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Willson, J orcid.org/0000-0002-1988-1683 (2020) Tricity Vogue's 'Blueing Up' as Sedimented Resistance: Extravagant Costume and the Expanded Field of Dressing Up. Studies in Costume & Performance, 5 (2). pp. 175-190. ISSN 2052-4013

https://doi.org/10.1386/scp_00024_1

Tricity Vogue's 'Blueing Up' as Sedimented Resistance: Extravagant Costume and the Expanded field of Dressing Up

ABSTRACT

My focus in this article is to understand the way theatrical costume is performed in subcultural cabaret spaces, specifically *The Blue Lady Sings Back* by London-based cabaret singer Tricity Vogue. This show premiered at The Royal Vauxhall Tavern in the area of Vauxhall in South London that already has an embedded history of hedonistic pleasure. With reference to Dorita Hannah's 'expanded' notion of costume as a 'body-object-event' (2014) and Jasbir Puar's understanding of categories of race, gender and sexuality as 'events, actions, and encounters between bodies (2012), I seek to understand the way theatrical feminine costume enfolds dissident and marginalized histories of resistant urban space and site.

In this show Tricity Vogue undertakes multiple costume changes that embody various histories and contexts of cabaret performance: as Bollywood dancer Madhuri Dixit, as a European Marlene Dietrich-like cabaret singer and as a Josephine Baker-esque character in a banana skirt. All of this whilst wearing a blue stocking and blue body paint, effectively 'blueing' up. This steps into uncomfortable territory in what could be seen as cultural appropriation, racial stereotyping and speaking for others. This concern also has currency within the contemporary burlesque community who are acutely self-conscious and politicized as regards this kind of costume and performative appropriation. Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of feminist killjoys (2017) will be employed to better understand these difficult conversations about dressing up with Aoife Monks (2010) discussion of multiple costume changes being used as a strategy for 'undoing' stereotypes and rethinking a feminist *we*.

By also drawing on Diva Studies, which builds on Lauren Berlant's concept of 'Diva Citizenship', and postcolonial feminism, I will argue that the costumed cabaret body becomes a medium for women to politicize and reframe pleasure through the costumed spectacle of cabaret's various erotic and exotic muses.

Keywords: blueing up; costume appropriation; burlesque; gesture; peekaboo, intersectionality; space/site.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Jacki Willson is a University Academic Fellow in Performance and Culture (UAF) at The University of Leeds. She is the author of *The Happy Stripper* (2008) and *Being Gorgeous* (2015), both published by I.B.Tauris. She is co-editor of *Revisiting the Gaze: Feminism, Fashion and the Female Body* (2020: Bloomsbury Dress Cultures series). Willson is also PI on a 3 year AHRC project 'Fabulous Femininities: Extravagant Costume and Transformative Thresholds'. She is currently writing her third monograph *Fashioning the Reproductive Body* and co-editing *Dangerous Bodies: new global perspectives on fashion and transgression* for the Palgrave Studies of Fashion and Bodies series.

Introduction

Costume and Performance designers, practitioners and scholars urgently need new conceptual models for better understanding and interrogating practices of costume appropriation. In this article, I would like to offer up the playful and unruly potential of dressing up as one such activist approach that can move the critical engagement with issues of costume appropriation forward. My focus is to understand the way theatrical costume is performed in subcultural cabaret spaces, specifically in *The Blue Lady Sings Back* (2011) by London-based cabaret

singer and burlesque artiste Tricity Vogue. This show premiered at The Royal Vauxhall Tavern in the area of Vauxhall in South London that already has an embedded history of hedonistic pleasure with its former Pleasure Gardens. In the performance Vogue has multiple costume changes that embody various histories and contexts of cabaret performance: as Bollywood dancer Madhuri Dixit, as a Marlene Dietrich-like cabaret singer and as a Josephine Baker-esque character in a banana skirt. All of this whilst wearing a blue stocking and blue body paint, effectively 'blueing' up.

This steps into uncomfortable territory in what could be seen as cultural appropriation, racial stereotyping and speaking for others. This concern also has currency within the contemporary burlesque community who are acutely self-conscious and politicized as regards this kind of costume and performative appropriation. The community on the whole prides itself on intersectionality and inclusivity. Aoife Monks' discussion of stereotyping in relation to costume is instrumental to my discussion. She makes the point that costume can make 'identity and bodies knowable and readable' thus making 'bodies safe and recognizable on the stage, depicting (indeed producing) fixed categories of identity' (2015: 105). In relation to the example of drag queens, Hodes and Sandoval (2018) argue in a similar vein that costume appropriation can be 'fatally un-subversive' appropriation: 'Distinguishing between subversive appropriations and those that are not is no simple task' (2018: 156). By using bell hooks' insights into the way power operates in the intersection of race, class and gender, they argue that the stereotypes produced through costume reproduce the violence and discrimination that take place in the everyday lives of the show's contestants.

Contrary to this fatally un-subversive appropriation, Maclaurin and Monks argue that this can be undercut by changing between costumes where the performers 'keep on undoing the

stereotypes that they produce' (Maclaurin & Monks 2015: 105). This article will look at this strategy for undoing stereotypes but will also understand the multiple costume changes in relation to space and site which acts as another layer of 'undoing'. My argument is that theatrical costume can become a medium for women to politicize and reframe pleasure through the costumed spectacle of cabaret's various erotic and exotic muses. To that regard therefore this article entwines both scenography theorist Dorita Hannah's 'expanded' notion of costume as a 'body-object-event' (2014) and queer theorist Jasbir Puar's consideration of categories of race, gender and sexuality as 'events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects' (2012: 58). I would like to develop these arguments by putting emphasis on the sedimented histories of site and space in a reading of the costumed cabaret body. What I would like to offer up is a new conceptual model for understanding the way that theatrical feminine costume enfolds dissident and marginalized histories of resistant urban spaces and sites.

Methodology

My methodology is interdisciplinary, predominantly drawing from the theoretical disciplines of Feminist Performance Studies, Theatre Studies and Costume Studies. The argument builds upon my feminist performance scholarship on new cabaret and burlesque (Willson 2008a; 2008b; 2015a; 2015b)[1] but with a developed focus on issues of theatrical 'bluing up' (Herrera 2012); theories of 'blue' (Attwood 2002, 2013; Long Chu 2017; Lordi 2016) and costume appropriation and stereotyping (Maclaurin & Monks 2015: Pennington 2016; Barbieri 2017 Hodes and Sandoval 2018; Carriger 2018; Delhaye 2019; Chatterjee 2020). Chatterjee's (2020) recent contribution to the critical debate about costume appropriation has set this as an

[1] I am also Principal Investigator on an AHRC funded 3 year project 'Fabulous Femininities: Extravagant Costume and Performative Thresholds' which is exploring contemporary burlesque costume cultures.

urgent agenda for costume practitioners and scholars. Her argument extends upon the existent body of research on cultural appropriation that can be defined as the contested and knowing taking of a valuable aspect (usually a symbol or a practice) from another culture (Young 2008) that emphasizes 'uneven power relations' (Ziff and Rao 1997 cited in Delhaye 2019: 249-50).

What Chatterjee sets forward is a new ethical model of 'intercultural exchange' where the costume materials are ethically researched and sourced thus staying faithful to their cultural sites and contexts of origin (Chatterjee 2020: 55). Rather than an intercultural dialogue, which can emphasize dichotomous identity positions, my argument sets forward an intersectional approach that is performed politically through costume's exotic and erotic muses as sedimented resistance. I will be contributing to these debates but with a focus on women's subcultural performance practice as an expanded field. The concept of an 'expanded' practice (Kraus 1979; Read 2013; Hannah 2015; Puar 2012 ; Palmer and McKinney 2017) will knit with theories of 'bluing up' or bluefacing to help us understand sedimented resistance that speaks across sites and spaces. This is not to ignore identity politics but to draw affiliations across these 'low' feminized and sexualized sites and spaces which help us to ringfence specific issues that are pertinent to women's bodies in public spaces. I will be reflecting on an expanded blue notion of the cabaret costumed body in light of the 'uneven power relations' (Ziff and Rao 1997) of donning iconic costumes from cabaret's exotic and erotic past. This will be explored through a feminist postcolonial critical lens with specific discussion of Sara Ahmed's idea of feminist killjoys and the contested issue of a feminist 'we' (Lugone 2010, Parashar 2016, Ling 2016, Pennington 2016).

My overarching research question asks to what extent a 'blue' expanded approach to the cabaret costume body/bodies offers up a more playful activist intervention into the urgent issue of costume cultural appropriation. I will focus on the framing devices of peekaboo and gesture in my close analysis of specific costume changes in Vogue's performance and within the relevant sites and spaces. What the argument offers up is an expanded notion of extravagant feminized cabaret that enfolds dissident and marginalized histories of resistant urban spaces and sites. It is important to make this argument because it develops a different ethical approach to costume where activist communality can be performed through the costumed body at the site of the appropriation itself. 'Blueing up' becomes the expanded field and nexus point that binds these low sites, spaces and forms not as a universalizing practice but as an activist knowing gesture of home-making and belonging.

The Blue Lady Sings Back: 'Blueing Up' and Appropriation

In *The Blue Lady Sings Back* Tricity Vogue performs as the popular painting by Russian artist Vladimir Tretchikoff that was produced in Cape Town, South Africa in 1951 and became known around the world variously as 'The Chinese Girl', 'The Blue Lady' and 'The Green Girl'. In the original painting we see a young woman (the model is half-Chinese/half-French) looking sternly to the left of the frame. The model's face has a green-blue tinge, with bright red lips, fine eye brows and rouged cheek bones. Her black hair is side parted with a Westernized shoulder length perm wave. The dress has a yellow painted qipao or cheongsam[2] collar with green, blue and purple decorative motifs around the shoulder that finishes at five

[2] A cheongsam, known also as a qipao, is an iconic close fitting dress with distinctive traditional Chinese features of Manchu origins. It was popularized by upper-class women in Shanghai in the 1920s/30s as a sign of Western modernization, femininity and sexuality.

points that are edged with red. The remaining part of the dress is unfinished and her crossed hands are hidden under voluminous sleeves against the raw canvas background.

Vogue performs 'The Blue Lady' from both within a picture frame and outside of the frame to bring the painting to life as 'disobedient art' (announced through the tannoy at the beginning of the show). Vogue does this by emphasizing its 'monstrosity' – its blueness – as 'low', bored, bawdy, erotic and exotic. Tretchikoff's painting was 'said to have been more widely reproduced than the Mona Lisa' (The Telegraph, 29 August, 2006), but not taken seriously in high art circles where it was seen as 'an icon of kitsch', a 'much mocked lady' (Bell 2013) and 'arguably the most unpleasant work of art to be published in the 20th century' (Art Critic William Feaver quoted in Bell 2013). It was only with the painting's validation when it sold for £1M in London in 2013, that there was a sudden interest in the model named as Monika Pon-su-san. In interview she stated that many people had asked her why she had such a stern face, to which she always replied: 'Well you know, one gets tired sitting and just looking' (BBC News, 7 May 2013). Vogue's brings a rendition of this body to life in a sensual array of beautiful gowns from cabaret's erotic and exotic past.

For the performance Vogue wears a blue-green body stocking and paints her face, hands and neck in a similar hue as she sings about how she became 'blue'. However, in 'blueing up' and dressing in a DIY cheongsam, with an almost Pierrot-like collar, and later a Bollywood belly dancing costume and a banana skirt, can this kind of costumed performance register as anything other than superficial dressing-up? I would argue that Vogue's 'blue' costume performance can more usefully be understood as an act of 'inappropriation' which Michelle Liu Carriger (2018) conceptualizes in relation to the 2015 protests at Boston Museum of Fine Arts where visitors were invited to dress up in a kimono like Claude

Monet's *La Japonaise* (1876). This is a theatrical strategy for unpacking the complexities, multiplicities and imbrications that are elided from the binary debate of racist orientalist appropriation - 'yellowfacing' - or light-hearted, celebratory appreciation that however acknowledges its own potential fault lines.

By dressing up as 'The Blue Lady', a painterly representation of the model Monika Pon-su-san, Vogue steps into what postcolonial feminist theorist Riyal delineates as 'the difficult territory of representation and reproducibility' (Riyal 2019: 84). This has also been defined as 'content appropriation' where symbols and dress practices are 'shared between a representation and reproductions of the representation' (Coleman 2005: 17 in Lenard and Balint 2020: 338). The ethical problem of misrepresentation or speaking for the muted Other (Said 1978; Lewis 1996; Spivak 1987; Mohanty 1988) is poignantly expressed through a specific anecdote about the costume that is narrated by the model Monika Pon-su-san. In the original painting she wore a richly brocaded qipao or cheongsam however when interviewed she states that the colour of the gown that was in the painting was Tretchikoff's own creation: 'I was given his wife's gown to put on. It was silk chiffon - beautiful, beautiful stuff. It wasn't yellow like in the painting - that was his own invention.' 'And when I saw the painting I was so shocked. I thought I looked like a monster from a horror film. I pulled an ugly face and said: "Ugh - green face!"' (29 August, 2006, The Telegraph).

The monstrosity of the colours - the yellow costume and the blue or 'green' tinge to her face – made her pull an 'ugly face' in a repulsed reaction to how she looked – 'like a monster' from 'a horror film'. This also makes us recall Ngai's 'ugly feelings' (2005) outlined by Long Chu in her articulation of a 'blue ache' (2017: 307) where there is no proof of structural violence – just a feeling – whether that be despair, misery, defiance or coolness. Taking these

feelings as one's own and expressing multiple 'blue aches', multiple feelings of displacement through one white woman's body triggers a different 'ugly feeling'. Vogue's blueing up also uncomfortably reminds the spectator of vaudeville's tradition of 'blacking up' and minstrelsy where 'blacking up' appropriates the raced body and usurps that body's agency. This performance could be interpreted therefore as an act of double colonization firstly depriving the female Oriental body by of her voice and agency and secondly with the 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1987 in Nelson and Grossberg 1998: 282-83) of making her a vessel for Western feminist theorization, politics and identity formation.

I would argue however that Vogue's make-up strategy of 'blueing up' presents us with a different resistant tactic for the costumed body beyond an identity-based framework. Race and performance theorist Patricia Herrera's (2012) theorization of the theatrical act of 'bluing up' or 'bluefacing' opens up a useful way forward to that regard. Bluefacing is described by Herrera as a strategy for drawing alliances between and inside a broader panoply of marginalized identities around common issues of disenfranchisement. She discusses bluefacing as 'differential oppositional consciousness' (2012: 406) which is a way of expressing the lived embodied experience of oppression within and across race differences. Herrera references the Hanna-Barbera Productions Smurfs cartoon popular in the 1980s and American multi-media performance company, The Blue Man Group (formed in 1987) as examples that illustrate the way that the colour blue has been used to create characters that are 'non-human and nonracial' (2012: 410).

Herrera makes a reference to the specific female character of the Smurfette 'to link affective and experiential registers to the ethnic, racial and gender subject' (2012: 414). It is this angle that my argument develops further. Marking the body as blue is explicitly emphasizing this

practice as political and this body as accountable. The meaning of 'blue' resonates in a particular way in relation to the exotic and erotic cabaret histories with its peepshows, birds of paradise, showgirls, striptease and singing the blues. I specifically define Vogue's practice as 'blueing up' to encapsulate 'low' bawdy sexualized feminized performance practices, which utilize this tactic to critique and assert sexual citizenship - the configuration of belonging and agency for sexual female bodies in public spaces.

Vogue's 'blueing up' is expressed through her make-up, song, humour and comic timing, her direct address to the audience and her various skits. Throughout the 45 minute show she undertakes various costume changes – in *The Blue Lady Sings Back* there are six– and many of these costume changes happen behind the painting frame to introduce another 'blue' song and narrative. At the beginning of the show she sings; 'I wasn't always this blue, I was once the same colour as you'. She then heartily sings about her various sexual adventures using innuendo about an ice cream van man who gave her his enormous cone to lick, using comic timing to deride in various ways the trail of married men, soldiers and good-for-nothings who she had the misfortune to have had sexual dalliances with. This, her lyrics tell us, is how she became increasingly more 'blue'.

Vogue's performance situates itself within the female-centred subsidiary form of new cabaret culture – burlesque. Burlesque is predominantly a tongue-in-cheek form that hams up gendered sexual stereotypes through costume, caricature and performance skits. It questions the dynamic of looking and places the spectacle of woman's body centre stage in order to question what this sexual and sexualized body as spectacle means in the public sphere (Willson 2008a). It uses 'low' 'blue' Carry On type bawdy humour, innuendo and direct address – winks, smiles, eye contact as well as 'blue' low sexual forms such as stripping and

erotic dress. The performance form could also be described as 'blue'. Burlesque as a form is anti-hierarchical and inclusive and embedded in marginalized immigrant performance histories. As I have argued elsewhere: 'Its cross-class, cross-form, cross-race, cross-gender, cross-cultural ability was achieved by virtue of its uncategorizability' (Willson 2008b: 53).

Burlesque, rooted in an immigrant melting pot vaudeville tradition, is a highly pertinent platform for 'blueing up'. Herrera's argues that bluefacing is a theatrical strategy used, 'to address the feelings of alienation and desires of belonging that an individual encounters when caught in the social web of identity categorization' (Herrera 2012: 414). Using bluefacing within a burlesque routine therefore creates allegiances by challenging white phallocentric definitions of desire that alienate women's own sexual and sensual bodies. The role of Vogue's white, cis-gendered straight cabaret body within her practice of 'blueing up' is therefore critical. There is an assumption that her white cis-gendered body is apolitical and neutral. Indeed 'blacking up' makes the assumption that that the blacked up body is a 'neutral' base for painting on identity. Blueing up takes away this assumed 'neutrality' – which is in fact a white concept.[3] Making her body political and empathetic creates an ethical dialogue with her own position within those histories. 'Blueing up' stages a communal desire for accountability, belonging and home-making.

The theatrical strategy of 'blueing up' therefore resonates with contemporary post-colonial feminist theory in its push for 'accountability and empathy' (Agathangelou and Ling's 2009: 85 in Parashar 2016: 273). Vogue's extravagant cabaret costumed body, as a visual motif spills over and creates a shared space – a shared home - of articulation for gendered political staged affinities. In the next section I would like to turn my attention to these shared

[3] I am grateful for the peer reviewer's insight as regards neutrality being a white concept.

theatrical spaces, which perhaps provide us with another way of understanding the creative expression of these affinities and resonances.

Sedimented Histories of Dressing up.

Understanding Vogue's costumed performance in relation to its sedimented histories of site and space gives us a deeper understanding of what is at stake in the act of dressing up. An 'expanded' context of site and space is significant because it brings to the fore hierarchies of pleasure and looking - risqué, brash, bawdy, erotic – which are expressed through sartorial cabaret performance. Dorita Hannah's notion of costume as a 'body-object-event' (2014: 17) is a useful theoretical hook for understanding this wider affective and political dimension of extravagant feminine costume. For as Hannah states: 'We cannot separate the theatrical from the sociopolitical' (Hannah 2014: 15).

Tricity Vogue's costumed body speaks across the sedimented histories of Vauxhall – it speaks to the eighteenth century Pleasure Gardens where costume and props allowed for a more democratic non-hierarchical access to looking. Vogue's performance also speaks to the queer space of Vauxhall and specifically The Royal Vauxhall Tavern. Staging the premier at this site aligns her performance with queer circuits of explicit performance. This is where Duckie, an alternative queer collective created by producer Simone Casson and compered by Amy Lamé, begun as club night in 1995. Lesbian performer Ursula Martinez is also associated with the Duckie collective and her work quintessentially represents the collective's outlook in its combination of high and low brow forms that push cultural and social boundaries. Martinez uses burlesque striptease and sartorial tropes of the heterofemme - stilettoes, tight black skirt, black bra and pants, red lipstick - to undermine and unsettle sexual and gendered assumptions. She does this by using peekaboo - through curtains, by

way of a teasing control of dress and undress - to negotiate various acts of peeping (Willson 2008a; 2008b; 2018a).

Situating *The Blue Lady Sings Back* in this site and space is therefore provocative for the artist is performing an aesthetic and politics of resistance as a straight cis woman. She is re-framing pleasure by piggy-backing on alternative queer and historical anti-hierarchical spaces and sites to assert straight women's own feelings of disenfranchisement. By doing this Vogue performs 'blue' affinities and resonances between marginalized bodies and highlights the way that the costumed body can interrogate hierarchies of pleasure and spectatorship. It is useful and important to make these sedimented histories of a site and space count as they allow the costumed body to narrates a deeper story of resistance – a liminal space for resisters - 'that enhances accountability and empathy' (Agathangelou and Ling's 2009: 85 in Parashar 2016: 273). Dorita Hannah's idea of costume as 'active and activating agents that are integral to complex spatiotemporal webs' (2014: 15) is highly relevant to this enquiry. Hannah argues through De Certeau that the spatial object 'saturated with "other" garments continually unfolds in space and time, multiplied by an accelerated succession of actions' (De Certeau 1988: 88 in Hannah 2014: 20). Taking the *red dress* as an example of the '*evental* nature of iconic garments' (2014: 16), she describes it as viscerally unfolding its dangerous licentious desire across the spatiotemporal field like a bloody gash. What this monstrous-feminine garment is activating in its reference to a trans-historical female inhabitant is, 'the dramatic force of her sexuality' (2014: 25). Hannah sets out to explore what makes the garment significant when it performs, 'without, and in spite of the human body' (Hannah and Harslof 2008: 18 in Hannah 2014: 17).

What is not explicit in Hannah's argument, and what I would like to question, is what happens with the iconic garment as a 'body-object-event' if it accounts for the specificity of a sexual female subject or feminist subjects. Jasbir Puar in her discussion of Joseph Massad's ideas flags up a similar reservation about a generalized and universalized conception of *sexuality,* which she succinctly sums up as the 'epistemological capture of an ontological irreducible becoming' (Massad 2009: 25 in Puar 2012: 54). For Puar, 'intersectionality' – our position on the grid of intersecting identity categories, whether that be race, gender, ethnicity, class, status or sexuality – should always be in friction with the idea of 'assemblage', the threatening mobility of these categories. Puar argues that it is the affective capacity of the theatrical – the 'events, actions and encounters between bodies' (2012: 58) - which can actually reconfigure categories of identity themselves. And it is these insights that help us to develop Hannah's spatiotemporal notion of costume further.

The notion of capturing, reducing or freeze-framing identity – nailing it down to a stereotype – directly relates to my argument as regards Vogue's costume changes in *The Blue Lady Sings Back*. The affective experience of watching (or participating in) Vogue's cabaret costumed body - as an event – politicizes rather than captures the multiple sexual identities. But how does one activate the affective potential of costumed histories and bodies without superficially painting over Other feminist desires and voices? 'Blueing up' is an affiliating strategy that politically mobilizes the threatening potential of 'low' feminized and sexualized costumed bodies across spaces and sites. I would argue that it is the action of 'peekaboo' (playful looking) that directly gives the subject agency to politicize these aesthetic encounters between the theatrical and the sociopolitical. In *The Blue Lady Sings Back*, Tricity Vogue peeks through a painting frame, she disappears behind curtains to get changed, she uses comedy and bawdiness in her use of lyrics. Vogue connects herself as a performer to a

politics of looking by performing as and within those marginalized histories and geographies of the feminized spectacle and the extravagant spectacular. She peeks through her own 'low' position as a female cabaret artiste and plays peekaboo with her own intersectional entwinement with Othered legacies.

The Blue Lady Sings Back starts with Vogue hidden behind a picture frame that sits on top of a black curtained stand. The painting is being guarded by a female gallery attendant. Through the tannoy comes the announcement 'Welcome to the Institute for Disobedient Art. Please do not touch the exhibit and on no account play with the exhibit.' The blind inside the frame then rolls up open with a snap and we see Vogue mischievously peer through the frame, arms crossed. She is wearing a DIY white loose dress with a large cheongsam-styled collar with a red trim, a red sash and blood red lipstick. She then peeks out and waves at the audience members who laugh back. The music begins and Vogue then begins singing in an animated way from behind the frame, only stopping when the attendant comes back to make her stay in the frame when she pulls back whilst coyly fluttering her long false eye lashes. As she sings, she protrudes her body through the frame and widely gesticulates with her outstretched arms. She is wearing full pleated sleeves that hang ostentatiously outside the frame, with the attendant rushing in to push the excess of cloth back behind the frame again.

This sense of peekaboo also maps onto the site where *The Blue Lady Sings Back* premiered. This was the ground of the former eighteenth century Vauxhall Pleasure Garden. At this site, accessories, costume and props were used to frame the body – to tease and play but also to protect and shield oneself. Like the more exclusive masquerade ball, this was a place of play where a range of identities – normally categorized and restricted by class, status, race, gender and sexuality - could mix shielded by masked disguise. 18th century novels give as a strong

idea of a drunken sense of both the pleasures and the dangers of the experience of visiting this pleasure garden. Oliver Goldsmith in *The Citizen of the World* (1762: 60) describes every sense 'overpaid with more than expected pleasure.' And Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771: 66) describes the Gardens as 'excess of pleasure' set within a dirty criminalized and pernicious city. What is apparent in these texts is the potential for experimentation and theatrical play for women in the urbane. However, as Frances Burney recounts in her *novel Evelina: Or The history of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778), alongside the excesses of pleasure, women also had to negotiate potential risk and danger. In this novel the protagonist Evelina is assaulted on one of the darker pathways, set off from the brightly lit bandstands.

What is relevant to my discussion is this collision and conflict between different excesses of pleasure - the way pleasure is hierarchical and conflicting and very much clearly aligned with power relations, dynamics and positions. What is particular interesting is that a central figure within this queer culture – Vauxhall Tavern compere Amy Lamé –is presently feeding into the Night Time economy campaign and policies for safe night time urban spaces for women.[4] New Cabaret and neo-burlesque couch their performance within these issues and concerns. The pleasures and dangers that come with being visible in the public sphere are mediated and re-negotiated through the performer's control over and knowing awareness of power dynamics in the act of looking. Burlesque and new cabaret performance creates a safe playful space where costuming and props are integral to these visual and representational politics. The sedimented histories of site and space therefore allow us to understand the way that Vogue aligns her costumed body with Othered identities and resistance.

[4] https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/24-hour-london/night-czar

This is extravagant theatrical costume as an event that draws together feminized 'low' bodies that challenge their visible position in the public sphere. As a sedimented 'body-object-event' the costume resists and plays with and against hierarchies, frameworks and constructions of pleasure. The female cabaret performer uses her feminized and sexualized costumed body to highlight how power operates in relation to intersections of gender, class and race and sexuality, to reflect wider structural inequalities and oppression. The sedimented histories of space and site becomes the socio-political context of resistant home-making that I would like to now explore more deeply in relation to Vogue's specific costume changes

The Politics of the Cabaret Costumed Body

The act of peekaboo that was discussed in the last section highlighted a spatiotemporal costume framing device that performatively mapped Vogue's new burlesque performance politics onto queer and intersectional performance practices, sites and spaces. In this final section my focus will be on the resistant role of gesture as a second framing device for the cabaret costumed body's sedimented histories and political affiliations. Rather than an act of costume appropriation, the multiple costume changes stage difficult and uneasy conversations intersecting within and between communities about how the dancing body is framed and therefore how that body is seen. This section will argue that the direct address of bawdy sexual innuendo and knowing erotic movement allows Vogue's body to intervene in the symbolic narrations of erotic and exotic desire, pleasure and love: through costume.

Two costume changes that will be the focus of my analysis in this final section will be the banana skirt and the Bollywood belly dancing costume. Both of these costumes reference seminal performance moments of flamboyant marginalized resistance that cuts across identity borders and moral boundaries. The banana skirt is a homage to Josephine Baker's 1924

Dance Sauvage skit at the Folies Bergere where Baker's twerking and Charleston bee knees sent the plastic bananas frenetically flying out from around her waist band. The second costumed example is Vogue's reference to the infamous breast pump performed by Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit to the song *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai* (1993). Dixit's performance created a stir across India with the calls from the right-wing Hindu political party for the song to be excised from the film or the bawdy lyrics 'Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai?' ('What is under your blouse?') to be edited out. Dixit's and Baker's provocative gestures are used by Vogue as a homage to gesture moments that have been performed by the cabaret costumed body that unsettled gendered assumptions and propriety.

The performance skits however stage a difficult conversation and a collective ethical positioning between Tricity Vogue's cabaret costumed body and its collective histories. It is difficult because it ignites the evident tensions around cultural appropriation in neo-burlesque. There is an open wound in burlesque community around these genres of costume practice, a politicized stigmatization and split. The costume shaming befits Sara Ahmed's label of feminist killjoys – killers of joy: 'By working out what we are for, we are working out that *we*, that hopeful signifier of a feminist collectivity. Where there is hope, there is difficulty. Feminist histories are histories of the difficulty of that *we*' (2017: 2). For Ahmed, feminist dwellings need to be dismantled and then rebuilt by understanding the difficulties of the histories of 'we'.

Gestures are used by Vogue as a tongue-in-cheek strategy to knowingly connect with the audience. These are shared in-jokes that undermine propriety and bring everything down to earth. New burlesque use forms of direct address such as winks, knowing smiles, glances to the audience and bawdy body language in their routines to challenge and question sexual and

gender expectations and stereotypes. However when this mocking is performed through costume tropes this dangerously teeters on the edge of 'blacking up' for one wonders who is being laughed at and mocked. The audience's laughter is at whose expense? I have argued elsewhere (Willson 2015a: 11) that certain forms of laughter come from the 'unlaughing' heart of sexualized images. The laughter sits 'knowingly and pleasurably within imagery that doesn't quite fit and turns the laughter back at those who were laughing – but for all the wrong reasons.'

Vogue's use of gestures in her banana skirt skit is used to frame costume and stereotypes through laughter or 'unlaughter' in a similar way. The banana skirt routine follows on from Vogue's pussy cat routine when Vogue wears her blue body stocking, red stilettoes, pussy cat ears and tail. She then adds to these initial costume accessories by putting on long beads and a banana skirt, which she takes from a box on the floor and fastens around her hips. As soon as she begins to frenetically move her hips and cross her knees, the soundtrack of *The Bare Necessities* is heard. She sings this song first in French and then in English. When she gets to the lyric, 'Now when you pick a pawpaw' she picks up a pawpaw from the box and then mischievously moves to the darkened part of the auditorium to interact with the audience and to get them to join in with the tune by blowing a party horn.

In this skit the various embedded symbols of race and sexual significance – the banana and pussy - are layered onto the costumed body. Alongside these objects are nonsensical anarchic objects such as a pawpaw that is paired with similarly suggestive looks and smiles to the audience. Anne Anlin Cheng argues that in Josephine Baker's original banana dance, the sexual and racial fetish of the banana as phallus, penis and symbol of jungle, 'enables and encapsulates a complex network of mediated desires and cross-narratives' (Cheng 2013: 47).

With Vogue layering into these cross-narratives pussy cat ears and tail, a pawpaw and a party horn, all the various signifiers of desire and the sexualized are made to look equally ludicrous and nonsensical. Jennifer Sweeney-Risko argues that Baker's influence lies in her 'seeming ability to possess her own body, to control her image despite the racial contours of the lens through which her audience read her' (2018: 498-99). What the frenetic banana dance gesture does therefore is to turn the lens back onto the audience and highlight an imbalance of power in the act of looking by explicitly staging these narratives as 'contaminated desires' (Cheng 2013: 48).Vogue performs these narratives within her performance to emphasis the persistent nature of this contamination and to contribute another layer of new burlesque resistance to these histories.

Diva citizenship and Kareem Khubchandani's ideas of 'diva gestures' (2016: 74) are useful conceptual tools to that regard. Khubchandani develops Lauren Berlant's notion of 'Diva Citizenship' which she argues, 'does not change the world' but 'occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere, in which she does not have privilege' (1997: 223). Khubchandani argues that Dixit's breast pulse in the song 'Choli Ke Peeche' from the film, *Khalnayak* (1993: Dir. Subhash Ghai) could be defined as one of these dramatic coups. In the film she plays a policewoman who disguises herself as a cabaret singer in a revealing belly dancing costume to seduce the villain, Ballu. Dixit's *jhatkas* and *matkas* (convulsive breast pulses) perform diva citizenship in that they 'force a dialogue with symbolic, embodied and institutional patriarchies' (2016: 74). In this case blurring the borders between the good girl (Indian womanhood) and the vixen (Western lasciviousness).

The 'Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai' scene in *The Blue Lady Sings Back* begins with Vogue changing behind the shut picture blind into orange belly dancing pantaloons, golden

headdress and gold halter top with layers of artificial gold, orange and red marriage garlands. A Bollywood style beat of music is playing in the background. The scene ends with a convulsive breast pump action which becomes a teasing reveal with each breast pump releasing the armour-like embellished top until she fully pulls it away whilst coyly lowering herself behind the curtain. This gesture finishes by Vogue detaching from the top a DIY golden fabric pendant that has a 4" red padded heart motif embroidered into it. The layering of a contemporary burlesque gesture – the teasing winking striptease – on top of Dixit's breast pump and double entendre lyrics ('What is Under Your Blouse?') adds another layer of cabaret histories to the original scandalous gesture. This is not intended as an appropriation, exploitation nor mocking but a sedimented layering of that resistant flamboyant staged moment. Vogue creates allegiances and alliances between her own context and the Hindi women's perspectives in India without usurping Dixit's position or perspective.

This layering of gesture happens throughout the scene with Vogue playing on the idea of the good and bad girl by mapping Western symbols for love, morality and temptation on top of Hindi imagery. Vogue sings the original lyrics, goddess-like in a golden crown-like headdress, with Vishnu-like multiple blue arms. The gallery attendant standing next to the frame with English subtitles –'I Won't be Anyone's Second Wife'. 'I Won't Become a Nun'. 'Lover-Boys are Chasing me'. 'Someone Save this Woman. Hide her Inside your Heart'. Vogue then puts on a blue wedding veil and looks with exaggerated besotted love up into the sky holding the heart pendant that hangs from her neck. The gallery attendant seeks to tempt her away from her 'heart' offering her firstly an apple, then a banana which she suggestively moves towards with her mouth and then a champagne flute which she grabs with glee and quickly pulls down the blind. The apple as the original scene is followed up by the bawdier burlesque-like gesture of the phallic banana followed by a more contemporary 'sin' of

champagne. Each playful gesture builds up a complex narration of female taboo desires and pleasures.

The sexually provocative breast pump speaks across Indian sexual and gender identities; Khubchandani argues that this diva gesture is repeated in queer drag clubbing culture as an example of sexual audacity: 'charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent' that defies dominant national morality that is 'perpetually played over women's bodies' (Ibid.) The banana skirt speaks across black femininities. Beyoncé also paid homage to this when she performed in sequined banana skirt at the 2006 *Fashion Rocks* television broadcast. Tricity Vogue's homage to these dramatic feminist coups in her performance acts as an in-joke within a tight-knit burlesque audience. It also initiates a difficult conversation within that community as to what is appropriate and what is appropriated. These representational and sexual politics question stereotypes but they also turn the laughter and the looking back at the audience to understand an inclusive and intersectional feminist 'we' going forward.

Conclusion: An 'Expanded' Blue Field of Dressing Up

My argument has therefore offered up a new conceptualization of the cabaret costumed body as a collective and resistant encounter between marginalized bodies, spaces and experiences. This performative event brings to the fore categories that frame and control desire and pleasure. Costume and props are used to frame and control who is to be looked at, by who, and in what way. By emphasizing the 'blue' performance – as bawdy, sad, erotic, exotic and 'low' – Tricity Blue highlights the way that pleasure is hierarchical and conflicting and clearly aligned with power relations, dynamics and positions. The subversive pleasures of peekaboo and the layering of diva gestures become the enfolding strategy that helps us to forge new understandings of sexual citizenship and belonging.

Initiating my argument from Maclaurin & Monks (2015: 105) premise that multiple costume changes enact a continual undoing of the stereotypes they produce. I would argue that Tricity Vogue and broader cabaret costume histories do, to some extent, demonstrate that this is the case. The extravagance and excess of costume and props work in triangulation with the site and space to gain control over circuits of power that exoticize and eroticize women as sexualized Other. However more explicitly I would argue that rather than one costume stereotype undoing the last costume stereotype, the multiple costume changes perform a spectacle of a cabaret costumed body as sedimented histories. Costume framing devices such as peekaboo and the diva gesture are used to negotiate and reframe how that body is looked at and how that body wants to be looked at. These framing devices fold that costumed body into the 'blue' politics as activist encounters with the Other.

Alliances are drawn by way of this 'blue' discourse where performances of various feminized and sexualized bodies intersect in relation to questions of visibility and desire. This sedimented layering of 'blue' politics 'creates 'event-potential' (Massumi 2002: 269n5 in Puar 2012: 61) for an expanded new notion of costume. The sedimented narratives of desire make transparent a representational economy that controls and engrains restrictive gendered expectations and assumptions. How we are looked at and seen freeze frames and determines who we can be or become. It also traps us within a social web of hierarchical encounters and power dynamics. An expanded 'blue' field of dressing up has the potential for opening up feminist accountability which respects and learns across our differences. I would argue that the cabaret costumed body in all its multiplicities, makes a home within these resonating alliances and unease. This is empathetic playful costume politics that speaks not only across new cabaret practice but also to an urgent postcolonial feminist moral becoming.

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