercussions of such representations will help to determine if the artistic gains that may result are worth the risks in presenting them.

As for my initial questions that were my springboard into this investigation: Can the representation of female nudity take place from a subject rather than an objectified position? Can performing “femaleness” based in the image of the nude female body signify an ownership and display of her own sexuality? Is female nudity always only a commodity for appropriation by the male or desiring spectator? Can women intervene in an economy of sexual desire by using the very images that are the stock and trade of such an economy? Who is in the power position if a woman chooses to have the desiring gaze directed at her? Can a woman experience that feeling of power that I myself experienced, no matter how artificial or theatrically dictated my circumstances were, by standing on stage as a nude performer? The answer to all of these questions is: a very firm “definitely maybe.”
Of the three groups of performers, the Fluffgirls seem to retain the most control of their nude images because the ownership of them happens only in the moment of the live performance. There seems to be very little administrative structure in the organization, and, other than determining if a particular performer is Fluffgirl material or not, Cecilia Bravo appears to leave most elements of the performances up to the individual performers. The performers choose their own costumes, choreograph their own dance routines, and are paid for their efforts. Without being recorded to video for mass distribution like the Girls Gone Wild and SuicideGirls performances, the Fluffgirls are able to directly manage their representations in the live moment. There is no remote control that can work to speed up or pause a Fluffgirl performance on stage. The fact that they must be viewed live and in the flesh works against the possibility of their objectification. While they can’t entirely control the way their images are received in the minds of every spectator, they manage to maintain control of the majority of the means of production of their images. None of my assertions about the Fluffgirls representing sexually powerful women directly contradict Bravo’s claim that all she intends is to entertain. The performances are certainly entertaining. It is an instance of a situation that can exist in a state of both/and instead of either/or. This both/and understanding is applicable to all of the examples of performance I’ve explored throughout this project and is a useful strategy in embracing uncertainty.

While they may certainly be having fun, the young women who get up on stage to participate in the Girls Gone Wild events appear to me as the most likely targets of coercion and loss of control of their own images. They are young, possibly under the influence of alcohol, and have very little time to consider the repercussions of their decisions to participate in the flesh exposing events. The ownership of their images seems to begin and end with the decision to get on the stage. Their names are announced at the beginning of the contests, possibly heard over the screaming crowd, and then they are immediately forgotten—barely audible even on the recorded documentation of the event. They become bouncing, giggling, wet living advertisements for the corporate sponsors of the events and Joe Francis’s own brand name, Girls Gone Wild. While enacting agency by the female performers in these events is admittedly possible, it seems to me that the risk of danger involved in making the choice to represent themselves in these events outweighs that possibility. It is not, however, my choice to make. What is my choice to make is that as a heterosexual male I can use my awareness about the
dangers involved in this sort of female representation and direct my desire elsewhere rather than reinforcing the workings of an economy of sexual objectification.

It was with great excitement that I turned my desiring gaze to the SuicideGirls. It appeared to me that in looking at the SuicideGirls, even at their photos on the website, I was playing into their desire to be looked at—a carefully considered and constructed desire. The perception that the site was by women for women and men made it such an incredibly attractive site for enacting an exchange of heterosexual desire. It still may possibly be such a site, but the involvement of Suhl, to whatever extent he proves to be involved in the end, certainly makes it far more complicated. His presence could mean that the group is no different than a pierced and tattooed version of *Playboy* with Suhl stealthily slinking into Hefner’s smoking jacket and slippers. While the failure to disclose Suhl’s role in the organization initially is certainly suspect, since his “outing” he doesn’t seem to be trying to completely hide his presence within the organization any longer. He agreed to talk with a reporter for the article in *Spin*, but then refused to be photographed or visually marked for the article (Hopper 79). This is certainly a situation under development and will need to be closely watched as it continues to develop if decisions about ethical desire are to be made.

I have begun every section of this thesis with a personal narrative of one sort or another, and it is now a personal narrative that I would like to use to give this project an interesting stopping place. It is an anecdote that my grandmother told me on New Year’s Day, 2006 when I told her I was working on a project about burlesque. I think it is a simple, clear example of the both/and nature of these types of performances and the way that spectators receive and interpret the representations of female nudity. My grandmother told me that her own mother and her mother’s sister used to go to a burlesque house in Cleveland, Ohio to see the performances that were so popular during the first half of the 20th century. When the two ladies would get to the theatre, my grandmother’s aunt would say to my great-grandmother about the female performers, “Aren’t those girls terrible! Let’s go sit down front!”

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39 Trust me, the Appendix and Works Cited list will be quite a bore and a let down after this anecdote.
APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL LETTER AND CONSENT FORMS
OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH
HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE
Tallahassee, Florida 32206-2755
(850) 644-8033 • FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 10/20/2005

To: George McConnell
2131 N. Meridian Rd. # 115
Tallahassee, FL 32303

Dept: THEATRE

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Naked: Representations of Female Sexuality and the Fluffgirl Traveling Burlesque

The forms that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Human Subjects Committee at its meeting on 10/12/2005. Your project was approved by the Committee.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals which may be required.

If the project has not been completed by 10/11/2008 you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

You are advised that any change in protocol in this project must be approved by resubmission of the project to the Committee for approval. The principal investigator must promptly report, in writing, any unexpected problems causing risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols of such investigations as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Protection from Research Risks. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

cc: Mary Karen Dahl
HSC No. 2005.791
Florida State School of Theatre Master’s Thesis:
Live! Nude! Girls! Representations of Female Sexuality in the Fluffgirls, GirlsGoneWild, and SuicideGirls

Fluffgirl Burlesque Audience Member Consent Form

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT:

1. George McConnell, who is a Theatre Studies Graduate Student, has requested my participation in a research study.

2. The purpose of the research is to provide a first hand account and document the performance and reaction to the performance of the Fluffgirl Burlesque.

3. My participation will involve chatting with George McConnell and answering some informal, though frankly personal questions about the performance of the Fluffgirl Burlesque.

4. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts if I agree to participate in this study.

5. Although there may be no direct benefits to me, the possible benefits of my participation in the research are finding possible places for empowerment through the representation of female sexuality as behavior is modeled through performance.

6. The results of this research study may be published but my name or identity will not be revealed. The researcher will do the following to maintain confidentiality of my records, George McConnell will not use any proper names in the published work but only “stage names” for the performers and any audience spectators will be referred to only by their sex, race, age and possibly sexual orientation. Master lists of subjects actual names will be destroyed once these identifying codes are assigned.

7. In case of injury I expect to receive the following treatment or care which will be provided at my expense: N/A

8. I will not be paid for my participation.
9. Any questions I have concerning the research study or my participation in it, before or after my consent, will be answered by George McConnell, 2131 N. Meridian Rd. #115, Tallahassee, FL 32303, 850/284-5753, gdm04c@fsu.edu, Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mary Karen Dahl

10. If I have questions about my rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if I feel I have been placed at risk, I can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Institutional Review Board, through the Office of the Vice President for Research, at (850) 644-8633.

I have read the above informed consent form and I agree that my willingness to answer questions asked of me will be proof of my consent. I understand that my answers are anonymous and will remain that way. I agree to release any information I offer that may be recorded on audiotape that in no way identifies me. I understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to me.
I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT:

1. George McConnell, who is a Theatre Studies Graduate Student, has requested my participation in a research study.

2. The purpose of the research is to provide a first hand account and document the performance and reaction to the performance of the Fluffgirl Burlesque.

3. My participation will involve chatting with George McConnell and answering some informal, though frankly personal questions about the performance of the Fluffgirl Burlesque.

4. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts if I agree to participate in this study.

5. Although there may be no direct benefits to me, the possible benefits of my participation in the research are finding possible places for empowerment through the representation of female sexuality as behavior is modeled through performance.

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7. In case of injury I expect to receive the following treatment or care which will be provided at my expense: N/A

8. I will not be paid for my participation.
9. Any questions I have concerning the research study or my participation in it, before or after my consent, will be answered by George McConnell, 2131 N. Meridian Rd. #115, Tallahassee, FL 32303, 850/284-5753, gdm04c@fsu.edu, Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mary Karen Dahl

10. If I have questions about my rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if I feel I have been placed at risk, I can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Institutional Review Board, through the Office of the Vice President for Research, at (850) 644-8633.

I have read the above informed consent form. I agree to release any information I offer that may be recorded on audiotape. I understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. In signing this consent form, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to me.

Subject's Signature _______________________________ (Date)
________________________
Florida State School of Theatre Master’s Thesis:

Live!  Nude!  Girls!  Representations of Female Sexuality in the Fluffgirls, GirlsGoneWild, and SuicideGirls

SuicideGirls Peformer Consent Form

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT:

1. **George McConnell**, who is a Theatre Studies Graduate Student, has requested my participation in a research study.

2. The purpose of the research is to provide a first hand account and document the performance and reaction to the performance of the SuicideGirls Internet site and live Burlesque.

3. My participation will involve chatting with George McConnell and answering some informal, though frankly personal questions about the performance of the SuicideGirls.

4. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts if I agree to participate in this study.

5. Although there may be no direct benefits to me, the possible benefits of my participation in the research are finding possible places for empowerment through the representation of female sexuality as behavior is modeled through performance.

6. The results of this research study may be published but my name or identity will not be revealed. The researcher will do the following to maintain confidentiality of my records, **George McConnell** will not use any proper names in the published work but only “stage names” for the performers and any audience spectators will be referred to only by their sex, race, age and possibly sexual orientation. Master lists of subjects actual names will be destroyed once these identifying codes are assigned.

7. In case of injury I expect to receive the following treatment or care which will be provided at my expense: N/A

8. I will not be paid for my participation.
9. Any questions I have concerning the research study or my participation in it, before or after my consent, will be answered by George McConnell, 2131 N. Meridian Rd. #115, Tallahassee, FL 32303, 850/284-5753, gdm04c@fsu.edu, Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mary Karen Dahl

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Subject's Signature ___________________________________ (Date)  
_________________
REFERENCES


Bravo, Cecilia. E-mail interview. 15 Jan. 2006.


*Girls Gone Wild Wet T-Shirt Strip Off.* Dir. Unknown. DVD. Mantra Entertainment, date unknown.


Suicide, Missy. E-mail interview. 21 Feb. 2006.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

George McConnell grew up in Michigan. He graduated magna cum laude from Western Michigan University with a BA in Theatre Performance in 1997. He then worked as an actor, director and playwright in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. In his career as a theatre practitioner he has acted in over forty productions and directed more than twenty. In an attempt to inhabit the roles of both theatre practitioner and theatre scholar, George is currently completing his requirements for a masters in Theatre Studies from Florida State University and in the Fall of 2006 will begin work on his PhD in Theatre Historiography at the University of Minnesota.