

ABSTRACT

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THE IRRECONCILABLE VOLATILITY OF
BLOODY BETTY & THE ONLINE ARCHIVE

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This project investigates volatile portrayals of rape and sexualized violence in gorelesque performances by Vancouver-based troupe Bloody Betty and the Deadly Sins, as well as the digital YouTube archive that preserves those performances. Through examining how both the work of Bloody Betty and the manner in which that work is preserved maintain mutually exclusive contradictions, this project offers performance scholars a feminist theoretical framework for approaching similarly volatile contradictions in Fourth Wave feminist aesthetics and the online archive. This project proposes that both those objects of study require a feminist reconsideration of the gaze (live and online) that does not neutralize the volatility of sexual objectification, but rather accepts its inevitability in service of more effective feminist praxis.

THE IRRECONCILABLE VOLATILITY OF BLOODY BETTY & THE ONLINE
ARCHIVE

By

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Interviewer: *“I noticed with your performance that you’re very professional. For you it’s art, eh? You’re very different from the other girls, I’ve noticed. When you’re doing it, you’re very succinct and calculated in your movements Who’s your favorite murderer?”*

Betty: *“Murderer or serial killer?”*

Interviewer: *“Serial killer, let’s go with it!”*

Betty: *“Serial killer ... that would have to be Elizabeth Bathory or Jeffrey Dahmer. Elizabeth Bathory, I don’t know if she actually, physically killed people on her own ... Jeffrey Dahmer did. [stares into the camera] He ate them, he fucked them, he licked them, he put them in vats of acid for months, and then took them out and had sex with them again - by far the best. But, Elizabeth Bathory supposedly bathed in the blood of [using scare quotes] ‘virgins.’”¹*

When the Canadian burlesque performer known as Bloody Elizabeth Bathory—more often referred to as simply Bloody Betty—steps onto the stage, audiences expect to be shocked. Utilizing a form of neo-burlesque she has coined as “gorelesque,” performances by Betty and her troupe the Deadly Sins stage scenes of graphic violence, both physical and sexual. She has stated in interviews that she is “amused by really awful things, I find them funny When I hear something awful that happens on the news, I just find it entertaining.”² She promotes her performances on social media sites like Facebook with phrases like “SERIOUSLY twisted” and “filthiest event in Vancouver.”³ Her impermeable performance persona (Bloody Betty) is that of a “self-proclaimed lunatic and serial killer” whose performances dazzle audiences “long enough for her to lead them into the green room where the rest of her ladies [the Deadly Sins] will devour them leaving only their bones to be used as props in their next show.”⁴

¹ “Bloody Betty Interview [Foreskin Radio],” YouTube video, 8:19, posted by “transpondency,” September 9, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWsPdcMi0N4>

² Ibid.

³ Bloody Betty’s Facebook page, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Bloody-Betty-265533190126284/?fref=ts>.

⁴ “Bloody Betty - About | Facebook.” Bloody Betty - About | Facebook. Accessed February 22, 2017. https://www.facebook.com/pg/Bloody-Betty-265533190126284/about/?ref=page_internal.

It seems clear that Bloody Betty and her troupe are using horror aesthetics and grotesque femininity as a punk rock rebellion against the hyperfeminine glitter of mainstream neo-burlesque. What is less clear for her audiences both live and on social media is who precisely Betty seeks to shock with that rebellion and to what end.

The subjects of Bloody Betty's burlesque lampoons run the gamut of true crime, horror films, and popular culture; the gorelesque landscape is one where nothing is too taboo or serious to escape parody. The mildest pieces see Betty taking on the humor in methamphetamine addiction⁵ and embodying femme versions of horror creatures like the "human fly."⁶ Her more unsettling pieces approach Betty's favorite subject – serial killers, typically male – and the horrors of history with black humor: American serial killer Ted Bundy; Ukrainian serial killer Andrei Chikatilo;⁷ and the mythologized deaths of rock stars like Sid Vicious.⁸ The most confounding elements of Bloody Betty's repertoire include the most theoretically untouchable taboos of Western society, including real life murder victims like JonBenét Ramsey and sexual assault, particularly against infantilized women. Nonetheless, instead of repulsing spectators, the brazen devil-may-care attitude of the pieces (and Betty herself) attracts admiration from fans; praise from the press for its "art;" and now, for the first time, the critical eye of feminist performance studies.

⁵ "Bloody Betty Bathory - "Meth" - TOURETTES Without Regrets," YouTube video, 4:09, posted by "TourettesWithoutRgrts," July 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeYK3xRTCzs>.

⁶ "Bloody Betty Devils Night Human Fly – Michael Fromberg," YouTube video, 4:48, posted by "FrombergGorelesque," October 18, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1gFOsDrp_A.

⁷ "Bloody Betty Serial Killers Andrei Chikatilo – Michael Fromberg," Vimeo video, 6:00, posted by Michael Fromberg, February 11, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/32382048>.

⁸ "Bloody Betty Rock N Roll Tragedies 8 – Michael Fromberg," YouTube video, 4:57, posted by Michael Fromberg, September 2, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EH-zjgO3eTc>.

As a feminist critic, I am conflicted about the inscribed meaning in these performances: are their taboo-breaking stagings a subversive feminist provocation? Are they a simple glorification of violence against women? For the critical feminist spectator, there are a few possibilities for layered meaning: on the surface, these performances recreate horrifying real-life violence against women and girls in a sexualized context; beneath that, these performances are burlesque and, therefore, imply tongue-in-cheek parody; and beneath that, it has been claimed by some feminists that burlesque is part of a movement in feminist discourse that empowers women to express their sexual agency freely among consenting adults. The question remains, then, whether these layers of meaning can be politically reconciled and coexist. However, as quickly as these questions arise and settle, so too comes the realization that if I wanted to look away I or any spectator browsing online could simply press pause on the YouTube video of the performance I am watching and leave these images to the internet ether. That idea is quickly dispatched by looking at the number of views and realizing that these images would not be lost at all; they had been seen by hundreds of other online spectators before me and more still will see them as time draws on. However, those thoughts, too, are complicated by the same simple and terrifying realization that strikes fear in the hearts of digital scholars: what happens to this archive of videos when YouTube becomes an obsolete platform, like so many others before it?

Both these performances and the digital platform that preserves them contain volatile contradictions. Bloody Betty's pieces could reasonably be interpreted as both empowering and disempowering; feminist and anti-feminist; radical and conservative. Similarly, the performances on YouTube, as part of an online archive, are preserved

and vulnerable; dynamic and concretely recorded. Through examining how both the work of Bloody Betty and the manner in which that work is preserved maintain volatile contradictions, we can arm performance scholars with a feminist theoretical framework for approaching the similarly volatile contradictions in Fourth Wave feminist aesthetics and the online archive. These feminist frameworks are not distinct in their approach to either the current wave of feminism or online knowledge transmission. Rather, I propose that both require a feminist reconsideration of the gaze (live and online) that does not neutralize the volatility of sexual objectification, but rather accepts its inevitability in service of more effective feminist praxis.

In order to address the volatility of both Bloody Betty's catalogue of work and the online archive that makes the catalogue legible, I will rely on that essential theory of feminist criticism in visual culture, Laura Mulvey's "male gaze." In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey defines the cinematic gaze as male, assuming heterosexuality, and the object of that gaze as female: "the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfield to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire."⁹ According to Mulvey, that desire, in part, comes from scopophilia, or the pleasure in looking. As a feminist critic, Mulvey is deeply concerned by the complicity of film and its male gaze in the sexual objectification of women in society: "it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object it can become fixated into a perversion,

⁹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 19.

producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.”¹⁰ Mulvey’s concept has proven extremely influential, with theoretical and popular reference to the “male gaze” becoming so pervasive that it is part of the popular vernacular. I will use Mulvey’s gendered understanding of the spectator’s objectifying gaze throughout this project to address the central components of my argument: the objectifying gaze as the basis for tenuous conflict between feminisms and burlesque; the volatility of the gaze in receiving Bloody Betty’s work and how it contributes to the contradictions at the heart of her performances; and the gaze of internet users that accompanies the online archive, particularly when consuming the volatile work of Bloody Betty.

This project will unfold in four parts, each building upon the one previous to create feminist frameworks for reevaluating the gaze for the Fourth Wave and digital historiography. The first part outlines the historical and aesthetic origins of gorelesque speculating on how those origins inform the kind of political or social message we can derive from the work of Bloody Betty. The second part addresses how Bloody Betty’s work - specifically in staging true crime stories - simultaneously subverts and affirms dominant gender narratives, reflecting the volatility of Fourth Wave feminism. The third section proposes feminist strategies for analyzing Bloody Betty’s spectators without neutralizing multivalent readings of this stigmatizing work. The fourth and final section suggests a new way of imagining the online archive - drawing from the latest theory on digital performance historiography - that facilitates reading digital

¹⁰ Mulvey, 17.

knowledge transmission through the feminist performance theory lens proposed in the third part.

Bloody Betty & the Origins of “Gorelesque”

“BLOODY BETTY’S BLOODBATH BURLESQUE – a horror-themed burlesque show CAUTION: BE PREPARED – THIS SHOW IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART!!”¹¹

The political and aesthetic contours of gorelesque have their origins in early 21st century Vancouver and the neo-burlesque revival. Central to understanding the work of Bloody Betty and its politics is the tense relationship burlesque and neo-burlesque have historically had with women’s movements - both in Canada and throughout the English-speaking world - primarily because of their association with sex work. This tense relationship prompts consideration of whether and how burlesque is able to assume the mantle of feminist praxis, as well as what the political capital of feminist praxis actually is. Further, and perhaps most essential, the history of burlesque and the gorelesque subgenre indicates that these art forms have consistently struggled internally with both empowering and disempowering female performers; at once providing performers with artistic agency and yet shackling their success to the scopophilic desires of spectators. The complex context of gorelesque and its historical development provides important clues as to what Bloody Betty’s practice might be responding to or rebelling against, as well as how scholars might navigate its inherent contradictions.

¹¹ “Bloody Betty’s Bloodbath Burlesque!: The Neo Nasties, The Shives.” LiveVictoria.com, accessed October 2, 2016, <http://livevictoria.com/show/90575/view>.

Burlesque History and Its Discontents

From its outset, even prior to the advent of the more well-known burlesque striptease, burlesque performance was a contradictory opportunity for largely male audiences to gaze upon the female form while female performers subverted gendered cultural norms. Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* marks the history of burlesque performance beginning with the arrival of stage sensation Lydia Thompson in New York City in 1868 and traces its development through the work of Mae West in the 1930s. In its first 30 years, burlesque took the form of a scripted, comedic variety show including parodies of high-culture songs, dances, and stories, like Greek myths. Allen argues - echoing Mulvey - that "the history of burlesque is the history of an otherwise unintelligible system of gender representation driven by male pleasure."¹² What distinguished burlesque from other variety shows was how it centered female sexuality by featuring young female dancers in revealing costumes. Though no more revealing than ballet costumes of the same period, as part of popular, low-culture, burlesque earned a maligned reputation as "the leg business."¹³ As a popular entertainment, the business of burlesque, as Allen writes, emphasized competition for audiences with each show trying to outdo the other "in terms of scale, lavishness of costumes and production, topicality, and daring."¹⁴ Part of that competition included more and more "daring" sexuality on the part of dancers, as well. With its emphasis on female sexuality, burlesque flouted the culturally prescribed and highly valued chastity of young women, making the burlesque dancer a "low

¹² Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991, 281.

¹³ Allen, 12-13.

¹⁴ Allen, 17.

other;” a volatile subject reviled by the social order yet desired by society.¹⁵ In this way, Allen argues, burlesque has traditionally been “grounded in the aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque” and a space in which performers can act out cultural contradictions and contestations – especially with regards to gender and sexuality - exemplifying the ambiguities therein.¹⁶ Thus, just as may be the case with Bloody Betty’s contemporary gorelesque, the historical burlesque predicated itself on the grotesque contradictions of using low-brow cultural symbols to accomplish high-brow cultural subversion.

While burlesque continued its subversion by developing into the striptease and then further developing into the sex work performance of “stripping,” western cities like Vancouver – Bloody Betty’s hometown – became sites of an emerging battle between burlesque and those enforcing social moralities. Following the Mae West era which Allen marks as the end of traditional burlesque, Vancouver was the indisputable vaudeville capital of Canada and hosted both traditional local burlesque performers and touring stars, like Gypsy Rose Lee, who touted the contemporary striptease.¹⁷ The striptease moved away from the implied tease of revealing costumes and to the explicit tease, with dancers stripping their costumes off - typically down to underwear and pasties - over the course of the dance. As the 40s gave way to the 50s and vaudeville gave way to television family entertainment, the venues that dotted Vancouver closed

¹⁵ Allen, 26, extrapolating from the theory of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White.

¹⁶ Allen 27

¹⁷ It should be noted that Gypsy Rose Lee, while an icon of the mid-century striptease, received the nickname “the intellectual’s stripper” due to her onstage wit and frequent recitation of original lyrics. That this nickname undermines Lee’s artistry in favor of objectifying her as the sexual plaything for the thinking person is worth consideration in another project. I will, however, return to the tension between the burlesque performer as sex worker and the burlesque performer as artist later in this section.

and many were reopened as strictly burlesque striptease clubs, offering adult entertainment one could not see on television. In the early 1960s, as striptease was becoming aligned with counterculture, especially the sexual revolution, and *Hair* “redefined undressing as political activity,”¹⁸ venues like Isy’s Supper Club on the West End of Vancouver made the conscious decision to make their burlesque shows more sexual.¹⁹ Following the example of Isy’s Supper Club, in the 1960s Vancouver burlesque clubs began to bend to the desires of audiences, asking dancers to perform entirely nude. This shift sparked legal challenges from both the Canadian women’s movement and advocates for “family values.” In 1966, the Mayor of Vancouver tried unsuccessfully to ban the “topless craze”²⁰ sweeping the city and in the early 1970s family advocacy and women’s groups also advocated nationally to close what were now called strip clubs across Canada on the grounds of morality.²¹ Despite activist effort to sway the Canadian government, nude dancing was nonetheless legalized in 1972. Just a few years later, clubs were encouraging dancers to practice “spreading,” spreading their legs while dancing nude to display their genitalia; a practice to which established dancers broadly objected.²² Following this period of rapid change for dancers, from the 1970s into the 1980s, the historical tension between feminisms and sex work performers began to heighten due to the strength of anti-pornography activism among feminists.

¹⁸ Ross, 101.

¹⁹ Ross, 46.

²⁰ Ross, 54.

²¹ Ross, 72.

²² Ross, 180.

Burlesque dancers - now called “exotic dancers” or “strippers” – were largely maligned by feminist movements in the 1970s and early 1980s as part of a stance against pornography. Radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin argued that sexual objectification was the primary tool for oppressing women and that “sexual liberation” was simply misogyny disguised as agency: “On the Left, the sexually liberated woman is the woman of pornography The Left cannot have its whores and its politics too.”²³ In *Burlesque West*, sociologist Becki L. Ross notes that during the 1970s “feminist activists snubbed exotic dancers as non-feminists” countering that such closed ranks from Dworkin and others, in fact, reinforced patriarchal gender norms: “Transgressive readings of striptease as mimicry, as ‘female clowning,’ and as an enactment of hyper-femininity as a role, and not a nature, were foreclosed by an essentialist attachment to belief in a primary, authentic femaleness.”²⁴ While Ross underserves the feminist activists’ argument that the labor of “exotic dancers” was manipulated by exclusively male “club owners and booking agents,”²⁵ she is right to point out that activists underestimated or ignored the agency of dancers. For example, even as club owners were demanding explicit practices like spreading, “Vancouver dancers further customized their acts by experimenting with elements of magic, puppetry, theatre, gymnastics, pantomime, comedy, and dance training,”²⁶ a display of artistic investment referent to the vaudeville past of burlesque and prescient of the neo-burlesque movement to come. Just as feminist activists feared, however, rising demand for sexual

²³ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1981, 209.

²⁴ Ross, 194.

²⁵ Ross, 30.

²⁶ Ross, 104

explicit performance empowered male club owners to abscond newly developed tricks and the relatively demure burlesque striptease; styles that no longer offered the taboo treat they once did. These dancers, developing artistic innovation while being pressured to perform in sexually explicit ways, were the direct forebears of Bloody Betty.

Exclusion of sex workers, exotic dancers, and women in the pornography industry lessened as Third Wave feminism and dispossessed sexuality politics took shape in the United State and Canada, making way for a neo-burlesque revival ideologically aligned with contemporary feminist sexual agency and yet obsessed by glamour from the past. In the 1980s, Amy Robinson argues persuasively, Madonna became a globally popular “erotic spectacle of dispossession,”²⁷ opening the door for a “sex-positive” feminism defined in contrast to the anti-pornography movement. The politics of empowering sexual objectification also facilitated the reemergence of a neo-burlesque performance apart from “exotic” dance or stripping. By the 1990s, original burlesque acts started appearing again in small nightclubs in New York City. This new burlesque was consciously referent to traveling stars of decades past, like Gypsy Rose Lee and Mae West, but offered a nostalgic pastiche which nonetheless prized ironic camp and imaginative concepts.²⁸ In *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, Jacki Wilson describes neo-burlesque as “the ‘low’ invading the ‘high,’” echoing the scholarship of Allen on early burlesque. She defines the aesthetics of neo-burlesque loosely: “It cheekily and brashly moves into the mainstream, adopting its

²⁷ Amy Robinson, “Is She or Isn’t She?: Madonna and the Erotics of Appropriation,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, eds. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

²⁸ Taormino, Tristan. “The Hip Strip.” *Village Voice*. April 02, 2002. Accessed February 11, 2017. <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/the-hip-strip-6414065>.

forms – theatre, cabaret, performance art, comedy, circus, modern dance – but without taking any one of these too seriously.”²⁹ The most exemplary figure of the neo-burlesque revival remains Dita von Teese, whose campy performances famously include bathing in a human-sized martini glass. Taking on a nearly dramaturgical adaptation of 1950s Hollywood, Teese’s work seems to intentionally challenge the patriarchal notion that personal, professional, or sexual empowerment is antithetical to traditional Western femininity. Responding to Teese’s aesthetics and adding to Robinson’s speculation on sexual empowerment politics, Wilson contends that neo-burlesque is the ideological progeny of the early 21st century “craze for striptease and pole/lap dancing in its affirmation of women’s sexual expression;”³⁰ a backlash, she argues, to radical feminism and anti-pornography rhetoric. While Wilson locates this backlash in an antifeminist stance – an assertion I will address shortly – she simultaneously situates neo-burlesque in the avant garde performance art tradition and apart from traditional burlesque entirely.

With its frequently transgressive use of the explicit female body, neo-burlesque can be placed within a lineage of the feminist performance art created by Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finely, Annie Sprinkle, and others who put sexuality and the body at the center of their work. Wilson concludes that neo-burlesque represents an evolution in feminist thinking – which she attributes to “postfeminism;” what we would now call Fourth Wave feminism – that considers the possibility of performed sexuality as a reciprocal pleasure: “Being desired (as opposed to desiring) does not necessarily have

²⁹ Jacki Wilson, *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008, 4.

³⁰ Wilson, 6.

to be passive. Burlesque performers willingly indulge in this controlled compliancy, in wanting to be appreciated and adored.”³¹ In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Rebecca Schneider similarly makes a compelling case for the power of reciprocal gaze when nudity and sexuality are a female artist’s medium. In her analysis of Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle, Schneider argues “the ‘seen’ takes on an agency of her own and wields the unnerving potential of a subversive reciprocity of vision, an explicit complicity, or mutual recognition between seer and seen, who become seer and seer, subject and subject, object and object in the scene of viewing.”³² The mutual gaze which Schneider proposes provides a helpful framework for theorizing ways in which Betty’s own explicit body (in her case both sexual and violent) might similarly stare back at the audience, cultivating her own “subversive reciprocity.”³³ Through tracing the political-aesthetic drive of reciprocal pleasure and gaze, one can create a lineage of sexuality and the body in female performance, connecting neo-burlesque aesthetics – certainly the aesthetics of Bloody Betty - perhaps more closely to feminist performance art than classic burlesque of the turn of the century or the post-World War II era. With this in mind, Bloody Betty’s body of work can be analyzed not simply as popular performance in the vein of her vaudeville ancestors, but also as a kind of avant-garde

³¹ Wilson, 177. Wilson’s gloss over the artistry and artist identity of burlesque performers deserves brief comment on why I call Betty an artist where Wilson would call her a performer. I use the term artist with the understanding that Betty has artistic agency in conceiving and executing her work, rather than as a performer embodying the aesthetic concepts of others. I fear that Wilson and other scholars who refer to burlesque artists as performers are leaning into the historical conflation of burlesque with sex work; there seems to be great hesitation to intermingle sex work and artistry, though I see no intellectual reason that the two should be mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, while I do not intend to erase or gloss over burlesque performers who identify as sex workers, I refer to Betty and other burlesque performers as artists in order to affirm their agency as cultural producers.

³² Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 86.

³³ Ibid.

art treading along the “rough edges”³⁴ of provocative performance. This embodies the “high invading the low” aesthetic burlesque has had historically, and represents a deeper, aesthetic volatility to Bloody Betty’s work, as well.

The Emergence of Gorelesque

I would like to preface that as this is the first academic study of gorelesque specifically I am drawing on diffuse bodies of knowledge to create a base of understanding for the historical and social context for gorelesque. While I am not building upon an established body of theoretical or historical literature specifically about gorelesque, I am drawing from historical sources from online and social media. One might consider that research my equivalent of traditional archival work because the internet is the only archive on gorelesque performance available.

Given that gorelesque deviates from mainstream neo-burlesque in its particular aesthetics, it is helpful not just to look at the artistic lineage of gorelesque in feminist performance art but also examine the historical context of its initial development during the first decade of the 21st century. The first Bloody Betty performance documented by the online archive was on August 25, 2006 at The Lucky Bar in Vancouver, though earlier performances which were not recorded online are likely.³⁵ There are two unique, converging cultural circumstances which likely contributed to Betty’s development of gorelesque around 2006: a resurgence of graphic horror films following the September

³⁴ I derive this idea from James Harding, “From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance,” in *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

³⁵ “Bloody Betty’s Bloodbath Burlesque!: The Neo Nasties, The Shives.” LiveVictoria.com, accessed October 2, 2016, <http://livevictoria.com/show/90575/view>. It is important to note that for that first documented performance Betty was performing solo without her troupe and had apparently not yet adopted the term “gorelesque” for her performance style. See also Appendix A.

11 attacks and a popular wave of alternative, grotesque femininity. In the years following September 11, there was a renaissance of extreme horror films – colloquially referred to as “torture porn” – popular in the United States, Canada, France, and South Korea, which film scholar Aaron Michael Kerner argues were attributable to the proliferation of torture imagery during the War on Terror.³⁶ Much like the slasher films of the 1970s or the gore-filled experimental horror of 1960s films like *Blood Feast*, torture porn films such as *Hostel* or *Saw* openly embraced the same shock value ethic Betty embraces in her marketing material: “NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART!” Around the same time period, online and aesthetic communities were developing new strains of femininity for the new millennium, exemplified by two cultural phenomena which can be ideologically aligned with Betty. The first is alternative pornography website SuicideGirls.com, which gained popularity with “feminist communities” by subverting traditional pornography with models who “sport extensive piercings, tattoos, and dyed hair – all traditional female signifiers of the female grotesque.”³⁷ It is significant to note that Betty fashions herself in all of the “traditional female signifiers of the female grotesque” adopted by suicidegirls; this self-fashioning contributes significantly to her serial killer stage persona and the particularly subversive quality of her nudity.³⁸ A quality that shocks, signifying extreme difference. The “very definition” of a suicidegirl, according to one user interviewed by Katrien Jacobs, is “to be comfortable with [your] body and to support something that celebrates girls for

³⁶ Aaron Michael Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

³⁷ Shoshana Magnet, “Feminist sexualities, race, and the internet: an investigation of suicidegirls.com,” *new media & society* 9, no. 4 (2007), 580.

³⁸ See Appendix B.

being different.”³⁹ The second is Arielle Greenberg’s theory of “gurlesque” poetry, which similarly uses the grotesque to undermine the traditional feminine with “work which performs femininity in a campy or overtly mocking manner, risking being inappropriate, offensive, outlandish, even repulsive, shaking the foundations of acceptable female behavior and language as previously used in poetry.”⁴⁰ The collusion of both extremely violent imagery in popular media and movements towards subversive femininity antagonizing traditional feminisms likely informed Betty’s early experiments in gorelesque, developing into its current brand of problematic violent imagery that nonetheless undermines traditional notions of feminine and the erotic.

Now after nearly a decade of practice, Betty’s gorelesque and the form more broadly have established clear aesthetic tenets distinguishing it from mainstream neo-burlesque, integrating those violent images and non-traditional feminine erotics. Betty’s now established gorelesque has become part of a larger swath of alternative neo-burlesque subgenres, which includes sideshow burlesque, queer burlesque, and boylesque, all of which reimagine the traditional striptease using the climactic revelation of flesh as an aesthetic axis point. Where the neo-burlesque striptease climaxes with revealing bare breasts with pasties, the gorelesque striptease climaxes with a moment of staged violence, usually a death or serious injury of some kind. Gorelesque marries neo-burlesque’s erotic, satirical striptease with the Grand Guignol *douche ecossaise* (hot and cold shower) of juxtaposing slapstick comedy with

³⁹ Katrien Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007, 18.

⁴⁰ Arielle Greenberg, Craig Santos Perez, Michael Theune, Megan Volpert, and Mark Wallace, “Hybrid Aesthetics and Its Discontents” in *The Monkey and the Wrench: Essays into Contemporary Poetics*, Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher, eds, Akron: University of Akron Press, 2011.

extremely graphic stage violence. This allows burlesque performers drawn to the macabre to perform scenes not commonly found in the glamorous world of neo-Burlesque: pastiches of horror films or literature and true crime stories, primarily. While largely maintaining the nostalgia of mainstream neo-burlesque, gorelesque turns its nostalgic lens to slasher horror movies of the 1970s and 80s;⁴¹ 1990s riot grrl aesthetics;⁴² and the gothic horror of Victoriana,⁴³ rather than the 1940s or 1950s Hollywood glamour revived by neo-burlesque performers like Dita Von Teese. While certainly a niche area of neo-burlesque practice, gorelesque has steadily become an important subgenre in part because it offers artists radically different means of expression.

Primarily through social media sharing, Bloody Betty's particular brand of alternative neo-burlesque has caught on internationally, inspiring practitioners to take up the practice as their area of specialization. Gorelesque is a popular seasonal style for all neo-burlesque troupes during Halloween,⁴⁴ but established gorelesque troupes, like Bloody Betty and the Deadly Sins, perform gorelesque as frequently as monthly all year round. Following Betty and the Deadly Sins, dedicated gorelesque troupes and performers have become established throughout the English speaking world with a strong concentration of performers working in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and Canada. There are two troupes in Seattle, Washington, the Gore Girls,

⁴¹ See: "Bloody Betty Famous Monsters Freddy Krueger – Michael Fromberg," YouTube video, 6:33, posted by Michael Fromberg, November 12, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Iq76n38kE8>.

⁴² See: "Bloody Betty Bathory - "Meth" - TOURETTES Without Regrets," YouTube video, 4:09, posted by "TourettesWithoutRgrts," July 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeYK3xRTCzs>.

⁴³ See: Lilly Laudanum's work.

⁴⁴ See: "Gorelesque Idol," American Repertory Theatre, accessed October 2, 2016, <http://americanrepertorytheater.org/events/show/gorelesque-idol>.

established 2010,⁴⁵ and Grotesque Gorelesque, established 2013.⁴⁶ In 2009, burlesque performers Miss Nic and Vesper White founded their troupe, simply called Gorelesque, in Melbourne, Australia.⁴⁷ Other individual performers who specialize in gorelesque include La Petite Mort in Seattle⁴⁸ and Lilly Laudanum,⁴⁹ Pearl Grey,⁵⁰ and Lou Safire (a rare male performer)⁵¹ all working in England. While all of these artists were inspired in part by Bloody Betty's work, her particular strand of the subgenre differs from other gorelesque artists in its confrontational material and elaborate storytelling.

Just as burlesque has grown in popularity since the 1990s, gorelesque has only grown more popular since Bloody Betty first introduced it into the burlesque scene in 2006, essentially becoming the standard style for burlesque Halloween revues throughout the Anglophone world. Amidst the popular zombie beauty queens and twisted Alices from Wonderland, Bloody Betty stands out not just as the originator of gorelesque, but in how she uses the form. Betty puts forward work that is pushing in a confrontational manner; not simply adding tease or sexuality to horror, but rather using the structure and narratives of both horror and true crime to create boundary pushing burlesque. Through a critical feminist perspective, the boundaries she pushes should be subject to scrutiny, but nonetheless prompt a reconsideration of the role of neo-

⁴⁵ Gore Gore Girls, "About Us," accessed September 22, 2016, <http://www.gorelesque.com/index.php>.

⁴⁶ Grotesque Gorelesque's Facebook page, accessed October 2, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/grotesquegorelesque/info/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&tab=page_info.

⁴⁷ Jeremy Williams, "Gorelesque," Beat (blog), <http://www.beat.com.au/arts/gorelesque>.

⁴⁸ La Petite Mort, "About | La Petite Mort," accessed October 2, 2016, <http://www.glitterandgore.com/about/>.

⁴⁹ Lilly Laudanum, "About Lilly Laudanum," accessed October 2, 2016, <http://www.lillylaudanum.com/about-lilly-laudanum>.

⁵⁰ Pearl Grey, "About Pearl Grey," accessed October 2, 2016, <http://www.pearlgreyburlesque.co.uk/about-pearl>.

⁵¹ Lou Safire's Facebook page, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/L.Safire/>.

burlesque and violence in the feminist project. Burlesque, particularly in the Third and Fourth Waves, has achieved a place in the constantly renegotiated value-system of feminist expression. As a part of burlesque that is growing more popular each year with a significant international following online and given its problematic imagery, what role do gorelesque aesthetics and the particular aesthetics of Bloody Betty play in the Fourth Wave of feminism activated primarily online?

Bloody Betty, Violence & the Complexities of Fourth Wave Feminism

“Some said it was a vicious swipe at feminism/ others said it was a vicious feminist swipe./ It was the only word I knew.”⁵²

“Would the frame of ‘art’ authored by a ‘feminist’ have altered the significance of these same images for me?”⁵³

For the feminist spectator as critic – to borrow from Jill Dolan – the work and self-fashioning of Bloody Betty creates a crisis of conscience torn between support for artistic subversion and repulsion at the uncritical means of that subversion. Whether through performance, media appearance, or social media, one’s initial interaction with Bloody Betty bares out that her most prominent attribute is the jarring nature of her persona. The Bloody Betty public persona predicates itself on a performative bloodlust and delight in pain or discomfort. Specifically, an important part of the broader world-building, one might say, of the Bloody Betty and the Deadly Sins narrative is that Betty takes her stage name from the infamous Hungarian Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecsed, who is believed to have killed as many as 650 young women in the 16th

⁵² Tina Brown Celona, “Sunday Morning Cunt Poem” in *Gurlesque: the new grrly grotesque, burlesque poetics*, Lara Glenum and Arielle Greenberg, eds, Ardmore, PA: Saturnalia Books, 2010.

⁵³ Schneider, 125.

century.⁵⁴ She has joked with interviewers that she treats the Deadly Sins much like Bathory de Ecsed would have treated the servant girls she killed: “Do you see the whip marks and bruises? That’s how I get them to do what I want them to do onstage.”⁵⁵ Betty’s conceptual embrace of the most famous female serial killer in history, including her performative domination of fellow female burlesque artists, is an ironic subversion of the traditional gender power dynamics in true crime and performing troupes. By asserting an all-powerful control over the other artists, Betty takes on the stereotypically male role of the paratheatrical Svengali.

Further and most clearly, by adopting the persona of a famously female serial killer – whose traditional courtly femininity stands in sharp contrast to her vicious alleged crimes - Betty is consciously reclaiming violence, gore, and horror aesthetics from the male perspective. While this is, indeed, a feminist subversion in theory, we should wonder at its means. Should feminist subversion be in service of giving femmes access to all domains that have been historically male-driven, regardless of their ethics? In pursuit of adopting the subversive role of the serial killer, Betty rather uncritically plays into patriarchal structures by performing violence against other women, both in the concept of her persona and in her individual burlesque pieces. However, because of the volatility of both burlesque irony and performance art utilizing the explicit body, even Betty’s performed violence against other women could be interpreted as a meta-criticism of the aesthetic violence committed by burlesque and its audiences against the explicit female body. The unsettling uncanny of Bloody Betty’s work in the eyes of the

⁵⁴ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Elizabeth Bathory,” accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Bathory>.

⁵⁵ “Bloody Betty Interview [Foreskin Radio],” YouTube video, 8:19, posted by “transpondency,” September 9, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWsPdcMi0N4>.

feminist critic, then, may stem not from whether it is feminist subversion or anti-feminist violence, but that it can be both simultaneously.

The precariously thin and porous border between that which is feminist praxis and that which feminist praxis seeks to dismantle is a key conflict in art and media criticism in the Fourth Wave of feminism. A central debate reflecting that tension - specifically in white feminism - has been whether to call the Fourth Wave a feminism at all. The Fourth Wave of feminism was initially referred to by feminist scholars, including Jackie Wilson, as “postfeminism.” This term, however, erroneously implies that the Second or Third Waves are the definitive feminism and that all feminisms to follow are deviations, rather than evolution. Despite this, in *The Happy Stripper*, Wilson defines postfeminism as “a movement forward from the second wave for the next generation of women, expanding to incorporate class, race, sexuality, religion and ethnicity.”⁵⁶ While Wilson glosses over the contributions of intersectional feminist theory from black scholars Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberle Crenshaw,⁵⁷ her definition gestures towards the need for an established new wave for that “next generation of women.” Feminist author Jennifer Baumgardner argues that that new generation is here and declaring itself; she writes that the Fourth Wave and the Third Wave overlapped for two years (2008-2010), but that feminist activism is now entirely in its Fourth Wave.⁵⁸ The Fourth Wave - like the Third Wave - ascribes agency to female sexuality and self-objectification, however, for Baumgardner the Fourth Wave differs in its support for

⁵⁶ Wilson, 8.

⁵⁷ Wilson makes an implicit, but uncited reference to intersectional feminism, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” and then popularized through Patricia Hill Collins’ reimagining of the idea as a “matrix of domination” in her 2000 book *Black Feminist Thought*.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Baumgardner, *F’em: Goo Goo, Gaga and Some Thoughts on Balls*, Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2011.

“transgenderism, male feminists, and sex work” as well as its “deployment of social media” for political progress. An absolute reversal from Second Wave anti-pornography and anti-sex work rhetoric, the Fourth Wave’s investment in sex work – a near cousin and sometime sibling of burlesque - creates friction between feminisms unsure if accepting sex work is progress or regression.

In Fourth Wave feminism the tension between that which is feminist and that which is antifeminist is a slippery distinction exacerbated by the sex-positive agency embodied by neo-burlesque. This tension is a central issue in Wilson’s burlesque scholarship, also, as she conceives of neo-burlesque as related to both feminist politics and feminist performance art, while questioning whether its politics are a movement forward for feminist praxis or a reactionary response against it. Wilson questions whether the neo-burlesque artist can really be considered “happy” within the matrix of feminist empowerment and if neo-burlesque is, in fact, “postfeminist” (Fourth Wave feminist) or antifeminist, that is resistant to deconstructing traditional gender roles. Her intriguing conclusion is that, as I have also suggested, due to the volatility of self-objectification, the distinction between Fourth Wave feminist empowerment and anti-feminist patriarchal submission is not a hard boundary, but more akin to a porous membrane:

Bracketing the hyphen between feminism and anti(-)feminism or post(-)feminism helps to locate this discomfort. The hyphen puts an emphasis on a more fluid interchange between ‘feminism’ and its seeming antithesis of ‘anti-feminism,’ a constant shifting between positions ... between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ politics, between ‘femininity’ and ‘feminism.’⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Wilson, 175.

The threat of this slippage between the “correct” and the “incorrect,” “feminism” and “anti-feminism” is most potently demonstrated by the precarious representations in Bloody Betty’s gorelesque, which Wilson does not consider in her study. As the aesthetic matrix of gorelesque expands beyond sexual self-objectification to also include violent self-objectification, this subgenre and specifically the work of Bloody Betty represents a vanishing point at which feminist subversion and symbolic patriarchal violence converge.

By closely examining the use of violence and sexual objectification in two of the most unsettling and perplexing pieces in Bloody Betty’s archive, we can tease out the co-existing alternative readings of both pieces. Both pieces lampoon true crime stories making them particularly egregious examples of Betty treading the line between “correct” and “incorrect” feminist politics. In order to identify both moments of subversion and political ambivalence, I will look to Mulvey, Schneider, and Jill Dolan’s distinct theories of the gaze, as well as Carol Clover’s essential theorizing around violence and the female body in American horror films. By examining these pieces through those theoretical lenses we will see how two apparently mutually exclusive ideas – feminist subversion and anti-feminist violence – can coexist within the same piece of performance and the troubling implications such knowledge has for feminist performance theory.

Case Study: Grotesque Contrast & Returning JonBenét Ramsey’s Gaze in “Strip, Baby, Strip”

In the piece labeled in the YouTube archive as “Strip, Baby, Strip,” Bloody Betty masquerades as famous child beauty queen and murder victim JonBenét Ramsey,

confronting some of the most untouchable taboos in Western society: explicitly sexualizing violence against women or girls and sexualizing children. While the piece unquestionably has shades of eroticism, close reading of two slightly divergent versions of “Strip, Baby, Strip” – performed at the Cobalt Club on June 28, 2011⁶⁰ and during the WIGGLE Wearable Art Festival on April 13, 2013,⁶¹ respectively – indicate that Betty may be simultaneously criticizing the sexualization of violence against women and oversexualization of girls in child beauty pageants, while reproducing that same violent sexualization.

In both versions of the performance, Betty aggressively contrasts explicit sexuality and innocence indicating a critical parody of child beauty pageants. The piece progresses climactically - as is demanded by burlesque structure – accumulating gestures referring to child beauty pageant norms, growing more grotesque as the piece goes on. Betty rubs her teeth with Vaseline, a practice that encourages pageant girls to smile. She gyrates seductively, exaggerating her movements, while drawing attention to her frilly white ankle socks, a style that dominates the pageant stage. She rips open a fistful of Pixie Stix candy, dumps the powder on a hand mirror, and mimes snorting it up her nose like a narcotic. At the height of these grotesqueries, she sits on the stage drinking a bottle of milk which she then pours down the front of her dress; briefly referencing innocence before transforming the gesture into sexuality. Betty then begins to remove parts of her costume piece by piece, which traditionally telegraphs that a

⁶⁰“Bloody Betty Strip Baby Strip – Michael Fromberg,” YouTube video, 4:36, posted by Michael Fromberg, June 29, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjPvhpKxkP4&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DhjPvhpKxkP4&has_verified=1

⁶¹ “WIGGLE 19 – Bloody Betty Burlesque – Gorelesque Performance.” YouTube video, 3:35, posted by “ONOSHI DIDN’T.” April 15, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-gP9IDX_BE

burlesque performance is building to its climax: the reveal of breasts, nipples covered with pasties. She removes a sash which reads “Little Miss Georgia 1996” – the clearest reference to the true story of Ramsey - and violently pulls off her bodice and sleeves; a violent repudiation, it seems, of oppressive prescribed femininity. Throughout, the recorded female voice of Canadian singer Queen Adreena growls the similarly subversive lyrics to “FM Doll:” “Strip, baby, strip ‘cause you know you’re worth nothing/ Strip, baby, strip by the knife.” The violent lyrics serve as a stark reminder of the real violence suffered by the real Ramsey. Each of these unsettling, grotesque contrasts disrupts the erotics of burlesque gyration and striptease by consciously reminding the audience that despite Betty’s adult female body, she is playing a sexualized child and, at that, a sexualized child who had horrifying physical violence enacted upon her.

With the grotesque contrasts both in her gestures and in the music of each version of this piece, Betty seems to be consciously disrupting Mulvey’s scopophilia, the pleasure in looking. Or, at least, attempting to complicate that pleasure. We can see how Betty might be mocking the sexuality of the gaze by unrelentingly drawing the spectators’ attention to the youth of her character while simultaneously drawing their sexualizing gaze to her body. Not to mention that she does so with a keen eye for transforming the familiar hallmarks of girlhood innocence – milk, ankle socks, candy – into props for the “male perspective” or sexualizing gaze: a milk “wet t-shirt contest,” ankle socks turned burlesque stockings, a lollipop playing phallus. Schneider’s discussion of feminist “explicit body performance”—that is, female performance art which centers the artists’ nude and/or sexualized bodies—unpacks “the ways such work

aims to explicate bodies in social relations” and how artists have “deployed the material body to collide literal renderings against Symbolic Orders of meaning.”⁶² In her book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan similarly argues that the work of performance artist Karen Finley disrupts the female body-sexuality immediacy—and, implicitly, the male gaze—by “locating the body as the source of excrement and detritus.”⁶³ By desecrating her body with food and other materials, as well as “appropriating the male perspective while maintaining the female gender,” Dolan argues that Finley “mocks the sexuality” of the heterosexual male gaze leaving “the male spectator nowhere to place himself in relation to her performance. He can no longer maintain the position of the sexual subject who views the performer as a sexual object.”⁶⁴ In this manner, Betty creates a jarring push and pull which repulses and allures the gaze; at once inviting sexualization and punishing the sexualizing gaze by shoving violence and the grotesque into frame. Unlike the subversion of Karen Finley, as described by Dolan, Betty leaves the sexualizing gaze in its place, but puts it on notice. Given that Finley’s performances, despite “desecrating her body with food and other materials,” were nonetheless famously sexualized by Senator Jesse Helms when he called the work “pornographic,”⁶⁵ it could be argued that Betty’s subversion strategy more keenly acknowledges the impossibility of entirely displacing the sexualizing gaze in performances using the explicit body.

⁶² Schneider, 3.

⁶³ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012, 65.

⁶⁴ Dolan, 66.

⁶⁵ Constance Penley, “Crackers and Whackers” in *Porn Studies*, Linda Williams, ed., Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004, 324.

Unique to the Cobalt performance of “Strip, Baby, Strip” is an example of such push and pull worth analyzing with particular attention to pushing violence into frame: a final tableau in which Betty “dies” as JonBenét and stares directly at the audience with lifeless eyes. As Ramsey, in a gesture reminiscent of the photography of Cindy Sherman, Betty enacts the violent consequences of sexualizing young girls by confronting spectators with a different kind of gaze, as direct as it is haunting. It is a symbolic return of the one-way gaze of tabloid readers and television viewers who consumed images of the young girl obsessively. Immediately after removing her bodice, briefly revealing her pasties, over the speakers Queen Adreena ends the song with a sharp intake of breath and Betty falls to her knees grabbing a roll of white duct tape. She slaps a piece of the tape over her mouth – another direct reference to Ramsey’s real murder, - laying on her side with eyes wide and staring out toward the audience. Within Mulvey’s theory, Betty’s silent and still body representing that of Ramsey’s risks symbolic manipulation by the sexualizing gaze: “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.”⁶⁶ In her stillness and nudity, Betty is, indeed, vulnerable to the undirected gaze of the audience. However, by pointedly gazing back at them, Betty also creates a denouement filled with accusation. This subversive tactic embodies Schneider’s understanding of the powerful mutual gaze between seer and seen. By returning the

⁶⁶ Mulvey, 15.

audience's gaze, Betty is, in the words of Mulvey, an unstable compound of meaning maker and meaning bearer in the face of sexualizing spectators.

The most unstable manipulation of the gaze in "Strip, Baby, Strip," however, comes in the alternate ending of the piece performed at the 2013 WIGGLE Festival. Just as the piece looks to be ending with Betty's character stripping off her costume triumphantly - shedding the performative femininity of beauty pageants, as she had in the earlier version - this time a masked man emerges from backstage, sneaks up behind her, and mimes choking her to death with a piece of wire. Betty, eyes wide, manages to shimmy most of the way through the moment of violence - an attempt to complete the liberatory climax of the striptease - but she disintegrates into intermittent convulsions until her body goes limp. Again, she directs her gaze toward the audience throughout her "death," this time allowing the sharp intake of breath that closes "FM Doll" to become a sound cue supporting the act of violence. To finish the piece, the masked man takes on the actions Betty had earlier performed herself: he covers her mouth with the same white duct tape, after running his hands along her leg and stuffing a note in her mouth. His final act is dragging her still body offstage; her eyes remain open and staring as she is dragged away.

In order to unpack the WIGGLE version of the piece, it is important to acknowledge its context as an art festival as opposed to the Cobalt performance which took place in a nightclub. The most significant distinction between the two spaces is commercial: during the Cobalt performance, spectators tipped Betty by walking up to the stage and leaving cash as she performed; during the WIGGLE performance, spectators occupied a more traditional theatrical position, sitting in chairs in a dark audience space, not

engaging directly. While this context suggests that the more confrontational ending was motivated by the artistic oeuvre of WIGGLE, it prompts consideration of another volatile vanishing point in this work: whether artistic context is more forgiving in terms of subversion because it is somehow less objectifying than the club culture of tipping reminiscent of sex work.

Within the more traditionally artistic context of the WIGGLE festival, it could be that Betty is consciously subverting scopophilia in a more confrontational manner, disrupting it not just with the grotesque contrast we have seen previously in the work of Karen Finley, but also by implicating the spectator in the death of JonBenét Ramsey. By utilizing details from the real crime – Ramsey was strangled and her family famously received a ransom note – and substituting the reenactment of the girl’s death for the typical burlesque climax, Betty again punishes the sexualizing gaze by abruptly subjecting it to the violence for which it is implicitly responsible. According to Mulvey, the image of woman is threatening and seeks to be neutralized because of the Freudian castration complex.⁶⁷ However, I would contest that that argument is not only problematic in its phallocentrism, but also too simple in its understanding of the female image. Rather, the captured image of the woman is dangerous and seeks to be neutralized because it is inherently sexualized, gazed at through the dominant patriarchal paradigm. Betty could be engaging that issue directly with the image of JonBenét Ramsey: that young girl’s image is a dangerous cipher in the Western world for innocence lost, as well as the sexualization and exploitation of young children. It is a volatile, uncomfortable image that seeks to be neutralized. Betty and goresque more

⁶⁷ Mulvey, 15.

broadly do not allow for the female body to be neutralized. Instead, in her work Betty is embracing and enhancing the inherent volatility of the female body on stage in the presence of spectators; she amplifies all possible grotesque qualities. In “Strip, Baby, Strip,” Betty teases not just at the revelation of her flesh, but at greater and greater horrors from this true story culminating in the undeniable horror at the center of Ramsey’s image: details of the actual murder reenacted without the satirical props drawing a contrast between the adult female artist and child character.

In considering an alternative reading of the piece, we can see that though Betty’s subversion and manipulation of the gaze follows a template of radical feminist performance, however her work is undermined in total by perpetuating images of violence against women. The imagery of “Strip, Baby, Strip” is haunted by the life and death of JonBenét Ramsey; Betty reenacts the real death of this child and perpetuates its imagery in an erotic, campy context. Even within the context of feminist artistic agency and subversion, can the perpetuation of violent imagery effectively contribute to the feminist project of gender equity? Schneider has a similar concern with the explicit sexuality of feminist performance artists, like Annie Sprinkle: “Would the frame of ‘art’ authored by a ‘feminist’ have altered the significance of these same images for me?”⁶⁸ Schneider further questions whether, within the context of feminist works, “explicit performativity as perspectivalism turned upon itself.”⁶⁹ Indeed, this is certainly the case with Bloody Betty, an example of sexual and artistic agency politics verging ever closer to internalized (and externalized) misogyny. Within Betty’s work

⁶⁸ Schneider, 125.

⁶⁹ Schneider, 86

lies the vanishing point of the two; an ouroboros of satire, subversion, black humor, and reinforcement of patriarchal violence.

Case Study: “Ted Bundy” as Inverted Final Girl

Betty’s gorelesque as vanishing point of feminism and anti-feminism is made all the more troubling when Betty embodies not the sympathetic victim of true crime, but one of its perpetrators. When Betty embodies the female victims of violence in gorelesque performance, the potential for subversion is closer to the surface because she performs from the perspective of oppressed voices. How does that subversion change – or disappear – when she adopts the perspective of the oppressor? In her November 2011 piece in “Bloody Betty’s Serial Killers Show,” “Ted Bundy,”⁷⁰ Betty aptly shifts her embodiment from famous victim to famous victimizer, Ted Bundy. In the piece, Betty presents another volatile combination of deeply problematic imagery and radical feminist subversion: she dangerously flirts with glorifying or making light of the real crimes Bundy committed against American women in the 1970s while flouting the role of women in horror or true crime scenarios during that same era.

In the “Ted Bundy” piece we not only see Betty take on a different role as the victimizer, but also a different role in the structure of the piece: rather than performing the striptease, Betty plays a supporting character who nonetheless holds all of the power. The piece begins with a traditional-looking burlesque performer seductively stepping out of a bed onstage and moving to another part of the stage that serves as her bathroom. From behind her, we see Betty emerge dressed in male drag and wearing a

⁷⁰ “Blood Betty Serial Killers Ted Bundy – Michael Fromberg.” YouTube video, 6:26, posted by Michael Fromberg. November 6, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvobU2WjiQc>.

crude paper mask of Ted Bundy's face as Lionel Richie croons "Hello/Is it me you're looking for?" The drag itself is as crude and cartoonish as the mask; Betty makes no attempt to carry herself in a traditionally masculine way, instead sneaking and peeking with the exaggerated movements of a comic book character. But, Betty is not alone; there are two or three other dancers dressed in the same simple male drag also playing Ted Bundy. Thus the scene unfolds into classic comedic dramatic irony: Ted Bundy(s) creep around the woman's apartment as she performs a striptease downstage. Suddenly, Betty as Ted Bundy emerges again surprising the woman, pushing her onto the bed and choking her before lifting her up again to stroke her face as Richie sings "But let me start by saying I love you." The music fades out as "Ted Bundy" straddles the woman; mimes slitting her throat and stabbing her in the chest, pulling from obscurity a bloody prop heart to display to the audience. In a moment that would otherwise be triumphant in another burlesque context, – the dancer taking her bow, adored and proud in her nudity – "Ted Bundy's" victim is instead left on the bed, fully exposed as the lights come up. Her limp body slowly slides off the bed and onto the stage before she is helped to her feet; alive again.

Betty performing as Ted Bundy in genderfuck drag – that is drag more concerned with gender critique than impersonation - is consistent with both her performative persona and her larger body of work, as well as a prominent way in which Betty uses gorelesque to trouble gendered narratives in horror and true crime. As part of her social media self-fashioning, Betty has problematically embraced this practice as part of a feigned criminal madness: "As a major side-effect to Betty's dementia she often believes that she is an entirely different person most often of the opposite gender and

has been dubbed a 'Drag Performer' by many standards. Such 'acts' are normally based on famous killers, raunchy rock stars and other criminals and criminally insane."⁷¹ In these acts, as is the case in "Ted Bundy," Betty uses exaggerated phalluses as part of the drag while making no effort to veil her breasts or pasties. In that way, when playing killers like Ted Bundy, Betty can assert her own gender identity while assuming and potentially critiquing the gendered power of male bodies. Genderfuck, phallogentric drag, then, allows Betty to undermine the sexualizing gaze throughout her body of work, manifesting in particularly interesting ways in "Ted Bundy."

The primary way in which Betty may be manipulating and challenging the sexualizing gaze specifically in "Ted Bundy" is through the grim dramatic irony of her character's voyeurism. That dramatic irony, in theory, should complicate the sexualizing gaze by making the audience a bystander instead of the killer. In this way, Betty may be rerouting and subverting the archetype of the "Final Girl" in the horror films she loves so well. Carol Clover identified this archetype in her generative book on gender in horror films, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. Clover nuances the sexualizing gaze theorized by Mulvey with regard to American slasher horror films of the 1970s through a Freudian reading of gender roles and her "Final Girl" concept. The virginal Final Girl is defined by Clover in opposition to male killers, whom the Final Girl must defeat by the end of the film: "She is abject terror personified She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)."⁷² Clover argues

⁷¹ "Bloody Betty - About | Facebook." Bloody Betty - About | Facebook. Accessed February 22, 2017. https://www.facebook.com/pg/Bloody-Betty-265533190126284/about/?ref=page_internal.

⁷² Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 35.

further that by the horror film's end the Final Girl has reclaimed the gaze of the camera from the Killer, which could be read as an empowering action: "the female exercise of scopic control results not in her annihilation, in the manner of classic cinema, but in her triumph; indeed, her triumph depends on her assumption of the gaze."⁷³ Betty, in her own way, is exercising her "scopic control" by resituating the audience as voyeurs of the murderous voyeur, rather than simply of the dancer. As the audience is looking upon the erotic scene of the burlesque dancer stripping down to bathe, – a reference to traditional burlesque striptease – their gaze is met by another voyeuristic spectator: Ted Bundy. Given that Bundy is a relatively well-known serial killer, it is fair to believe that the audience would be familiar with the image of his face. Therefore, not only is the audience confronted with a mirror to its own voyeurism, but Betty ensures that the image in that mirror is horrific and implies a violence on the part of the audience. With Bundy's reputation and the shock aesthetics of gorelesque well-known, also, the audience understands from the Bundy(s) first appearance that the burlesque dancer will likely be murdered; they are made keenly aware that if they are going to eroticize the dancer, they will be forced to eroticize her death. The many Ted Bundy(s) make it especially difficult to cleave the erotic dance from the threat of violence. At every moment of titillation another Bundy reemerges as if to remind the audience that the climax of this piece will not be sexual satisfaction from bare flesh, but rather – in the tradition of the Grand Guignol Betty seems to unknowingly emulate – a moment of unadorned horror.

⁷³ Clover, 60.

While the reorientation of the voyeuristic gaze in “Ted Bundy” feels like a subversion of simple sexualization, Betty’s embodiment of the titular serial killer is a more ambiguously political gesture. In embodying the killer in this true crime fan fiction, Betty could be stoking volatility by reverting the neutrality of the Final Girl and the role of femmes in horror narratives more broadly. That is to say that Betty also takes the power away from the killer in a manner resembling the Final Girl’s scopic control, but does the Final Girl one better: she assumes all of the killer’s power by performing his role. Despite her ultimate defeat of the killer, Clover argues that the Final Girl is nonetheless a nonthreatening character to patriarchal power: “The Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality.”⁷⁴ In an inversion of the Final Girl’s gender expression, Betty in genderfuck drag as Ted Bundy is masculine enough to perform the role of killer, but not so masculine that her feminine gender expression is obscured. The result is a Ted Bundy who has the masculine power of the killer, but femininity enough to potentially “disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality.”

The power that Betty assumes as Bundy, however, neutralizes in turn the subversion of the more traditional burlesque dancer. The traditional dancer has two moments of non-traditional burlesque subversion. The first is miming the removal of a bloody tampon, which she summarily throws into the audience.⁷⁵ Betty as Bundy

⁷⁴ Clover, 51.

⁷⁵ This is likely a callback to an infamous incident when the lead singer of L7, a radical Third Wave feminist punk band, removed her tampon during a concert and threw it at a heckling audience; a nod to the lineage of alternative femininity in punk rock aesthetics and gorelesque. See Karina Eileraas,

symbolically takes the power from this gesture by removing another bloody object from the dancer's body: her heart. This mirroring of symbols demonstrates how Betty must necessarily perform violence against other women in order to assume that power of the killer, subversive as it may be. There is no position of power for a killer who does not kill. In fact, the burlesque dancer's second and more effective subversion echoes the ending of "Strip, Baby, Strip." Once the dancer has been "killed," and Betty as Bundy has left the stage, the dancer remains on the bed with eyes wide open and body limp. As the crowd's applause dissipates, the dancer slides off the bed and on to the floor, drawing attention to the limpness of her body; she does not move again until the stage lights come down. In her performed death, this dancer challenges the danger of voyeurism, but can only do so by virtue of Betty as Bundy's triumph; her protest is only possible through surrender. While the feminist critic might appreciate Betty's work reorienting the role of women as only the victims of crime rather than its perpetrators, we must again question the means of flouting stereotype at the expense of other women.

By assuming the traditionally male role of killer and committing violence against women on stage, Betty is performing a feminist reclamation of true crime and horror narratives that simultaneously reinforces that narrative, at least in part. Much like in "Strip, Baby, Strip," Betty uses a kind of feminist shock tactic to force audiences into questioning their voyeuristic gaze, but does so by manipulating the real suffering of real women and girls. The politically ambivalent posturing of "Ted Bundy" may emerge, then, from a key difference between the spectatorial gaze Betty manipulates

"Witches, Bitches & Fluids: Girl Bands Performing Ugliness as Resistance," *TDR* 41 no. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 122-139.

and the cinematic gaze that Mulvey and Clover theorize about: Mulvey and Clover suggest reorienting the gaze for fictional narratives, where Betty uses historical narratives that had clear material consequences.

The work of Bloody Betty exemplifies a key tension in Fourth Wave feminism because it teeters on the vanishing point of antifeminist rhetoric and agency politics that theoretically empower feminist artists to subvert by any means necessary. Constant subversion even within the feminist movement has, arguably, come full circle to acceptance of oppressive patriarchal systems in the name of the femme power to transcend such systems. Neo-burlesque subverts patriarchal hegemony of female sexuality in the name of sex positivity for femmes and, in response, gorelesque subverts neo-burlesque in the name of alternative femininity and punk aesthetics. The slippage between Fourth Wave feminist agency politics and antifeminism is a growing threat to feminist coalition building and meaning-making in feminist art. The most pressing concern of which is not the intention of the artists creating this work, but how it is received (and interpreted) by spectators.

Bloody Betty as Boundary Object & the Resisting Feminis(m) Spectator

“The possessive spectator commits an act of violence against the cohesion of a story ... and the vision of its creator. But, more specifically, the sadistic instinct is expressed through the possessive spectator’s desire for mastery and will to power.”⁷⁶

The volatility of Bloody Betty’s gorelesque stems primarily from its ability to be read many ways by spectators with disparate political investments in cultural

⁷⁶ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006, 171.

production. During the WIGGLE festival, while Betty as JonBenét Ramsey was dragged offstage, the audience cheered, whistled, and clapped. On the night of “Bloody Betty’s Serial Killer Show,” the audience laughed as the burlesque dancer killed by Betty as Bundy flopped limp onto the stage, returning their voyeuristic gaze with a Cindy Sherman-esque resistant gaze. Due to the presence of both feminist subversion and the reinscription of patriarchal narratives, spectatorial meaning-making for Bloody Betty pieces seems to be dependent on what you *want* to see in the work. If you approach the work seeking feminist subversion, you can find it. If you are seeking non-politically correct satire which looks to make mainstream or feminist viewers uncomfortable, you can find that, as well. Regardless of the radical work a feminist critic might derive from gorelesque and Bloody Betty pieces, can they have political efficacy if spectators have the option to only read the dominant narratives affirmed? If we accept that Betty’s work has the ability to subvert the sexualizing patriarchal gaze, then her work may become problematic just by virtue of the fact that those resistant to feminist aesthetic subtexts are unlikely to swallow the feminist subversion with the patriarchal reinforcement. These issues have disruptive, but important implications not just for gorelesque or neo-burlesque, but also for feminist performance more broadly. By confronting how the volatile ambiguities of gorelesque and Fourth Wave feminism impact spectators, we can develop theories to create meaning from those ambiguities without simplifying their complexity

A productive way in which we can think about the political complexity of Bloody Betty’s gorelesque is by examining it as a boundary object that can be used for both feminist praxis and anti-feminist movements, such as men’s rights activism. The term

“boundary object” was coined by sociologist Susan Leigh Star, whose work took a feminist approach to information studies.⁷⁷ In 1989, Star and her co-author James R.

Griesemer defined boundary objects as:

those objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use and become strongly structured in individual site use.”⁷⁸

The key idea to derive from this definition with regard to gorelesque is that these performances are “plastic enough to adapt to local needs” but “robust enough to maintain a common identity.” Placing Betty’s gorelesque into the framework of a boundary object also expands this definition, presenting the possibility that the plasticity of boundary objects may allow them to contain mutually exclusive “informational requirements.” Gorelesque as a boundary object is neither ideologically pure nor ideologically inconsistent. That is to say that gorelesque is neither entirely anti-feminist in its rhetoric nor entirely reflective of Fourth Wave aesthetics, but it is instead robust enough to maintain a common identity of both without neutralizing the volatility of either. This more appropriately complicates what could be simply disregarded as internal fracture or conflict in the gorelesque work of Bloody Betty; instead, the work can be thought of as containing multitudes of political or social ideology that can be manipulated by spectators to fit their incumbent belief system.

⁷⁷ Geoffrey C. Bowker, Stefan Timmermans, Adele E. Clarke and Ellen Balka, eds, *Boundary Objects and Beyond: Working with Leigh Star*, Boston: The MIT Press, 2016.

⁷⁸ Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39,” *Social Studies of Science* 19 no. 3, 1989, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/030631289019003001>.
With a special thanks to Dr. Katie King for alerting me to this unifying theory.

Conceptualizing Bloody Betty's gorelesque as a boundary object provides a framework for handling the volatility of the performance itself, but creates a need for further theoretical support to engage the audience of these performances. In theorizing a spectator who is resistant to feminist subversion or imagery, we can probe the danger of performances of any kind as boundary objects, particularly those that may be seeking political efficacy. Can feminist art have efficacy for an audience that resists feminist discourse? This is another kind of irreconcilable volatility; the volatility of the politicized performance before a politically immovable audience. Whether viewed live or online, Betty's work as boundary object invites a possessive, resistant spectator to claim it for their own aims.

Feminist theorists have long been concerned by how audiences can overcome the powerful tide of patriarchal culture drawing them away from feminist subversion, however audiences actively resistant to feminist rhetoric have rarely been considered. Schneider moves near to theorizing this resistant spectator in her concern about the explicit body leaving art open to sexualization despite its feminist framework. If we turn to early feminist performance theory, we can find the framework for theorizing this resistant spectator by performing a feminist inversion of classic feminist theory. Jill Dolan theorizes a feminist gaze which resists objectification. She proposes that feminist spectators might deconstruct the male gaze by "displacing his hegemonic position and stealing his seat, as it were, for a feminist spectator who can cast an eye critical of dominant ideology" and analyze the representation of women onstage "for the meanings it produces and how those meanings can be changed."⁷⁹ I agree with

⁷⁹ Dolan, 18.

Dolan that “desire is not necessarily a fixed, male-owned commodity When the locus of desire changes, the demonstration of sexuality and gender roles also changes.”⁸⁰ However, I intentionally do not use the term “male gaze” to describe my intervention using Dolan’s theory because I would like to expand her thinking beyond the dichotomy of male gaze and resisting feminist spectator. Where Dolan is arguing within the framework of lesbian desire, I would like to expand our understanding of desire, gaze, and feminist resistance by considering gender non-conforming identities, as well as the possibility of queer and heterosexual female spectators who are not simply not-feminist, but anti-feminist. Dolan writes of the feminist spectator that their “different, but equally strong, ideological commitments might resist the formal manipulations of the work ... in a way that belies his intent.”⁸¹ Bloody Betty’s gorelesque prompts us to consider whether an anti-feminist audience would similarly resist tongue-in-cheek feminist subversion in favor of reinforcing their own “ideological commitments” to explicitly anti-feminist or patriarchal thinking. In short, a spectator who resists feminism in the same manner that Dolan’s feminist spectator resists patriarchal narratives. Playing off of Dolan’s own “resisting feminist spectator,” I will call the problematic inversion of that audience member the resisting feminis(m) spectator.

When confronted with a boundary object – Bloody Betty’s gorelesque, for example – the resisting feminism spectator will take the path of least ideological resistance; that is, reinforcing their own deeply held beliefs by interpreting subversion as recreation or reinforcement. Even with the returned gaze of the female subject, the resisting

⁸⁰ Dolan, 80.

⁸¹ Dolan, 57.

feminism spectator can – as Dolan suggests for the feminist spectator – change the meaning of that gaze to desire rather than defiance precisely because they are uncritical of “dominant ideology.” An ideologically stubborn spectator is always a challenge for satirical work parodying narratives by restaging them through an absurd lens. However, within the context of neo-burlesque and gorelesque, the spectator resistant to feminism is especially emboldened because of the form’s volatile association with sex work. The audience for both a neo-burlesque show and a gorelesque show are present at least in part to have their scopophilic desires satisfied; burlesque bases all of its structure and irony upon that assumption. Since that is their aim, it is particularly difficult to disrupt a desiring gaze even with the use of violence and grotesque imagery. While redirecting the scopophilic desire of the resisting feminism spectator may be nearly impossible, any spectator might slip into that possessive mentality during sex work performance because of sexualizing imagery present in all aspects of Western society. With this challenge in mind, then, examining Bloody Betty’s most troubling pieces – those that feature sexual assault – become all the more problematic. Knowing the resisting feminism spectator is present, the staging of sexual assault in gorelesque invites interpretation of her work that not only eroticizes it, but also reinforces dangerous narratives within rape culture.

A potent example of the dangers of these performances as boundary objects open to interpretation by resisting feminism spectators are pieces featuring Betty’s characters committing sexual assault against other female characters using a phallic prop. “Bloody Betty Under the Bed,”⁸² performed October 23, 2013, sees Betty embodying not a real

⁸² “Bloody Betty Under the Bed – Michael Fromberg,” YouTube video, 5:10, posted by Michael Fromberg, October 23, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHlb5g4PfEo>.

life monster like Ted Bundy, but an imagined one: a lecherous gender non-conforming creature hiding under the bed. Punctuated with lyrics like “Oh yes, this is it/ This will be the night/ Let your forcefield drop” from the Prick song “Communique,” Betty emerges onto stage from underneath the bed of a sleeping girl, whose youth is signaled by her pigtails, pink long johns, and stuffed animal to which she clings. After Betty sneaks around the stage – often twirling with delight as if this is the creature’s perverse coming out party - she takes a position on top of the sleeping girl and proceeds to choke and slap her. The piece proceeds acting out this scenario three times: the creature dances downstage and then returns to the bed to terrorize or assault the sleeping girl. The creature is initially femme in presentation, wearing a tear-away bodice with matching underwear and stockings; however, they briefly take on male genitalia. In its climactic moment, the creature puts on an exaggerated phallus and mimes orally sodomizing the girl, leaving behind green glitter as a stand-in for semen. This piece is not subversive in its construction, as “Strip, Baby, Strip” and “Ted Bundy” could be read. Though Betty plays with genderfuck performance as this lecherous nightmare creature under the bed, the victimization of the other dancer and the staging of sexual assault as a triumphant narrative stands without challenge. The piece is recklessly apolitical in its disregard for material consequences; all shock and awe, it is intended to disturb spectators, but risks trivializing sexual assault. Since burlesque is – as Wilson argues – ideologically aligned, particularly in pop culture, with the sexual agency politics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, this piece may also provide evidence to a resisting feminism spectator that sexual agency simply translates to the acceptance of sexual assault as a kind of sexual agency. Those are the stakes for performances of this

kind: the ability to subvert without leaving space enough for harmful interpretations. Within the sexually objectifying gaze of burlesque spectators, however, subversion of this kind without harm may be impossible.

We can think of this resisting feminism spectator as being especially empowered by the decontextualized and individualized spectator experience of YouTube streaming. When viewing particularly violent and sexually violent material, the YouTube streaming platform provides spectators with the power to isolate and replay moments of violence *ad nauseum*, – undermining Betty’s stark contrasts in live performance – as well as the power to pause, make screenshot images from those moments, and contemplate them in a way outside of Betty’s artistic purview. This new technology for enacting the sexualizing gaze has not escaped the critical notice of Mulvey as a complicating development for her theories. In *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey returns to her work in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by considering how DVDs and home videos give power to the gaze. Through this new technology – including, I would argue, online streaming services – the spectator is able to create what Mulvey calls the “delayed cinema,” which turns the moving image into an inert image:

The delayed cinema reveals the significance of the pose even when ‘something has passed.’ The halted frame, the arrest, discovers the moment of immobility that belongs to the frame and allows the time for contemplation that takes the image back to the brief instant that recorded ‘the real thing’.... Pose allows time for the cinema to denaturalize the human body.⁸³

In denaturalizing the human body, the spectator of paused cinema or streaming videos of live performance can assert more power over the images than they otherwise could. Mulvey proposes two archetypal spectators who engage with the moving or live image

⁸³ *Death 24x a Second*, 163.

made still; one of which she calls the “possessive spectator.” Mulvey further proposes that this possessive spectator “commits an act of violence against the cohesion of a story” due to a “sadistic instinct” that is “expressed through the possessive spectator’s desire for mastery and will to power.”⁸⁴ The spectator who resists feminism is a kind of online possessive spectator. Mulvey does not specifically address online streaming with the possessive spectator, but we can extend her theories to the latest in the mediated spectator experience with consideration for its uniquely interactive qualities. Betty’s work is especially vulnerable to the possessive spectator because her work is a boundary object, straddling the politics of feminism and anti-feminism; the possessive spectator is the spectatorial counterpart to Betty’s role as boundary object. Whether viewed live or online, Betty’s work as boundary object invites a possessive, resistant spectator to manipulate the work toward their ideology.

There is another troubling prospect implied by this line of thinking: a spectator who embraces feminism to an uncritical fault; the feminist spectator as possessive (un)critic, if you will. In this delayed cinema of a different kind, performance is vulnerable to that other kind of possessive spectator. While it is troubling for feminist performance theory to imagine an audience immovable by compelling feminist art, it is nearly as disheartening to imagine an audience that sees radical feminist praxis in everything. In that way, the projecting feminism spectator is a similarly dangerous kind of possessive spectator, asserting a political will to power that conscripts artists into their own political ideology. Then, too, the power of radical feminist performance is lost in the great equalizing gesture of valuing female artistic agency as inherently feminist without

⁸⁴ *Death 24x a Second*, 171.

attention to content. This very project and myself have the potential to become that uncritical spectator, however I have intentionally sought to avoid that spectatorial trap by maintaining a critical ambivalence to Betty's work.

In the case of boundary objects (or subjects) like Bloody Betty, it is essential to not just engage with what spectators are seeing, but also how they are seeing it. The curation of online information allows the Fourth Wave feminist to seek out the spaces that appeal to her political sensibilities, but internet culture has proven to be a treacherous space for engaging in truly conflicting political discourse. As I have suggested but not addressed in full, the complexity of Fourth Wave feminist politics in Bloody Betty's gorelesque and the concerning role of the resisting feminism spectator are made more pressing by the dual existence of this work and these spectators in-person and online. In considering the social and political material consequences of Bloody Betty performances, then, we must consider one final volatile matter: the role of the online archive in her work. How does audience reception and the male gaze contribute to the volatile contradictions at the center of Bloody Betty performances, both live and online? How do we prepare or account for audiences that are not only inhospitable to feminist themes and ideas, but openly hostile towards them in that forum? Not only does the role of the spectator change online, but also the nature of the work and the function of remembering that work. By examining Betty's work in the contradictory platform of YouTube streaming, we can fully unpack the spectator's role and reimagine the online archive as its own slippery contradiction: an archive at once recorded and "live."

Bloody Betty, the Online Archive & the Online Gaze

*“Cyberspace has forced us to name and delimit the ‘real.’ ‘Real time’ is not the same as the present. ‘Live’ is not the same as alive.”*⁸⁵

In the downtown Vancouver venues where Bloody Betty and her Deadly Sins cut their teeth developing gorelesque, their audience was often prepared for a one-night-only performance experience. Possibly unbeknownst to the audience - though known to Betty and the Deadly Sins themselves – these one-night-only experiences were being recorded for the express purpose of steaming on the YouTube channel of videographer Michael Fromberg. Fromberg - who describes himself in his YouTube profile as “a multimedia artist”⁸⁶ – maintains a channel of videos documenting live events organized under the umbrella of “adult oriented” content, specifying that his “favourite themes are horror related.” Indeed, Fromberg’s channel has many of the trappings of a free pornography streaming site, despite YouTube’s prohibitions against such content.⁸⁷ The bulk of Fromberg’s videos are clips from fetish balls⁸⁸ and burlesque featuring nude or sexualized women. The cover image for his channel is the close-up of a faceless woman’s behind; an impersonal body adorned with the lace underwear and sequin

⁸⁵ Diana Taylor, “Save As ... Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies,” (2010 keynote lecture at the Imagining America’s national conference, Seattle), available at <http://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=ia>, 14.

⁸⁶ Michaelfromberg. "Michael Fromberg." YouTube. Accessed February 11, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/user/michaelfromberg/about>.

⁸⁷ "Nudity and sexual content." Nudity and sexual content - YouTube Help. Accessed February 11, 2017. <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802002?hl=en>. Notably, YouTube maintains that nudity and sexually explicit content is allowed “if the primary purpose is educational, documentary, scientific, or artistic, and it isn’t gratuitously graphic.” This ruling, while not conclusive, has deep implications for whether and how we can consider burlesque as a kind of uncanny between performance (art) and sex work (pornography). It should be noted, too, that there is a content block on Michael Fromberg’s videos requiring users to log-in and confirm that they are over 18 in order to access the content, so there is some barrier to entry.

⁸⁸ These events are centered on the buying and selling of fetish items, but also include modeling of fetish apparel, performances, and other kinds of display events centered on (typically femme) sexualized bodies.

bralette indicative of burlesque. Videos are prefaced by a short clip of an animated black panther growling in warning, with the word “RESTRICTED” painted on its body in white and “no admittance under 18” written in black under its paws. One might hear echoes of Betty’s own warnings from her marketing materials: “NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART!” For the intrepid researcher of gorelesque, this makeshift collection of videos, despite its unsavory appearance, is the most complete archive of the obscure, but important performances of Bloody Betty. It is also the medium through which thousands of viewers – perhaps the majority of spectators who have seen her work – have encountered her particularly problematic strain of gorelesque.

This collection of streaming videos has many of the hallmarks of a traditional archive – time stamps; recorded material from a moment passed; clear labeling of relevant information for easy categorization – however, it does not present itself in the manner of even a digital scholarly archive. There are the obvious differences in its virtual location and uncured selection of material, but there is a more subtle difference that sets this populist archive apart from its hard copy progenitors. This archival knowledge is necessarily uncured, unedited, and apart from the hegemonic control of a university library or government collection, regulated only by Fromberg and largely anonymous YouTube users. Further, as an independent, self-producing artist working in the digital age archival materials related to Bloody Betty performances are available on many other online platforms, as well, expanding the scope of what we might call the Betty archive. Beyond YouTube and Fromberg, fans and even Betty herself have created a diffuse trail of historical data on a variety of social media platforms. Both the

Facebook fan group⁸⁹ and official Bloody Betty Facebook page⁹⁰ contain a treasure trove of materials that would thrill a scholar of the 18th or 19th century: videos, photos, correspondence between the artist and fans, correspondence between fans, near immediate reactions from audience members who have seen performances, and more. On the media sharing site Tumblr, a small group of users even share photos and fan art of Betty, of which she may or may not be aware.⁹¹ One other significant quality setting this archive apart from tradition is that it has a performative persona. Its content warnings promising illicit material almost dare the viewer to come a little closer and learn the dark truths within, not unlike the bombastic punk rock swagger and mysterious identity of Bloody Betty herself.

A complicating factor of Bloody Betty's online archive is that her live performance persona becomes a complete identity on social media, as there is little evidence distinguishing between artist and persona in that archive. It is common practice among burlesque artists to perform under a pseudonym and to publicly separate their legal identity from their sexually charged performances, however Betty's highly conceptual and pervasive persona sets itself apart by implicating violence, crime, and madness. Betty uses typical online expressions of identity – "About Me" sections, profile picture captions, status updates – to extend the fantasy world of her serial killer persona. Her official Facebook page "Biography" is a prime example, through which she reinforces

⁸⁹ Bloody Betty and the Deadly Sins Facebook group. Accessed October 2, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/6629636643/>.

⁹⁰ Bloody Betty's Facebook page. Accessed October 2, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/Bloody-Betty-265533190126284/?fref=ts>.

⁹¹ Tumblr. "another older drawing from four years ago. this ... - late night cartoons." Accessed March 6, 2017. <http://latenightcartoons.tumblr.com/post/77862246736/another-older-drawing-from-four-years-ago-this>. See example in Appendix C.

the domination of Betty over her Deadly Sins and their domination in turn over stagehand "Slaves:"

Because of this splatter aspect we often bring along our "Slaves" a group of provocative and voluptuous women who follow us around onstage (always fashionably and scantily clad) getting rid of the evidence and picking up our clothes and leftover viscera. In exchange for their services The Sins promise not to eat their children or sodomize their boyfriends. (Even bloodlusting maniacs know a good deal when they see one.)"⁹²

Echoing the rhetoric she uses to promote her performances, this description expands the live performance experience to social media; audiences hungry for more of Betty's brand of ultraviolence may continue watching Bloody Betty perform, even when they are not watching performances live or streaming. Unlike offline, online personae such as this one can create a performing identity entirely partitioned from the physical presence of the artist. While Betty does rarely interview under the dual-identity of both Bloody Betty and "Betty Draven"⁹³ – a name under which she works as a make-up artist⁹⁴ and has a private Facebook page⁹⁵ – it is unclear if Betty Draven is yet another persona. Betty's separation of private identity from performing persona as well as her use of social media to enrich that persona exemplifies the striking 21st century challenge of grasping an archive of performance which is itself performing.

Coupled with the ethically and politically ambiguous content of Bloody Betty's work, the porous nature of her online archive and her entirely partitioned performance persona necessitate reconsideration of the online archive more broadly. Theatre and

⁹² "Bloody Betty - About | Facebook." Bloody Betty - About | Facebook. Accessed February 22, 2017. https://www.facebook.com/pg/Bloody-Betty-265533190126284/about/?ref=page_internal.

⁹³ Thomas, Maegan. "Two-Toned Psychosis: Bloody Betty & the Glamour of Gorelesque." SAD Mag, May 5, 2015, 10-17.

⁹⁴ Facebook." Betty Draven - Evil Genius of Facial Artistry Facebook. Accessed February 22, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/Betty-Draven-Evil-Genius-of-Facial-Artistry-415058555255116/>.

⁹⁵ "Betty Draven." Betty Draven | Facebook. Accessed February 22, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/betty.draven>.

performance scholars, like most in the academy, have already begun to examine the revolutionary implications of the internet for their subject, including how the internet impacts both our conception and use of archives. What has received less academic attention is critical analysis of how the performing contents of that archive impact the public who engage with it and how we might conceptualize these digital spectators doubling as digital archivists. The central problem being that what we might call “liveness” on the internet still takes the form of inscription and vice versa. How can we utilize the internet as an archive or as a performance apparatus when the present is subsumed into the past as soon as it emerges? This section of my paper will consider the following questions with respect to Bloody Betty and the volatile digital archive for performance scholarship more broadly: What constitutes the online archive, how has it changed from archives of previous generations, and what do these changes mean for feminist criticism? In essence, can the online archive – like the problematic performances it contains from Bloody Betty and other artists – exist as simultaneously live and historicized; present and past; repertoire and archive? I propose that scholars shift their approach, using the online archive as both a means of documenting (archive) and constructed disembodied knowledge to be studied and documented (repertoire).

Living in the Disappearing Archive: The Online Archive as Performative Apparatus

While the theoretical frameworks for performance scholars approaching the digital archive are still developing, established theory on the traditional archive has been the base for this exploratory scholarship. In her foundational book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor presents the now indispensable theory for a spectrum of knowledge sites: the hegemonic paper archive and the physically embodied, but

ephemeral repertoire of knowledge absorbed through cultural osmosis. Taylor's distinction between the material archive and the embodied repertoire has refigured how performance studies scholars and others conceive of how knowledge is gained, transferred, and stored:

The rift, I submit, does not lie between the written and the spoken word, but between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual). 'Archival' memory exists as documents, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones – items supposedly resistant to change....The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge.⁹⁶

While the distinction between archive and repertoire is important to Taylor's argument, perhaps more important is her assertion that the rift between them is not entirely stable and frequently blurs with illuminating results. Though published in the early 21st century, Taylor's book was unable to cover the proliferation of the digital in daily life to fully explore the implications of an online archive in her generative theory. However, in her more recent 2010 meditation on the nature of the internet as archive – her lecture "Save As ... Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies," an addendum to *The Archive and the Repertoire* – Taylor expands her thinking on the instability of archive and repertoire as discrete categories, centering the internet as a development both along and outside that spectrum requiring revised theory. Taylor suggests that the digital may even represent a third way of thinking about knowledge transmission apart from the archive and repertoire dichotomy: "the digital that enables almost limitless access to information yet shifts constantly, ushers in not the age of the

⁹⁶ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 19-20.

archive, nor simply a new dimension of interaction for the repertoire, but something quite different that draws on, and simultaneously alters both.”⁹⁷ The most provocative thread of Taylor’s revision to her earlier work is how she ascribes a quality of liveness to the digital despite its superficial form as a gigantic store of information: “Digital databases seemingly combine the access to vast reservoirs of materials we normally associate with archives with the ephemerality of the ‘live.’”⁹⁸ In this Taylor identifies the most volatile quality of the digital as archiving technology; a volatility that is essential to its utility. The online archive accumulates information rapidly, *en masse* precisely because its dynamism allows for live updates from any and all with access to it. The digital is a realm in which the archive lives, not entirely inscribed nor embodied.

In the most recent scholarship on digital historiography and performance, scholars echo Taylor’s thinking on the ephemeral “liveness” of the online archive; that is its sense of presence even in creating a massive inscription of instantly documented past. Scholars similarly interested in understanding the digital and its impacts on performance historiography such as Sarah Bay-Cheng, Tara McPherson,⁹⁹ Lea Manovich,¹⁰⁰ and Matthew Causey have addressed the need for a non-dichotomous theory for knowledge transmission in the age of the internet, recognizing its live qualities. Both Causey and Bay-Cheng have noted that the saturation of the digital into everyday life represents a new understanding of presence and, therefore, performance. Focused on implications for performance, Causey declares a postdigital age in which

⁹⁷ “Save As,” 3.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ See: Tara McPherson, “Post-Archive: The Humanities, The Archive, and the Database,” in *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ See: Lea Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

society is “fully familiarized and embedded in electronic communications and virtual representations,” wherein the “ontologies of media and performance are indistinct.”¹⁰¹ Bay-Cheng, concerned primarily with digital historiography, similarly argues that “when even our private spaces have become potential sites of both performance and its documentation” it is essential to “understand digital historiography within the framework of theatre.”¹⁰² While Bay-Cheng’s argument holds, I would propose that the inverse is also true: it may make sense to understand theatre-going and performance spectatorship in the framework of digital historiography. To borrow once again from Taylor, we can think of digital archives not as a performance that transmits knowledge, but as a method of transmitting and storing knowledge that performs.¹⁰³ Further, just as Causey argues that media and performance become increasingly indistinct in the digital age, so too does the distinction between artist and performative persona, the archive of the performance and the performance itself.

The performance and its archival record are difficult to distinguish in the online digital world for two reasons: first, the digital archive of a performance is as ephemeral and live as the performance itself and, second, digital presence is an inextricably integrated component of contemporary performance and spectatorship. In the work of Bloody Betty we find an instructive example of both due to the nature of Fromberg’s YouTube archive and Betty’s performed persona on social media.

The online archive is as ephemeral as performance in part because of rapidly changing technologies and the instability of user-driven databases; much like Taylor’s

¹⁰¹ Matthew Causey, “Postdigital Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 68 no. 3 (September 2016), 432.

¹⁰² Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Digital Historiography and Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 68 no.4 (December 2016), 511.

¹⁰³ *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

repertoire can be lost to population decimation, the online archive-repertoire is frequently lost to platform disintegration. The archive of Bloody Betty performances on YouTube, then, is more akin to a repertoire in the precariousness of its translation. YouTube records, while seemingly permanent and certainly recorded, are vulnerable both to platform change and user commitment, as Taylor articulates:

most of what people call online ‘archives’ are not archives though they may have some archival features. Skits posted on YouTube or other sites are not archived even though YouTube has been referred to as a media archive. This is actually not a technological issue – storage is cheap. It’s a commitment issue – the owners may or may not commit to preserving these materials long term.¹⁰⁴

Taylor’s concern for the user-driven archive’s “commitment issue” is particularly pertinent for artists like Betty, whose work is archived by a separate entity, Michael Fromberg. In such cases, the “archive” only has as much permanence as the user has will. Fromberg’s will to preserve is further limited by technological advancement. As Sarah Bay-Cheng notes, knowledge transmission across platforms is a necessary and, she argues, traditionally archival quality to the digital archive: “The objects in the digital archive require, rather than resist, the ‘change over time’ I associated with the traditional archive. But ‘copy’ as a form of transmission also differentiates the archival from the digital – and most profoundly from the repertoire.”¹⁰⁵ While Bay-Cheng argues rightly that the digital archive requires transmission across platforms, she neglects to consider that being copied during a time of platform shift – the transition from flash video sites to YouTube is an illustrative example – is a matter of value to the copier. Some parts of the archive are canonized via copy and others are lost to memory. Artists like Betty, whose work is archived and even consumed through online

¹⁰⁴ Save As, 8.

¹⁰⁵ Save As, 7-8.

platforms, occupy a contradictory space of being remembered in the present with the understanding that they will likely be forgotten in the future. A position strikingly similar to that of live performances.

While digital archives, as Bay-Cheng argues, do require “change over time,” because there are no thorough archivists ensuring complete translation on popular platforms there may be - as is the case with most of performance history - more knowledge casualties than survivors. For example, while social media records of Bloody Betty performances prior to the founding of her Facebook page in 2011 likely existed at one time, popular networking sites from the mid-aughts like MySpace.com have now changed format such that those records are inaccessible and likely lost. The same is true for popular Vancouver online media like *Tyee* and *The Georgia Straight* who covered Betty during that time, but have since had site overhauls; meaning at the time of this writing little remains of the first four years of Betty’s gorelesque. For artists like Betty who are archived online and present an actively performed online person there is conflict in simultaneous awareness that precise cultivation of inscribed social media persona now may also be part of your history waiting to be erased. Internet culture at large is also keenly aware of this issue, as evidenced by digital archiving websites specifically for webpages like Webrecorder.io¹⁰⁶ or the recent high-profile archiving of the Obama administration’s social media activity.¹⁰⁷ The online archive on social media or networking platforms, then, can be thought of as more like a performance than other, more traditional online databases. As Peggy Phelan has

¹⁰⁶ "Webrecorder." Webrecorder. Accessed February 11, 2017. <https://webrecorder.io/>.

¹⁰⁷ "Obama White House Social Media Archive - fully searchable." ArchiveSocial. Accessed February 11, 2017. <http://archivesocial.com/whitehouse>.

argued, that which is performance is defined in part by our knowing it will disappear as soon as it appears: “The disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance; it rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered.”¹⁰⁸ In performing her persona online, Betty puts forward objects – statuses, profile descriptions, photos – that represent her character’s subjectivity; as Phelan argues, the disappearance of those objects indeed rehearses the ephemerality of Betty’s persona entirely. Following Phelan’s logic, then also, the online archive is one enormous performance; it longs to be remembered by inscribing itself, but is doomed to the repetition of disappearance due to its rapidly progressive technological nature. While ephemerality and user-driven platforms make the online archive performative, these platforms are perhaps most like performances because theatre and other popular performances use social media and video streaming websites as an extension of the spectator experience.

Supporting the ephemeral performative nature of the online archive, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and the like provide a digital lobby space where audiences can express their impression of the performance and performers can extend their performance to spectators. Bloody Betty and Fromberg create this meeting of work and spectator through comment sections on YouTube, but more prominently through her official Facebook page and Facebook group. What Bloody Betty does with the online archive as performative apparatus in particular is use the digital to her advantage in expressing her persona. Through Facebook, spectators have access to the Bloody Betty persona sometimes in one-on-one, more direct encounters than

¹⁰⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York: Routledge, 1993, 147.

performances. As Betty is largely performing in *Deadly Sins* shows rather than hosting them, she rarely speaks directly to the crowd during performance. Facebook – and other platforms – allows for Bloody Betty the on-stage persona, as opposed to the artist, to perform and to have a presence with audiences at virtually any time. For spectators who engage with Betty performances only through online platforms – as I have – then who Betty “really is” apart from her persona and the work she performs is, then, irrelevant. Her online identity is Bloody Betty and that is a real and true presence, if not embodied, in the 21st century postdigital era. It is medium, matter, material history. Betty’s practice of engaging with fans on social media in the performative guise of her stage persona is standard for contemporary burlesque dancers working under a pseudonym. It facilitates the cultivation of alternative identity, strengthening the divide between performer and persona, but it also offers an opportunity for constant performance connected directly to audiences. The realness (and liveness) of online engagement in the postdigital, then, significantly challenges what it means to be embodied for both spectator and performer and that challenge is especially pertinent for the social media presence of burlesque dancers like Betty.

As the internet is more deeply embedded into our lives and merged with our “real” or “lived experiences,” performance scholars must question the distinction between presence and mediated experience for spectators. For fans of Bloody Betty and the artist herself, the mediated experience of the internet is disembodied communion that complements the live performance; an extension rather than a substitute. As Taylor writes, our entire understanding of “embodied knowledge” has shifted: “Cyberspace has forced us to name and delimit the ‘real.’ ‘Real time’ is not the same as the present.

‘Live’ is not the same as alive.”¹⁰⁹ Just as Taylor suggests that we can hardly make the distinction between the online and the offline, I would argue that in the world of the digital we have a hard time distinguishing between the live and the recorded (i.e. the repertoire and the archive). This is certainly true of the blurred roles of spectators viewing Bloody Betty performances live and online. With a keen awareness of the online audience to their interactions, Betty and her fans can both perform their roles on social media in ways that mirror and enhance the live performance-going experience. These online interactions between artist and fans are liveness self-conscious of its instant archiving. It is an archive simultaneously self-conscious of its liveness; an altogether different kind of performance than previously seen in history.

Theorizing the Online Gaze

While the binaries of live and mediated, archive and archived object continue to collapse, one complementary pair remains demanding scrutiny: spectator and performer. If we proceed with the understanding that online digital spaces are both repertoire-archive of performances and part of the performance itself, it is logical to then turn our critical attention to the complementary spectator-archivist. Bay-Cheng succinctly summarizes the unique position of this 21st century spectator: “An audience that is simultaneously observing, documenting, viewing, and creating as part of its engagement with performance requires new methods of historical analysis.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, as Bay-Cheng argues, this audience requires a new method of historical analysis, but it also requires a new method of spectatorial analysis for how “observing” and “viewing”

¹⁰⁹ Save As, 14.

¹¹⁰ Bay-Cheng, 513.

impact “documenting” and “creating.” Of particular interest and critical concern for feminist performance scholars is the gaze of the spectator-archivist. When spectators are disembodied and enabled to take on anonymity, their relationship to the performer (and, presumably, the archive) is irretrievably altered. Further, that relationship between archive, performer, and spectator is made more volatile by consuming boundary object performances – best exemplified by Bloody Betty – offering mutually exclusive interpretations. For that reason, we must examine how gendered behaviors and stereotypes impact how spectators engage specifically with the online repertoire-archive of Betty and speculate on how feminist artists might co-opt this gaze.

The online spectator-archivist is unlike the live spectator in their ability to perpetuate the transmission of repertoire-archive knowledge and their relative awareness of contributing to a performance’s historical record, a hegemonic power similar to the institutional archive. Online users encountering YouTube videos of Bloody Betty have the ability to share the videos with their social network across platforms (Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, etc.); declare their opinion of the videos using a thumbs-up or thumbs-down function aggregated quantitatively for the reference of future spectator-archivists; and take qualitative notes in comment sections underneath the video, again theoretically for the benefit of future spectator-archivists. While these users do not determine what is documented in the online archive, they have the ability to evaluate its relevance through popular opinion. The power of this unique role and the persuasive power of its gaze also extends to direct contact with artists. Through her official Facebook page and group, fans of Betty (or those who do not enjoy her work) can address the artist directly, both asserting their reception into the record of

performances and potentially persuading the artist to alter their work in a way previously relegated to critics. The issue of amateur or automated curation has been addressed by Taylor, who writes that the “online curatorial process” is driven “by data-mining techniques and crawlers to identify patterns of information in a database.”¹¹¹ Taylor, however, neglects to consider the archival power of social media or video streaming sites where the hegemonic power of deciding what is important enough to be remembered bends to the taste of the mass. This is why the gaze of the spectator-archivist is important to consider not just in its power to curate the repertoire-archive online, but also in how it is gazing upon content and how that gaze impacts whether and how performances are remembered.

As with the cinematic male gaze theorized by Mulvey, the online spectator-archivist gaze is gendered and sexualizing, requiring a level of critical analysis not typically applied to the traditional archive. In its spatiality as “public building” and relative anonymity, the online archive gives users and scholars alike a false sense of “nowhereness” and “nooneness.”¹¹² Despite this neutral, clean-slate impression of the internet, users bring with them all the stereotype and dominant narratives that permeate their offline life. Lisa Nakamura argues persuasively that online interaction includes constructing racial identities (and consequently dividing lines of online abuse) using “cybertypes,” despite users’ inability to definitively determine a user’s race.¹¹³ Critically engaging with identity online through behavior rather than through concrete offline identity is also productive with regards to gender. Online trolling scholar

¹¹¹ Save As, 14.

¹¹² Save As, 9.

¹¹³ Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

Whitney Phillips takes a similar approach to Nakamura's in evaluating the infamous /b/ board of online forum 4Chan, arguing that while users are not unquestionably biologically male, their performances online are "unquestionably androcentric" in their "male-focused attitudes and behaviors:" "[Acting] becomes the pivotal mode of being in a chat room The absence of a body and the disengagement of social structures make it possible to perform one's identity, and thus actively shape one's self-display."¹¹⁴ Phillips further argues that internet culture and specifically that of the /b/ board has a sexualizing gaze, frequently inspiring users to comment upon the perceived sexuality or attractiveness of any given subject. The relative anonymity of the spectator-archivist, as well as Nakamura and Phillips' sharp observations about online identity, present a challenge to Mulvey and Dolan's theories of the heterosexual male gaze - how can the heterosexuality or maleness of online users be determined? Instead, we must think of the online gaze as broadly sexualizing in nature and, typically, masculine in its ethos.

Given that gorelesque acts as a boundary object for both Fourth Wave feminism and anti-feminist rhetoric, the broadly sexualizing and masculine gaze of the online archive contributes to the volatile nature of the work and illustrates the explosive potential of encounters between artists and users online. Within the view of this gaze, the contradictory meanings held by Bloody Betty's work are at significant risk for being simplified to interpretations reinforcing the ideology of resistant spectator-archivists.

¹¹⁴ Clio Unger, "'SHOOT HIM NOW!!!" Anonymity, accountability and online spectatorship in Wafaa Bilal's Domestic Tension," *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 11, no. 2 (2015), 206

Particularly for the Bloody Betty archive full of boundary object performance – and any streaming video site documenting sex work performance or explicit body performance art - the sexualizing spectator-archivist gaze is exacerbated by the specter of streaming pornography. The ghosting of pornography on a streaming site like YouTube is not entirely reminiscent, but present. This is especially true for Michael Fromberg’s video archive as he heavily documents adult content, but it also more broadly true across YouTube. Internet pornography scholar Katrien Jacobs has observed on YouTube that “many members have disregarded the clause on pornography and use the site to freely exchange excerpts of porn videos.”¹¹⁵ Like so much else about the context and content of Bloody Betty’s work, the specter of pornography in how Betty is databased both encourages a sexualizing interpretation of her work and an empowering reading of her play to alternative feminine sexuality. Given Betty’s self-fashioning with punk rock aesthetics, including piercing, tattoos, and non-natural hair color, as well as her work’s frequent genderfuck, the particular pornography that haunts her archive is the ostensibly feminist pornography project “suicidegirls.” Jacobs explains how suicidegirls intends to subvert patriarchal pornography practices:

as a feminist contribution to porn, the site breaks ground in how it encourages ‘authentic’ models to collaborate with photographers in suggesting photo shoots and stories. The models are mostly conventionally attractive young girls, but their bodies and fictions are not as contrived as those of commercial porn stars. The site also breaks down the typically gendered economy of pornography, as it has attracted a fairly large percentage of female consumers to look at and comment on the work of the suicidegirls.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Jacobs, 55

¹¹⁶ Jacobs, 19

While the specter of suicidegirls favors a feminist commentary on pornography, the online spectator-archivist can just as easily view the streaming apparatus of YouTube and the explicit body of Betty and her Deadly Sins as in line with the “commercial porn stars” a project like suicidegirls is subverting. This brings the spectator-archivist into alignment with the resisting feminism spectator. The critically important distinction between the two being that while the resisting feminism spectator simply reinforces dominant narratives in their own interpretation of the work remaining ideologically unmoved by subversion, the spectator-archivist has a small share of hegemonic power in constructing a major component of knowledge transmission in the digital age. A small share which taken collectively becomes a formidable issue of consideration for performance historiographers.

One additional way in which the spectator-archivist may be especially problematic and worth examining with regards to Bloody Betty’s work is in their uncritical acceptance of online videos as archive. Drawing on the work of Raymond Bellour, Mulvey theorizes a supplemental figure to her possessive spectator, the pensive spectator; one who focuses on the “past-ness” of recordings:

the pensive spectator who pauses the image with new technologies may bring to the cinema the resonance of the still photograph These reflections are not lost when the film is returned to movement. On the contrary, they continue and inflect the film’s sense of ‘past-ness.’ And the ‘pensive’ spectator ultimately returns to the inseparability of stillness from movement and flow¹¹⁷

Following Mulvey’s thinking, the stillness of recordings made from live performance allows for the online-spectator archivist – a pensive spectator, indeed – to relegate the performance to past, to the realm of the archive. To the realm of that which is worthy

¹¹⁷ *Death 24x a Second*, 186.

of being remembered. Though the spectator-archivist holds considerable power in promoting and preserving knowledge in the online repertoire-archive, their ability to determine what is worth being remembered is undercut by an understanding that that which is inscribed is already remembered, even if what is being inscribed is a livestream, for example. How can the spectator-archivist question the validity or political ethics of preserving the work of Bloody Betty when they believe that work to be done? “Betty Under the Bed” with its deeply problematic staging of sexual assault, for example, is a performance that could be uncritically accepted as part of a digital canon and its problematic imagery could be coopted inappropriately, especially with the specter of pornography. As Mulvey puts it, the object in a streaming video – able to be paused, contemplated, and replayed - refers to a ‘real,’ ‘historical’ object located in a past that no longer exists.”¹¹⁸ The “past-ness” of the online archive despite its live presence renders already ideologically resistant spectator-archivists from applying the necessary critical eye to delineate that which is worth remembering and that which is not. In being able to pause, or replay problematic recordings like “Betty Under the Bed,” spectator-archivists can not only reinforce their own troubling paradigms but also disengage with the work through its “past-ness.” As such, the problematic reinforcement of harmful narratives and politically provocative subversion alike can be preserved or forgotten wholesale.

The only way for performance historiographers and scholars to approach the online archive is by accepting its volatility, much in the same way they approach the ephemera of performances. In the online archive, scholars, particularly scholars of performance,

¹¹⁸ *Death 24x a Second*, 188.

must balance valuing the breadth of objective material from which to derive knowledge and the unstable, deeply subjective way in which that material is selected and stored. Further, scholars must wrestle with the volatile politics of what is worth translating over platform disintegration and technological advancement. Those politics are the primary reason Betty serves as an appropriate subject for this discussion: depending upon the politics of your gaze, her work could be seen as both innovative use of anti-feminist rhetoric to subvert itself and deeply troubling representation of violence against women with serious material consequences. That ambiguity is further inflamed by the sexualizing, gendered gaze of online users encountering streaming video sites. The very existence of such work, obscure as it is, preserved for now in the online archive provokes us to question our basic assumptions about what is important to remember, as well as the assumptions we take on in making the declaration of artistic or academic importance.

To close my investigation of the volatile world of Bloody Betty, I return to the question I began with: who does Betty intend to shock and to what end? Through a deeper exploration of Betty, gorelesque, and the online archive that holds them, I have come – as many works of scholarship do – to find that I began with the wrong question. As a boundary object performance offering contradictory meanings, Bloody Betty's gorelesque has the ability to shock or pacify anyone to the end of an uncanny not stemming from the disturbing content of the work, but from the unsettling feeling that this explosive work could be manipulated ideologically indefinitely and with multivalent outcomes. With that in mind, it is clear that the more productive question to ask is how Betty creates unsettling performances containing volatile contradictions

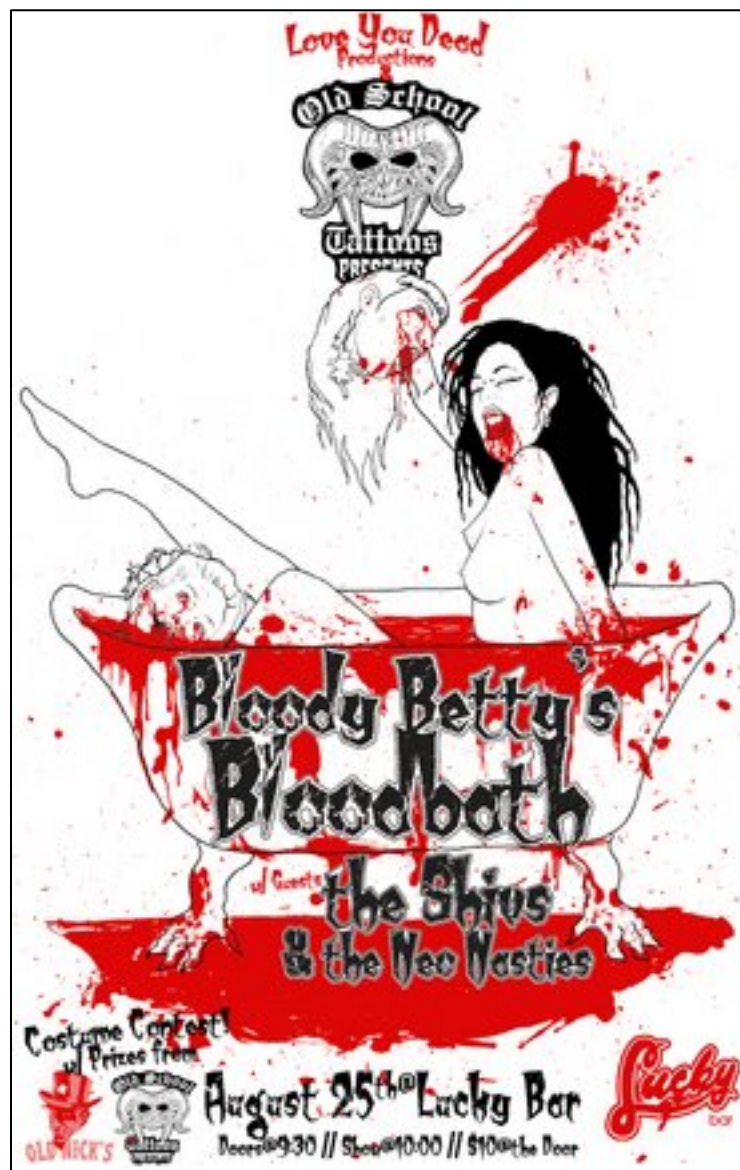
and how audiences in turn engage with those contradictions both in the audience and from the solitary comfort of their laptops.

In pursuit of answering that more productive question, I have proposed three major feminist frameworks through which to engage with work of Bloody Betty and gorelesque to enrich feminist praxis and digital historiography. The first is rather than approaching Bloody Betty's work seeking one consistent meaning, we should approach the work as a boundary object manifesting mutually exclusive readings. This approach is particularly suitable for Bloody Betty, as her aesthetic strategies both undermine and reinforce dominant patriarchal narratives, sometimes simultaneously. In this manner, Bloody Betty embodies a Four Wave feminist aesthetic that reaches a vanishing point between feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric. The second framework is making considerations for resisting feminism spectators in the digital and live audience who will reinforce their committed ideologies when confronted with boundary object performances like gorelesque. This is a critical lens for determining whether and how feminist subversion can persuade audiences on social change and evaluating whether projecting feminist ideology onto unfeminist work is effective. The third and final framework I have proposed is collapsing the binary of archive and repertoire when approaching the online archive in favor of looking at online archival material such as Bloody Betty's as a performative apparatus. That online performative apparatus contains its own contradictions as an ephemeral network of knowledge that only performs through inscription. Further, as part of that understanding of online archive as performative apparatus, I have proposed the spectator-archivist figure who allows

for feminist performance scholars to analyze users' relationships to online archival material in terms of audience analysis, such as the sexualizing gaze.

These three frameworks converge to underline the importance of embracing irreconcilable volatility where it exists as opposed to demanding a resolute, binary understanding of an artist, art work, archive, or political ideology. While it is essential to come to a conclusion in scholarship that provides knowledge of a research object, just as important is analysis that provides us with novel ways to analyze those objects. By embracing the volatility of Bloody Betty, her inflammatory work, and the complex living archive on the internet that preserves that work (for now), feminist scholars and digital historiographers may be able to approach objects of study that previously seemed beyond reach due to their impossible ambiguity, political or otherwise. In accepting that some volatile objects and subjects cannot be reconciled without losing their essential essence, scholars might explore intellectual terrain where they previously dared not tread, no longer heeding Betty's signature warning: "NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART!!"

Appendix A.



Appendix A Possibly the first promotional image for a Bloody Betty gorelesque performance (August 25, 2006; Lucky Bar in Vancouver, BC). Note the two female heads and bathtub of blood referring directly to Betty's persona inspiration, Elizabeth Bathory de Ecsed. LiveVictoria. "Bloody Betty's Bloodbath Burlesque!: The Neo Nasties, The Shives." LiveVictoria.com, accessed October 2, 2016, <http://livevictoria.com/show/90575/view>.

Appendix B.



Appendix B *Performance still captured by cell phone illustrating Betty's self-fashioning: the stitch tattoos located on Betty's right breast, right wrist, and left calf; unnatural hair colors, most frequently green; and the false teeth or fangs Betty often wears, in addition to her five lip rings which also serve as fangs of a sort.* BAD VIBES! Dark Music & Culture Magazine. "BLOODY BETTY – LOVE HURTS ! Gorelesque Provocateurs ready to invade No. 5 ORANGE!" Posted February 16, 2015. Accessed March 6, 2017. <https://vampirebatsblog.wordpress.com/2015/02/>.

Appendix C.



Appendix C Fan art of Bloody Betty. Original illustration by Tumblr user *latenightcartoons*. Tumblr. "another older drawing from four years ago. this ... - late night cartoons." Accessed March 6, 2017. <http://latenightcartoons.tumblr.com/post/77862246736/another-older-drawing-from-four-years-ago-this>.

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