

**SELF-AUTHORING AND PERFORMANCE: CLASSROOM BURLESQUE AS A  
STRATEGY FOR CULTURAL AND IDENTITY AFFIRMATION**

A Dissertation

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Children in early childhood and elementary classrooms are often marginalized due to a variety of identity markers, which create borders within learning spaces and limit access to social and academic success. Students who face marginalization are frequently subjected to systems that colonize both, bodies and minds. Such systems do not recognize the cultural identities of children and frequently misinterpret resistance to normalization and assimilation as discipline problems. Teachers exacerbate the problem because they teach from their own points of view and fail to understand the differences that exist between them and their students. Thus, when children perform their cultural identities, teachers often perceive difference as deviance.

This study employed the theoretical frameworks of Postcolonial Theory and Border Theory. Additionally, burlesque, applied as symbolic frame, served as a metaphor for the subversive performances by students as they transgressed borders that negatively constructed and marginalized them. The study explored the strategies implemented by the burlesque community that have transgressed traditional social boundaries – rooted in racism, classism, and sexism – and which have served to establish a carefully cultivated and maintained community of acceptance.

Results from the study revealed several strategies that could easily be modified for use in schools. Namely, the burlesque community functions as a collective, they work collaboratively, address issues as they arise, they provide adequate support for community members as needed, they are intentional about meeting community needs,

and they are authentic and accessible. Similar use of these steps and strategies in schools could minimize borders and boundaries, and thus transform learning spaces so children are allowed authentic expression of identity, and classroom communities of acceptance are created. Further, results from the deconstructive analysis of several texts showed six themes of disruption employed by the burlesque community, and also implemented by children; visibility, constraint removal, voice, the returned gaze, spectacle, and pleasure in identity. Results showed that students made active use of these mechanisms to interrupt conventional social norms, and made way for performances that resisted domination and oppression through behaviors that parodied public education, made a mockery of classrooms, resisted conformity and preserved identity.

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mother, Carol McAlister Steeland, who traveled each step of this journey with me until she could no longer, to my friend Morgan Franco, who *saw* me, and to Barney, Annie, Lucy, Sister, and George, whose love and devotion saw me through.

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All work for the dissertation was completed independently by the student.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*It was almost balmy as we stood in line outside – a true Houston winter – bits of post-holiday conversation drifted around us – blended with raucous laughter and dueling pianos from the neighboring piano bar. Cigarette smoke hung low above our heads until wafted away by the humidity-laden breeze. The line got longer – more laughter – more smoke. Each time the door to the Bronze Peacock Room opened, a fleeting moment of silence and subtle shuffle of feet – anticipation – was it time? Could we enter? Then, relaxed conversation as the wait again ensued.*

*When the doors finally opened, a surge of music washed over us and we were greeted by our host for the evening – whose attire consisted of a black mesh tank-top, black leather pants and six-inch black stilettos, in which he walked remarkably well.*

*The lights were low, but the room wasn't quite dark, as we selected our bar height table, near the back and close to the wall, where we could easily see the stage but had plenty of room to move around.*

*The show wasn't to start for another hour, but there was already so much to see! What an interesting assembly of humanity, in every manner of dress: cocktail dresses for those celebrating a bachelorette party; two men in tuxes, one of powder blue, the other bright orange, like *Dumb and Dumber*, including top hats and canes; blue jeans and boots; corsets and tiaras; and glittery sparkle in every imaginable shade of carefully applied eye shadow, eyeliner, mascara and lip-gloss. And everyone was happy.*

*Anticipation rippled through the room, expectations electrified. Perfume, cologne, and alcohol permeated the air. Conversations arced through the space, one table to another, and the music soared, a fantastic, eclectic mix of genres that spanned decades; jazz and Motown, MJ and Madonna, big bands and swing, The Anderson Sisters and Lady Gaga. With each successive song, I watched the room, felt myself relax into the space, and let go of my brooding questions, “Why would I be even remotely interested in watching people take their clothes off?” and “Why, in 2013, are women still stripping to support themselves?” My anxiety was replaced by enthusiasm and curiosity, as I was completely captivated by the experience. Every scan of the room revealed some new, glittery treasure.*

*Against the wall opposite our table, was a merchandise table covered end-to-end with sparkling trinkets. Unable to resist the glittery allure, I wandered over and found myself immediately drawn to the feather boas – an array of pinks, purples, reds, blues, black and combinations thereof – I let each one slip through my fingers – dripping downy softness – as I selected one for each of us in our group. The look on every face as they wrapped them around their neck was magical. Just about the time we were all resettled, boas sparkling at every wisp, a previously unnoticed figure emerged from the dusky background. In his be-feathered top hat and full-on glamour make-up, the stage helper and hair and make-up artist for the troupe approached our table and introduced himself. With his beautifully charming smile and magnetic personality, he asked if we had ever been to a burlesque show before, wanted to know if we were comfortable and even offered to get us drinks.*

*When the house lights finally dimmed completely, the only light left in the room was that coming from the back where the bar glowed in a pale blue wash of neon and glass. The hush that immediately fell over the audience lasted only a moment before the room burst into a roar as the emcee took the stage. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't the beautiful Latina in the stunning blue sequined dress with a sharp wit, crass humor, and language that would make even the most seasoned sailor blush. She whipped the audience into frenzied hysteria and then the first act took the stage. For nearly two hours, there was a flurry of boas and beads, belly dances, fan dances, glove peels, stocking removals, garters, G-strings, pasties, and glittering rhinestones. And all too soon, it was over. A quick look around the room, as the house lights came up, revealed the crowd's state of drunken euphoria. Broad, silly grins. Big, hearty laughs. Celebration. What a great time I'd had!*

*For days, after that show I found myself still mesmerized by it all. Everyone had fun – but I was still stuck on it, why? It took some time to puzzle out why it was such a significant experience for me. As I reflected on the entire evening, I found myself considering every aspect – circling – contemplating from every angle I could see. And finally, a few days after the show, I realized, it was a significant experience for me because I'd been treated like a person. In a space filled with perfect, pretty people, I, too, was treated with dignity and respect – and that realization spurred the deeper revelation that the space had been one of openness and acceptance for everyone in attendance. It seemed to me as if the borders that serve to divide us outside of that space, had been removed –*

*and the chance to be a part of that community, within that environment, even if only for a little while, was profound.*

*After that, I was determined to see another show. I wanted to know if the rapport between the performers and other members of the burlesque community, with the audience members were authentic or manufactured solely for the purpose of a show. I wondered, “Is it possible that this space, filled with humanity of every sort, created a spiritual place?” And, “if so, then isn’t it possible to suggest that within such a space – social hierarchies and stratification are diminished?” “Was this intentional?” “How?”*

*The next show was bigger, with more performers, in a larger venue, and there were more people in attendance, but the space was still so welcoming and embracing it was just irresistible.*

## **RESEARCH BASIS**

Early in the spring semester of 2014, I was tasked with completing a number of interviews and observations for each of my research courses. Having recently attended a burlesque show, for the first time, I knew immediately that I wanted to combine the research for both classes, in that, though the assignments required were different, I wanted them to share burlesque as a common theme. The whole burlesque scene was fascinating to me for two primary reasons. The first had to do with personal identity. Though I’ve changed in many ways, in some instances very drastically, having grown up in the traditions of the Southern Baptist Church (SBC), I long possessed a very narrow, very exclusive view of the world and those around me. Not only had I been part of the harsh judgment and exclusion of others, I had also been judged and excluded. So, for me, the

acceptance and welcome I experienced in the burlesque space was cathartic, and inspiring, liberating and fun. And the more time I spent in those spaces, and with the people, the more I learned about myself, personally and professionally. The second reason of interest in the burlesque community was related to my career as a teacher. Having spent 14 years as a teacher of very young children in urban classroom settings, I began to wonder about the possibility of purposely constructed classroom spaces where marginalizing borders might be minimized so that all kids experience the kind of acceptance at school as I felt in burlesque spaces.

As I researched burlesque and considered the performances I saw – the parodies of divisive social norms – I wondered about students and their cultural identities. Thinking back on my life and experiences in the SBC – and reflecting on the confines of those traditions, against which I chafed – gave me a new perspective, or perhaps, a deeper, more insightful perspective of the children I had served. Understanding how I had felt trapped and powerless by the norms of my religious beliefs, I began to imagine how my students must have felt – trapped and powerless – by norms and cultural values not their own, but by which, within which, they were expected to operate and succeed. And then, I wondered if maybe some of what appears to be disrespect, lack of interest, and disciplinary problems might really be resistance to norms that choke the life out of kids in an effort to force them to conform to dominant social expectations. And so, what I learned from those two projects led me to now using them as the basis for this study.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Colonization of students in public school classrooms disregards the histories and cultures of diverse student populations, thereby negating the educational needs of students in favor of systems and strategies that generate compliance (Rivas, 2010). Those children most affected by the politics of post/colonization are the poor and children of color. The disregard of cultural differences via standardization, colorblind curriculum, whitewashed and sanitized textbooks, ill-prepared teachers and inequitable funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010), produce classrooms where borders, both literal and figurative, are erected and prove to be problematic for students' academic and social success.

Lack of regard, or lack of understanding of cultural differences, of learning and communication styles, presents problems for students and teachers alike (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lareau, 2011). Students' challenges of teacher authority may not actually be a disciplinary issue, but rather, expressions of deeply engrained, very sophisticated cultural modes of communication – an assertion, or performance – to maintain cultural identity. Classroom climates function such that there is a constant shuffling of the proverbial deck so kids are repeatedly colonized and then recolonized.

## **THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Children in urban, early childhood and elementary classrooms are often marginalized due to differences in race/ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, size, socioeconomic status, and immigration status, which creates literal and figurative borders within classroom spaces (Anzaldúa, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). Children's access to social and academic success within classrooms is thereby limited. Students who face

marginalization are frequently subjected to practices that colonize both physical bodies and minds (Saavedra & Camicia, 2010). A racist system that marginalizes and colonizes children's bodies and minds does not recognize the cultural identities of its students and therefore fails to recognize the difference between children who pose true discipline problems, and children who resist normalization, standardization, acculturation, and assimilation by clinging to deeply engrained, complex, and very sophisticated cultural codes in effort to maintain their cultural identity (Asher, 2009; Bhabha, 1994; Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

Lisa Delpit (1986) indicates that teachers contribute to this problem because they teach from their own points of view and do not understand, or take the time to learn about, the cultural differences that exist between them and their students. Thus, when children perform their cultural identities, teachers often misinterpret differences as deviance, so they implement classroom- and discipline-management plans that aim to get children to conform to mainstream, traditional social norms.

## **DEFINITIONS**

*Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)* – a behavior intervention plan is used for students who, for some reason cannot, or will not, comply with school or classroom behavior expectations. Though often viewed negatively, a BIP is intended to put in place strategies that can help students successfully navigate a traditional classroom space.

*Benevolent Patriarchy* – a paternalistic aspect of patriarchal power that conceives of women and people of color as underdeveloped; who, for their own well-being, need



monitoring, saving, and protection by an authority figure. It is often not identified as a form of prejudice, or as oppressive, because it appears positive, helpful, and kind.

*Blue Laws* – laws intended to preserve Sundays as a day of rest or worship, and therefore prohibited activities such as the purchase of alcohol, working, recreation, or shopping.

*Border Theory* – Border theory has most frequently been used to describe the geographic boundaries between Mexico and the United States and the consequences faced by those people caught at the border, whose identities are not wholly Mexican or wholly American. Border theory is about the borders and boundaries that separate people based on dominant social and cultural norms that are used to exclude people from access to opportunities; that deny entry to, and participation in, the dominant culture. Borders can be erected for a multitude of reasons: A person's country of origin, their native language, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, body-type/size, and so on. For this study, borderlands are the margins students are forced into when they do not fit within the parameters of conventional social norms and classroom expectations.

*Boylesque* – male burlesque

*Burlesque* – As explained by Goldwyn (2010), the word “burlesque” comes from the Latin root *burlare*, and means to laugh at, or make fun of something, for example, fusing high- and lowbrow humor to mock dominant social norms and class hierarchy. Burlesque was a working-class form of entertainment that used physical satire, jokes about the body and double entendre to exhibit complete disregard for social protocol (Goldwyn, 2010).

*Classic Burlesque* – routines based on traditional American burlesque glamour, beauty, and style.

*Concert Saloon* – a theater or music hall that provided entertainment to the working class.

*Constraint Removal* – in burlesque, the removal of clothing is not only about the striptease, but is also about freeing oneself from the constraints of conventional social norms that bind, restrict, and confine most people to the same standards, to one most correct way of being.

*Cooch Show* – The cooch show, according to Allen (1991), was what we now call the belly dance, and was performed publicly for the first time in the United States as part of the Chicago World’s Colombian Exposition in 1893. The dance got its name, “cooch,” “cootch,” or “hootchy-kootchy” from the way fair-goers referred to the performance. It was the immediate forerunner of the striptease.

*Cultural Performance* –“ the way people experience everyday life, as shaped by forces that exist beyond their control; the ways they enact cultural meanings based on their lived experiences and encounters with injustice, prejudice, and stereotyping” (Denzin, 2003, p. xi).

*Culture* – as defined by Spradley (1979) is “acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior” (p.5). Culture is found in the meanings assigned to the relationships among knowledge, behavior, and artifacts (Spradley, 1980).

As defined by Nieto & Bode (2009), “culture consists of the values, traditions, worldview, and social and political relationships created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or other shared identity. Culture includes not only tangibles such as foods, holidays, dress, and artistic expression but also less tangible manifestations such as communication style,

attitudes, values, and family relationships” (p. 171). More specifically, culture can be defined as either *explicit*, or as *tacit*.

*Drag* – Here, the term “drag” refers, basically, to those who adopt the behaviors and characteristics, including clothes and make-up, of the opposite sex. It is important to note, however, that drag is a very sophisticated subculture of its own.

*Erotic Spectacle* – the ways women purposely flaunted their sexuality on the burlesque stage, as an object of desire, but fully in control of herself, her choices, and her sexuality. She put her femininity and sexuality on display as part of her performance of the striptease, where she appeared available but was not.

*Explicit Cultural Knowledge* – as explained by Spradley (1980), explicit culture “makes up part of what we know, a level of knowledge people can communicate about with relative ease” (p. 7).

*Feminine Spectacle* – Burlesque was, and is, considered by many as a form of feminine empowerment because women are in control of their bodies and their sexuality. Feminine spectacle is the way women present, or display themselves, in a provocative manner, that defies conventional social norms that define socially acceptable feminine behavior.

*The Gaze* – essentially, the act of seeing, or being seen. Here, as a covert form of oppression as the Gaze is generally an act of judgment, of ownership, of superiority, enacted from a position of privilege and power that objectified those looked upon.

*Honky-Tonk* – theaters that served immigrants and the working class, offered gambling, served alcohol, and provided entertainment in the form of variety shows.

*Institutional Racism* – Meyer Weinberg addressed racism’s institutional nature: “Racism is always collective. Prejudiced individuals may join the large movement, but they do not cause it...what is crucial is understanding that the doctrine of White supremacy is at the root of racism” (Weinberg cited in Nieto & Bode, 2009, p. 69). Nieto and Bode (2009) explain institutional racism as the systematic use of power, economic and political, in institutions such as schools, that produces policies or practices that have a detrimental effect on groups that share particular identities (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender). By exerting their power, via normal daily operations, people who control institutions reinforce and legitimate oppressive policies and practices that exclude others and deprive them of rights or opportunities (Nieto & Bode, 2009).

*Leg show* – a performance that revealed, and featured, a woman’s legs.

*Legitimate Theater* – referred to the theaters of the middle- and upper-classes, where the entertainment aligned with conventional social norms, expectations, and acceptability.

*Nerdlesque* – a pop-culture form of burlesque where performers base their routines on favorite characters from films, sci-fi, comics, anime, and videogames.

*Performance* – for my purposes, is applicable in several ways; as culture, the way we live our lives on a daily basis, acting on, within, or in resistance to, dominant social norms from our own cultural positions. Performance also pertains to the stage performances presented by the burlesque community for the purpose of entertainment. And, performance refers to the poetry I have written in response to personal experiences as a teacher, to experiences as I observed in classrooms, and to my experiences within the burlesque community.

*Performance Art* – like burlesque, performance art involves an interactive relationship with the audience and challenges traditional culture norms, social circumstances, politics, and the human condition. Performance art events are unique, like burlesque shows, in that they cannot be experienced or repeated in exactly the same way – each performance is authentic.

*Pin-up* – images of models or performers intended for mass production and display on a wall – or “pinned up.” Burlesque performers used their photographs like business cards and pinned them up in theater green rooms and dressing rooms, as advertisements. Today, pin-up models fashion themselves after the look and style of the World War II and 1950s era pin-up models.

*Postcolonial Theory* – Colonialism exerted control over subjugated people, places, and spaces via military might and prowess, and made way for imperialism. Now, postcolonialism, via imperialism, exerts control over people, places, and spaces via economics. Postcolonialism is a hegemonic force that requires the participation of the colonizer – who imposes the conditions, and the colonized – who submit to those stratifying conditions; whose societies are thus economically, materially, and culturally subordinated (Young, 2000).

*Racism* – operates as a system of privilege and penalty. “Racism consists centrally of two facets: First, a belief in the inherent inferiority of others, and second, the acceptance of distributing goods and services...in accordance with such judgments of unequal worth” (Weinberg, cited in Nieto & Bode, 2009, p. 69). Thus, racism rewards those who belong to a particular group with access to services such as housing, education, employment, and

health care, regardless of individual merit, while simultaneously it punishes those who belong to other groups by denying them access to those same goods and services (Nieto & Bode, 2009).

*The Returned Gaze* – when those usually gazed upon – objectified by the Gaze – surveille the surveillant – and thereby defy the Gaze – defy the objectification, deny the stratification, and resist the power that would subjugate them.

*Self-contained Classroom* – a traditional classroom, typically elementary, wherein one teacher teaches all of the core content areas of reading, math, science, and social studies.

*Spectacle* – dramatization, allegories, or reenactments of contemporary and historic events; they told a story, may have been fiction, fairy tale, Biblical, based on foreign affairs, past or present (Davis, 2002). In burlesque, and for the purpose of my research, Spectacle is a performance of the personal story, personal reality, and identity. Spectacle make the hidden visible – uses the personal story as a form of resistance, to draw attention to issues that might otherwise be ignored.

*Stage Kitten* – a person who picks up all of the costume pieces and props after a burlesque routine and sweeps the stage clean of any feathers, rhinestones, confetti, or other bits left behind after a performance.

*Striptease* – “Strip” and “tease” first appeared together as a word in 1928 (Shteir, 2004), and referred to a performer who portrayed the act of seduction as she removed her clothes during her routine; an act that provoked sexual fantasies and hinted at sexual availability while reminding her audience that she was in control, in command, of her own sexuality.

*Tacit Cultural Knowledge* – further explained by Spradley (1980), is cultural knowledge that lies outside immediate awareness, is not easily expressed or communicated in direct ways; the cultural things we do, things we say, meanings we act on without thinking, because they are so much a part of ourselves. Thus, culture, for the purposes of this research, is essentially the essence of who we are, the core of our identity. It is the filter through which we experience the world.

*Title I* – Title I is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). Schools with large populations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds receive financial assistance from the federal government, making them “Title I Schools.” Title I is meant to ensure that all students have fair and equal access to high-quality schools and highly-qualified teachers.

*Visibility* – to be seen, particularly in regard to those most often overlooked, denied the dignity of being recognized as worthy, as valuable, as human; who may also be viewed as deficient, criminal, deviant; who experience marginalization due to how they are perceived by mainstream (particularly White) society.

*Voice* – to be heard, particularly in regard to recognizing the voices of those most marginalized, whose stories are often overlooked, ignored, and who are most often silenced; whose thoughts are discounted or dismissed; especially people of color, the LGBT community, women (particularly women of color), and children.

*Warm Demanders* – a term used to describe a teacher who employs culturally responsive/relevant pedagogy to develop relationships with students, particularly students of color. Using their cultural heritage as touchstones, teachers help students build

confidence and self-efficacy, establish expectations academically, and provide them with a structure of support, discipline, and belief in their abilities.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

My study focused on children in kindergarten through fifth grade who attended a school in a major urban school district in North Texas. The findings of this study were immediately relevant to the elementary school in which my research took place, as well as to its district. The information gained from this study provided insight regarding the ways by which students, including very young children, performed acts of resistance to normalization in order to preserve and maintain cultural identity. The study also provided insight into creating learning environments where divisive borders are minimized, where all children are accepted, and their identities legitimated and validated. Although this study was limited to K-5 students on a single campus, it could be expanded to include students from grades Pre-K – 12, and could also include schools in districts and communities other than a major urban district.

### **CONCLUSION**

It has taken some time to come to a place where I understood the true depth of what this research means to me. The perspective of a classroom teacher, a graduate student, and student-researcher seemed like enough, and there was nothing wrong with seeing my work from those viewpoints, but none of those plumbed the depths of burlesque's significance to me. From the very first show I ever attended, I often said it was one of the most spiritual spaces I'd ever been in, one of the most spiritual experiences in my life. When I asked myself why it was so, my answer was always – it's everything church claims to be but is



not. The burlesque space is one of openness, genuine care, and love, inclusiveness and celebration of humanity – of the soul in each of us. It is a space of refuge and safety. A space where who I am is enough – is OK – is beautiful – a space where I am visible.

Though I spent my life in it and devoted to it, church was never any of those things. In church, everything about me was always wrong and needed to be fixed. No matter how hard I tried – it was just never enough. Such is the colonizing effect of religion. I can see it now, how I marched along, exactly as the patriarchy intended – but I am no longer a sheep. In the burlesque community, I found grace – for others – but also for myself. I discovered profound kindness, the likes of which I have never seen. And so, I wondered: If the burlesque community could come together and create such a beautifully magical place, why could we not do the same as educators? Why can we not create schools whose classrooms are just as open, accepting and inclusive? How much better would public schools be if we served children within genuine spaces of love, care and support? But then, schools, much like churches, are institutions deeply rooted in service to the purposes of those patriarchal structures that benefit from the colonization of children’s bodies and minds, colonization that ensures preservation of patriarchal power and economics.

When I began this journey, it was for the purpose of improving educational opportunities for children in schools such as those where I worked as a teacher. And so, it still is – but somewhere along the way I realized my intellectual journey is a spiritual one, as well – and so it must be for children, also. For, as teachers, we are not educating only their minds, we speak to their souls, too.

My years in public education, the books I've read and courses I've taken revealed to me the social injustices that children who are poor, children of color, and others, too, suffer at the hands of the education system in the U.S. but it was my experiences in the burlesque community that caused me to ponder whether students may be actively resisting the processes of colonization and assimilation – and to consider what borderlands educators may be constructing in their classrooms based on identity markers such as race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, gender and sexuality, among others. I wondered if my students – and their families – had shown me only what they wanted me to see; if they were not perhaps, playing along so they could be about their business in their own way.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### INTRODUCTION

Around the same time I completed the pilot studies, I read Zora Neale Hurston's (1935) account of her research and collection of folk tales from Black communities in rural Florida, and the struggles she faced even though she was also African American. In her writing she told of the tactics that some people used in order to resist the clawing, suffocating, invasive, oppressive groping of Whites: "We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the White person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing" (Hurston, 1935, p. 2). And then:

The White man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.  
(Hurston, 1935, p. 3)

Further, Selby (2005), applied burlesque as a symbolic frame (Burke, 1968) to several speeches made by Ralph David Abernathy, during the Civil Rights Movement (1964). In his speeches, Selby asserts, Abernathy burlesqued the White community – even made fools of those White FBI agents, and other Whites in attendance – via language and humor symbolic to African American culture, but completely lost on Whites – because, in spite of what many Whites may believe, they don't know as much as they think they do about non-White cultures. Thus, the possibility exists that even very young children resist the

patriarchal forces of colonization and assimilation – that behavior often perceived by White educators as deviant or undisciplined is actually a sophisticated cultural performance enacted to preserve and protect cultural identity; that like, in Abernathy’s speeches, children invert the power structures in classrooms. They take subversive action, transgress borders, and return the gaze that negatively constructs and marginalizes them. Thus, children burlesque the educational system.

## **BURLESQUE**

### **History of Burlesque**

For hundreds of years, the art of burlesque has offered to the poor and working classes – the marginalized – a place of entertainment and escape via theatrical presentations (Minsky & Machlin, 1986; Allen 1990). The meaning of the term “burlesque” has shifted over time, but historically, it denoted mockery, or disdainful imitation of that which was considered serious or sophisticated (Devereaux, 2014). Burlesque was a cultural phenomenon that allowed the ‘low others’ to challenge the social hierarchy and their position within it. It was a way to make sense of their world, to communicate to the bourgeoisie that they understood perfectly well their social position, while at the same time, making fun of those who attempted to define them through social discourse (Allen, 1991).

From the Latin root, *burlare*, “burlesque” means to laugh at, to parody, to mock, to make fun of; risqué undertones were typical of burlesque theater. “Original burlesque was performed with a wink and a nod. It was a tease. It was raucous, simple humor. It was accessible...brazen, always provocative...stripped of pretensions. It never tried to be

anything more than good entertainment for the common man” (Zemeckis, 2013, p. 302). As a form, burlesque can be traced back to the Greek tragedies and comedies (Goldwyn, 2010; Zemeckis, 2013). Though the theatrical form is much older, *Lysistrata*, by Aristophanes, in 411 B.C. is considered the first written example of a burlesque play (Goldwyn, 2010; Zemeckis, 2013). Aristophanes’ sense of humor, puns, and use of satire was so influential that the material he wrote remained in use, and served to anchor burlesque in the parody category, through the early twentieth century (Minsky & Machlin, 1986; Von Teese, 2006). Until then, a burlesque was a play, opera, ballet, or other theatrical production that poked fun at popular legitimate works of the time, and did not include chorus lines, comedians, or exotic dancers (Zemeckis, 2013).

To be sure, the meaning of the word and perceptions of the form itself have shifted over time. “It’s been called a variety of names: a girly show, burly show, tab show, vaudeville, medicine show, and strip show” (Zemeckis, 2013, p. 2). Now, the term “burlesque” is most often associated with the striptease for which it became known in the 1920s, toward the end of its heyday as a theatrical form. Burlesque, in nineteenth century America, consisted of a variety of forms of comic entertainment, as well as what became known as the leg show (Allen, 1991; Buszek, 1999). Burlesque’s rise in popularity paralleled that of vaudeville in bourgeois theaters, and both implemented variety acts. Burlesque, like the minstrel show, retained the low-other as its central figure.

In 1869, former minstrel show performer, M. B. Leavitt, took Lydia’s Blondes and fused their show with the style of the minstrel shows popular at the time, consisting of gags and songs and dance performed mainly by performers in black face. This new show

followed a three set formula that was to become the signature burlesque show we know today – an opening with lavish song and dance numbers, a second act of variety performers, a third act skit or send-up of a popular play, and finally, a grand finale by the entire company. (Zemeckis, 2013, xxii)

The leg show in burlesque theater productions of the nineteenth-century, typically parodied Romantic or historical texts favored by the bourgeoisie and often focused on the scantily dressed actresses rather than the drama (Allen, 1991; Buszek, 1999). Production of the *Black Crook* by Adah Isaacs Menken, and *Ixion*, by Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, established ballet, and its brief costumes, and the burlesque-based leg show, as permanent elements of burlesque theater (Allen, 1991; Buszek, 1999; Nally, 2009).

Burlesque increased in popularity as the presence of women in theaters – as actresses and as patrons – became more acceptable, or at least more common – and expanded to include what the middle – to upper-class thought of as legitimate theater (Allen, 1991; Buszek, 1999).

Burlesque, in its more traditional form, played in American theaters as early as 1839. As with any other form of artistic expression, playwrights and producers blended and merged aspects of other theater genres with those of burlesque and the form changed gradually, as it evolved to meet the demands of its audiences (Allen, 1991). Burlesque had always provided a space for women to play men's roles, and for men to play women's too, but as the form changed, it became increasingly dominated by women who expanded the form, and in addition to the traditional, parodic, inversive works of high-culture, produced a new sort of entertainment that publicly featured the female body and feminine sexuality

(Allen, 1990). “Initially dominated by women writers and producers, as well as performers, burlesque took wicked fun in reversing roles, shattering polite expectations, brazenly challenging notions of the approved ways women might display their bodies and speak in public” (Allen, 1991, xii). Firmly in the grip of the Victorian era, many women in the United States were chafing against rigid norms of femininity, thus in 1868, when Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes made their first appearance on the New York stage, women were poised and ready to seize the moment and push the limits of social constraint (Allen, 1991).

Though initially popular and well received, that first season posed a threat to the social hierarchy because it held nothing sacred; it enacted alternative values, presented a world without limits, inverted social structures, and reordinated the place of women in American society (Allen, 1991). The feminized form of burlesque raised questions about women’s presence and behavior on stage, as well as in American society. Saucy insubordination and feminine sexuality flagrantly flaunted, challenged power relations and brought about public outcry that claimed burlesque was indecent and deemed it a threat to moral decency and warned genteel society of the potential for contamination by the working class (Allen, 1991; Glenn, 1993). Through the public display of women’s bodies, through their voices – both literally and figuratively – on stage, and its inversion of male-female power structures, women transgressed the norms of acceptable social and sexual expression, and in so doing, burlesque challenged the stereotypical portrayal of independent women as low-other (Allen, 1991). Burlesque, then, became a cultural battleground between social classes (Glenn, 1993).

In the space of the burlesque theater, the borders that existed to divide and marginalize those less fortunate vanished. Notions of power and dominance were inverted, gender roles challenged, and even the very idea of fixed gender identity was upended (Allen, 1991; Davis, 2002). Through parody, raw wit, wicked humor, and often, scathing sarcasm, performances served to undermine and dismantle the rigid, patriarchal, social norms of the dominant and made a mockery of the wealthy and elite (Allen, 1991; Sween, 2002).

Burlesque, in spite of its popularity – because of it, even – posed a threat to mainstream social norms, and to a large degree, to men’s position in the social hierarchy as head-of-household (Allen, 1991). As an increasingly industrialized America brought more women to jobs outside of their homes, and increased leisure time, it also meant that men and women were more likely to socialize in settings that had previously been inhabited primarily by men. In the case of burlesque, it also meant a mingling of the classes because burlesque wasn’t featured in the theaters of the upper class; it played in the theaters of the poor and working-classes (Allen, 1991). Within those spaces, the upper class was confronted with parodies of their lives, of social status, and political commentary that not only acknowledged class differences, but also challenged them and their basis for existence (Allen, 1991; Nally, 2009). It was this transgressive, inversive nature, the blurring of gender role distinctions, the physical and verbal insubordination, that eventually caused the bourgeoisie to force burlesque out of the spotlight (Allen, 1991). Through censors and raids, blue laws and the financial strains of the Great Depression, burlesque was wrested from the creative genius of those whom it had represented for centuries and seized by the



upper-class, bent on reestablishing their positions in the social hierarchy. As the footlights dimmed and burlesque theaters closed in the districts of the working class, the form underwent more transformations and was reborn in the theaters of the wealthy.

### **Theatrical Space**

Until 1849, American theaters catered to a heterogeneous audience. Though eschewed by clergy and the pious, as they were viewed as sites of immorality and corruption, early theaters were one place where the social classes mixed – one space where the voices of the lower classes were heard, their wishes acknowledged, a space where audience feedback was part of the theater’s appeal (Allen, 1991; Sween, 2002). Theater spaces were divided such that the elite were accommodated in private boxes, and the third tier was reserved for showgirls and their clientele, but the pit was where the lower-classes were seated – where seats were cheap and readily available (Allen, 1991; Sween, 2002).

It was from those seats that the working classes actively participated in the production, where they vocalized their opinions on performances, where they stomped, shouted their approval, or hissed their disdain, and from which, the random rotten tomato was hurled (Allen, 1991; Sween, 2002). The pit served as a legitimate space for the marginalized to air their frustrations with civil inequities – as a space where they were empowered to challenge social norms (Sween, 2002). Such behavior contributed to class conflict as it breached boundaries of permissible speech and acceptable public behavior. Thus, the raucous expression of discontent from an increasingly empowered working-class, coupled with a sense of threat to social status of the elite, resulted in the New York Astor Place Theater riot of 1849 where 20 audience members died (Sween, 2002; Willson,

2008). The riot was the turning point in American theater history, because until 1849, there had been no class division in theaters, and formal limits were placed on audience participation and feedback (Sween, 2002; Willson, 2008). After the riot, theaters became divided among classes, some theaters moved locations, and each theater selected programs that specifically targeted one social class or another (Buszek, 1999; Sween, 2002; Willson, 2008).

### **The Birth of American Burlesque**

As the industrialized city expanded, standard workday hours were established, and workforces found themselves with more leisure time and with wages to spend. Concert saloons and honky tonks emerged as entertainment centers for the working-class, and what would be the predecessor of American burlesque (Allen, 1991; Davis, 2002; Patinkin, 2008; Willson, 2008). Entertainment in these establishments consisted of female singers and dancers, comic routines based on working-class and immigrant humor, and the occasional display of boxing prowess, so that American burlesque came to resemble vaudeville, and appealed particularly to a working-class male audience (Patinkin, 2008). Though not traditional theater settings, the concert saloons and honky tonks served as a space for distraction for the working class, from the hardships of overcrowded tenement living and monotonous factory jobs (Willson, 2008). The comic routines that poked fun at everyone dispelled fear of the Other and established a space that was expressive of a wide array of cultural identities (Willson, 2008).

British burlesque differed from American burlesque in that shows were typically full-length parodies of stories or plays that already existed, and they included songs, dance

routines, comic skits, and specialty acts that all told part of the same narrative (Patinkin, 2008). It was Lydia Thompson and the all-female troupe, the British Blondes, their brazen wit and unconventional costumes, who presented programs that were just as likely to satirize contemporary culture as classical literature, coupled with elements of the leg-show, that resulted in what has come to be known as American burlesque (Buszek, 1999; Patinkin, 2008). The emergence of American burlesque lent legitimacy to programs that had previously played primarily in concert saloons and honky tonks, and moved the form into the legitimate theaters of the middle-class. Initially, burlesque shows were very popular with middle-class audiences that included women and children (Devereaux, 2014), but as public outcry against burlesque increased, the form was abandoned by its middle-class patrons and relegated, once again, to the theaters and concert saloons of the working-class; and it was increasingly difficult for theaters to make money. Gradually, shows began to rely more heavily on the erotic spectacle of the female performer and even the slightest allusion to a play or some narrative structure faded, so that even the parodic framework that connected the acts vanished (Allen, 1991; Patinkin, 2008; Devereaux, 2014).

### **Burlesque in Decline**

A battle raged between the theaters of the middle class and those of the working-class. As burlesque theaters of the working-class struggled to survive, vaudeville poached the best variety acts; other talents were enticed away by Hollywood and the movies, while others still were offered long-term positions with shows like the Ziegfeld Follies (Allen, 1991). Burlesque theaters turned to shows that relied solely on the striptease to keep patrons interested. As blue laws were passed and raids on theaters ensued, stage lights

dimmed and the curtain closed on burlesque as it gave way to the more socially acceptable displays of feminine spectacle, in middle- and upper-class theaters and left thousands of performers without work and nowhere to turn in the theatrical world, as only a few had talents that transferred to other forms of entertainment (Allen, 1991; Weldon, 2010).

### **Spectacle**

After Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes took to the stage in New York, public perception of burlesque was permanently altered so that what had become known as the “leg show” was inseparable from the burlesque form and increasingly, the female form served as spectacle for male theater patrons (Allen, 1991; Devereaux, 2014), and the inversive, transgressive female performances which had challenged gender roles and social hierarchies, the comedy and sarcasm, were abandoned (Glenn, 1993), so that even when an act was not of a sexual nature, female performers were reduced to objects of sexual humor (Allen, 1991).

The permanent addition of the cooch show to burlesque programs essentially established fixed gender roles on stage, men reasserted themselves as vocal and dominant, and women – silenced when the physical and verbal acts of insubordination were removed – became objects of sexual display – silent spectacle (Allen, 1991).

As silent spectacle, on the stages of the upper –class - the presence of nude, or nearly nude women on stage became acceptable, even respectable, in cabarets and revues, such as the Ziegfeld Follies, where chorus girls were the image of wholesome beauty (Allen, 1991). Ziegfeld girls were the antithesis of female burlesque performers. The burlesque form embraced – celebrated – the full-figured, often substantial girth, of the

female body, where Ziegfeld girls often appeared prepubescent, somewhat androgynous, and non-threatening in their sexuality (Allen, 1991).

Though no other theatrical form was ever more saturated by women, the roles and perception of women in burlesque gradually changed throughout its history; from bawdy working girls who boldly chafed against inscribed social norms to silent spectacle; respectable and pliant as object for male enjoyment; from smart and celebrated, vivacious and empowered, to silent, dim, stage decoration – again assigned to the role society chose for them (Allen, 1991).

### **Current State of Burlesque**

American Burlesque is said to have died a slow and painful death, having taken its last gasping breath in the early 1930s. However, the mid-1990s saw a burlesque revival from which sprung the revelation that burlesque was not dead, it had merely gone underground, so to speak, and survived in different forms – before rising from the ashes as what is now referred to as “neo-burlesque.” During its dormancy, burlesque survived in a variety of forms across the country. In New York, it survived as part of the Performance Art movement; in Los Angeles, as part of the Rockabilly music, car and pin-up girl culture, and; in Chicago, New Orleans, and Texas, burlesque held to its more classic “Golden Era” style (Personal communication with MissVHaven, spring, 2014).

When the neo-burlesque form emerged, it brought vestiges of each of these, in addition to nerdlesque, boylesque, drag, fetish, striptease, and adult-themed circus performances (Weldon, 2010). As its popularity spread in new cities nationally, such as

Seattle, it also gained audiences internationally; most notably in Japan, Europe, and Australia (Weldon, 2012).

Throughout its many transformations, burlesque has retained its humor and wit as the vehicles by which it has continued to challenge the status quo and celebrate the low-  
other, while it lampooned traditional, mainstream, social norms. What has changed, however, at least to some degree, are the motives that inspire burlesque artists to create and perform new routines. Aside from the draw of the theater, early American burlesque was one of the only industries that paid women wages equal to those earned by men (Allen, 1991), whereas in the neo-burlesque industry, most performers are not paid a significant amount of money for their performances. Though some producers are able to pay each act a small fee, of perhaps \$30-\$50, it is not uncommon for a shows' headliners to be the only ones who get paid for their appearances (Personal communication with Coco Lectric, spring, 2014). Additionally, performance content has changed such that artists create their own acts based on personal sources of inspiration; a single performer may develop a variety of routines such as a striptease dressed in a chicken costume, an aerial routine reminiscent of the circus, as well as a drag routine, but in each routine, there remains an element of humor, of insubordination, and a cheeky challenge of assigned roles and social normativity (Weldon, 2010; Blanchette, 2014).

Like its early, American burlesque, forerunner, the neo-burlesque community embraces the intentionally insubordinate humor that inverts gendered and social hierarchies, but it has also intentionally expanded its borders and created a space that is safe for all who enter; a space that transgresses the borders of gender, size, age,

race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and class (Willson, 2008; Weldon, 2010; Blanchette, 2014).

## **POSTCOLONIAL THEORY**

Postcolonial theory serves to examine the effects of colonialism on contemporary cultures globally, in addition to revealing colonial mechanisms that are still employed to ensure economic, political, and cultural dominance of the colonizer over the colonized (Young, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Like colonialism, postcolonialism functions internally as well as externally, as it is a culturally hegemonic force that requires the participation of the colonizer – who imposes the conditions, and the colonized – who submit to those stratifying conditions; whose societies are thus economically, materially, and culturally subordinated (Young, 2000).

According to Young (2000), the term ‘colonization’ didn’t always refer to the subjugation and exploitation of indigenous people and their wealth, but rather to the transfer of people and communities who sought personally advantageous economic, political or religious conditions, while maintaining their own cultural identity. However, that outward expansion served to establish markets for European products which cemented the relationship between imperialism and colonialism (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Colonialism made way for imperialism, and the affects of imperialism on the places, spaces, and people, are what enable colonizers to exert control over entire nations, and in the postcolonial, without colonies or military presence (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Loomba, 1998; Smith, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts reprinted from pp. 30-50 of the literature review will appear in a book chapter, Postcolonial theory and teacher education, by Radhika Viruru and Julia Persky in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Global Perspectives on Teacher Education*. Oxford University Press, New York. (July 2019).

The vast dimensions of colonialism are remarkable not only because of the global expansiveness of its reach, but also because the power exerted through Western imperialism soldered peoples and societies from different cultures and historical traditions into the same course of economic, political and cultural control (Young, 2000). A particularly significant characteristic of the post/colonial mechanism of control is the process of Othering. Said's (1978) example of the Oriental described as "...irrational, depraved, childlike, different..." (p. 40) in comparison to mature, scientifically advanced, rational and pious Europeans illustrates the subjugation of people and cultures via essentialized representations that cast them as inferior to the West (Rivas, 2010). This process is important because it serves as a tool that controls not only the colonized, but also the colonizer, as the economic enterprises of imperialism must assert control over Western subjects, as well as indigenous populations (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Young, 2000). To justify dominance over, and the destruction of, other people, societies and cultures, colonizers had to establish themselves as superior. To do so, they constructed identities for themselves and for the colonized based on descriptors that excluded the colonized from the colonizer, and in so doing, inextricably tied together the identities of the dominant, and the Other (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Rivas, 2010). Disparagement of one group based on ethnic, geographic, economic, or ideological markers encouraged all Europeans to identify with the dominant, positive construction of Western colonizers – which subsequently allowed the colonizing power to control them all (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Rivas, 2010).



## **BORDER THEORY**

Imperialism creates boundaries between places as well as people, as colonizers work to order society/social hierarchy to meet their own purposes (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). There are, inevitably, clashes at these borders as people from different cultural backgrounds navigate the boundaries that divide them; language, race, religion. Borders are always contested sites of power as the colonizers are always working to keep the subaltern in 'their place' while simultaneously maintaining positions of power and privilege, thus the borders become the space of both overt and covert resistance (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Post/colonialism makes use of two primary forms of power, explained by Foucault (1975-76/2003) as disciplinary power, which ensures compliant, useful, docile bodies, and regulatory power which serves to monitor and regulate populations. Both are critical to establishing and maintaining divisions that hierarchize and normalize (Shallwani, 2010). The norm generates borders as it compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes and excludes people while it operates as a mechanism of disciplinary and regulatory power as it defines the average to be achieved, establishes limits of deviation, and is applied to individual bodies and to populations (Foucault, 1977/1984).

Anzaldúa (2012) explains the borderlands as places and spaces "...where two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between the two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (p. 19). There should be no question as to why borders exist; they are constructed for the purposeful separation of us from them, of the safe from the unsafe, the clean from the unclean (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). "Cradled in one culture,

sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (Anzaldúa, p. 100). “The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference cause *un choque*, a cultural collision” (Anzaldúa, p. 100).

Anzaldúa (1983) expressed her understanding of herself as not belonging to any one people – only to herself. The borders erected and maintained by the dominant serve not only to separate colonizer from colonized, but also as divisions of the colonized from each other. Forced to take on the values of their oppressors they are alienated from their native cultures communities as they internalize the violence meted them and erect color, class, and gender borders of their own (Anzaldúa, 1983; Moraga, 1983).

Post/Colonization comes at a cost, at a loss, for all involved, colonizer and colonized. Post/Colonization renders its victims barely legible, as by ignoring or devaluing their age, gender, race, and nationality, they are denied full status as human beings (Butler & Spivak, 2010). Forced, by the system that produces and maintains the conditions to accept this wretchedness as normal, they are stripped of belonging to their home culture while simultaneously denied access to the new, or dominant one (Butler & Spivak, 2010). Exclusion and loss of self – loss of racial/ethnic identity, of language, of gender/sexual identity – leave the colonized abandoned in the borderlands of existence (Anzaldúa, 2012; Butler & Spivak, 2010).

## **COLONIZATION, BORDERS & SCHOOLING**

Postcolonial theory and Border theory can be applied to public schools in the United States. Like colonialism forced indigenous cultures into the same economic path,

the postcolonial/neoliberal agenda in public schools pushes all children from diverse backgrounds, cultures and historical traditions toward the same path in service to an economy that serves the elite – in a capitalist/imperialist global order. The same as colonized indigenous populations globally, children in U.S. public schools are Othered via race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, size, socioeconomic status, and immigration status as well as other markers of difference from the White, heteronormative, middle-class, protestant construction of normalcy and belonging. It is an imagined contrast that sustains Otherness and justifies the domination of colonial rule (Rivas, 2010).

In education, characteristics of oppressive Othering can be identified in the interactions that affirm the ideologies of the dominant group, in the inferior/superior, normal/deviant binaries and in the ways the postcolonial enterprise has rendered children subjects, as objects – commodities – for the Empire (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). And just as the mechanism of Othering served to justify domination and destruction of indigenous people and societies, so it serves to justify the continued domination and destruction of children deemed different, thereby placing children and educators under the control of dominant economic forces (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Cultural collisions occur in classrooms when teachers fail to recognize differences in learning styles, emotional expression, verbal and non-verbal communication styles, and behavioral expectations (Collins, 2010).

Misconceptions formed due to failure to consider these cultural dissonances contribute to the construction of borders within classroom settings - where those within are perceived as “...the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the

mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25) - and create spaces for resistance that challenges stereotypes; spaces that necessitate struggle, where there is never peace (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Collins, 2010).

So, the borders become a place where identities are constructed, contested, maintained, and denied as those who inhabit the borderlands are forced into the margins of existence while those who dominate are affirmed and legitimated (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). When boundaries resulting from physical and intellectual regulation are challenged, those who resist subjugation, whether directly or subtly, are considered deviant trouble-makers in need of intervention (Asher, 2009; Bhabha, 1994; Cannella & Viruru, 2004). It is imperative, however, to recognize that it is impossible for colonial authority to ever be total or complete, thus power and resistance to power occur at the same point and make preservation of agency and identity possible for the colonized (Asher, 2009; Bhabha, 1994; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Foucault, 1980).

### **Us/Them Binaries**

One way post/colonialism functions to justify the oppression and subjugation of the Other is the construction of us/them binaries that create a superior/inferior climate that privileges the dominant culture over colonized cultures (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). These binaries always work in the interests of the colonizer and serve to maintain the social, economic and cultural hierarchy.

The language invoked by the us/them, superior/inferior binary is associated with codes of difference and deviance that generate the power to oppress, degrade, and exclude

the Other (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Shallwani, 2015). Difference and need are always located on, and within, the bodies and lives of the Other – family, home, language, education, socioeconomic status – and the alleged deficiencies serve the us/them binary as it functions to allow or deny access to mainstream culture (Shallwani, 2015). The post/colonial employs the us/them binary to flex its power over the Other as it seeks to neutralize difference and purge society of its heterogeneity by either excluding or exterminating that which is different, or by absorbing those who are different into the mainstream and then forcing them to conform to standard social norms (Butler & Spivak, 2010; Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Therefore, these modes of being dictate every aspect of subjugated lives including: movement, personal associations, work, schooling, and speech (Butler & Spivak, 2010). There are several dangers that stem from superior/inferior binary constructs, one of which is benevolent patriarchy, discussed by Paulo Freire (1972).

### **Benevolent Patriarchy**

Freire (1972) wrote that, as powerful as the oppressors are, they don't have the strength to liberate the oppressed or even themselves, but that instead, it is the weak who hold the power to liberation for everyone. However, the education of the oppressor should not come at the expense of the oppressed (Moschkovich, 1983). Neither should the oppressor take up the stance of a missionary who attempts to save the oppressed, tries to speak for them, and thus silences and further oppresses them (Anzaldúa, 1983).

Post/colonial conceptions of the Other as deficient, as somehow always lacking, as backward, and static, generates a sense of urgency, that suggests the necessity for patriarchal responsibility to, and for, the Other, thus legitimating authority and control

(Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Shallwani, 2010). Portrayal of the Other as socially, economically, historically, and culturally undeveloped lends to the compulsion, and justification of presuming the right and authority to teach them how to live appropriate, enlightened lives and thus reinscribe dominant ways of being and belonging (Saavedra & Camicia, 2010). This presumed authority extends into the lives of children. When difference, deviance and need are located in the bodies and lives of children, the sense of danger is accompanied by a sense of moral responsibility to intervene in their raising – and thereby save them (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Shallwani, 2010).

Education plays an important role in the post/colonial agenda, as schools are a particularly significant mechanism employed by the dominant where the use of education professionals, books, curriculum, and other learning resources are wielded as tools to legitimate authority, as weapons of domination and molds to shape and ensure compliance (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Loomba, 1998; Shallwani, 2010). Having justified its interference in the lives of the Other and establishing itself as benevolent patriarch whose purpose is to save, the post/colonial agenda is further advanced in its aim to normalize as it seeks to colonize minds.

### **Colonizing Minds**

Western imperialism ascribes to the belief that knowledge is a source of power and those who reside within the strongest economic positions articulate that which can be considered knowledge, thereby privileging one way of knowing, one set of knowledge, over others (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). The powerful use social processes and practices to legitimate knowledge deemed true and valid, while de-legitimizing indigenous knowledge

through exclusion, silencing, marginalizing, ignoring, and prohibiting it; and thus, indigenous peoples are denied the rights of expression and representation of their own realities (Rivas, 2010; Smith, 2012).

Every aspect of the field of education is controlled by a hierarchy of experts who determine which knowledge is of most importance, what information gets included in curriculum, who has access to education, the language in which it is presented, teacher preparation, and the manner in which learning opportunities are offered to children (Soto, Hixon & Hite, 2010; Soto & Kharem, 2006). In doing so, education is normalized, as all children are expected to learn the same material, the same way, at roughly the same time, with little to no room to accommodate difference. Learning and development thus becomes a universal phenomenon that is predictable, orderly, linear, progressive and cumulative – normal; children whose development lies outside this established universal path are, therefore, considered abnormal (Shallawani, 2010). The universal insists that all children are the same, so then, when a child diverges from that norm, race, class, gender or culture are to blame and are the reason a child is considered deficient and again, dominant discourses on learning and ways of being are maintained and reinforced (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Shallwani, 2010).

Growing up in the U.S. and educated in its public schools almost assuredly means that students will not be exposed to any cultures or languages other than those of the dominant, and those from marginalized backgrounds will struggle to receive affirmation, acceptance, and approval (Moschkovich, 1983; Purpel, 2007). Since it begins in childhood and continues throughout their lives, children from the dominant culture are increasingly

empowered through shared experiences and shared identity with the culture of power, while children from non-dominant, subordinated, backgrounds simultaneously learn to accept, and participate in, the process of their own marginalization and essentially consent to the erasure of their culture, their history, and of their self as they are shoved into the margins, powerless to do anything except surrender to colonization (Cannella & Bloch, 2006; La Paperson, 2010; Moschkovich, 1983; Soto, 2006; Yamada, 1983). Dehumanizing pedagogy robs children of their humanity, stifles their potential and encourages passivity and submissiveness (Salazar, 2008). From her own experiences as a child, Wong (1983) expressed, “When I was growing up, I felt dirty. I thought that God made White people clean and no matter how much I bathed, I could not change. I could not shed my skin in the gray water” (p. 8).

Instead of students from different cultural groups having the opportunity to express their cultural truths, culturally hegemonic educational discourses generate such a profound imbalance in power that many marginalized children succumb to the conditioning process that teaches them not to expect to be taken seriously, or to matter, but to instead figure out how to fit themselves into the molds prepared for them (Darder, 2012; Yamada, 1983). Salazar (2013) remembers, “My educational experience was marked by a deep sense of isolation that resulted from systematic practices in the U.S. educational system that suppressed vital elements of my humanity, both at home and at school” (p. 121). As children submit themselves to the continual degradation of the conditioning process they not only learn to yield themselves to the power exercised over them by others, they also



transmit their oppressor's ideologies to friends and family members (Anzaldúa, 1983; Canaan, 1983).

I am filled with endless stories of advertent and inadvertent messages of inferiority that compelled me to crave Whiteness as a young child. In the third grade, I desperately wanted to be White. My teachers privileged Whiteness through the English language and U.S. culture, and they excluded all that was native to me; hence I ascertained that White children were smarter, more attractive, and affluent. As a result I became a connoisseur of Whiteness when I was 8 years old. I observed my White classmates closely and dissected their behaviors until I discovered a common pattern; every White student in my class was in the highest reading group. Thus, I hypothesized that if I propelled myself into the top reading group, the red robins, the color of my skin would change and I would become White and worthy. I achieved my goal and my name was called to join the red robins. I ran home that day and examined my complexion in the mirror, to no avail; my skin remained the color of burnt toast. I waited anxiously for days, yet the transformation never ensued, and I became distressed that I would have to live in my dark skin forever as *la morena*, the dark-skinned girl. (Salazar, 2013, p. 122)

Children from marginalized backgrounds are rarely educated to be free to be leaders, except by purposeful design, when it serves the needs and purposes of the colonizer (Soto, 2006). "When we view our liberation as a scarce resource, something only a precious few of us can have, we stifle our potential, our creativity, our genius for living, learning and

growing (Canaan, 1983, p. 235). The power and ability to act in one's own self-interest is destroyed (Soto, 2006).

### **Surveillance**

Colonization occurs not only on a systemic level, but also at the level of the individual and acts upon both the body and the mind (Asher, 2009). Knowledge of, and power over, the Other comes through the act of surveillance. Surveillance functions as a tool of post/colonization as it places the colonizer in a position to use knowledge of the colonized to maintain hierarchical advantage for the purpose of control.

Observation/surveillance is used as a method of categorization, measurement, regulation, and control, and as such serves the post/colonial by shaping methods of control.

Surveillance is used as a method to construct and reinforce dominant beliefs of race, gender, class, and cultural superiority that then justify imperialist acts that subjugate and oppress, regulate and control the Other (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Saaverda & Camicia, 2010; Shallwani, 2010).

Bhabha (1994) discussed the idea of surveillance as a way that colonial discourses constructed the Other and created subject people by depicting them as deficient in ways severe enough that they need to be controlled, their lives ordered and regulated by those who generated the knowledge, and so, the body, manipulated and disciplined, became the target upon which power is exerted (Foucault, 1977). As it relates to children, Foucault (1977/1984) explained surveillance as the management of childhood and manner by which interaction and relationships between children and adults are regulated, and colonization is

obvious in the physical control over children's bodies and also over the spaces within which children interact (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Shallwani, 2010).

Western constructions of childhood place children in positions of inferiority which justifies surveillance and regulation as constant visibility assures maintenance of power – whereby the gaze itself is a means of discipline, control and regulation (Burman, 2010; Foucault, 1977/1984; Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Belief in knowledge as a universal phenomenon serves the process of normalization as teachers and caregivers are expected to observe children's behaviors and interactions, taking into account their interests, abilities, likes and dislikes, overall development, strengths and weaknesses (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Foucault, 1977/1984; Shallwani, 2010). The information gained is then used to judge whether or not children fit within the parameters of the universal norm and to what degree interventions are necessary to ensure bodies and minds are obedient, useful and docile (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Foucault, 1975/2003; Shallwani, 2010).

Surveillance turns the gaze into a sinister means of control as it serves as a mirror, such that children are forced to view themselves as reflected by dominant social views. Children encounter the destructive forces of the gaze in every aspect of their lives as it even manages to seep into their homes via TV where programming (including commercial advertisements) portray people of color as the 'bad guys' (Soto & Kharem, 2006; Valerio, 1983).

### **Racism**

Perhaps one of the most obvious ways post/colonialism is visible is racism, as it serves to subjugate the Other via construction of a racial hierarchy that positions and

privileges Whiteness as superior to all other races of people. Asserted and maintained historically and institutionally, the religious views, art, language, and world perspectives of Whites have been promoted as superior, while those cultural features of African Americans, Latinos/as, and others, have been denigrated and dismissed as inferior and unworthy of recognition (Hyland, 2005). The norms that privilege Whiteness disempower and disadvantage people of color (Hyland, 2005). Racism is rooted in the doctrine of White Supremacy and though prejudiced individuals may join the larger movement, racism is a movement of the collective which consists first, of a belief in the inherent superiority of some people and the inherent inferiority of others, and second, of disproportionate access, and denial, to goods and services in accordance with such judgments of unequal worth (Weinberg, as cited in Nieto & Bode, 2009).

Historically, the concept of race emerged as a means to justify chattel slavery, as well as the exploitation and annihilation of indigenous people groups due to Westward expansion and imperialism (Alexander, 2012). Racism, as a mechanism for sorting, hierarchizing and normalizing populations and for individuals, is explained by Foucault (1975-76/2003) as a "...break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (p. 254-255). In true post/colonial fashion, racism exerts its influence through physical and psychological control as those caught in its grasp grapple with the costs of Otherness. Subordinated cultures are maintained in oppressive conditions by legitimating the interests and ideology of the dominant culture as the cultural values, heritage, language, knowledge, and lived experiences of subordinated groups are simultaneously marginalized and invalidated

(Darder, 2012). Dealing with the fear born of racism exacts a toll and affects individuals differently as, Wong (1983) explained, “I began to wear an imaginary pale skin” (p. 7), and as expressed by Lorde, “I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there” (1983, p. 101).

Classification, and hierarchical organization, of the world’s people along racial lines then, is an act of power that functions on one hand, to affirm and maintain the superiority of Whiteness and dominant cultural norms, while on the other, justifies inequality and the right to define the Other and who should or should not be granted access and included in mainstream society (Ahmed, 2000; Alexander 2012; Picower, 2009). It should be mentioned however, that while racism is most frequently, and accurately, associated with the oppression of people of color by Whites, it is important to also consider that there are poor and working class people of color who, having adopted dominant cultural beliefs, also function from a racist perspective because, “we are all continually pumped with gross and inaccurate images of everyone else and we all pump it out” (Cameron, 1983, p. 49). As Beverly Tatum (2003) explained, we are all smog breathers, inhaling the air pollution around us every day; similarly, racism permeates everything around us, making us racism breathers – regardless of our skin color. It is so embedded in the fabric of our lives we generally do not recognize how it structures every aspect of society. This hegemonic nature of racial domination is the reason White privilege, along with the subjugation of people of color, is so easily maintained (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Gutierrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, 2010).

Used to create both, false differences and very significant real ones, race becomes a border that divides the normal from the abnormal, where Whiteness is constructed as normal and all others are therefore abnormal, different, inferior, in need of intervention, and excluded (Quintanales, 1983; Shallwani, 2010). Current culture in the United States idealizes Whiteness, making it the normative standard, while others are devalued, minimized (Bonilla-Silva, 2012). Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) explained it as being constantly compared to a color chart, while Canaan (1983) recalled the degradation associated with her brownness as, “lazy, shiftless, poor, non-human, dirty, abusive, ignorant, uncultured and uneducated, while the ultimate model of good things was White” (p. 232). Though resistance to the message that White is better than Brown is possible, it is not a message that can be unlearned easily as Anzaldúa (1983) indicated, it took over thirty years to turn her own self-hatred to love.

In education, racism, as defined by Foucault (1975-76/2003), is evident in the regulation of children’s bodies and the spaces within which they interact (Shallwani, 2010). U.S. classrooms reflect racism in the larger society as children are segregated, classified and normalized (Shallwani, 2010). Children may live a multitude of experiences that leave deep, long-lasting negative effects on them socially, emotionally, and academically. Chrystos (1983) expressed her difficulty in liking herself while surrounded by a culture that perceived of her as a disease. Similarly, Moraga (1983) felt alienated from and fearful of her peers due to class and cultural differences, and Cameron (1983) internalized her anger, frustrated with herself for her inability to trust her White friends and with the alienation she experienced as a result.

Members of minority groups often internalize racialized stereotypes such as the mild Hindu, the slow Black, or the studious Asian, which reinforce the superior/inferior binaries, position Whiteness as culturally superior while constructing children from other backgrounds as culturally deprived, and therefore serve to limit options and opportunities for learning (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Loomba, 1998; Rivas, 2010)

Constructions of cultural deprivation, or culture of poverty, justify segregation, difference in access, low expectations for learning, disciplinary differences and discrimination. Yet, “culture is not really something I have a choice in keeping or discarding. It is in me and of me. Without it I would be an empty shell and so would anyone else” (Moschkovich, 1983, p. 82).

From the earliest of American history to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the intelligence and academic capacity of subordinated groups has been disparaged; language, prior knowledge, culture, presumed genetically inferior, presumed deficient, aberrant, and hopelessly uneducable, unable to perform at parity with White children (Boutte, 2012; Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Described as culturally deprived, disadvantaged, and at risk, children of color are framed as lacking the resources necessary for success in school and society (Delpit, 2012, Milner, 2008; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). The discourse over children who are at risk locates the responsibility, the fault, for the lack of success, within students, their families, and communities, instead of placing that responsibility on institutional practices designed and implemented for the maintenance of the status quo (Milner, 2008; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

The at-risk label is problematic in that it erases the complexities of cultural and linguistic differences and then treats those differences as deviations from the norm – it pathologizes children of color, constructing race as an indicator as a need for special services (Pacini-Ketchabaw, White & Alemeida, 2006), and extreme discipline measures (Lewis, 2003). Hence, children of color experience drastic disparities in classroom removals, suspensions, and expulsions. “Although our national discourse on racial disparity tends to focus on academic outcomes...in school districts throughout the United States, Black, Latino and American Indian students are subject to a differential and disproportionate rate of school disciplinary sanctions...” (Russell, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). Race shapes classroom procedures and practices, and due to societal stereotypes, children of color, particularly African American boys, it is not uncommon for teachers to negatively react to normal boy behavior (Delpit, 2012; Lewis, 2003), or misinterpret communication styles and interactional patterns as combative or argumentative (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May & Tobin, 2011). Even the most well-intentioned educators may perpetuate racially unjust disciplinary practices (Lewis, 2003).

Fenning and Rose (2007) suggest that teachers fear the loss of control over their classrooms and may therefore escalate minor classroom disruptions. Further, due to racial perceptions, this fear likely causes the over-identification of poor students of color as problematic. The degree to which teachers perceive control over their classrooms to be threatened “determines whether or not the misdeed will be handled within the classroom or deteriorates into a heated exchange between student and teacher, leading to the student’s removal from the classroom” (p. 538). Nationally, the predominantly White (and female)



teaching force (Darling-Hammond, 2010) makes racial stereotyping a probable contributor to disproportionate discipline referral (Skiba, et al., 2011). There is, however, no data that supports the assumption that children of color engage in higher rates of problematic behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2008). Conversely, there is substantial evidence that shows children of color are disciplined more frequently and more severely for less serious discipline infractions, many of which are for more subjective reasons than for actual violations of school or classroom rules (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Most suspensions (95%) cannot be attributed to unlawful or dangerous offenses, but instead occur for disruptive behavior, with only 5% the result of guns, drugs, or violence (Losen, 2011). Most suspensions for students of color are due to minor incidents for which White students would not be disciplined at all – with Black students being most disproportionately impacted by such discriminatory removals (Losen, 2011). In elementary schools, African American students are more likely than White students to receive suspension for all types of behavior infractions, but are four times more likely to be suspended for minor behavior issues, while Hispanic students are twice as likely as Whites to be receive suspension as a consequence for minor disciplinary infractions (Skiba, et al., 2011).

Suspension rates for all non-White students has more than doubled since the 1970s, and as suspension rates have risen, so have the number of referrals to the juvenile justice system – with African American youth constituting 45% of all juvenile arrests (American Psychological Association, 2008; Losen, 2011; Welner & Carter, 2013). Suspension and

expulsion leave students alienated from peers and deny access to learning, and potentially contribute to poor academic performance, higher school dropout rates, and the increased likelihood for involvement in the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2011).

Often overlooked are the roles that teachers, school administrators, teacher training, and school policies play in students' disciplinary problems (Losen, 2011). Research indicates a positive correlation between effective classroom management and improved educational and disciplinary outcomes; high levels of student engagement reduce instances of misbehavior (Losen, 2011). However, these connections are frequently negated and children are held solely responsible (Losen, 2011; Milner, 2008).

Post/colonialism subjugates group/cultural values in favor of the interests of the individual. The language of individualism positions the dominant culture over others and serves as the basis for cultural elitism and many racist constructions, so that the failure or underachievement of children from particular groups becomes a cultural deficit, characteristic of a child's environment rather than the failure of a racist system that favors and empowers those children who fit within the construction of individualism (Cannella, 1997; Collins, 2010; Rivas, 2010). Racism in classroom settings functions to devalue and erase the lived experiences and cultures of children of color, and to then replace that which was lost with a new set of values and experiences that aim to make malleable their bodies and minds (Saavedra & Camicia, 2010). That which gets excluded dismisses the heritage of those from non-European descent and denies the truth of the real connections that exist between all of us (Lorde, 1983). Racism then, becomes internalized, is always present and

inescapable as it is easier to repeat the racial patterns of fear and prejudice than it is to resist them (Anzaldúa, 1983; Moraga, 1983).

## **Language**

Language is a site of struggle, oppression and domination as post/colonialism privileges the English language over all others, and more specifically, Standard English, as it is prized over other English dialects. When English is positioned as superior, language acts as a hegemonic mechanism because it functions to strategically and systematically strip away heritage languages, the cultural integrity and independence of the colonized, and replace them with the language, values, and culture of the colonizer (Darder, 2012; Soto, 2006). Language domination then, is a tool of post/colonialism as it promotes “...cultural invasion, loss of sovereignty, loss of resources, loss of dignity, and loss of humanity...” (Soto, 2006). Language is regarded as a marker of ethnic identification and is essential to the performance of social roles and social cohesion (Rivas, 2010). Further, language is recognized as a gatekeeper for entry into the dominant culture, and as a means of social mobility (Rivas, 2010; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002).

Language serves as a mechanism of social stratification, with those who speak Standard English positioned at the top of the hierarchical structure (Soto, 2006; Stubbs, 2008). Used as a measure of social classification, how well one speaks Standard English signals perception; intelligence, ambition, confidence, and reliability are attributed to people who speak it fluently and without accent, while those who do not are frequently portrayed as lazy, criminal, unwilling to conform and become ‘American,’ and therefore need to be controlled (Soto, 2006; Stubbs, 2008). To attain upward mobility, those

subjugated must devalue their own home culture and language and replace it with Standard English and Western culture, further surrendering power and agency to colonizing forces of White supremacy (Soto, 2006; Stubbs, 2008). Therefore, learning another language always involves issues of culture, identity and resistance (Hirst, 2010).

Historically, it has been considered un-American to speak native languages other than English in U.S. schools, and since educational institutions are fundamental in promoting the language and cultural traditions of the dominant group, choices regarding language of instruction are based on the political ideology of the elite (Rivas, 2010; Soto, Hixon & Hite, 2010). Regarded as inferior to English, native languages of minority groups are devalued and face extermination within the U.S. educational system where there remains a political push for mandatory English-only policies (Rivas, 2010).

Though linguists have well established that languages worldwide consist of vastly complex grammatical systems, the idea that languages other than English, particularly languages spoken by low-income and minority groups, are somehow primitive, continues to permeate U.S. culture (Stubbs, 2008). Standard English does not connote standard of quality, as Standard English is, simply, the language of convenience – the language most commonly spoken (Delpit, 2008; Hilliard, 2008; Nieto, 2002; Stubbs, 2008). “Yet, the approach to teaching English in our schools seeks to establish standards for aesthetics and to establish a national cultural heritage based on it” (Hilliard, 2008, p. 94).

As they produce cultural clashes and issues of social justice surrounding the struggle for equal and equitable access to education, English-only language policies deeply impact native languages and those who speak them (Rivas, 2010; Soto, Hixon & Hite,

2010). Regardless of the fact that all languages are valid, languages and dialects other than Standard English have less status, and the children who speak those languages are often considered deficient; less capable, less intelligent, in need of remediation (Nieto, 2002). In dominant educational discourses, children whose first language is not English are frequently portrayed as culturally backward, linguistically deficient, and cognitively delayed such that mental and emotional support are necessary in order to overcome obstacles to learning (Delpit, 2008; Rivas, 2010; Wynne, 2008). Their native languages are considered a handicap, something that needs to be cured, eradicated, if students are to experience academic success (Nieto, 2002; Salazar, 2008). Educational policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) contribute to language oppression by emphasizing English language development as the solution for achievement disparities, making bilingual education less accessible and less critical (Salazar, 2008). Though research indicates that second language acquisition improves cognitive functioning and further supports the necessity for a strong foundation in their native language to ensure academic success, the dominant rhetoric remains, "...if they can speak English, they can be educated" (Rivas, 2010, p. 257). Positioned as a critical axis of representation and practice, language serves the elite as a tool of domination that facilitates the loss of dignity, of self, of humanity, and further, acts to silence the voices of children (Rivas, 2010; Soto & Kharem, 2006).

For generations, abandonment of one's native language, in order to survive in English-only environments, has been expected, perceived as an acceptable price to pay in return for success in U.S. public schools, for access to the culture of power, for citizenship (Nieto, 2002; Salazar, 2013). Educators play a primary role in the linguistic assimilation of

their students, frequently justifying the disregard for, and prevention of native language use, as in service to students' best interest, of intellectual development, emotional well-being, and economic and social mobility (Darder, 2012; Nieto, 2002; Soto, 2006; Stubbs, 2012). Too seldom, too little attention is given to teacher bias, ideology, or political beliefs that structure classroom environments and interactions. As Freire and Macedo (1987) assert, "The English-only movement in the United States...points to a xenophobic culture that blindly negates the pluralistic nature of U.S. society and falsifies the evidence in support of bilingual education, as has been amply documented" (p. 154). Consequently, even in schools with bilingual programs, these attitudes are reflected in policies and practices that rush to move children into mainstream, English-only classrooms where they receive little to no support academically or linguistically and are actively discouraged – even punished – for using their native languages; Spanish, Chinese, Ebonics, Arabic, etc. (Darder, 2012), leaving students disempowered rather than better prepared.

Anzaldúa (2012) explained culture and language as "twin skins" (p. 80) and as such, established that they are inseparable characteristics of identity. Further, according to Bakhtin (1984) language hierarchies not only sort language into dialects, but also socio-ideologically so that language is deeply connected to meaning-making within extremely unique and diverse cultural settings. Thus, we are intimately connected to our first language as it is inextricably linked to the deepest parts of ourselves and is the way by which we negotiate both the private and public spheres of our lives (Spivak, 2015). Language and culture, fundamental signs of our humanity, affirm our identity, and serve as the lens through which we make meaning of the world (Giroux, 2001; Nieto, 2002), and

“...gives basis for informing the world as to whom a people are; it also serves to inform the people themselves about how they look at the world” (Soto, 2006, p. 22).

The knowledge children bring with them to school is based upon their own cultural constructs, and communicated via their home language – these are the tools they use to navigate classrooms, to produce new knowledge (Darder, 2012; Giroux, 2001; Soto, 2006). Schools, however, legitimate the values and practices of the dominant culture and in so doing, reproduce the dominant language and cultural preferences (Giroux, 2001). This means that the culture, language, knowledge and experience that language minority children bring to school gets disregarded as insignificant, subjugated such that children cannot access their own realities as foundations for learning. Children experience socio-cultural fragmentation when subjected to programs and practices that position the dominant culture, language, and history as superior, and all Others as inferior (Soto, 2006). Recalling childhood experiences, Valenzuela (2008) reflected:

...all the school’s Mexican Americans had to walk a tightrope of holding onto our childhood tongue and identity in a schooling context that was indifferent, even hostile, to it. Although Spanish was my first language, English assumed dominance during elementary school... We Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants were subjected to English-only practices and policies premised on cultural erasure. Texas history was particularly degrading. The way it reminded us Mexicans that we were losers and that Anglos were militarily and culturally superior. Never mind that Anglos fought this war in order to defend their right to own slaves or that Texas Mexicans also fought and died at the Alamo. (p. 52)

Effective teaching is premised on the fact that children learn by building on their prior knowledge, however, when curricular choices and classroom activities, like worksheets and textbooks, that are not meaningful or relevant to their lived experiences, students are forced to abandon their language and culture as they attempt to function within that of dominant American culture (Delpit, 2008; Nieto, 2002; Soto, 2006). Children's primary language is of particular significance in regard to learning, brain development, sense of self-confidence, and sense of belonging within their cultures and communities, however, the common assumption that language minority children are deficient undermines that development (Nieto, 2002). English-only policies that prohibit, or prevent, the use of native languages essentially require students to totally restart their education – leaving their primary language behind in the process (Nieto, 2002).

Denied the opportunity to learn and use their native languages at school, children learn to save that which is an essential part of their identity for use when they are at home, around members of their own culture – or, they come to disown and abandon the language of home (Anzaldúa, 1983; Cameron, 1983; Moraga, 1983). Therefore, the loss of language equates to loss of culture and cultural identity such that children are separated from their native cultural traditions and values and unable to recover them, as they are increasingly unable to communicate in their heritage languages. (Soto, Hixon & Hite, 2010).

“Language domination impacts the social, spiritual, civic, moral, economic, and the political. The imposed language becomes the axis where the colonizer breathes as a superior being” (Soto, 2006, p. 29). Educational practices that deny children use of their heritage language via shame, humiliation, and punishment are dehumanizing forms of



control and oppression (Salazar, 2008). Shamed to “talk right” or “fix” their language, and punished physically, emotionally and psychologically for use of their native language, children assimilate, or choose silence (Delpit, 2008; Soto, 2006).

Rejection of a child’s primary language constitutes rejection of the child, their family, and of their home (Delpit, 2008). The violence of monolingualism renders children from language minority backgrounds powerless. As Salazar (2013) painfully recounts:

I went to school with all of my treasures, including my Spanish language, Mexican culture, *familia* (family), and ways of knowing. I abandoned my treasures at the classroom door in exchange for English and the U.S. culture; consequently, my assimilation into U.S. society was agonizing. One of my earliest memories is of wishing away my dark skin; I wanted desperately to be White, and I abhorred being *la morena*, the dark-skinned girl. I came to associate Whiteness with success and Brownness with failure. I was overwhelmed with feelings of shame over the most essential elements of my humanness. As a result, my experience in the U.S. education system was marked by endless struggles to preserve my humanity. (p. 121)

In the best of circumstances, children must learn to function in two worlds; in two languages, and two cultural realms, that are in constant conflict – existing, at once, in the space of both – colonized and colonizer (Soto, 2006); and at the worst, the very process that touted to provide access to the culture of power, instead, leaves children floundering at the margins. The cost of English-only programs – of delegitimizing any language or English dialect other than Standard English – are heavy. Assimilation, loss of identity,

cultural genocide, educational and economic alienation, and marginalization can all occur through the colonizing process of language domination (Darder, 2012; Soto, 2006; Wynne, 2008). “Because White eyes do not want to know us they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit” (Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 80).

### **Silencing**

Delpit (1986) asserts that the silenced dialogue of people of color is one of the greatest tragedies in education today. Silencing can be understood in a variety of ways: as a kind of invisibility and isolation achieved as the dominant render the oppressed powerless by delegitimizing their voices, allowing them only to speak of the inconsequential, or by ignoring them completely, just as children are denied the power to speak due to adult constructions of them as inferior and incomplete (Cannella, 1997; Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995; Yamada, 1983); silencing could be a fear of talking, where children choose silence rather than risk resistance to inequitable power dynamics because they are afraid, or because they believe their silence is necessary in order to find favor in the dominant group (Fine, 1991); and, silencing occurs by marginalizing and excluding the voices from subordinated groups whereby White teachers fail to incorporate diverse worldviews into the classroom environment and thus silence whole groups of children who are then shut out of the learning process (Castagno, 2008; Giroux, 1984; Soto, Hixon & Hite, 2010). Thus, “silence is like starvation” (Moraga, 1983, p. 29). Children are frequently subjected to such silencing tactics in classrooms.

The power to silence children is exerted through curriculum, relationships between teachers and students, and racial bias (Cammarota & Romero, 2008). Children are

systematically silenced through curricular choices that render inferior and strip away their primary language, their worldview, group membership and identity, and their historical experiences, in order to replace it all with Standard English, school knowledge, mannerisms, and belief systems deemed acceptable – superior – by the dominant group (Cammarota & Romero, 2008). Limited in these ways, students are not only deprived of the skills and knowledge necessary for economic advancement, they are also denied the opportunity to acquire the social capital and critical intellectual capacity required to resist (Cammarota & Romero, 2008).

Michelle Fine (1991), explains silencing as “who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled” (p. 33). Schools silence children formally, through curriculum selection and implementation, and English-only policies, as well as informally, through conversations that require the use of Standard English, and “talking right” (Quiroz, 2001). In general, both formal and informal silencing mechanisms function together to submerge language minority students into silence (Cammarota & Romero, 2008; Quiroz, 2001). Silencing occurs for different reasons such as avoiding conversations that may be difficult or awkward like those surrounding race, religion, or sexual orientation (Soto, Hixon & Hite, 2010). Whether it’s the exclusion of minority voices or refusing to discuss difficult topics, dominant discourses are not challenged, the opportunity for growth and change is lost, and silencing always maintains the status quo (Soto, Hixon & Hite, 2010). Cut off from culture, language, and knowledge familiar to them, students are left isolated and alienated, hindered from development of the knowledge

and power necessary for empowerment and liberation, unable to effect social change; abandoned in the borderlands (Camarota & Romero, 2008; Darder, 2012; Soto, 2006).

“...whereas silence is an absence, silencing is an act done to someone...”

(Castagno, 2008, p. 318); students experience both – sometimes choosing the silence in the margins, and other times actively marginalized and forced into silence. Borders are contested in those marginal spaces of speech and silence. Resistance to dominant discourses may take the form of silence. However, when they are empowered, and heard, the voices of the Other – of children – may also be profoundly reflective and insightful in terms of oppressive power relations, and thus serve to challenge the status quo by refusing to be silenced (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Soto, Hixon & Hite, 2010).

## **Gender and Sexuality**

### *Gender Roles/Gender Bias*

Marginalization via post/colonization is not limited to resources, but also functions to dictate personal possibilities by defining gender identity and controlling or limiting options and opportunities in relation to gender. Clark (1983) suggests that oppression of women originated with the first division of labor between men and women, which institutionalized the patriarchal, male-supremacist, establishment that gave men the right to own and accumulate private property and impose heterosexual monogamy, that rendered women sexual commodities, domestic servants, cheap labor, and inherently inferior. “Men at all levels of privilege, of all classes and colors have the potential to act out legalistically, moralistically, and violently when they cannot colonize women, when they cannot

circumscribe our sexual, productive, reproductive, creative prerogatives and energies” (Clark, 1983, p. 128).

Similarly, post/colonialism denies the full personhood of children and their understanding of themselves, their bodies, their gender and their sexuality. Students and teachers are all deeply impacted by adherence to traditional gender roles (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Gender roles, behaviors society deems appropriate according to one’s gender, generally arise from gender stereotypes, characteristics attributed to – and expected from – people according to gender such as, academic interests and abilities, hobbies, athletic prowess, occupational interests, standard of dress, physical appearance, and attitudes (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

As children grow and develop, they actively observe their surroundings, and the people in them, while they work to construct meaning of their experiences – including the development of gender identity and the implications of stereotypical ideas in regard to what it means to be male or female (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). From infancy, children are inundated with information, images, language – overt and covert – from television programming, movies, radio, commercials, books – about gender roles (DeLisi & Johns, 1984; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Narahara, 1998; Turner-Bowker, 1996).

Children’s books are a powerful agent of socialization. Nearly fifty years ago, Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada & Ross (1972) examined eighteen Caldecott Award winning children’s books to learn whether or not gender differences were present in the texts, and to note the manner by which character roles were represented. They found that women appeared as central characters far less than men, had fewer job opportunities with less

status, and were portrayed as less ambitious, passive, static, and dependent, while males were frequently the central character, were portrayed as superior, maintained high status job positions, strong, dynamic, leaders, and active, with unlimited occupational options (Weitzman, et al., 1972). Their study was replicated in the 70s, 80s, and 90s with similar findings, though there is some evidence indicating that female representation as main characters increased (Kinman & Henderson, 1985; Turner-Bowker, 1996), as well as an increase in sexual equality as the portrayal of gender differences decreased (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

Picture books encourage children to learn about others and the world around them. Children absorb the images, the messages, the values transmitted, and apply that information to themselves. As powerful tools of socialization, there is risk of harm to readers, both male and female, as gender stereotypes are damaging for everyone (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). The language in books often maintains gender bias that can potentially negatively impact children's self-esteem and self-concept, to such a degree that their expectations of how they should be treated by peers are affected (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Turner-Bowker, 1996). Gender bias, present in many children's books, limits children's ideas about their personal potential, and prevents them from exploring activities and interests based on the portrayal of what is, or is not, deemed appropriate, for one's gender (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Additionally, DeLisi & Johns (1984) indicated that upon hearing children's books, children adopted negative attitudes toward female characters portrayed as nurturing, passive, home-makers – preferring instead, characters that were brave, strong, and adventurous – characters that acted with personal agency.

Gender bias – those perceptions learned early on – carry over into every aspect of life – for children and teachers. If teachers are not aware of their own gender bias and stereotypes, they enact those beliefs with their students. Gender bias contributes to inequitable schooling as it influences issues such as females receiving less attention from teachers, having less access to advanced science and mathematics courses, and fewer advantages in college admissions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Although many teachers would oppose outright gender segregation in their classrooms, they often behave in ways – unknowingly – that favor boys over girls and thus, perpetuate gender bias, and promote traditional gender roles. For example, teachers generally devote more time to their male students, either for redirection of off-task behavior, assistance with assignments, or answering questions (Bauer, 2000) Conversely, girls receive less support and less helpful feedback (Pollard, Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Rather than taking time to converse with girls about their work, teachers are more likely to subtly imply that they are unable to do the work on their own, so they do not get the same opportunities to learn helpful strategies to correct mistakes (Bauer, 2000). Additionally, boys are centered as superior, and more important on the playground. Boys have first access to outdoor equipment such as bats and balls, basketballs and footballs, for games that require more space, while girls jump rope and play hopscotch – or, rather than being active participants in the boys’ games, they become spectators (cheerleaders) (Bauer, 2000).

Because boys are positioned as most important, they develop self-confidence, take more risks, and learn to ask for what they need (Bauer, 2000), while girls learn to endure silence and loss of self-esteem (Bauer, 2000; Davies, 2003). Girls learn their voices are not

worth hearing, their thoughts and ideas are not important, their interests not worth pursuing, and their athletic skills not worth using (Bauer, 2000; Davies, 2003). Girls get positioned as Other, while boys' behaviors, activities, interests, and abilities are positioned as the norm (Bauer, 2000). Thus, girls learn that power belongs to men, and that the only place they have power is in the domestic realm, or as helpers – in service of men (Davies, 2003).

### *Sexuality/Gender Identity*

People in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community are amongst those members of society who are persistently devalued, whose legal rights are consistently denied, and who experience the unbearable weight of disdain, discrimination, and danger, within a dominant culture that favors and privileges heterosexuality (Grant & Sleeter, 2011). Consequently, differences in gender and sexuality, like the markers of race, physical size, and disability, are played out in schools, even as early as preschool (Grant & Sleeter, 2011).

Cultural struggles over children's sexuality generally revolve around three issues including: physicality and sexuality, privileging a heteronormative childhood, and censorship of books and other materials that address children's physical and sexual selves (Wickens, 2010). Much of the dissention surrounding the censorship of books and materials is due to the construction of childhood innocence as opposed to adult knowledge and understanding of sexuality, especially in regard to homosexuality (Robinson, 2002; Sears, 1999; Wickens, 2010). The portrayal of childhood innocence and purity as akin to



ignorance and asexuality is problematic because it denies children access and development of a critical aspect of their identity. (Wickens, 2010).

In general, adults fail to recognize children as sexual beings, and the inability to acknowledge children's emerging sexuality contributes to bias – both overt and covert – in addition to obscuring the social construction of child development and sexuality (Burman, 2010; Sears, 2009). The social construction of children as innocent and in need of protection produces images of children that fit within normative conceptions of childhood (Burman, 2010; Sears, 2009). But these constructions of children, devoid of their own emerging sexuality, placed firmly within the male/female binary, actually put children in danger; of being bullied, or becoming a bully, and of developing unhealthy coping mechanisms in response to their sexual identity and orientation (Burman, 2010; Sears, 2009).

Most educators tend to avoid the integration of queer curricular materials and conversations into their daily classroom practices; in part because of its controversial nature, but also because the notion of childhood innocence constructs children as asexual (Filax, 2007). In so doing, educators reinforce the assumption of heterosexuality and ultimately deny young children the opportunity to see themselves represented, or have their unique experiences validated, nor do they receive historical or cultural knowledge about themselves in schools, which negates the legitimacy of queer identity (Butler, 1990; Filax, 2007; Wickens, 2010). From this silence, children who eventually identify as queer learn that their difference is intolerable (Filax, 2007).

Whether through images, curriculum, children's books, videos, music, or classroom decorations, heteronormativity is pervasive in early childhood classrooms (Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001). Similar to other biases, homophobia may not manifest in overt discrimination, harassment, or violence, but instead acts covertly – where the very possibility of queer identity is ignored, or when teachers fail to intervene when children hurl names like “sissy,” “faggot” or “dyke” at each other, or families are narrowly defined with only mothers and fathers as parents (Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001). Biases are transmitted, and affirmed, when parents express concern in regard to children's nontraditional gender behavior – like boys who play with dolls or play dress-up in traditional girls' clothing; or when girls prefer sports traditionally associated with boys, or may not like to wear dresses – and teachers reassure them that their child won't turn out gay, instead of questioning the homophobia (Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001; Filax, 2007). Though blatant forms of prejudice against queer children are not generally observed in early childhood and elementary classrooms, teachers do often have homophobic beliefs that can inadvertently limit the development of positive identity, and those classroom practices, and representations of heteronormativity, inform children of norms and prejudices – both children who will, and will not be, queer (Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001; Filax, 2007; Sears, 2009).

As children get older, heteronormativity exposes those who do not conform to conventional gender norms, leaving them vulnerable (Filax, 2007; Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001). Heteronormative discourses shape social perceptions of queer people, and represents them as sinful and diseased, mentally ill and dangerous, deviant and predatory,

abnormal, unnatural, and unacceptable (Filax, 2007; Grant & Sleeter, 2011; Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001). These widely held beliefs render queer youth powerless and defenseless, and as a result, queer youth are more likely to experience depression, to use and abuse drugs, to become homeless, to experience violence and harassment, and to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Grant & Sleeter, 2011). There are very real, life-threatening circumstances faced by all queer children, but recently, transgender children have endured particularly harrowing experiences. Currently, bathrooms are a point of contention in several states as the battle over restrictions for transgender children from using restrooms that match their gender identity rages (Martinez, 2018).

At the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, *Time Magazine* and *The Dallas Morning News* reported that the Achille Independent School District, in Oklahoma, had to close for two days due to threats made by parents against a 12-year-old transgender student (McGaughy, 2018; Martinez, 2018). On a Facebook group, “Achille ISD Parents Group,” several parents made demeaning comments, “this thing” and “half-baked maggot,” while others openly threatened violence against the child: one parent commented that his son should “whip his ass until he quits coming to school,” while another brazenly stated, “You know we have open hunting seasons on them kind. Ain’t no bag limit on them either.” And another, “If he wants to be a female, make him a female. A good sharp knife will do the trick real quick” (McGaughy, 2018; Martinez, 2018). The Facebook page is not affiliated with the school district in any way, and the posts have since been deleted. The school district has reached out to several consultants for staff development and training (Martinez, 2018). There are other stories, as well.

In Maryland, *INTO* writer, Kate Sosin (2018), detailed events surrounding one parent's job termination after she protested the use of trans slurs and the use of gay and trans stereotypes to make jokes, in a high school production of *Shrek*. Though several other parents and students throughout the Frederick County Public Schools District lodged complaints, Nicola Van Kuilenberg was the only one who lost her job. The music teacher at the high school lodged a complaint with her employer, Maryland State Education Association (MSEA), stating that her position with the union created a conflict of interest – the union sided with the teacher and fired the parent, citing her for gross misconduct. Previously, Kuilenberg had been a key advocate for the creating, adoption, and implementation of a new policy that grants trans students access to restrooms that align with their gender identity – and also mandates that the names and preferred gender pronouns be respected. The backlash left some students feeling too vulnerable to return to school. Kuilenberg's advocacy and activism landed the school district in the national media last year, and could have potentially influenced MSEA's decision to fire her.

In the online forum, *them.*, Mary O'Hara (2018) reported that two Republican legislators in Ohio have proposed a bill that would require school employees, psychologists, and social workers to disclose information to parents if a minor child asks questions about matters related to gender identity. Failure to disclose said information – regardless of safety concerns – would be considered a felony. The bill, should it pass, requires consent from both of a child's parents, before they can receive any kind of assistance. Local LGBT advocacy groups have spoken out against the bill out of concern that children will not seek help for fear of their family's reactions, which could potentially

leave LGBT children feeling even more isolated and alone. Should the bill pass, the law would also prevent parents from facing legal action should they opt not to permit treatment for gender dysphoria – no legal complaints of abuse or neglect could be filed, nor could they face the loss of custody. Currently, there are no laws in Ohio to protect trans people from discrimination.

### **Poverty/Socioeconomic Status**

Poverty is a form of oppression from which there is no respite or relief as there is no way for the poor to escape into any space or place where its intensity is diminished (Smith & Smith, 1983). “There is no beauty in poverty, in my mother being able to give only one of her children lunch money...It was not very romantic for my sister and me to wear the dresses and panties my mother made us out of flour sacks because she couldn’t afford store-bought ones like the other mothers (Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 202).

Poverty profoundly affects the lives of children, particularly in public schools. Though once considered the great equalizer, and the only institutions in the United States that are obligated to serve all children – the only place where many of the nation’s children are guaranteed food to eat, relief from the cold, and some small degree of safety (Milner, 2013; Noguera & Wing, 2006) – the schools for the poorest children in America are the most poorly funded (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In spite of being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, the United States has the highest rates of children living in poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Poor students in America’s public schools receive fewer social supports, fewer educational resources, fewer curricular offerings, and are expected to learn in over-crowded, often poorly maintained, classrooms taught by inexperienced poorly

qualified teachers (Darder, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner, 2013; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Gross inequalities and inequities, such as these, ensure that increasing numbers of students leave school without the skills necessary to successfully participate in dominant social and economic structures (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Noguera & Wing, 2006).

Equal opportunities versus drastically unequal outcomes is a long-standing controversy in American public education (Nieto & Bode, 2009; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Historically, race and ethnicity, gender, language, immigration status, disability, and social status differentially impacted children's access to educational resources and functioned to maintain unequal, and inequitable outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Though many battles have been waged over educational equity, issues of segregation, school finance policies, and disciplinary practices, have worsened such that disparities have continued to increase and the educational opportunities for the poor and children of color remain separate and vastly unequal (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, due to legislation such as *Brown v Board of Education* 1954 that provided all children with access to schools, and the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* 1965 (ESEA), now No Child Left Behind (NCLB), that provides Title I funds for schools in low-income areas and provides other protections, as well, there is an illusion of equitable access, therefore, conversations surrounding issues of inequity are less urgent and less public than they once were (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Additionally, it must be acknowledged that much of the federal funding that supported educational programs for college access, innovative educational ideas, and

support programs in K-12 urban and poor rural areas were drastically reduced or completely eliminated in the 1980s during the Reagan Administration (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Consequently, low levels of achievement, and the resulting achievement gap, are presumed to be an inherent characteristic of children marginalized by race, class, and culture (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

What must be remembered, however, is that the extra funding provided by ESEA, and other federal programs, worked; teachers in poor areas were paid well, teacher shortages shrank to nearly nothing, and students made considerable gains academically (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). The achievement gap narrowed, as indicated by National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores where Black and Hispanic students made larger gains than White students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). Students of color graduated high school, attended college, entered the workforce, took political office, and began to earn wages at the same rates as White students – until the budget cuts of the 1980s – and the achievement gap began to widen again (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). Investment in the education of poor students of color has never been reestablished to the same degree as that of the 1960s and 1970s, but if the rate of growth and progress had continued, the achievement gap would no longer exist (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Segregated communities, neighborhoods, and schools ensure the maintenance of the achievement gap as distribution of finances and educational resources is based on inequities “created by property tax revenues, funding formulas, and school administrative practices to create substantial differences in the resources made available in communities

serving White children as compared to minority children” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 22). Thus, isolated from their White peers – economically, socially, and academically – students of color in high poverty schools are highly unlikely to experience an equality of outcomes (Books, 2007; Buendia, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Teachers, arguably, are among the most important and highly influential people in children’s lives. Yet, well-qualified, well-trained teachers with multiple years of experience are inequitably distributed in U.S. schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). A disproportionate number of less-qualified, less-experienced teachers are assigned to high poverty schools where rates of teacher absenteeism are higher, where lack of teacher commitment is more likely, where teachers are likely to teach outside their content areas, and where teacher turn over rates are high due to the number of teachers who leave high poverty schools to teach in locations deemed more desirable (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner, 2013). Further, due to widely accepted stereotypes and deficit ideologies, many poor students of color find themselves in classrooms taught by teachers who fail to see their students as worthwhile investments – who expect students to fail, accept it – and then use the socioeconomic status, race, culture, and languages of their students as an excuse for their inability and failure to teach their students well (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Rothstein, 2013; Gay, 2010; Delpit, 1986).

Negative stereotypes and deficit ideologies have contributed to the pathologizing of poor students and their cultural backgrounds and practices, particularly poor students of color in high poverty urban areas (Buendia, 2011; Delpit, 2012; La Paperson, 2010; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). “The ‘plague’ metaphor reflects a moral cartography,



overlaying discourses of pathology and contagion upon neighborhoods, and by easy inference, upon race” (La Paperson, 2010, p. 17). The terms “at risk” and “urban” are coded language; terms that attribute characteristics like violence, drug use, criminality, laziness, and uneducated, as the nature of those who are poor, while also making veiled reference to race, ethnicity, first language, family structure, and geographic location (Buendia, 2011; La Paperson, 2010; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). The characteristics ascribed to geographic locations and those who live in them, are thus ascribed to children in classrooms who labor under the weight of the labels of “at risk” and “urban” – and who, taught by mostly White teachers from mostly middle-class backgrounds, find it exceedingly difficult to be successful (Buendia, 2011; Delpit, 2012). Many educators, unable to relate to poor students, or students of color, erroneously assume that students need to be “saved” from their communities, that they need to “get out” and away from their families, and therefore miss the rich cultural backgrounds, knowledge, talents and experiences students bring to the classroom with them (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Deeply ingrained biases that construct poor children of color as inferior are one of the primary factors that hinder academic and social success (Delpit, 2012; Lareau, 2011).

Children who live in poverty experience school differently than their middle-class counterparts, but they also need school, and the resources available, differently (Delpit, 2012; Lareau, 2011; Milner, 2013). They may need school personnel like counselors and administrators and nurses to assist them with access to services they may not receive outside of school (Milner, 2013). And some children may even need help understanding

how to navigate and function in the school itself (Delpit, 2012; Lareau, 2011; Milner, 2013). The perception of these differences contributes to deficit ideologies that blame children and their families for their lack of success (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lareau, 2011).

Educators need to understand that Americans prize the rugged individual, bootstrap, American Dream ideal that locates success in individual initiative and largely ignores the power of social class (Lareau, 2011). Social class structures daily life – jobs, transportation, health care, food, language use, education, etc. – including interactions between families and schools (Lareau, 2011). Schools are structured around the norms of the White, middle-class, therefore parents and children from poor- and working-class backgrounds often struggle to communicate their needs to school personnel and have difficulty getting educators to respond to their concerns (Lareau, 2011). In many cases, parents from working class backgrounds rely, primarily, on teachers and school staff to teach their children what they need to learn to get by in the culture of power (Lareau, 2011). Conversely, middle-class families, familiar with the cultural norms of schools, and able to navigate expectations, are empowered to advocate for their children and ensure they receive the best possible educational opportunities (Lareau, 2011). Additionally, due to shared cultural backgrounds and similar socioeconomic status, teachers respect, and favor, the parenting styles, extracurricular choices, and the educational roles played by parents from middle-class backgrounds, while the strategies employed by working-class and poor families are denigrated, disrespected, and disregarded as unsupportive, ineffective, and potentially harmful (Lareau, 2011). Where middle-class parents have easy access to information and resources, working-class and poor parents are largely unable to acquire

such social capital, unable to make the rules work in their children's favor, and rendered powerless in the face of the school institution, among others (Lareau, 2011; Nieto & Bode, 2009).

Higher social class ensures more social capital, which then results in higher quality services, more educational opportunities and increased access to school administrators (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Lareau, 2011). Cultural practices of the middle-class are privileged over those of the poor and working-class, and greater efforts are made to cultivate the interests and talents of middle-class children, ensuring that children from middle-class backgrounds have an easier time taking advantage of educational opportunities and achieving their goals (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Lareau, 2011).

Teacher influences and expectations are more powerful, and of greater consequence, for children from poor and working-class backgrounds because they rely on the social structure of the school for exposure to the culture of power, and their teachers to help them learn to navigate within that culture (Darder, 2012; Delpit, 1986). However, in addition to having lower expectations for poor and working-class students, teachers are also more likely to discount the strengths, abilities, and interests they bring to the classroom because they fail to either understand or appreciate the relationship between culture – including socioeconomic status – and students' attitudes, values, and behaviors (Darder, 2012; Gay, 2010; Lareau, 2011; Milner, 2013). Consequently, many teachers are likely to devote less time and attention to children from poor and working-class backgrounds (Darder, 2012, Gay, 2010; Lareau, 2011; Milner, 2013). The skills middle-class children learn at home – organizing commitments, reading itineraries and schedules,

travel with sports teams, vacation – are skills that are respected and fit well within the institutionalized world of the dominant culture, but skills poor and working-class children are likely to bring to school –autonomy from adults, participation in informal peer groups, managing their own time, negotiating conflict during play, creativity, spontaneity – are generally rendered invisible in the structure of the institution (Lareau, 2011).

Where children from middle-class backgrounds are given opportunities to practice those social skills in a variety of places and circumstances, and are encouraged to speak up, to advocate for themselves, in the absence of similar opportunities, encouragement and support, children from poor and working-class families learn restraint, learn to defer to adults, and learn to accept the actions of people in authority (Lareau, 2011). While children from middle-class homes are empowered to see themselves as important and deserving of having their needs and wants addressed, children from poor and working-class homes are devalued and learn that their needs are inconsequential in institutional worlds (Delpit, 1986; Lareau, 2011; Nieto & Bode, 2009; Milner, 2013). Education then, like poverty, becomes a weapon – used by the colonizer to control the colonized.

## **CONCLUSION**

Fanon (1967) wrote of his experience when he encountered the gaze of the White man and not only saw himself as the White man saw him, but as a result of the experience, then subjugated his own understanding of his identity to that of the White construction of his identity. Similarly, children are expected to participate in their own colonization as they internalize dominant constructions of identity that define them as inferior (Asher, 2009).

Post/colonization places limitations on children's possibilities because it assumes due to their young ages that their knowledge and understanding is deficient, lacking quality, that their conceptions of reality and personal identity are incomplete and deems them, therefore, a population in need of surveillance, intervention, and regulation (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Saavedra and Camicia (2010) suggest that it is assumed that young children haven't developed an identity, are incapable of discussing experiences that shape their lives, or even relate to anything beyond their immediate surroundings, but Anzaldúa (2012) wrote "...at a very young age, I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. It tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms no matter how unsuitable to others they were" (p. 38).

Those in dominant positions construct the very young as incapable of understanding anything except their immediate, concrete world and in so doing deny that children from non-dominant backgrounds carry with them complex identities necessary for survival within multiple cultural contexts (Saavedra & Camicia, 2010). The power inherent in such assumptions eradicates the significance of children's perceptions of their worlds, imposes on them a singular dominant, normative interpretation of the world that ignores diverse voices and different ways of thinking and being (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Denial of personhood results in borders that then become sites of resistance.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research study was based upon the following four research questions:

1. Is there something to be learned from the burlesque community about deconstructing social borders that could be adapted, and similarly serve, to remove borders erected based on identity markers such as race/ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, size, socioeconomic status, and immigration status, in early childhood and elementary classrooms?
2. If so, what strategies are used within the burlesque community to resist conventional social norms and cross borders to create a community of acceptance?
3. If teachers are operating within, and privileged by, the borders of conventional social norms such as race/ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, size, social status and immigration status, what messages and beliefs are being transmitted to students and translated as social norms for children?
  - 4a. How do children construct and maintain their cultural identities within classroom environments shaped by conventional social norms?
  - 4b. How do children utilize less tangible cultural manifestations to perform cultural identities?

#### **RESEARCH FOCUS**

My research study investigated the burlesque community as a metaphor for education, more specifically, education in public elementary schools. Its primary purpose

was two-fold. First, the study attempted to determine what strategies were employed by the burlesque community that deconstructed social borders and made way for a community of openness and acceptance for all who shared the space, and then to determine whether or not those strategies might be applied to elementary classrooms in such a way that marginalizing borders, based on identity markers such as race, class, gender and sexuality could be minimized.

Second, the study examined the norms within which elementary teachers operated, to determine how borders were constructed within classroom spaces, and to examine the ways by which children constructed and maintained their cultural identities as they were subjected to - and transmitted - norms of acceptance and exclusion; school and classroom norms and expectations that were both absorbed, and reinforced by, conventional social norms but which may have been incongruent with their own cultural norms and identities.

### **DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS**

My study took place within a large urban school district in North Texas. The district had 152 elementary schools, 41 middle schools, and 38 high schools. The total student population within the district was 158, 693. The racial demographics for the district were as follows: 70.4 % Hispanic, 22.6% African American, 4.8% White, 1.3% Asian, 0.3% American Indian, 0.1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.5% 2 or more, and 0.1% unknown. Eighty-eight percent of the district's students were classified as Low-Socioeconomic Status (Low-SES), with 68% qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch based on family income.

## **SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS**

The elementary school used in this study was located in an older neighborhood comprised primarily of poor- and working-class citizens. (StartClass, 2017). Though approximately 12.5% of the community held a Bachelor's Degree, the majority of the population was considered less-educated (StartClass, 2017). The elementary school served a total student population of 751 children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. It was a Title 1 school where 93% of the students participated in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and received free or reduced price lunches, and 58% were considered at-risk. Racial demographics for the school were as follows: 79% Hispanic, 15% African American, 3% White, and 2% Asian/Other. Forty-nine percent of the students were Bilingual/English Language Learners (ELLs). The student population was 52% female and 48% male.

The school housed two sections of pre-kindergarten (PreK), one Bilingual Education (BIL) class and one General Education (GEN) class; seven sections of kindergarten, three BIL and four GEN; six sections of first, second, and third grades, with three BIL classes and three GEN classes each; seven sections of fourth grade, three BIL and four GEN class; and five sections of fifth grade, with two BIL classes and three English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

The school day lasted from 7:55 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. All students were served breakfast in their classrooms from 7:55-8:15 daily. The instructional day began at 8:15 a.m. Students had 30 minutes for lunch, 45 minutes for specials (art, music, or PE), and a 30 minute recess, once a day. PreK – 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classes were self-contained. Third through



fifth grade were partially departmentalized. Students in third grade rotated between three teachers, either BIL or GEN, one for reading/language arts, one for math, and one for science and social studies. The BIL students in fourth grade, like third grade, rotated between the three BIL teachers while the students in the four GEN classes were divided into two groups that rotated only once per day, spending half of their day with a reading/language arts and social studies teacher, and the other half of their day with a math and science teacher. In fifth grade, the two BIL classes switched at half-day, spending part of the day with the reading/language arts/social studies teacher, and the other half with the math/science teacher. The ESL classes rotated, like third grade, between three teachers.

### **Absenteeism**

Roughly 10% of the student population was considered chronically absent – missing 15 or more days of school a year; cumulative averages from elementary schools across the state of Texas (6%) and nationally (8%), indicated that students at this school have a higher than average rate of absenteeism (StartClass, 2017; TEA, 2017). By ethnicity, Black students demonstrated a higher percentage of chronic absences than Hispanic students, 15% and 8%, respectively. Males, 10%, represented a slightly higher percentage of chronic absences at this school than females, at 9% (StartClass, 2017).

### **Retention Rates**

The school retained 2% of its students in 2016. Retention rates by ethnicity showed 1.9% of the students retained were Hispanic; by gender, 1.9% of the male student population was held back a year, while 2.1% of those retained were female (StartClass,

2017). Retention rates for students in special populations were as follows: ELLs, 2.1%; and learning disabled, 8.9% (StartClass, 2017).

### **Trends in School Discipline**

The school had relatively low numbers of students who received in- or out-of-school suspensions. Overall, 0.8% of the student population received in-school-suspension (ISS); 1.6% of the male population received ISS; and by ethnicity, 1.5% of the students who received ISS were Black, whereas 0.7% of the students who received ISS were Hispanic (StartClass, 2017).

Interestingly, the only students who received out-of-school suspensions, at this school, were Black females. By gender, 0.5% of the students who received out-of-school suspensions were female; and by ethnicity, 1.5% of the Black student population received out-of-school suspension (StartClass, 2017).

### **Special Program Enrollment**

Students at the school may have participated in a variety of support programs such as the Gifted and Talented program, or received support from services such as those for students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and Special Education (SpEd) for students with learning disabilities. The overall enrollment of students in the GT program equaled 9% of the school population, which was equal to that of the district, but slightly higher than the state (5%) and national (5%) averages for elementary schools (StartClass, 2017). Additionally, by ethnicity, the GT population for the school was as follows: 10% Hispanic, and 3% Black (StartClass, 2017). Females, 10%, were better represented than males, 7%, in the GT program at this school (StartClass, 2017).

Students who received LEP services represented 51% of the student population, which was much higher than averages for the district (44%), the state (19%) or nation (8%) (StartClass, 2017). Of those who received LEP support, 52% were female English Language Learners, while 49% were male (StartClass, 2017).

Nine-percent (9%) of the children on this campus were considered learning disabled (TEA, 2017). This was some lower than the median across elementary schools in the state (10%) and nationally (13%) (StartClass, 2017). Ethnically, of those who received SpEd services, 11% were Black, and 8% were Hispanic (StartClass, 2017; TEA, 2017).

### **Standardized Test Performance**

Results from the 2016 administration of the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) showed an overall school passing rate of 74.7% across all grade levels and content areas, which was lower than the Texas average of 76.3% but higher than the district average of 72% (StartClass, 2017; TEA, 2017).

When compared by content area, the school out-performed the district and the state in math and in science; the school scored a 78% passing rate in math, where the district average was 74% and the state average was 77%, and they scored at 77% passing in science, while the district and state averages were 70% and 74%, respectively (StartClass, 2017; TEA, 2017). However, the school did not fare as well in English/Language Arts, where the passing rate was 69%, which was somewhat lower than the district at 72%, and significantly lower than the state passing rate of 76% (Start Class, 2017; TEA, 2017).

Available data for English/language Arts and math indicated that, when compared by gender, girls at the school out-performed boys in English/language arts with 77%

passing in comparison to 67% passing, while both, girls and boys scored a passing rate of 72% in math (StartClass, 2017). A similar trend was seen when the school was compared to the district and the state; at the district level, 65% of females and 62% of males passed math, and 71% of females and 62% of males passed the English/language arts test; meanwhile, state averages indicated passing rates of 74% for girls and 73% for boys in math, and 79% for girls and 73% for boys in English/language arts (StartClass, 2017).

Finally, available data for 2016 revealed average passing rates for math by ethnicity as follows: Hispanic, 72%; Black, 55%; and white, 50% (StartClass, 2017; TEA, 2017). Data for English/language arts by ethnic are: Hispanic, 77%; Black, 55%; and white, 50% (StartClass, 2017; TEA, 2017).

## **STUDY DESIGN**

Qualitative inquiry is rooted in the belief that there are many constructed realities based on individuals' lived experiences, is inductive in nature and emphasizes the emergence of insights as a study progresses (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Neuman, 2003). Participants' points of view are important to qualitative researchers. It is through participants' viewpoints during interviews and observations that investigators are positioned within the social worlds of those participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, et al., 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Qualitative research employs its own methods; strategies based on constructed worldviews, for establishing authenticity and trustworthiness, those of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to how well research findings match the lived experiences of those observed within

the context of the study, as well as the context where the study took place (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, et al., 1993; Merriam, 2009). Researchers must engage collaboratively with project participants who contribute to the collection of data. There are a number of naturalistic techniques used to establish credibility, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, referential adequacy, peer debriefing, member checks, and reflexive journals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Prolonged engagement means that a researcher spends enough time in the researched context to be able to recognize personal biases, to account for the intrusive nature of their own impact on the environment, and that they are there long enough to understand the daily life in a manner similar to that of those who live within the culture (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, et al., 1993). Persistent observation means that a researcher identifies the most relevant characteristics in a situation and focuses on them in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation is another well known method used by qualitative researchers to establish credibility. There are four types of triangulation: 1) sources, 2) methods, 3) investigator, and 4) theories (Denzin, 1978, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Using sources for triangulation means that a researcher compares collected data to the perspectives of multiple individuals within the research context in order to confirm (or not) their findings; methods triangulation means that a researcher uses a variety of research methods such as interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts to verify data collected; investigator triangulation means that multiple investigators collect and analyze data and; triangulation of theories means that investigators use multiple theories to verify facts –

which makes this form of triangulation unacceptable to naturalist researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, et al., 1993; Merriam, 2009).

Peer debriefing, whereby a researcher steps back from the research context long enough to consult with, and receive evaluative feedback from, peers and other experts who have sufficient knowledge of the context studied offers qualitative researchers another method for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). When a researcher collaborates with participants who review and verify collected data, as well as the researchers' interpretations of the data, a researcher has used member checks as a method for establishing credibility (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Finally, researchers may engage in reflexive journaling.

Rather than generalizability, naturalist researchers prefer transferability, which is "judged in terms of the extent to which findings can be applied in other contexts or with other respondents" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The original investigator cannot do transferability, as the investigator cannot anticipate where a user may later attempt to transfer the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For trustworthiness to aid in the establishment of transferability, researchers may use three methods: thick description, purposive sampling, and reflexive journals. Thick descriptions make possible "thick interpretations" (Denzin, 1989, p 32-33, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Thus, thick description can be understood as rich, detailed presentation of the setting, participants, findings, and researchers' interpretations of a research study, that may also include field notes, interviews with participants, and other documents (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). Descriptions by the researcher should provide sufficient detail and precision regarding the

interconnections and relationships of a setting to allow insight and judgment about transferability on the part of users (Erlandson, et al., 1993).

Purposive sampling means that as a study progresses, the researcher purposely pays particularly close attention as relevant insights emerge so as to expand the range of information to be reported from the research context (Erlandson, et al., 1993; Merriam, 2009). In addition, reflexive journals will add to the measure of transferability as the researcher attempts to establish their work as trustworthy.

Consistency in qualitative research is “conceived of in terms of dependability, a concept that embraces both the stability implied by reliability and the trackability required by explainable changes” (Guba, 1981, p. 81). In a qualitative study, replication is not possible as there will be multiple interpretations of the same information, but Lincoln & Guba (1985) assert that what is most important is the consistency between data collected and the results. “Rather than demanding that outsiders get the same results, it is hoped that when outsiders view the collected data the results are dependable – that they make sense,” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). The methods researchers use to establish dependability of their data are, dependability audits (audit trails) and reflexive journals. An auditor uses an audit trail to determine the dependability of a qualitative study and thereby establishes the trustworthiness of the project (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Materials used for an audit trail fall into six categories: 1) raw data, which consists of items such as interview guides, notes, and other documents; 2) data reduction and analysis products, including note cards, and peer debriefing notes; 3) data reconstruction and synthesis products made up of grounded theory, data analysis sheets and reports; 4) process notes, recorded in a journal; 5)

materials relating to intentions and dispositions, consisting of the inquiry proposal, journal, and peer debriefing notes, and; 6) information relative to any instrument developed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail describes, in precise detail, the manner in which data were collected, the construction of categories and the decision-making process throughout the study (Merriam, 2009). Researchers are encouraged to maintain journals and running records so there is documentation of reflections, questions that arise, decisions made regarding issues or ideas encountered while collecting data, and a record of interpretation and analysis of the data collected (Merriam, 2009). Richards (2005) wrote, "...good qualitative research gets much of its claim to validity from the researcher's ability to show convincingly how they got there, and how they built confidence that this was the best account possible" (cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 223).

The final criterion that must be met if trustworthiness is to be established is confirmability. To the qualitative researcher confirmability is the degree to which research findings reflect the respondents and context of the study and not the motives and biases of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bias represents a skewed perspective – the lack of objectivity – but also the lack of appropriate subjectivity (Stake, 2010). For qualitative researchers, confirmability of the research study is achieved through the confirmability audit via audit trails, triangulation, and keeping of a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). "Trustworthiness speaks to methodological adequacy," (Erlandson, et al., 1993; p. 151), and by meeting the methodological standards in the qualitative paradigm, a researcher will gain the confidence of readers and increase the likelihood of the trustworthiness of the study.



My research is of the naturalistic, and qualitative, paradigm. This paradigm best suits my work, as its purpose is to examine closely, and deeply, the inner workings of the burlesque community, as well as learning communities in K-5 classrooms. My project aims to infer meaning from the relationships and practices within each of these communities in order to arrive at some degree of understanding about the strategies the burlesque community has embraced and implemented in the construction of a community of acceptance, and also, to speculate about possibilities for the use of those strategies to create communities of acceptance within K-5 classrooms.

The qualitative paradigm is best suited for this investigation because of the naturalist version of the five axioms: 1) there is more than one truth based on multiple, constructed realities; 2) the epistemology is interactive and there is no way to separate the knower and known; 3) the work is specific to this particular case and is not generalizable; 4) all entities are constantly interacting, continuously shaping each other, so that there is no way to determine cause and effect, and; 5) my research is influenced by my own values, by my choice in the paradigm that guides my research, it is influenced by my working theory as I collect and analyze data and interpret findings, and my investigation is influenced by the values of those within the school and within in the burlesque community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **PILOT STUDIES**

The design of this study included interpretive ethnography and deconstructive analysis. I arrived at the use of these two methods after completing two pilot studies as a result of class projects conducted under the supervision of Dr. González and Dr. Lincoln,

as part of the requirements for their courses in Qualitative Research Methods and Advanced Field Methods, respectively.

For my pilot studies, I used the following research question: What are the contributions of, and the connections that members of the burlesque industry make with the audience in a live theater environment? I was trying to learn how burlesque crossed so many borders, and if those border crossings were intentional and genuine, or if, as part of the job, they were merely professional façade and just another way to make money. What I found was far more than I expected. Historically, the burlesque space was not the open and warm, embracing and accepting space that it is today. As the genre transitioned from its traditional form to feature the striptease exclusively, industry standards emerged that mandated women be younger than 35 years of age, slim, and big-breasted. Black, Hispanic, Asian, and lesbian women were not even allowed to perform in lounges designated as white spaces. Today, the burlesque community resists unionization and rules that would attempt to define what burlesque is and what it is not. Because of this, the burlesque community depends on its members to help and take care of each other. That family-like nature carries over in its purposeful inclusion and celebration of cultures.

Perhaps, one of the most significant findings of these studies was the sincerely humble nature of every participant. They each spoke of their hard work, dedication, and experiences in burlesque. However, without fail, they all spoke of how much respect they have for other members of the community. There was not a single instance of one person criticizing another member of the burlesque community, or another troupe, or venue, for any reason. In fact, what I heard over and over again was that there is just no room for

cruelty. They spoke of honoring their legends, and each other. They reminisced about accomplishments and aspirations, about mistakes they had made and about empowerment. In some way or another, burlesque offered each participant a chance for transformation, and a chance to extend the possibility of transformation to others.

My interpretation of my experiences in these two studies indicated that I encountered nothing within the burlesque space that would intentionally constrain a person's possibilities, to restrict creativity, or to judge negatively. Everything I learned from the participants suggested that the burlesque community is genuine, has purposely chosen to create an embracing, inclusive atmosphere, and they have set about to establish and maintain that space. The burlesque community chooses authenticity, to be accepting, and purposely creates a reality that empowers people. The implication, therefore, is that there is a connection between empowerment and the opportunity for change, and that if we want to break down barriers and cross borders in schools and communities we can do it.

Additionally, during the pilot studies, I read several books about the history of burlesque and the burlesque community. I started with *Behind the Burly-Q* by Leslie Zemeckis (2013), followed by *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* by Richard Allen (1991), and then *Minsky's Burlesque: A Fast and Funny Look at America's Bawdiest Era*, by Morton Minsky and Milt Machlin (1986). Though I initially read them for pleasure, what I found were repeated examples of social structuring and restructuring based on economics and social class. Burlesque was entertainment for poor and working-class Americans, but it was also a form of social commentary that illustrated the struggle for social mobility. For every moment the poor and working class managed to gain

leverage and the possibility for upward mobility, there was backlash from the bourgeoisie. That backlash could be seen in burlesque as well. When burlesque for the masses crept out of the Bowery district and into Times Square, the bourgeoisie stomped them back into their place. Naked and vocal women were deemed too great a threat to the conventional social norms, so women in bawdier shows were arrested while Ziegfeld paraded women, nearly completely nude – but also completely silent – across his stages. When the poor and working class masses gained enough social, economic, and cultural capital to pose a threat to the economic profits and social sensibilities of the wealthy, steps were taken to close down shows, and bankrupt theaters. This reminded me of how postcolonialism functions to maintain control of the marginalized. Thus, postcolonial theory, along with border theory, viewed through burlesque as a symbolic frame form the theoretical framework of my study.

Ethnography, according to Creswell (2013), is “appropriate if the needs are to describe how a cultural group works and to explore the beliefs, language, behaviors, and issues facing the group, such as power, resistance, and dominance” (p. 94). As interpretive ethnography, my work involved examining classroom cultures and the cultural performances of young children, through the lens of burlesque. Therefore, my research relied on my relationships with participants in the burlesque community, as I needed them to provide the information and insights into their culture, so that I can make sense of it.

A sophisticated method of critical analysis, deconstruction was originally a strategy intended for interpreting written and visual works (Slattery, 2013; Taylor, 2004). Contrary to common descriptions, deconstruction is more than the process of dismantling or taking

things apart (Taylor, 2004). Our society is constantly shaped by dominant discourses, thus it is necessary to recognize and question the ideas and norms that guide our actions, so that over time, little by little, social norms are revised and transformed (McCarthy, 1989). Deconstructionism disrupts dominant, hegemonic discourses of the structures that organize our experience – literary, psychological, social, economic, political, and religious – that are constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion (McCarthy, 1989; Taylor, 2004). “In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out. These exclusive structures can become repressive, and that repression comes with consequences...what is repressed does not disappear but always returns to unsettle every construction...” (Taylor, 2004, p. A-28). Deconstruction serves as a form of interrogation as it decenters the dominant and reveals that which has been subordinated through practices of repression, marginalization, and assimilation; excluded, as norms and boundaries purported as universal are established (McCarthy, 1989). “Deconstruction speaks on behalf of what does not fit into our schemes and patiently advocates letting the Other be in its Otherness”(McCarthy, 1989, p. 154). The deconstructive analysis of children’s cultural performances within classroom spaces aims to understand what’s behind those performances and what they signify, particularly in relation to the cultural performances of students of minority status, and how those performances might be interpreted and discussed.

To accomplish the deconstructive analysis of the aforementioned cultural performances, I focused on interviews with the burlesque community, as well as four substantive texts written on burlesque: *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque & American Culture*

by Richard Allen (1991), *Minsky's Burlesque: A Fast and Funny Look at American's Bawdiest Era* by Morton Minsky and Milt Machlin (1986), *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* by Rachel Shteir (2004), and *Gypsy: A Memoir* by Gypsy Rose Lee (1999). Deconstruction of these interviews and texts helped me understand where even the subtlest parody occurred and expose the ways underhanded attacks by the burlesque community's performances undermined standard social norms. Insights gained through this deconstructive analysis served as a template for the analysis of burlesque performances and of classroom observations. I first applied the insights gained through the deconstructed texts to burlesque performances and then applied that frame to classroom observations.

Understanding deconstruction as disruption and not only as taking things apart, as I read the texts, I looked for ways that burlesque interrupted socially stratifying norms. I located six forms of social disruption that functioned, at times, with subtle stealth, and others with blatant brashness. The six disruptions occurred in the form of 1) visibility; 2) constraint removal; 3) voice; 4) the returned gaze; 5) spectacle and; 6) pleasure in identity. Descriptions of the disruptions as I understand, and applied, them in my data analysis are as follows:

*Visibility:* Prior to the Industrial Revolution, women stayed in the home, took care of children, the homestead, and served their husbands. They didn't go out in public alone, especially if they were unmarried, and when they did, they covered themselves from head-to-toe, in suffocating layers of clothing. They were expected to be silent and obedient. They didn't work outside the home or have the same legal, or human, rights as men. That

began to change as the Industrial Revolution brought men and women from rural farms to urban centers. Women entered the public work force, and shared public spaces with men. They were, literally, more visible. As they gained autonomy from men and began to demand rights such as safe working conditions, better pay, the right to vote, the right to work places free from sexual harassment and abuse – they disrupted the previously unchallenged social norms. Burlesque gave women a stage and celebrated those disruptions. Not only were they vocal – they acted physically – they sang, they danced, they teased, they mocked. They were no longer hidden away, covered up, and silent. They acted with agency – for change.

*Constraint Removal:* Covered from head-to-toe, in hats or bonnets, bound up in corsets so tight they couldn't breathe, trussed up in petticoats and bustle skirts, gloves and stockings, and skirts at least to their ankles, women were expected to be modest – so as not to tempt men. And again, they were expected to be silent, submissive, compliant, passive, dependent, homemakers. Going to work outside the home acted as one removal of social and religious constraints. Changing clothing styles, including discarding corsets and shortening skirts, also counted as a form of constraint removal, especially on the burlesque stage, where they took their clothes off – or alluded to garment removal. Women making choices for themselves, no longer allowing men total and complete control of their lives, was another form of constraint removal.

*Voice:* As previously mentioned, women were expected to be silent and accept men's choices and decisions for them. However, as women moved into the public realm, they began to demand rights, the same rights afford men. The burlesque stage provided women

with the space to exert control over their own bodies, to express their sexuality, and to give voice to political issues.

*The Returned Gaze*: Women had few, if any rights. They were, quite literally, their husband's property. Men's attitudes toward women, as property to be owned, to be dominated, went unquestioned, unchallenged, as long as women remained dependent on them. The male gaze was one way that men objectified women – exerting control, by subjugating women. Once, however, women were able to earn money of their own, able to work collectively toward equal rights – women were empowered to return the objectifying gaze of men. They couldn't stop men from objectifying them, but they could look back at them and challenge their authority. The returned gaze disrupted power that stratifies and subjugates. From the burlesque stage, women were able to return the male gaze – able to reclaim control over her own body and sexuality – able to reject the oppressive, possessive grip of men.

*Spectacle*: Spectacles were performances, reenactments, dramatizations, of events. Wild West Shows, circuses, and burlesque shows all used spectacle to portray some recent historical event. In a circus or Wild West Show, audiences were likely to see some depiction of a military engagement or some explorer conquest - in a manner that portrayed the West as dominant and victorious – even if it wasn't true, of course (Davis, 2002). Burlesque did the same, but usually with a parodic and politicized twist instead of as an actual theatrical reenactment. For this project, spectacle means to do something that draws attention to some issue or occurrence with personal and political relevance, or as an act of resistance.



*Pleasure in Identity*: The idea, as a disruption, does not have an official definition. What emerged, for me, was that performers knew themselves, and knew full well how they were viewed by society, and they took immense pleasure in their identity, as well as in defying social expectations. They did not feel the need to change who they were to be acceptable by conventional social norms. This same sort of disruption, the revelry in self and “to hell with anyone who doesn’t approve” spirit could be seen in any number of early burlesque stars like Gypsy Rose Lee and Sally Rand, and later, such as Mae West and Tempest Storm. They enjoyed their femininity and enjoyed flaunting their sexuality. They bore no shame in their female identity, indeed, were empowered by it and celebrated it.

These disruptions served as a lens through which I evaluated burlesque performances and interviews, as well as observations of classrooms. I went back through my reflexive journals and reconsidered each burlesque show, with particular attention paid to those performances that had been the most significant to me; those so powerful that I had revisited them on YouTube, had spent time contemplating them, and even in conversation with others about them. From those, I chose examples that fit each of the disruptive categories. Though there are elements of disruption in each of the selected performances, something about each selected piece made it a particularly good fit with the representative category.

Similarly, I revisited my field notes and reflexive journal from the classroom observations and looked for examples of disruptions to the expected, conventional, classroom norms. Using the six identified categories, I considered those instances, within classroom settings, that were provocative and disruptive – even if subtle – and identified

moments when children's performances disrupted the status quo. I then paired the examples in separate sections, with headings that correspond to the six themes of disruption. I briefly discussed the significance of each theme, followed by thick description of the respective burlesque performance. Vignettes from classroom observations then followed the burlesque performance. I chose to use vignettes because they allowed me to provide thicker, richer, descriptions, with clear explanations of students' experiences that were the most appropriate for this study. The vignettes also gave me the opportunity to paint a vivid picture of the connections and relationships that influence each other.

Each of the vignettes represents a single moment, on a single day, during one, single observation. The descriptions are of those discrete moments; what happened, my perception of children's responses and behaviors, my perceptions of the teacher's behaviors, my impression of the learning environment, how the classroom space felt to me. The vignettes are not intended to describe the daily occurrences in the classroom, are not meant to paint a holistic picture of a normal day, or to contain more than a moment, lifted out and away – for a closer look and discussion. The moments I chose for the vignettes were moments that I thought held significant meaning, as I believed them to be some reflection of, or reaction to, a teacher's classroom practices. Each of the sections contains at least two vignettes, however, as some of the stories were particularly important to me, some sections contain three vignettes.

Commentary follows each vignette and describes the classroom setting, environment, and circumstances surrounding the moment depicted in the vignette, in greater context. The commentary pieces are intended to not only describe the classroom

settings, but also to discuss teacher behaviors, the tone set for the class, teacher interaction, the relationships between teachers and students, teacher's content knowledge, and student engagement, to give a thorough, thick description of what children experienced in the classroom; the borders and barriers they encountered, and how they navigated them. Each commentary further discusses practices that colonize and marginalize children, the borders erected by teachers, and the way children respond to them. Each commentary also makes clear my own personal experience and interpretation of what occurred during those moments. As it would be impossible to bracket myself, or my feelings, out of these experiences, I let them be clearly known.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

### **Teachers**

The school used for the purposes of my research was larger than average for elementary schools in Texas, and had a student-teacher ratio of 17:1 (15:1 was the state average), and a student-counselor ratio of 751:1 (534:1 was the state average) (StartClass, 2017). The school also had a higher-than-average number of novice teachers, with 15% of the teachers having two years, or less, of teaching experience, where the state average was 11% and the national average was 8% (StartClass, 2017). And, about 31% of the teachers at this school were considered chronically absent, having missed ten or more days of work during the 2015-2016 school year (StartClass, 2017; TEA, 2017).

There were 46 teachers at this school, including special teachers (art, music, and PE), instructional coaches for reading and math/science, the teacher for the Gifted and Talented program, as well as Special Education teachers. By ethnicity, there were 19

Hispanic teachers (41.3%), 10 Black teachers (21.7%), and 17 white teachers, (37%). By gender, there are 41 female teachers (89%) and five male teachers (11%).

The participants used in this study consisted of six teachers, one from each grade level, kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and their students; a total of approximately 240 students, who ranged from 5 – 12 years of age. More specifically, my study included four white teachers, one Black teacher, and one Hispanic teacher. There were five female teacher participants and one male. Five participants were General Education teachers and one was a Bilingual Education teacher. Three participants taught in self-contained classroom settings, while the other three taught in partially departmentalized classroom settings. Each of the teacher participants signed consent forms to participate in interviews and agreed to a series of classroom observations of 45 minutes – one-hour in length, not to exceed a total of six hours each; a total of approximately 36 hours combined.

Participants' educational backgrounds, attainment, and certification processes varied, as did their number of years of service, their teaching backgrounds and experience. The teacher in Kindergarten was 20-30 years old, had three years of teaching experience, all at the same school, and all at the Kindergarten grade level. She held a Bachelor's Degree from a traditional teaching program and an Early Childhood-6<sup>th</sup> grade (EC-6) Generalist certificate.

The first grade teacher had also obtained a Bachelor's degree in education through a traditional university-based education program. She was certified as an EC-4 Generalist and also had an English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement. During her 10 years of

teaching, she had taught second grade (3 years), Kindergarten (4 years), third grade (2 years) and first grade (1 year). She worked for the same school all ten years.

The teacher who taught second grade had 17 years of teaching experience, 16 of which were in first grade, self-contained classrooms. The teacher held a Bachelor's Degree in Human Resources and a Master's Degree in Counseling. She obtained her teaching credentials through an alternative certification program.

The third grade teacher was, by far, the most experienced participant, with thirty years of service as an educator. She began her teaching career in an alternative certification program, and obtained her certificate as a 1- 6 Generalist. Later, she obtained a Master's Degree in Education Administration. Overall, the participant spent 14 years as a classroom teacher, having taught third grade (9 years), second grade (1 year), and sixth grade (4 years). After eight years as a classroom teacher, the participant spent 17 years as an administrator (4 years as an assistant principal, and 13 as principal), and then returned to the classroom as a third grade science and social studies teacher.

In fourth grade, the teacher had 20 years of experience in education. She held a Bachelor's Degree from a traditional, university-based, teacher education program and was certified as a 1-8 grade Generalist and also held an ESL endorsement. She taught second grade (2 years) and 4<sup>th</sup> grade (18 years). Her teaching assignment was for math and science, though she had experience in all core content areas.

Finally, the fifth grade teacher was the only male teacher, and the only Bilingual Education participant, in the study. He began his teaching career in an alternative certification program. Upon completion of his program, he had earned certificates as a 4-8

Generalist, All Level Bilingual, and Spanish for K-12. The participant had 10 years of experience, third grade (2 years), fourth grade (2 years), sixth grade (1 year), and fifth grade (5 years).

### **Burlesque Community**

There were nine participants from the burlesque community who had varied degrees of performance experience and came from vastly different personal and professional backgrounds. Performance experience ranged from two to five years. Of the nine participants, seven were female and two were male. Though all identified as cis-gender, six self-identified as queer, and three as straight/heterosexual.

Their roles within the burlesque community included producer, performer, teacher, photographer, costumer, and milliner, with some of them playing multiple roles. For example, one participant was a producer, a performer, and a milliner, while another was a performer, teacher, and costumer. Two others were burlesque performers but produce other types of burlesque-related events like Naked Girls Reading. One was a performer and teacher, another a producer and performer. As they gained more experience in the community, they took on more responsibilities within the burlesque community.

Each participant found their way to burlesque in different and unique ways. One participant became interested, and decided to attend a show, after she happened to be working the cash register at her job in a bookstore when a burlesque performer visited the store, dressed in pin-up fashion, on her way to a photo-shoot. Another worked as an exotic dancer and took a class on pole dancing. Her instructor was a burlesque performer and encouraged her to go to a show. For another performer, it was her background in color-

guard that drew her to burlesque; she had seen a show and wanted to explore burlesque as a new creative outlet. One performer had just participated in a poetry slam event and was approached by a producer to be in their next show. Two of the participants came from performance backgrounds, either as theater kids in school, or as part of their adult work lives. Interestingly, the majority of them came from homes where some form of traditional Christian religion was practiced.

### **DATA COLLECTION AND DATA**

The data for this study were qualitative and were collected through interviews and observations, as well as through deconstructive analysis of four texts on burlesque:

*Horrible Prettiness* (1991) by Richard Allen, *Minsky's Burlesque* (1986) by Morton Minsky and Milt Machlin, *Gypsy: A Memoir* (1999) by Gypsy Rose Lee, and *Striptease: The untold story of the girlie show* (2004) by Rachel Shteir. They included textual data (field notes from direct observations of classrooms and participant observations at burlesque shows and events) and interview and observational data transcribed into text. Poetry also served as a method of data collection and analysis.

### **INTERVIEWS**

Interviews are key to gaining insight into the constructed realities of individuals, communities and cultures. Interviews are purposeful conversations that provide access to the lives of group members, where respondents can reconstruct past activities and experiences, discuss present motivations, concerns and emotions, and consider future possibilities (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, et al, 1993).

## **Teachers**

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) at Texas A&M University, permission from the district research review board, and permission from the building principal, consent was obtained from teachers (see Appendix A). Participating teachers were interviewed once, and interviews took one hour or less.

Based on personal experiences as an elementary teacher in an urban school, I developed an interview protocol specifically for teacher participants. It included structured questions regarding basic information such as certification processes (traditional, or alternative certification), and endorsements held, and unstructured questions regarding building and maintaining safe and inclusive classroom environments (see Appendix C).

## **Burlesque Community**

Burlesque participants who agreed to be interviewed first signed consent forms (see Appendix A). Based on personal experiences and observations at several burlesque shows, I developed an interview protocol that consisted largely of unstructured questions so that even though the questions were the same for all burlesque participants, there was opportunity for each person to respond with as much or as little detail as was comfortable. The interview questions focused on participants' roles and experiences within the burlesque community, how they found burlesque and why they stayed, and their experiences with the inclusive strategies employed by the burlesque community (see Appendix C).



## **OBSERVATIONS**

Observation was vital to my research because it “forms the context in which ethnographic fieldworkers assume membership in communities they want to study” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 470). I used two forms of observation: direct observation, and participant observation.

### **Teachers**

In the school, I used direct observation as I was only watching the teacher and students within the natural classroom environment. The observations were conducted randomly, on unscheduled dates/days/times, for the purpose of observing classrooms in their natural states as authentically as possible. The intent of the observations was to experience the classroom settings teachers have established, as well as to see and hear children’s responses to their own classroom experiences.

I conducted six, one-hour observations in each of the six selected classrooms, for a maximum of 36 observation hours. While I spent far more hours in observation of the burlesque community, it is important to note that I spent 14 years as a classroom teacher in the state of Texas, 12 of which were spent in the district and in the community where the school for my study was located. During that time, I served as a self-contained classroom teacher for second and third grade; a math and science teacher for second and third grade; and as a science lab teacher students in kindergarten through fifth grade. I also spent five years as a member of the Campus Instructional Leadership Team, in addition to organizing and presenting professional development sessions, serving on multiple committees, organizing and presenting family workshops, and procuring and managing multiple grants.

Further, I served as a substitute teacher in this school during the spring of 2015, thus the school climate was already familiar to me. Though I did not know the teachers or students personally, I was a familiar face to some of them. Additionally, due to my familiarity with the district, I understood the nature of their learning communities, specifically, that district and campus personnel – individually, and in groups - frequently visited classrooms. This further ensured that my visits to classrooms for the purpose of observations were of minimal impact and did not pose any significant distraction for teachers or students. Therefore, considering my years of teaching experience, my familiarity with the district, with the community, and with this campus, the criteria for prolonged engagement were met.

Prior to beginning classroom observations, I met briefly with each of the teachers to discuss the purpose of my research. During our conversations, I explained that I was interested in their daily classroom routines and practices, and that I did not want them to alter anything they would normally do. Per the district, in lieu of consent forms, informational letters were sent home to parents so they would be informed of the presence of a researcher in their child's classroom, and to briefly explain the purpose of the research. No parental consent or student assent was necessary.

For the purposes of this study, I created an Observation Rubric as a means of documenting classroom occurrences. I knew that I could not possibly anticipate what I would observe, so based on my years of experience in the district, I devised seven broad categories to which occurrences may initially be assigned: participating in class discussion/activities; safe learning environment; classroom interactions; cognitive demand;

access to materials, resources, teacher assistance, peer assistance; implementation of classroom management strategies, and; implementation of discipline management plan (see Observation Rubric, Appendix B).

These observations were not audio or videotaped. However, field notes were collected during and after the observation, based on the nature and circumstances surrounding classroom events/occurrences. I personally transcribed the notes from each classroom observation.

### **Burlesque Community**

In the burlesque community, participant observation was one method critical to my research because of the immediacy of access to rich, in-depth experiences and the opportunities it generated for greater insights into motives, behaviors, beliefs and practices, and access to tacit knowledge of group members by allowing me (the inquirer) to view the world of burlesque in similar fashion as participants and to grasp the culture in its natural environment, including the emotional experiences of the group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1992). The role of participant observer was most appropriate for me within the burlesque community because in this manner, observation was interactive and the degree of participation was negotiable and flexible (Spradley, 1980; Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000). Further, participant observer was a favorable position for me because, as I endeavored to learn the language and cultural rules of the burlesque community, I was be able to work collaboratively with participants as partners in my research who helped me with my research process (Spradley, 1980; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The nature of burlesque shows required audience participation. Though sometimes, performers asked for audience members to join them onstage, the audience was always asked to participate via cheers of approval, heckling of the emcees, and socializing with the cast and crew, vendors, and others, before and after the show, or during intermission. Burlesque performers and other members of the burlesque community, were observed during the natural course, in the natural setting, of burlesque venues. Observations were conducted randomly, at different venues, with different performers and different themes, for the purpose of observing the largest variety of acts and locations as possible.

The intent of these observations was multifaceted. I wanted to experience the atmosphere for each of the shows' locations, to see if the sense of openness and acceptance within the community was similar regardless of geographic location, audience, and performers. I also wanted to see if I had similar personal experiences. I was further interested to see if the strategies and mechanisms of inclusiveness were consistent from space to space, or based on geographic location and potential audience differences, if those strategies and mechanisms may vary.

These observations were not audio- or videotaped. However, field notes were be collected during and/or after each of the observations, based on the nature and circumstances surrounding the burlesque event. If taking notes during an event. I personally transcribed the notes for each observation of burlesque shows and events.

Burlesque shows and other related events were public and, most often, require ticketed access. Due to the public nature of these events, consent for observations was not required.

## **REFLEXIVE JOURNAL**

A reflexive journal may contain various types of information about the researcher's self (similar to a personal diary), as well as methodological reflections such as daily routines, and decisions made regarding research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Creswell, 2013). I maintained three reflexive journals that included my reflections on the research process for my burlesque observations, burlesque interviews, and classroom observations. I paid particular attention to reflections that addressed my assumptions about this study. My reflections and feelings voiced within my reflexive journal served as the basis for my poems, in Chapter 4.

## **TEXT DECONSTRUCTION**

I chose four texts on burlesque for deconstructive analysis. *Horrible Prettiness* by Richard Allen (1991), *Minsky's Burlesque* by Morton Minsky and Milt Machlin (1986), *Gypsy: A Memoir* by Gypsy Rose Lee (1999), and *Striptease: The untold history of the girlie show* by Rachel Shteir (2004). During the reading, I looked for the ways burlesque performers resisted conventional social norms, even if only subtly. I found six disruptive mechanisms: Visibility, constraint removal, voice, the returned gaze, spectacle, and pleasure in identity. I then used the six mechanisms as a template, or filter, by which interviews and observations were analyzed, to determine whether or not those disruptive elements were present in children's performances in classrooms.

## **POETRY**

The use of "[p]oetry has become a valuable research tool, and some would say a method..." (Faulkner, 2009, p. 15). I have used poetry as a method for data collection and

analysis as it pertains to my interpretation and representation of some of my observations of classrooms, as well as burlesque shows. While some poems recount events observed, others are portrayals of my personal experiences in these spaces, expressive of personal feelings, attitudes, and understandings. While much of the data analysis is in narrative form, "...poetry can evoke embodied responses in listeners and readers by recreating speech in ways that traditional research prose cannot" (Richardson, 1997, p. 143, cited in Faulkner, 2009).

Poetry, described by Faulkner (2009), can be considered a language accessed by researchers that other modes cannot capture. I experienced such moments; moments that defy description, that brought about such visceral physical and emotional responses they could not be ignored; moments when, as Behar (2008) explained, "...one's ethnographic work and one's life crash into each other in a head-on collision" (p. 63). The use of poetry allowed me to say things effectively and present data that otherwise may not have been presented at all (Faulkner, 2009).

## **RESEARCHER ROLE**

A singular description of my role as researcher in this process was elusive in that it seemed often to shift within a single space, in time and location. In one moment, I was both, at once, a classroom observer, removed to some corner of the room so as not to disrupt the learning environment, and an advocate for social justice for children – where my anger at how a child was mistreated overrode my observer status, but my observer status bounds my hands so that I could not intervene. And in that moment, I realized, I am

not a former teacher. I am a teacher – it is an essential part of my identity – and cannot be bracketed out of my interpretations as I experienced classroom observations.

At burlesque shows, I was an audience member, a paying customer, and a participant observer, but at this point in my research I have also become familiar to many of the performers in the state of Texas, particularly in Dallas, Houston and Austin. Though I've not attained 'friend' status, I am no longer an outsider in the burlesque community, and I found that I am quite protective of my acquaintances as their position in the burlesque community makes them particularly vulnerable.

My official role in the classroom space was "direct observer" and in the burlesque community it was "participant observer," but my perception of my experiences within those spaces was influenced by other related roles: teacher, acquaintance/friend, and white female who grew up steeped in the traditions of the Southern Baptist Church; the latter of which was particularly crucial because of its influence on my first experience at a burlesque show, and the subsequent influence that burlesque has had on my life personally – particularly spiritually.

I did not attempt to establish myself as objective in this work and I recognize that I have biases of which I will need to be aware. Those biases include my dedication to social justice and advocacy for children, and a research agenda that seeks an inclusive space for marginalized children, which I know stem from, at least in part, my experiences in the Church. In my role as participant observer, I ran the risk of overlooking, or down-playing, parts of the burlesque world that were not perfect, where there may still be conflict

amongst groups or individuals, because that same burlesque world brought me so much personal liberation and freedom.

In my position as a classroom observer, I ran the risk of missing the positive and inclusive strategies teachers may have used because, based on years of teaching experience, I expected them to behave out of ignorance, and to treat children inappropriately. To expand, by ignorance, I'm referring to instances where, perhaps, a teacher was unaware of her personal privileges and the impact they could make on a classroom, including biases that influenced differential application of rules, rewards and punishments, or limited access to materials and resources, or consistently excluded some children while privileging those who were accepted easily. And, based on my personal experiences, prior to realizing I had hidden biases that influenced my instructional choices, I know I looked for evidence of those hidden biases in those teachers I observed. In regard to inappropriate behavior, examples included speaking to children crossly, yelling, punishing the entire class for the behavior of one child (or a very few), or overly punitive consequences for minor incidents. My assumption was that teachers performed their duties from within the traditionally accepted and expected social norms for teachers and classrooms, and that the imposing of those norms created conflict for some students, whose cultural norms may be incongruent with accepted norms. Further, my assumption was that students' attempts to maintain their identity may often be misunderstood as social/behavioral problems, or could be ascribed to academic inability, because teachers did not understand the cultural differences that exist between them and their students.



For the sake of credibility, I triangulated my data through multiple observations of each teacher and classroom, and through attending and observing a variety of burlesque shows across multiple venues. I used member checking with each interview for teachers and burlesque participants to establish the credibility of interviews. I also provided thick descriptions of my observations of burlesque performances and classroom observations.

### **DATA MANAGEMENT**

Content analysis incorporated the processes of unitization, categorization, and constant comparison, as explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Text transcriptions of interviews and observations were unitized into individual sections. The pages were reformatted and coded to include participant number, type of transcript (observation or interview), date, and page number. Data were printed onto index cards and then sorted into multiple categories based on similar content. Subsequent sorts were conducted based on less explicit connections or themes. The themes, which emerged from each data sort, were organized into an outline, and then the data from each category was used to write the results of my study.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of the study was to explore the ways by which the burlesque community, today, was established and is maintained as a community of acceptance, to investigate the possibility that strategies utilized to deconstruct borders within the community could be adapted for use in elementary classrooms, to similarly deconstruct borders erected based upon race and ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and immigration status. Observations, interviews, and prolonged exposure to the burlesque community and culture revealed that it is a carefully constructed and maintained space. Though it was not always so, as neo-burlesque (as some call it today) emerged from its dormancy, the new movers-and-shakers purposely structured it as a space to welcome and celebrate all who choose to be a part of the community. They chose the standards by which they wanted the community to operate, and passed those standards on to burlesque schools and performers, producers, and others, throughout the United States, and ultimately, worldwide.

The community isn't perfect, and as its members are well aware of this point, they deal with issues as they arise instead of ignoring them and allowing them to persist. As in any other culture, some things are easier to resolve than others, but always, the goal is to maintain the burlesque space as one of openness and acceptance – a space within which there are no borders. It is a beautiful space; a space within which I experienced a sense of

joy and freedom, a space where I gained a new understanding of myself – experienced acceptance of myself – and made peace with myself.

It only took one show for me to know that the burlesque space, the community, was remarkable because of its openness. And I wondered if there was a way to create classroom spaces that are open and welcoming. Thus, the study further sought to investigate how the messages and beliefs of adults - who operate within conventional social norms - are transmitted to children, as well as to gain insight into how children translated – interpreted and internalized – that information as social norms within which they operated in the classroom setting. And finally, the study sought to understand how children construct and maintain their cultural identities, and make use of less tangible cultural manifestations to perform their cultural identities within classroom environments shaped by conventional social norms.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the school’s demographics. Following this information is a discussion of *Borderlands in the Classroom*, and *Burlesque: A Space for Everyone*, derived from the analysis of data collected during observations and interviews. Further analysis of the data is then presented in segments, based on the themes located in the deconstruction of four burlesque texts. Each segment contains a brief explanation of the theme, followed by a recounting of a burlesque performance that embodied that particular quality. Classroom observations then follow the burlesque performance. Written as vignettes, each account is a detailed record of a single moment during a classroom observation. Each of these moments were selected because they served as striking examples – in my perspective – of borders built by teachers and then burlesqued

by students. Each of the vignettes precedes a larger commentary that more thoroughly contextualizes the event. The chapter then moves on to discuss findings from the burlesque community regarding the strategies they employ to maintain an open and welcoming space. And finally, reflections on my positionality as teacher and researcher serve as conclusion and segue to the fifth and final chapter.

Briefly, the data collected for this study includes findings obtained from a single school, with approximately 800 students; 76% Hispanic, 17% African American, 5% White, 1% Two or More Ethnicities, and 1% Asian and Native American combined. Like many urban schools, a majority of the students (92%) were from low socioeconomic backgrounds, 57% were considered At-Risk, and 49% were LEP students (Limited English Proficiency).

Part of a large, urban school district, the school employed 48 teachers; 19 Hispanic, 18 White, 10 Black, and 1 Native American. The teachers came from both traditional education programs, as well as alternative certification programs. In years of experience, they ranged from three years (kindergarten) to thirty years (third grade).

Over the course of the data collection period, I conducted approximately thirty hours of observations in six K-5 classrooms; one from each grade level. Four teacher participants were White, one was Black and one was Hispanic; five were female, and one was male. Though I had originally planned, and teachers agreed, for a series of six observations in each classroom, of up to an hour each, due to random, unforeseen obstacles throughout the semester, such as testing, field trips, and days when teachers made their classrooms unavailable for one reason or another, I ended up with three visits to each of

the classrooms in grades 3-5 and five visits apiece to the classrooms in grades K-2; all for about an hour each. Initially, I was concerned about not being able to collect a sufficient amount of data from third, fourth, and fifth grade, but as I discovered, by the third visit, every class period was virtually the same from one day to the next.

Additionally, data collected include in-depth interviews with nine burlesque participants, and observations conducted at ten burlesque shows, as well as from four deconstructed burlesque texts. Previously mentioned in Chapter 3, the texts were: *Horrible Prettiness* by Richard Allen (1991), *Minsky's Burlesque* by Morton Minsky and Milt Machlin (1986), *Gypsy: A Memoir*, by Gypsy Rose Lee (1999), and *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show* by Rachel Shteir (2004).

The deconstructed texts revealed six mechanisms by which performers exercised personal agency to challenge conventional social norms and enact power inversions to resist the borders that would contain them: 1) they made themselves visible, 2) they removed their constraints, 3) they were vocal in times and places where society would have silenced them, 4) they returned the gaze, 5) they created spectacle, and 6) they took pleasure in their identity. They were in control even if it didn't seem like it to their audiences. Similarly, findings indicate that children do exert personal agency to purposely invert classroom power dynamics and resist restrictive classroom procedures and expectations. Finally, findings from burlesque interviews and observations suggest that there are several strategies employed by the burlesque community that could be useful in transforming classrooms by removing borders erected based on conventional social norms.

The following, by way of thick description, vignettes, and poetry, is my presentation and discussion of the findings. Each of the primary sections corresponds to the six themes of disruption; visibility, constraint removal, voice, the returned gaze, spectacle, and pleasure in identity. Each section features an explanation of the disruptive theme, followed by a recounting of a burlesque performance with an explanation of its significance, and then vignettes, based on discrete moments that occurred during classroom observations. Poetry is included in the spaces where a narrative recounting of an occurrence needed enhancement – to better enable me to convey the magnitude of the moment, for students, for teachers, and for myself.

### **BURLESQUE: A PLACE FOR EVERYONE**

Whereas the classrooms observed in this study would have all students think and behave in similar fashion, burlesque, from its earliest origins, has challenged the status quo, mocked those who fancied themselves elite, and subverted power structures that marginalized the masses and then denied them access to the same quality of goods and services, the same human rights, as the elite. Burlesque has always been a protest – an exercise in resistance – of those powers that would define, degrade, and dehumanize those Other than the middle-and upper-classes. And so it is today. The look is different. The presentation more risqué. But the same foundation, laid centuries ago, is still evident in burlesque performances, and within the burlesque community. Whether it be racial discrimination and oppression, gender identity, gender roles, LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, or social and political activism, the burlesque community has purposely and strategically created a space that is open and welcoming to everyone – a community that

challenges social norms that would exclude Others based on their differences, norms that would deny them basic human rights, norms that cause harm and are unjust. While they celebrate and value the identity of each individual, the burlesque community functions as a collective. They work together and hold each other accountable to the community's standards and core values.

### **An Intentionally Planned Space**

As burlesque emerged from the shadows in the mid-to late – 1990s, its new leaders, grounded in feminism, worked together to establish basic core values of inclusivity, social justice and empowerment. They worked to ensure a climate of equality based on merit rather than aesthetic, as one participant explained. They prioritized acceptance and body positivity, and that burlesque community would promote self-acceptance, and self-celebration. They encouraged a respect for its history, its community, and its evolution. They ensured that burlesque would be a sex-positive, pro-sexuality, feminist space, where according to one respondent, they try to transcend the containment of women, and where they are not constrained by the norms of race or religion. To ensure those standards are upheld, community members engage in educational opportunities, they invest in their craft, cultivate relationships with each other, and hold each other accountable for maintaining the core community values. The burlesque community functions as a collective, with an understanding that for the community to work, to accomplish their goals, they have to work together. When asked about how the burlesque community preserves a space of acceptance, participants explained, as a collective, that they are responsible for creating

and maintaining the community – that they have to make it what they want it to be. They decide what principles they will live by, and then stand on those principles.

Based on my own observations and experiences, my personal perception of the burlesque community is that it is, for the most part, a safe and inclusive space. However, as an audience member, though atypical, I realize my perspective is very different from those who are performers and producers, or otherwise more deeply engaged in the community. So, I asked participants for their thoughts regarding the burlesque community as an open, accepting, welcoming, and safe space. Without fail, each participant expressed their belief that the burlesque community is indeed a welcoming space where it is very easy to find acceptance and feel safe. Participants reported that the space within the burlesque community is very open and honest, and that there is a place for everyone. They described the community as respectful, helpful, and supportive, as a space that, overall, refrains from negativity and judgment.

Several participants expressed the idea that members of the burlesque community found each other because many of them have endured similar, painful, life experiences; abusive relationships, sexual assault, eating disorders, and other places of severe hurt and trauma, but that their outsider status brought them to a similar space of acceptance and safety in burlesque. One participant expressed that the burlesque space exists as it does, because of the pain so many of them have suffered. Others said that the burlesque community works hard to be aware of each other, and to understand that every little thing they do can affect another person. For example, one respondent explained that she would never give negative feedback to anyone about an act. Even if she did not like it and could



find nothing praiseworthy about the routine, she was adamant in her stance to be a positive force in the community, and found ways to encourage performers for their courage or tenacity. Whatever comment she chose to make, she refused to degrade anyone.

The burlesque participants in this study recognize that they are part of a community with a long history of social activism. While one participant expressed that he had great appreciation for burlesque as a platform where political and artistic stands are made, another espoused the vocal and proactive nature of the burlesque community and explained that having conversations about sensitive topics, though uncomfortable, are important to the community. Participants described burlesque as a social revolution rooted in a community made up of very different, unique, and sometimes weird, people who are all working toward the same goal; challenging mainstream social norms.

Participants explained how their involvement in the burlesque community was eye-opening and made them more aware of their privilege, White privilege in particular, and how that realization has encouraged them to speak up, where previously they were likely to remain silent. One participant described her socially active voice as hoarse since the 2016 presidential election. The majority of the burlesque participants in this study claimed that the burlesque community made them better people, made them more aware of social injustice, more aware of oppression, more aware of racism, sexism, ageism, size-ism, and made them more sensitive, more thoughtful, more purposeful beings. Burlesque gives community members a space within which they are heard and where their voices matter.

Participants expressed that there is room for everyone, there is a lot of work to be done to maintain the community, so there are many opportunities to participate and to

serve. When asked about their roles and responsibilities within the community, each of the respondents claimed that their first responsibility is to entertain their audience, and also reported feeling responsible for setting a good example in the community, to treat everyone with respect, to be conscientious of other people and cultures, and to use their skills to the benefit and growth of the entire community. Performers support each other as artists. They critique themselves, and each other. They train together, teach classes for the community, help each other with costumes and choreography, and with things like negotiating contracts. Those who enter the community, who are willing to put in the hard work, find themselves with all of the support they need in order to be successful.

### **Burlesque: It's Imperfect**

Noticeably missing from each interview conversation were any comments that could have been perceived as a negative reflection on the burlesque community. When I asked, specifically, about boundaries within the community, barriers to success, or negative experiences, each participant reported some issues that the community may face, even if they did not feel like they experienced those issues personally. They also explained how issues were addressed as soon as they arose, and that most of those issues do not exist within the entire community, but rather, tend to occur as isolated incidents, often based on particular locations. Concerns stated by participants included finances, cases of unequal access and opportunities for bookings, and instances of discrimination.

#### *Finances*

Burlesque is an expensive industry and requires significant financial investment if a performer wants to be successful and move from the fringes of the community into the

inner circles of performers who are well known. Therefore, finances function as a border within the burlesque community. The majority of the burlesque participants (8 out of 9) had other jobs on which they relied as their primary source of income, while the final participant was able to work in burlesque full-time. Though each participant expressed, in one way or another, their desire to receive better compensation for performances, some also explained potential downfalls to greater pay. Most specifically, one participant expressed his feelings about the demand for greatness versus minimal pay, but at the same time understood that he had more freedom in working on a small scale as he had more control over his creative choices.

Overall, it is safe to say that, though performing in the burlesque community is not a particularly lucrative endeavor, steps have been taken, and progress made, toward community members getting paid more money, more frequently. In part, as burlesque moves into mainstream entertainment and becomes more popular, more of the local, monthly and weekly shows are able to pay all of the performers instead of only headliners. Area burlesque alliances have taken steps toward setting industry expectations with local venues in order to avoid undercutting between shows and groups. They also help their members to create contracts to ensure payment for their performances. Though many festival productions do not pay all performers, some of them are working toward the ability to pay them all. For example, 2016 saw the first production of the Texas Queerlesque Festival. The producers knew they couldn't pay the performers but they were transparent about that from the start, and also laid out a plan that would enable them to compensate performers in other ways; complimentary admission to the festival on the night they were

not performing, access to producers for networking purposes, swag bags from vendors and sponsors, complimentary entrance to local gay bars, and two complimentary high-resolution digital photograph headshots. An increase in pay that enables those who desire to work in burlesque full-time to do so is a community goal.

### *Bookings*

While some participants expressed that they did not feel as though they encountered any borders or boundaries personally, except for financing their performances, a few mentioned that they were aware of some instances in booking performances that were of concern. One participant mentioned that producers are generally looking for specific things, whether it be a specific style of performance, gender, height, body type, or ethnicity. Therefore, some people are going to have an easier time breaking in to the burlesque community and getting booked for performances than others. The general consensus amongst participants was that those with classical dance backgrounds and those with smaller body types, especially Whites, have easier access to bookings. With that in mind, they further explained that a show has to fit certain parameters like duration, and it has to appeal to its audience in order to sell tickets. Performers understand that a producer can only book a handful of cast members for each show. They also understand that the acts they submit may not fit the producer's vision for the show, or that there may be too many submissions of the same style, which makes it more difficult to get cast in regular productions.

Selection for competition in festivals is even more difficult. Festivals cost so much to produce that producers often select the most well known performers, or those with the

most prestigious titles, because they have to sell as many tickets as possible. Therefore, those who have the finances to travel to shows and festivals are generally those who have had the most exposure. Therefore, they continue to benefit while others, just as talented, get overlooked or left out because they aren't as well known.

It should be noted that there are many burlesque performers who perform classical burlesque routines, so those with memorable gimmicks are more likely to be cast than someone who just does a typical, classical routine. Those with theater backgrounds, who are good at creating different characters for nerdlesque routines are also very likely to be selected because there aren't as many of them as there are of other styles. This makes the burlesque industry competitive, which as respondents explained, is sometimes painful. They put forth a lot of time, effort and money to create their brand, to make themselves known, and to share their art. For some, it is easier than others.

#### *Discrimination*

Participants, overall, described the burlesque community as accepting, but also felt that it would be misleading to make a blanket statement that suggested the entire community was open, welcoming, and accepting of others.

While they all expressed their sincere belief that most of the community is accepting, they are aware of some circumstances that need to be addressed, or of which are being addressed.

#### *Body Type*

One of the core tenets of the burlesque community's beliefs is that of body positivity, that all bodies are beautiful. However, as previously stated, even with the

emphasis and body positive consciousness within the community, plus size performers often find it more difficult to get cast in shows.

One participant shared her experiences after shows, when all of the cast members are standing around having drinks, visiting with each other and doing audience meet-and-greet, how it was frequently the cute, thin, performers who received the most attention. Another performer shared her frustration with some photographers. She described an ongoing conversation that involved several plus size performers in regard to photographers who take fewer pictures of them than they do of thin performers. She went on to describe how when they all get their shots back, whether it be three, or five, or ten each, as they all receive the same number – inevitably, the thin performers get back photos of their reveals, in pasties, and during glove and stocking peels, while plus size performers generally only receive photos of themselves still fully clothed. She further explained that she's even gone to greater lengths, like over-rhinestoning each piece of her costumes, to draw more attention to the costumes than to her body, trying to get a greater variety of photographs. Body positivity, as she described it, is still a problem that extends all the way to the top of the burlesque world, because there has never been a plus size performer who was invited to compete for the Miss Exotic World title at Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekend.

While I cannot personally attest to these claims, I find that there are a fair number of plus size burlesque performers who are well-loved and very popular on the burlesque stage. It's true, there are not as many of them, but performers like Kitty Von Quim, Ginger Snaps, Remi Martini, and Pixie O'Kneel, never fail to garner standing ovations at every performance I have seen.

### *Race/Ethnicity*

It is easy to attend a burlesque show anywhere in the Houston, Austin, or Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex and see casts that are inclusive and representative of varied and diverse backgrounds. So, I was somewhat surprised to find that the same is not true everywhere in Texas, or in other cities and states where there is a burlesque community. Though the two women of color interviewed for this study both reported that Texas, in general, and Dallas, specifically, does a great job producing shows that are inclusive of people of color, there are within the larger community, still problems with institutional racism. One respondent expressed that she feels White women are more immediately accepted and more respected than Black women, that even now, she has to be ten times better than White performers – that she has to be so good she cannot be ignored. She shared a couple of stories regarding her experiences with racism in the burlesque community.

Early in her burlesque career, she joined a troupe in which she was one of the only Black performers. There was also a Black man, a well known, well respected, and successful member of the community's theater group, in the troupe. For one number, the troupe leader, a white woman, performed her striptease in a bathtub. Throughout the entire number, she had the man stand, completely still, staring straight ahead, while holding her towel for her – essentially reducing a very talented Black male performer, to her servant and set dressing.

The participant also recalled the year she had finally saved enough money to travel to Las Vegas for the Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekend. While there, she visited the Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum. The museum is not large, but holds photographs and

artifacts from the early days of burlesque in America. The respondent was disheartened when, besides a few postcards for sale, she found only one photograph of a Black burlesque performer – Perle Noire – who is currently an important and influential member of the burlesque community. The participant asked the employee why there was not a wall or some kind of display that included Black performers. The employee responded that their pictures had been displayed during Black History Month. When the participant challenged that reasoning by explaining that every month is Black History Month for Black people, the employee apologized and gave her a bunch of free postcards.

Further, performers of color are reportedly less likely to headline shows, to be selected for festival competitions, or to win the most prestigious titles. Experiences like these, coupled with some producer’s failure to include people of color in their shows on a regular basis are why some performers of color have created troupes for primarily people of color, while others have begun to produce shows that cast people of color exclusively, in order to assure them opportunities to perform on a regular basis. Examples of such troupes and shows include: Fat Bottom Cabaret (Austin, TX) and Jeezy’s Juke Joint: A Black Burly-Q Revue (Chicago, IL).

### **No Tolerance for Intolerance**

When asked about how the larger community may handle those who depart from the community’s core principles, participants explained that within the burlesque community there exists a “call-out” culture. They address issues as they arise. When they face difficult situations, they strive to identify the causes and address them head-on, rather than avoid them. For example, in March 2017, there was an International Burlesque



Festival in Toulouse, France. One performer intended to do a routine in blackface, but there were several performers – including eight Americans – who protested the inclusion of the routine and requested that it be performed without blackface, or not performed at all, and have the performer use a different routine. However, the festival producers refused to make any changes, and several performers, including all of the international performers, removed themselves from the show. The significance of their choice is highlighted by the fact that these performers had paid for their own travel expenses and, as they tried to leave the venue, producers, staff, and security blocked the exits and even physically accosted some of the performers in an attempt to prevent them from leaving – to force them to perform. The story spread like wildfire in the community. The international burlesque community was outraged, and several articles, blogs, and Facebook posts, condemned the blackface act, as well as the treatment of those who chose to leave.

Even more recently, and here in the United States, a very well known male performer amongst the burlesque community, has been exposed publicly, for sexual harassment. Those victimized by his behavior initially tried to handle the issue discreetly, professionally, but they faced several obstacles. He had such a great reputation amongst those whom he had not harassed, that they were quick to defend him. Further, he claimed that he was only being friendly, or just kidding, and his behavior continued. Finally, in desperation, victims drafted a letter that detailed their experiences, and then they – and their witnesses – attached their names to the document and posted it in multiple burlesque groups in social media forums. The sheer number of victims and witnesses made the problem impossible to ignore or further defend. In each of these instances, community

members attempted to address the problems privately, dealing only with the people immediately involved in the issue, but when those efforts failed, the grievances were shared with the larger community where they were dealt with collectively. Ideally, as indicated by one participant, community leaders would be able to talk to the individuals or groups involved and take necessary measures to resolve the problems quietly and respectfully, but that is not always how things work out. Beyond the call-out nature of the community, participants explained that education is the real key to change, therefore, they take steps to educate performers and audiences.

### **Burlesque 101**

Membership in the burlesque community requires personal investment beyond stage performances. Education, in the burlesque community, is an ongoing commitment to, and investment in, the craft and in the community's values. Each participant interviewed mentioned ways in which they contribute to the community. Understandably, as they gained more experience, the depth of purpose and meaning of their roles increased. Of those interviewed, five are producers; three of them produce burlesque shows, but two of them produce events related to burlesque but which are not exclusively burlesque – Naked Girls Reading, and a monthly artist/sketch event. While these are not burlesque shows, the performers, models, and artists are often involved in all of these events. In each setting, performers take the opportunity to educate participants about their purpose and vision, as well as advertise other events, thus encouraging and promoting ally-ship for marginalized groups, as well as expanding potential sponsorship and audiences that support the community financially.

Other participants contribute to the community by teaching dance classes or workshops on topics such as costuming, makeup and hair, or even on creative processes like creating and developing an act. Most festivals, such as the Texas Burlesque Festival (Austin), the Dallas Burlesque Festival, and the Texas Queerlesque Festival (Dallas), offer workshops for performers. Festival workshops may range from an hour to a half-day, and are generally taught by festival headliners, or perhaps, an entertainer from out-of-town, or out-of-state, whom the local community may not see often. At the 2016 Texas Queerlesque Festival there was Unicorn School with a headliner panel where each of the headlining performers had an hour to discuss a topic of their choice; subjects included “Making Face,” “Blunt Talk” (about racial inequities within the burlesque community), and “The Non-Binary Performer’s Survival Guide,” among others. Unicorn School workshops for the 2017 Texas Queerlesque Festival included workshops like: “Dance Like a Diva,” “Glove Appeal,” “Floorotica,” “Dropping the Political Bombshell,” “Feats of Flight,” “Sass and Smoulder,” “The Body Political,” “Glitter Glam,” and “Bangin’ Bios, Tag Lines, and Intros.” Some of the courses were movement based while others were presentations that included varying degrees of interaction.

Workshops are also offered at large-scale events like BurlyCon – a national convention – where hundreds of performers, legends, and other community members amass for workshops, panel discussions, peer review boards and presentations. As one respondent expressed, the ongoing investment pays off. She described a workshop she attended on acting for burlesque and finding inspiration. The presenter gave them five minutes to devise an act based solely on the items they had brought with them to the

workshop. And then again, based on items in their kitchens. The participant explained how that exercise changed the way she views the world – how she now sees artistic possibilities at every turn because she is more artistically aware. Compelled to be a better dancer, a better costumer, to be more creative, and to be better than her last performance was the way another participant described one of her workshop experiences.

Most burlesque performers are acutely aware of issues surrounding social gender and gender inequities, as well as issues of racial inequities and other issues of social justice, so they work those topics into their workshop presentations. One participant explained how he expressed that he taught his workshop attendees the importance of the fact that burlesque is an industry produced predominantly by women, for women, and to empower women. As such, because women are required to wear pasties, he requires men in his workshops to wear pasties and encourages them to do so in their performances, too. He also teaches his workshop attendees about makeup application and the significance of matching makeup to their own skin tones so as to avoid darkening their skin unnaturally – avoiding cultural appropriation and blackface.

Burlesque members share their skills and insights with their peers. One respondent, for example, reported that she had recently received a critique on one of her routines from a performer whom she had never met in person. She explained that though they had only ever seen each other perform in videos and communicated electronically, she had been given a very detailed, well thought-out, and insightful critique of her work. She found the feedback so significant that the routine will be completely different the next time it is performed.

On a larger scale, some community members participate in peer review groups. One participant saw a specific need for such a group in her local community and created a space to meet that need. She had attended the annual BurlyCon event – a national burlesque convention – where there is a Peer Review Board; those who attend the peer review sessions have the opportunity to perform a routine and then receive feedback on their performance from peers. Feedback may include critique on any aspect of the performance such as dance, style, music, hair and makeup, costume, and facial expression. While the peer review process is invaluable, it is also intimidating for some performers – particularly at the national level where there are so many well-known, highly experienced and highly respected performers in attendance, serving on the Peer Review Board. Having heard burlesque members in her local community lament over their choice not to participate in the BurlyCon peer review sessions due to stress, related to their fear of harsh criticism or negative judgment, the participant decided to create a peer review group for performers in her own city. She believes the process should be available and accessible to all performers and that it should be a space where they are comfortable and feel safe and supported. It should further be noted that some troupes, as explained by one producer-participant, hold peer review nights as a group, where they share ideas for new acts, and help each other with choreography, as well as work on new troupe numbers.

Newer members frequently have mentors who are active performers and teach within the community, but some also have what they refer to as their burlesque mothers who are, generally, Burlesque Legends or other community leaders or members who have significant experience, have agreed to mentor novice performers and are committed to

passing on the history of burlesque along with performance instruction. Mentors work closely with their mentees on routine development. As one participant shared, her mentor watched one of her routines and then they talked about its complexity and how its many layers gave it depth and made it smart. Since then, the participant has paid close attention to developing acts with multiple layers of meaning and giving close to attention to each piece of the puzzle so that it adds to the entirety of the act such that audiences are left laughing, or maybe crying, as well as aroused.

Additionally, serving as a stage kitten – a burlesque apprentice - is often a rite of passage in the burlesque community. In many troupes, new members begin as stage kittens and spend months learning about burlesque, learning the moves, and studying other performers, before they earn their way to their debut performance. Most of the performers I interviewed spent time as kittens, even if they did not join a troupe. They actively pursued opportunities to volunteer because it gave them exposure to the burlesque community and provided an abundance of learning experiences. Sometimes, even burlesque producers volunteer to serve as kittens just because it keeps them connected to many members of the burlesque community, and it is an easy way to support each other.

There have been a number of times when the stage kittens were just as much fun, just as engaged with the audience, and just as entertaining as those performing. One kitten, in particular, comes to mind. Her name is Tasseled Squirrel and she is a member of Broads and Panties Burlesque. Though she is actually a performer, she acted as a stage kitten for one of the shows I attended at Viva's Lounge. Honestly, I enjoyed her as much as I enjoyed the rest of the performers. She wore a stuffed squirrel tail and a tutu as part of her

costume that night. When she came on stage between acts, squirrel tail bouncing, she flirted with the audience and the emcee – she played suggestively with the broom as she swept the stage, posed provocatively when she bent to pick up garments from the stage, and even stuck her tail out from behind the curtains and wiggled it at the audience. Whatever it was that she did, she added some quirky flair that had audience members cheering for her almost as much as they did for the actual acts. Every role in the burlesque community is important and respected.

In short, each of the performers interviewed expressed efforts made to ensure continued growth and professional development. Whether they traveled from one city to another to attend workshops, enrolled in longer courses in order to study particular skills with particular instructors, or served as stage kittens, they all engage in every possible opportunity to hone their skills, to be better than their last performance, and to serve their community.

### **Room for Everyone - Almost**

The burlesque community makes room for everyone to be their unique selves, but that space can only exist via the collective. In general, data collected during interviews with burlesque participants indicated that those with open, supportive, and welcoming personalities will find it easier to be successful in the burlesque community than others. Understanding this aspect of how the community functions makes it possible to recognize those who enter the space with selfish motives, who put their own desires and well-being before those of the community, and who are unwilling to invest in the community. Generally, performers need to be people with whom other performers and producers want

to work, and whom audiences want to see. While the burlesque community is assuredly open to anyone who elects to be a member and is willing to do the hard work required, sometimes there are, according to respondents, people who are uncomfortable to work with due to issues like homophobia, racism, sexism, or just plain selfish motives. One participant explained that she had a friend who had a very intense personality and experienced difficulty finding performance opportunities because she had gained a reputation for being difficult to work with.

Another respondent relayed a story of a relatively new performer who kitted for a festival in Houston, where she stole one of the festival t-shirts. It took months for her to admit that she had done so, even after she was confronted with evidence of her actions. Over the last year, she has gone on to undermine and steal from her troupe's founder and producer, and nearly completely destroyed the troupe altogether. She has so alienated the community in Houston that no one will hire her anymore, and neither will most of the people in Dallas.

I, too, have witnessed instances where people entered the community for self-serving purposes. One such experience occurred at the Dallas Burlesque Festival. There were two shows on Friday night, both in the Cambridge Room, a relatively small performance space. House of Blues staff stationed themselves outside the entrance, one at the podium, one who worked his way down the line of attendees, checking IDs and handing out wristbands that identified those of us of legal drinking age. When the heavy floor-to-ceiling carved wooden doors swung open, the line inched slowly forward, and at the door, split into two lines, where there were two employees who scanned the barcodes



on our tickets. As the audience slowly filtered into the space, I heard commotion behind me, chaos where there had been relative quiet and orderliness. I turned from my conversation at a vendor's table, in time to see a couple plunge through the guests at the door, smug looks on their faces, puffed-up with self-importance, as they flashed photographer's credentials at everyone around them, as if that excused their rude behavior. They continued through the room, around the velvet rope that cordoned off the cast seating and took the first two seats, closest to the stage. I meandered through the rest of the vendor booths, met new friends, took a few pictures, and watched those photographers as they tromped through the room, and preened, dismissive of everyone else in the space. Eventually, I made my way to the bar and then toward my seat. As I walked around the velvet rope, the woman glanced over her shoulder. When I sat down behind them, she immediately turned her body around in her seat so she was facing me, and sharply demanded, "Who are you?! Are you a photographer?!" as she held up her photographer's guest pass and shoved it toward my face.

I was so startled by her tone initially that I could only stare, mouth agape. When I explained I was conducting research, and was welcomed, by the cast, to sit with them, she immediately responded with, "Did they give you free tickets?! They gave us free tickets!" The surprised expression on her face, when I expressed that I prefer to pay for my tickets as a way to support the community, was priceless. She gushed on then, about how she and her husband were also doing research, how they had gotten a grant, and were traveling to burlesque shows all over the country, taking pictures. The deal was, they would, supposedly, give thousands of dollars worth of photos to the performers in exchange for an

all-access pass, including dressing rooms and staging areas, and that they would have permission to keep and publish the images of their choice. Their research would culminate in the production of a coffee table book. I managed not to laugh, but I am not sure I hid my smirk.

I watched them that night, as they moved around the room, angling for the best shot, inconsiderate of those over whom they walked. They were at the Saturday show, too. I probably would not have known it, except that the husband found his way down to the rail of the balcony where I was seated. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, blocked the aisle, waved hello when he saw me, and resumed his camera clicking.

What these two failed to realize was there were paid, professional, photographers in attendance, too – who treated everyone respectfully – whose work is well known and respected, who respect the craft of burlesque, and who contribute to the community. Those photographers are highly sought after. Their images are widely circulated, their names, highly recognized.

These two hawked their services, passed out their cards, tried to drum up business, in someone else's backyard. Genuine members of the burlesque community support each other rather than undermine them. Not only have I never seen those two at another burlesque show in the Dallas area, I never saw any photos from the Dallas Burlesque Festival posted or credited to them. I cannot be certain, but it appears that they were not well received, and not asked back, or welcomed into the community.

Furthermore, some people prove to be problematic because they neglect their responsibility to contribute to the community. Success in the burlesque community, as

communicated by one participant, largely depends on personality. She said, who a person was before they found burlesque is important because it determines how they approach the community; that what a person learns from burlesque depends not only on who they learn from, but also about the time, the effort, and the determination of the individual. Some, she said, will not learn anything, or take anything meaningful away from their experiences, because they keep their head in the sand and all they do is take their clothes off. There are others, however, who live, eat and breathe burlesque. Everything that happens in the community matters to them. Those are the people who contribute the most to the community, those most committed, the ones who make a genuine difference. These are the performers who come into the community with their minds and their bodies engaged, as one respondent said, because burlesque is physical, mental, and emotional. He said burlesque performances require everything of a performer as they navigate the world we live in through their performances on stage. Their performances are a celebration of life – of living – together. It is, therefore, essential that burlesque members are purposeful, strategic, and intentional about every aspect of the community; productions, performances, and perceptions.

### **A Connecting Force**

According to participants from the burlesque community, burlesque is a connecting force that draws talented individuals from many backgrounds and careers to one space. One producer-participant explained that burlesque attracts such a variety of people that simply being committed to hiring the best acts makes burlesque automatically inclusive. Another producer-participant echoed this sentiment when she described her experience

with assembling a cast for her show. She explained that even though she had received an overwhelming number of applications from people who wanted to participate, she reviewed each of the video auditions twice, to ensure that she had chosen the best acts, rather than those that may have had more personal appeal.

Audiences are also a major consideration when producers put a show together. It is important for people to see themselves in a world where they fit and belong, and know they are important, said one producer. Burlesque does that, and it is evident when audiences are representative of many different types of people from many different backgrounds, rather than a particular type, or singular group. Audiences are drawn to burlesque because of its inclusivity. For example, on one occasion, a respondent overheard a conversation between audience members, one of whom was somewhat disappointed because she had expected to see different body types instead of all thin and tiny performers. To say the least, much goes into show production.

### **Strategic and Purposeful**

The burlesque community is strategic, purposeful, and intentional in their efforts to produce successful shows, but also in maintaining its open and accepting nature – for performers and audience members, alike. As in any endeavor that involves large numbers of people, there is always a lot that goes on behind the scenes, so to speak. Well-planned, seemingly small, details make for a well-executed, well-received event. Such is the case with burlesque shows. They are held at a wide variety of venues such as small bars and nightclubs, as well as larger venues like House of Blues, and some spaces, like Viva’s Lounge, though they may host other events, were specifically created as burlesque spaces.

Over the last three years, I have had the opportunity to attend shows in Houston, Dallas, and Austin. In Houston, I attended the Bayou City Burlesque and Circus Arts Festival, held in a location called Warehouse Live! In the Houston Arts District. I also attended shows at the House of Blues in Houston and in Dallas, to see performances by the Ruby Revue. In Dallas, most of the shows I attended were at Viva's Lounge, although the Dallas Burlesque Festival was held at the House of Blues. In Austin, I attended the Texas Burlesque Festival, held at the Stateside Theater.

The shows in each space vary. Some are monthly shows that are on a small scale and last about two hours, while festivals take place over a number of days – generally on weekends – beginning on Thursday or Friday night and lasting through Saturday night or Sunday “stripper brunch” – and sometimes, the festivals are followed by classes taught by different headlining performers. Whatever the location or venue, there are routines and procedures that are similar, and interestingly, also a part of the burlesque experience. Even parking my car and waiting in line to enter a venue became a part of the anticipation for me –and contributed to the fun, the excitement, and the sense of community surrounding a show.

None of the theaters where I have attended shows were particularly upscale or fancy, though they each boast classy elements that enhance the environment and contribute to the celebratory atmosphere. The mix of functional, industrial elements, with the more lush elements further contributes, in a subtle way, to the idea of burlesque – elevating the low while bringing down the high. In each of the venues, I noticed that the floors in the performance spaces were polished concrete, which makes practical sense for venues that

host a variety of events where drinks are served - nothing fancy that may be difficult to clean or expensive to replace. With the exception of the shows I attended at the House of Blues, all of the venues were located in warehouses – or were constructed similarly. All of them had wide, open spaces so people could move around easily, and each had some form of a traditional box office.

In each of the venues, there were a variety of seating options, VIP tables, priority seating, general admission, standing room only. Sometimes, the difference in seating meant I had a front row seat in the balcony at the House of Blues, those who had paid for general admission were on the floor and actually closer to the stage, but it was standing-room-only and the stage was actually high enough to make it difficult to see if they were too close – and the space was packed – a crush of bodies crammed together. VIP seats at Viva’s meant seats closest to the stage, and generally meant a private table and cocktail/table service. Priority seats are generally what I purchase as it reserves me a seat toward the front of the audience and guarantees I’ll have a seat for the duration of a show. At Viva’s it’s always easy to see how big of an audience they are expecting because of the way chairs are arranged – and the number of seats in a section. While it seemed that for the majority of the shows I attended, the audience was not full until close to the start time for a show, I prefer to arrive early, as close to the time when the doors open as possible. There is a lot to see and experience in that hour before a show begins.

The bar is always a popular place at the shows and I found it interesting that, no matter how plain the performance space may have been, the bar in each venue was like a beacon, shining in the dark, beckoning to all who entered the space. In each instance, the

bars were one of the finer elements in the establishment. The bar tops/countertops were granite, smooth and cool, and gleaming in the dark. Rows of bottles climbed the wall behind the bar, lined up on mirrored shelves, and accented by neon lights glowing blue, or red, or purple. The bar was a place of connection – a natural blend of audience members and performers, of customers with bar staff, show producers, and venue owner and managers. Where it would be completely normal, in other spaces, for there to be divisions between these groups, in this space, the connections, the welcome, the blending of people, is the norm –and contributes to the feeling of community – everyone shares in the excitement and anticipation of the show. Drinks in hand, audience members and performers mingle as they drift about the space visiting with each other and browsing vendor tables.

Vendors are not present at every burlesque show, but when they are, the merchandise available runs a broad gamut, from the typical items frequently associated with burlesque, like boas and pasties, to other items like show posters, jewelry, make-up and hats, photo booths, fortune tellers, and beyond – to the bizarre – like balloon artists who fashion giant balloons into various parts of human anatomy. I enjoy watching who buys particular types of merchandise; it seems that women who attend a show as part of a bridal party are the most likely to purchase balloon genitalia and pasties, while those audience members who frequent the burlesque scene are more likely to purchase hats or fascinators – items that can be worn to future shows, and to participate in the raffles that support various charities. All of this mingling takes place in the midst of phenomenal

music and stage lighting that contributes to the ambiance from beginning to end, no matter the type of show.

Wherever a show may be, or for whatever purpose, no production could function – or be complete – without volunteers. Though all of the venues maintain their own professional staff for jobs like bartenders, light and sound technicians and security, there are many other tasks that go into a burlesque production to make it successful. Producers hire photographers and videographers, arrange for backstage assistants, and in some cases, secure the services of hair-and-make-up artists. Frequently, those providing assistance backstage are stage kittens. Kittens are an integral part of any show. They are responsible for placing props onstage for each routine, for gathering discarded garments after each routine, and then for clearing the stage of props and any debris left behind after an act – like feathers, rhinestones, confetti, or anything else that could create a potential distraction or prove hazardous by way of slips and falls.

### **Purposeful Productions**

Over the last few years, I have noticed that burlesque shows can fall into different categories based on a producer's purpose. There are festivals that often showcase a wide variety of performance styles and represent a large diversity within the burlesque community, but there are also shows that have a themed element that is central to production. For example, at Viva's there is a Cirque du Burlesque show every month and themed show every month, such as Oz, or Burton Burlesque, or Wonderland – where each routine represents a character and tells some part of the story. There are festivals devoted



to the representation of particular communities, like the Texas Queerlesque Festival that featured only queer-identified performers and queer-identified/queer-friendly vendors. There are also instances where the burlesque community pulls together to honor their own. There are times when the burlesque community is called upon to address important issues that arise in the personal lives of community members, so they plan and organize and take steps to do so. Such was the case with Tifa Tittlywinks.

In March 2016, Tifa was in a horrendous motorcycle accident and suffered injuries that left her unable to work or perform for months, and which resulted in massive medical bills. As a performer and producer, Tifa had no health insurance. As soon as the community learned of the situation, a GoFundMe account was set up to raise money for her care, and producers from all over the state of Texas began conjuring up ways to raise funds to support her recovery. There were two benefit shows, one in Houston and one in Austin, with all proceeds donated to Tifa, and venues in Dallas held raffles at every show for a month, again, with all monies raised donated to her care. There have been other fundraisers for health care needs for community members who have suffered from cancer and other serious, long-term illnesses. There are also fundraisers to enable burlesque legends to attend BHOF weekend; for Legends Night, there is a man who provides gowns for them, and another who provides hair and make up services for them. Most recently, there have been special events to raise relief funds for Harvey victims. Other examples of proactive politically attuned and motivated action include fundraisers and raffles for charities, particularly for charities like TransLives, and Planned Parenthood.

The shows I attended were produced, and performed, by members of the burlesque community who are committed to building community and creating and sustaining audience interest. Much planning goes into a production, and the more attention paid to small details, the better the show. For example, when I attended the Texas Queerlesque Festival at Viva's the bathroom signage had been covered up with paper signs that said "unicorn friendly." This made bathroom lines move faster, but more importantly, and the real purpose behind the signs, was to make bathrooms accessible, and safe, for everyone in attendance – specifically the trans community or non-gender binary people who don't identify with one gender or another. The producers of the TXQF also hired extra security for the event since it unabashedly featured an all queer performance roster and took place only days after the Pulse massacre in Orlando. Those extra steps – those seemingly small things – went a long way to creating an incredible sense of family and solidarity throughout the weekend.

### **Authenticity and Accessibility**

Authenticity and accessibility are, perhaps, two characteristics that make the burlesque community the most powerful, and most relevant, to the lives of those involved. Those traits also contribute to the inclusivity of the community.

The vibrancy of the burlesque space is always striking. Undoubtedly aided by the music and lighting, the sense of festive expectancy is contagious as it ripples throughout the crowd. The love, the acceptance, the welcome – the safety – of the space is nearly palpable and is clearly evident in the hugs, the boisterous greetings and jovial laughter. The authenticity is magical.

The burlesque space invites relationship. Each of the shows and events I attended opened at least one hour early, and at each one, producers, performers, stage kittens, and others, were often found mingling with each other, as well as guests in the audience. It was also common to find them at the bar, or standing at the back of the venue, watching and supporting other performers. Following each of the shows, there was an after-party that generally lasted for a couple of hours – where again, cast members were available to talk with guests, to take photos, and just enjoy the company of friends and colleagues. The festive sort of spirit in the space lingered long after a show was over – in part, due to the music and lighting – but more so because of what the burlesque community frequently refers to as a “glitter-high.” It’s that feeling akin to an adrenaline rush, when the show is over and the pressure of the performance is gone, when you’re standing in the middle of those who made it happen, sharing that space and knowing that in some small way you were part of history as it unfolded. There will never be another show exactly like this one. Standing there, in that space, with those people, all assembled, and working, performing – together – to push boundaries, to challenge oppressive ideologies, to resist, is powerful and empowering. Those hours that follow a show – that time spent with the community after all but only the truly die-hard fans are gone – that space – is hallowed ground – is sacred – is family – is safe. Over and over again, I found myself anchored in place – unable, unwilling, to leave. It is so hard to say goodnight, I have now lost track of the number of times I have stayed until I was asked to leave so the venue could close. Even when a show may have somehow lacked in great performances, or there were production issues, that time after the show is always magical. But that authenticity and accessibility

does not end when a show is over and a venue closes. Those are hallmark characteristics of the community.

Burlesque truly welcomes everyone who chooses to be a part of the community, even if only as audience members. They recognize the value of all members in the community. They spend time together and invest in each other. They work together to help the weakest, and in so doing, make everyone stronger. They enjoy each other and have fun together. They make time – before, during, and after, shows – to talk with guests and pose for pictures. They use all their energy, from start to finish, to engage with, and purposely connect with, the audience. The burlesque community purposely and intentionally cultivates a shared space that is open for everyone. Whether they are just getting started as stage kittens apprenticed to a troupe, or have many years of experience, there is a place and a role for all who enter the space. It is a space, flexible, open, and welcoming to new ideas. They step outside of themselves and consider multiple perspectives, not only to create and perform well-received routines, but also to contribute to the health and sustainability of the burlesque community as a whole.

### **Curtain Call**

Overall, participants agreed, the burlesque community is inclusive and safe, but it is not perfect. Instead, it is a work in progress. Though there are problems and problematic people, participants expressed their belief that most people in the community are working to improve themselves, and by extension, improve the community. It is, admittedly, not all unicorns and rainbows, as stated by one participant, but they each learn what they can, as they are, themselves, works in progress.

As reflected in these accounts, there are, indeed, many strategies to be learned from the burlesque community that could be adapted for use in early childhood and elementary classrooms; strategies that could effectively remove borders erected in classrooms, and reduce practices that marginalize and colonize children. Just as the strategies have effectively served the burlesque community, each of these strategies would be transformative in classroom spaces, as each of the strategies serves to create and maintain a community of acceptance, and of equality.

1. The burlesque community functions as a collective. They work together to uphold community values, and achieve community goals. There is a collective ownership and responsibility for the success of the community.
2. Burlesque performers work collaboratively to meet the needs of the community – individually and collectively.
3. The burlesque community addresses issues as they arise. Problems are dealt with according to their depth and breadth. When it's possible, situations are resolved privately, but when it's necessary, concerns are brought to the attention of the larger community, to be handled as a collective, and to ensure that similar problems don't arise later. Quite simply, discrimination is not allowed.
4. The burlesque community is dedicated to the education of its members.

Professional development opportunities are available for people at all skill levels. It's not a one-size-fits-all kind of education. Members ask for what they need, or needs are identified, and someone with the necessary skill set teaches them what they need and want to learn. Burlesque members share their skills with the larger

community, so that even the newest members with the least burlesque experience have something to offer.

5. Burlesque members are provided with sufficient support to be successful in the community. Problematic people are coached, mentored, forgiven, and given multiple opportunities to be positive contributors to the community, but if there are not significant improvements, they find themselves pushed out. They are not allowed to stay and continue to do damage to the community.
6. The community is strategic, purposeful, and intentional. They purposefully ensure the community is a safe place for everyone. They strategically plan and prepare shows, routines, and performance spaces, so that they meet the needs of community members – performers, and audience members, alike. And they intentionally make connections with each other and with their audiences. Burlesque is about connections and relationships.
7. The burlesque community is authentic and accessible. They genuinely care about each other. They are genuinely invested in social and political activism. They are each others' allies. And they are available – to each other – and to their audiences. They are eager to share the space, and spend time with anyone who is interested in joining them.

In many ways, classrooms are the polar opposite of the burlesque community.

While, in burlesque, the community works collectively toward a common goal, works collectively to support each other, and works in solidarity to reinforce and build upon its foundation to maintain its uniqueness and its familial sense, educators often work in

isolation even though they're part of grade level teams. Merit pay based on test scores make schools a place of competition instead of collective effort. And lack of teacher training, poorly funded schools, classrooms lacking sufficient resources, and unsupportive building administrators all contribute to teacher frustration, ineffectiveness, and exhaustion. Some of these things, and others, contributed to issues observed in classrooms during the course of this study.

### **BORDERLANDS IN THE CLASSROOM**

From cold and hostile learning environments, to brutal classroom management strategies, to poorly planned and executed lessons, the classrooms I observed were teacher-centered where children encountered borders and boundaries that not only confined their bodies, but also their minds.

Classrooms were sterile, with little to no decorations or learning materials on the walls. There was no student work posted inside, or outside, the classrooms, no anchor charts or artwork. In most of the classrooms I observed, there was little to even indicate that children were present in those spaces on a daily basis. There was certainly little, or nothing, to make the rooms inviting or the children feel welcome. The classrooms were poorly appointed, and ill equipped, for learning; not because the school district or the school did not provide much of what was needed, but because the teachers failed to make opportunities and materials available to students. There were no centers or workstations in any of the classrooms observed. Neither were there books available for students to read. There were no manipulatives, games, or other hands-on learning materials that were accessible to students. The spaces were boring, unimaginative, and uninviting.

The lessons, in every classroom observed, on every visit, were of low cognitive demand. Teachers relied heavily on textbooks, worksheets, and test preparation materials. None of the lessons observed made use of manipulatives in any meaningful way. In fact, the only time I ever observed the use of manipulatives was for the Kindergarten lesson when the students each got to count out five counters from a Ziploc bag, and then place them at the top of their worksheet. But that was all they did with them, nothing more, nothing meaningful. From the difficulty some children had with the task, it was likely the first time they had used counters in their class – and it was the only time I saw them, as there was no evidence of the presence of manipulatives at all, after that day.

Further, the lessons were developmentally inappropriate as they relied heavily on rote memory and routines that lacked relevance and context, within the classroom or outside of it. I never observed, or saw evidence of, the use of small group instruction, nor was there any indication of lesson differentiation. All students did the same thing – all the time. There were no opportunities for children to investigate or explore ideas or discover new information, no chances to ask questions or discuss their thoughts. There were no expectations or opportunities to engage in critical thinking – no experiences that made the content meaningful, personal, or interesting. Teachers put little effort into actually planning lessons and instead relied on computerized, digital lessons, and worksheets. Additionally, it appeared that teachers lacked the content knowledge necessary to have purposeful conversations with students, knowledge necessary to allow children to explore concepts deeply, to discuss the information and apply it meaningfully, either to other lessons learned, or to their personal life experiences. It did not appear that children were



actually learning anything. Teachers' lessons, content and delivery, reflected their attitudes toward their students, their lack of commitment and effort indicated a lack of confidence in their students' abilities, and demonstrated that they perceived them as somehow deficient, and unable to do more complex and meaningful work. And, perhaps, those poorly planned and executed lessons further belied teachers' laziness and ineptitude.

Their classroom management strategies further reflected problematic attitudes toward students. In each of the classrooms observed, rigid expectations confined and constrained students' bodies and minds. All of the classrooms I observed operated as stratified environments where students at the top of the hierarchies carried more favor and less punishment from the teacher than those at the bottom of the classroom social structure. Students were labeled and defined by their behavior, abilities, and disabilities. Students who struggled academically, behaviorally, or both, had limited opportunities to engage in the already minimal classroom discussions, and fewer chances to ask or answer questions, enjoyed fewer classroom privileges, and were often ignored and neglected by their teacher. Students were valued – or devalued – based on their compliance with classroom norms and expectations, as well as their academic capabilities. Those who successfully operated within the rigid constraints received praise, attention, and rewards. Teachers used shame, humiliation, degrading comments, sarcasm, and fear to control classroom behavior. They created competitive climates where children were pitted against each other – where the “good” kids were expected to admonish the “bad” kids. Students learned to shun and isolate anyone who was different, who somehow fell outside the classroom norm.

Teachers openly discriminated against students, breached confidentiality, undermined students' confidence, and then blamed students when they failed to meet unreasonable expectations. Teachers taught their students there was only one right way to be – to be acceptable and valued – they had to be able to function within very narrow margins. Those who could not do so were rendered silent and invisible. And for some students, the deck was constantly reshuffled so that nothing they did, no matter how hard they tried, was ever good enough to earn the teacher's acceptance, approval, or respect. They were, essentially, abandoned in classroom borderlands where the borders continuously moved – continuously excluded them.

Children, however, are resourceful – and often far more intelligent and capable of negotiating within complex sociocultural circumstances than most adults realize. Similar to burlesque performers, children observed in the course of this study utilized mechanisms of disruption - visibility, constraint removal, voice, the returned gaze, spectacle, and pleasure in identity - to interrupt conventional social norms within their classrooms, to exert their personal agency, to invert power dynamics and resist the normalizing effects of traditional classroom expectations.

### **Visibility**

Burlesque, in America, rose in popularity during the early Industrial Age, when Victorian Era norms still dictated appropriate comportment for women. Essentially, women were still considered chattel, their singular role was in the home as wife and mother. Women's social duties and responsibilities were primarily to the Church, and her presence in publicly shared spaces was frowned upon, if not forbidden. Burlesque changed

all that. Burlesque gave women a platform that made them visible – that legitimized their existence – and recognized them as individuals with valid goals and dreams and desires, that reached beyond the home (Allen, 1991; Minsky & Machlin, 1986; Shteir, 2004).

Now, the burlesque community takes steps to ensure it is an open and accepting space, where members are treated equally. Thus, the burlesque stage, today, continues to serve as a means by which people marginalized by conventional social norms find themselves legitimized, and visible – in a space that values their struggles, their goals, and their achievements.

### *I Exist*

She entered the stage wrapped in a hooded cape of black satin and fingerless black satin gloves that stretched all the way to her elbows. Set to the song *Water* by RaRaRiot, the first part of the routine was performed on a bench, and either behind, or under the cape, as if she was engaged in a struggle. Back and forth, she twisted and turned across the stage, the cape swirled about her, and revealed glimpses of the person beneath.

Little by little, as the wrestle continued, she let the cape fall away. She gained more and more confidence, until finally, near the end of the routine, the cape slid from her shoulders, and drifted to the floor. Eyes wide with wonder, she teetered and tottered in the light of visibility. In her newfound presence, she peeled away her long black gloves, and there, written on the backs of her forearms, two words, “I Exist.”

Long dark curls framed her head and tumbled over her shoulders as she stood still in the bright white spotlight. For a celebratory moment, she held up her arms, in a fighter’s stance and shadow-boxed. Then, with a childlike grin that shone across her face, she

cartwheeled around the perimeter of the stage, bedecked in her hot pink and turquoise costume.

At the end of the routine, she returned to the bench where she began, stepped into a pair of hot pink stilettos, and then, eyes closed, head tilted upward in the gleaming light, she simply stood still – to be seen.

The audience screamed and cheered in love and delight – and Tasseled Squirrel laughed through the tears that flowed freely down her face. She blew a kiss to the adoring audience, waved, and then skipped off the stage. That moment was a celebration – an acknowledgement of where she had been – of her journey – of her victory over her personal dark places, the struggle to be seen, to exist, to be.

This piece, to me, represented the struggle to be seen as valuable, as whole, as human – in spite of conventional social norms that stigmatize – that essentially, erase – those individuals who do not fit within the socially constructed parameters of what is considered average, or normal. It was a celebration of her personal agency – and the significance of visibility.

#### *A Normal Day*

*The hallways smelled – a familiar – rather unpleasant blend of kid sweat and cafeteria, where over-cooked vegetables lingered just a little too long in the steam trays. The foyer echoed with the sound of shuffling feet, whispered conversation and silly snickers.*

*Kids moved in every direction; to lunch, to specials, to recess, and back to their classrooms. They filed up – and down – the stairs, and lined up at the rail in the second*

*floor foyer. The first grade class that I was there to see waited in line for the restroom – directly across the hall from their classroom. Feet in one tile square. Still. Eyes forward. No smiles. With “bubbles in their mouths.” No talking. I told myself that wasn’t creepy at all – that at least I would get to see the lesson from the very beginning.*

*Shortly after I had taken my place in the classroom, at a table near the door, students followed their teacher into the room. The teacher flitted across the room to her desk where she first checked her phone, and then turned and remarked to me, “Oh, good! You’ll get to see an almost normal day.”*

*Puzzled by her remark, I fumbled for a response. I glanced around the room as students quietly settled into their seats, and replied that it had all seemed pretty normal to me. Dumbfounded expression on her face, she looked at me and retorted, “Even the crazy one?” Again, puzzled and troubled by her query, I told her, “I haven’t seen crazy. I’ve only seen six-year-olds.” Her eyebrows shot up, and then, brow furrowed, she shook her head and responded, “Bless your heart.”*

At face value, maybe her “bless your heart” comment meant that she felt bad for me, that if I thought her class was normal, I must have had some really rough teaching experiences. However, the dumbfounded expression coupled with the incredulous – almost sarcastic – tone of her voice suggested that her comment was more of a sneer than one of commiseration. She used the same diminishing tone, and manner, on me that she used on her students. She acted as if I did not know what a first grade class should look like, or how six-year-old children behave.

The truth of the matter was that I had not seen anything from students that indicated problematic behavior; students were attentive, on-task, relatively quiet, kind to each other, and respectful of the teacher. The only aberrant behaviors I observed were those of the teacher. There was very little about the classroom environment that was kid-friendly, and the teacher's classroom practices were not developmentally appropriate. Any behaviors exhibited by students that fell outside traditional classroom norms and expectations, were directly related to the teacher's choices and behaviors, and to the hostile environment she created.

The actual classroom space lacked warmth and appeal. The beige walls were devoid of decorations, bulletin boards, and student work. A college t-shirt hung from the ceiling on a wire hanger, and the only wall display of any kind consisted of more college paraphernalia; bumper stickers, a pennant, pompoms. The table that should have been used for small groups was piled high with stacks of paper, and other accumulated items on each occasion I visited the class. The top of the cubbies was piled high with storage boxes and more stacks of books and papers. There were no manipulatives or games, no books, no centers or workstations. Children occupied the space, but the space was not for children. This classroom was the teacher's space, the materials hers. And she frequently reminded the students of that.

When the math lesson began, for instance, she invited the class to be seated, as a whole group, in the learning space at the front of the room – demarcated by a large, brightly colored classroom carpet. She was seated by the board and drew tiny models of base-10 blocks that were impossible for the whole class to see. When she finished drawing

examples, she put the cap back on the marker and then held it, and two others, up for the class to see. She asked them what they noticed about the markers. She had put tape, green with pink flamingos, around the ends of them. Then she wanted to know if they knew why she had put the tape on the markers. One of the girls asked if it meant that the markers were just for her to use. Excitedly, the teacher yelled, “Yes! It means these are mine and only mine! Do not touch!” She spent more time ensuring that the children would not touch her markers than she spent modeling the math lesson.

It is understandable, to a degree, that a teacher would limit student access to some materials, but as I did not observe – on any occasion - students in small groups, centers, stations, or any other activity that would require their use of dry erase markers, the vehemence of the statement seemed like overkill to me. Indeed, all of the lessons I observed were teacher-directed, and teacher-centered. Sometimes students watched the teacher and then completed a workbook page. Most often, however, the math and science lessons were all delivered via computerized curriculum. There were no hands on lessons, no lessons that required critical thinking skills, no conversations. Every lesson I observed required nothing more than low cognitive demand. This was the “normal” I observed on my visits to the first grade classroom. The teacher’s reference to “normal,” however, was in regard to the student to whom she had referred as “the crazy one.” She had written a discipline referral on him and had him removed from class. That, too, was so normal that I had never seen the student present in her classroom. The “normal” to which she referred, was a room without him in it. The “normal” day seemed like all of the other days I’d seen.

The teacher's low expectations communicated her lack of confidence in her students' capabilities. Her comments about normal days, crazy children, and repeated classroom removals, suggested that she thought of them as deficient. Her willingness to help some students while she had only degrading comments and harsh punishment for others conveyed that the children she liked had value, while others were worthless.

This teacher erased her students, and when I didn't share her point of view – she erased me, too.

### *Now I Can Teach*

*She bounced up and down on her toes, all smiles today, as she pointed at the projector mounted on the ceiling. "Guess what?! It's fixed! Well, not fixed exactly. It's a whole different projector!" "Really?" I asked. "How did you manage a new projector?" "Oh, it's not new. It's one of the older ones from a classroom that got the new Digital Classroom upgrade," she replied. "Coach brought me this one and traded it out for mine. The office said they weren't going to buy any more bulbs until January, and I just didn't know what I was going to do. I can't model my lessons for my class without it! I have to be able to use the document camera!" The only acceptable response I could fathom was, "It's a good thing you got that taken care of, then." She gushed on, "Oh, it is! You saw them last week. They all had to huddle around my computer monitor so they could see what I was doing. Now I can teach!" And off she bounced to pick up her students from recess.*

I was quite perplexed by the time she left the room. I could not believe what I had just heard. My mind raced with dozens of questions I wanted to ask her. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to smile even as I fought back tears of frustration. I wanted to scream,



“Are you kidding me?!” Apparently, she did not understand that her dependence on total technology to model her lessons was problematic.

She was right. I had seen her the week before, and the class had, indeed, huddled around her computer monitor for the daily routines, and warm-up videos. They had worked on test-prep that day, too, and there had been no lesson to model. She had used test-prep packets for a week because the bulb for her projector needed to be replaced, and she could not teach without it. It made me wonder if she relied so heavily on technology to teach all of her lessons.

I let my gaze travel around the room while her class went through their math routines – noticed things I had missed on other visits because I was focused on the kids. It was this day that I realized most of what this teacher did was of low cognitive demand for her class. What appeared, early on, to be great classroom management and high levels of student engagement, now looked more like rote memory. During my first couple of visits, at the beginning of the year, it was impressive to see an entire class of five-year-olds who so quickly, and seamlessly, responded to changes from one activity to the next, who transitioned from their tables to the whole-group area on the carpet at the front of the room. They moved quickly and quietly from one space to another and were quick to pay attention as their teacher took them through their daily math routines; counting by 5s and 10s, changing the date on the calendar, counting coins, counting up and counting back on a number line, and so on. The math routines were followed by sing-alongs for days of the week and months of the year – before the teacher could even tell them what to do, the class jumped up and waited for the music to begin so they could sing along and do the

movements for each song. By mid-year, however, those routines were so ingrained that students were no longer thinking about what they were doing. They went through all the motions but they were not engaged. There was no challenge, no new questions to answer, no relevant connections to their lived experiences beyond those things they'd learned at the very beginning of the school year. The continued value of those routines was lost, as no new connections were made to real life experiences or to their daily math lessons.

As I looked around the room I noticed that, even though it was December, there were only five words on the Word Wall: "I," "a," "the," "on," and "see." There was a reading center in one corner. It was a cozy, inviting space with beanbag chairs and a filmy, frothy, white canopy that hung from the ceiling. There was also a nice wooden bookshelf to display books, but there were no books – not a single one. Thinking that just could not be right, I wondered where the books were and again scanned the room. There were half-a-dozen Christmas books standing against the white board, in the chalk tray, but there were no other books anywhere I could see. And there were no holiday books for any traditions or beliefs except for Christmas. There was no diversity in representation, but there was only one White child in her class.

Having noticed that the reading center was devoid of books, I searched the room again, for other centers. There were none marked anywhere, and there were no materials anywhere to indicate that there were science or math centers, or blocks or dress-up or puppets. In fact, I realized, I saw nothing to indicate that this class ever worked in centers or stations. I had certainly never observed them in small groups of any kind. Then, I

realized, of all the times I had been in to observe, I had seen the class use manipulatives only once. They each got to use five foam counters, red on one side and white on the other.

The teacher had pre-made plastic pouches with the counters in them, and the students had to take out five of them to use as they worked on their worksheet. The students who quickly counted out their manipulatives were directed to place them at the top of their paper and then sit with their hands in their laps while they waited for the teacher to walk around the room and help those who could not count to five on their own and check those who were waiting. She lost a lot of instructional time. Students were bored. And the lesson lacked quality. Devoid of creativity, it further lacked sufficient opportunity for students to engage with the concepts they were expected to master in a meaningful way. The lesson lacked depth and provided no opportunity for children to connect the content of the lesson to real world experiences. There were students who could not select five counters on their own, others who could not write the numbers, and yet, the expectation for the lesson was that they add with pencil and paper.

Low expectations, low cognitive demand, little-to-no use of manipulatives, poorly planned and executed lessons, the absence of centers, workstations and small groups, along with the use of worksheets and lesson delivery dependent on the use of technology were some of the ways the kindergarten teacher constructed borders for the children in her classroom. Lack of differentiated instruction meant that those students who struggled, as well as those who were advanced, rarely, if ever, received instruction that appropriately challenged them. The teacher taught to the average student's ability and all others were left behind – denied the opportunity to engage in meaningful learning at their ability level. Her

failure to provide literature that exposed her students to experiences beyond those of the mainstream meant that her students were not likely to see themselves, their beliefs, or their cultures, represented in the classroom. Routines, whether behavioral routines and expectations, or learning routines, when disconnected from, and lacking relevance to, children's lived lives, are merely mechanisms of conformity and colonization. This teacher couldn't see her children – or wouldn't see them – and so taught them that their value was based on conformity and compliance. She took, from them, erased – the things that made them unique because she treated them all the same.

*ZZzzz*

*He sat at his desk and taught the lesson – once again – from the computer. Methodically, the class plodded their way through one reading passage after another. On and on they droned. Kindle Readers in hand, they highlighted key words and phrases, circled context clues, and bubbled in answer choices – one question at a time – like kindergarten. Occasionally, a student had a question, but in general, there was little talking or activity. There was no buzz of excitement. No creative energy or enthusiasm about the lesson. The space was just hollow – tomblike.*

*I was ready to scratch my eyes out – to pull out my hair. And then – I yanked myself back to consciousness. To my horror, I had dozed off in the middle of the fifth grade lesson. Sheepishly, I scanned the room and wondered if anyone had noticed. Whew! It couldn't have been more than a few seconds because they were still working on the same question. Still, I was embarrassed. But more than that, I was angry, and frustrated, and*

*just sad that this class was so mind numbingly boring. And if I was bored enough to fall asleep, I could only imagine how miserable it was for the kids.*

*I looked at their faces – fifth graders – so much promise – so many possibilities. I wanted to scream, “Oh my, God! Wake up! Fight back! Make a scene! Anything! He’s robbing you – stealing your learning opportunities!”*

*They were good kids – at least, by classroom standards. They were quiet. They did their work as instructed. They supported each other, respected their teacher, actively participated (though quietly), and were quick to comply with their teacher’s expectations. They were bright and willing students, but all they got was bare bones – lessons so dry and boring and basic that the marrow had been leached from the dusty carcass. There was nothing of substance for them to sink their teeth into. Nothing creative. Nothing that encouraged them to think critically – or divergently. Nothing that taught them their thoughts and ideas were valuable. Instead, they sat there, like parrots in a cage, and picked over the same empty peanut shells over and over again. I grieved at the waste. I wanted shake them, to wake them up, to stir them to action. But they were good kids. And they didn’t know they deserved more - deserved better.*

*I watched them a little longer. Watched them read and work through questions, use the strategies they’d been taught. Comply.*

*“...Rage, rage against the dying of the light. ...Do not go gentle into that good night” (Thomas, 1953), rang in my thoughts as I watched him snuff out their lights. As I watched him – erase them.*

He welcomed me, enthusiastically. Of all the teachers, he was the most congenial. The fifth grade class was the only Bilingual Education class I observed. I had purposely selected to observe this class because I do not speak any Spanish and by the time students reach fifth grade, they should have been (in this program) receiving the majority of their instruction in English with support in Spanish when it was needed. I was, therefore, surprised when, on every occasion I visited, the teacher spoke only in Spanish.

Over the weeks, as I visited the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class, I found myself frustrated. Each visit was nearly identical to the one before. Each lesson was the same; read a passage, apply reading test strategies, answer questions – test prep. The lessons lacked rigor and relevance. When I visited the class, I felt a sense of loss. The students were so responsive, well- behaved, and eager to learn, the teacher could have had them engaged in much more challenging endeavors like writer’s workshop, reader’s theater, project-based learning activities, work stations for English/Language Arts and Social Studies – but all they did was test prep – ever.

The kids in this class seemed happy; they were engaged, answered questions, participated, and in general, seemed to enjoy being in the class. They got along well with each other – supported each other; students were kind to each other, included every person at their tables, worked well together, and helped each other with questions or misunderstandings; though this happened in the context of independent work that was always test prep. The teacher had established good rapport with his students and seemed to genuinely enjoy them. The students were respectful, participated as expected, and followed directions when asked. They were compliant – maybe too compliant. I could not help but

feel bad for these kids – they were getting ripped off – and I resented the teacher for it. I questioned his commitment to – his investment in – the kids and their learning.

Each time I entered his room I looked around in hopes that something had been added, that something had changed, to make the space more student-centered and friendly. And each time, I was disappointed. The walls were a sickly, institutional, flat, beige color. And they were blank. There was one small technology poster than hung above the charging station for the Kindles, and in one corner there was a poster about character traits. The bulletin boards on either side of the white board had been covered in butcher paper, one red, one purple, and were supposed to be Word Walls in English and Spanish, but they were empty – even in December. There were no student work samples posted inside the room or outside. It was a Reading and Social Studies class, but there were no books anywhere – not one. There were no workstations. Every surface in the room was blank and empty. There was no random clutter to denote that student work happened in that space. It was a void – sterile. The teacher put no effort into the space.

Similarly, his lesson content and delivery reflected minimal effort. The lessons were all of low-cognitive demand and were all delivered electronically via computer, document camera, and projector. Students used Kindles that networked with the teacher's computer, so they could see and access the same pages on their screens as the teacher projected to the whole group. While technology has certainly made some aspects of teaching much easier, and many students seem to enjoy the use of gadgets such as tablets in their classrooms, electronic test prep packets are still test prep packets that are of little benefit to students. And in the event there are issues with the technology, as was the case

in this classroom, the loss of instructional time is significant. On two separate days, there were connectivity issues and they lost twenty minutes, or more, of their learning time while they waited for the technology problems to resolve. The teacher had no other plans or activities that could be done instead. I had to wonder when it had become acceptable for students to lose that much instructional time, and when, exactly, had the use of technology supplanted all other instructional methods, and what made lessons with low-cognitive demand acceptable.

He could have used technology that was available to his students to create dynamic lessons, lessons that would have encouraged creativity, dialogue and collaboration. He could have delivered lessons that held some meaning, some personal relevance, and would have prompted curiosity and discovery. He chose, instead, to give them all the same thing, over and over again, every single day. He made them all the same. He made them invisible.

I wanted desperately to see some little rebellion, some little spark of resistance – some little bit of individuality gasping to survive – to exist. But they didn't know – they didn't know they couldn't trust him to teach them what they needed to learn, to help them gain the knowledge and skills they needed to be successful in middle- and high school. They didn't know that their success depended on more than their standardized test scores. They – and their families – trusted him. They came to school to learn – to take advantage of opportunities that their parents paid for dearly – they didn't know their teacher wasn't giving them all that he should- all that they deserved. And they were compliant.



From what I observed, this teacher stole his students' educational opportunities from them. He stole their potential, stole their futures. He left them silenced, and silent. He stole their light and made them invisible.

### **Trade Wars (a poem)**

When did testing become learning?  
And children automatons?

When we traded paintbrushes for pencils; sharpened to a point?

Or building blocks for bubble sheets; colored in just so?

Maybe it was the puppet theaters, exchanged for privacy screens?

Perhaps it was the ant farms,  
Replaced with an App?

Or art centers, for strategies,  
Stifled creativity?

We've traded microscopes for madness; what happened to authenticity?

Planting beans, and butterflies; frogs and earthworms, too;  
Make-believe and finger paints; sand tables and dress-up – gone;  
All shadows of the past.

When did we agree to this? And why?  
I want to know!

When did testing become learning?  
And children automatons?

After several weeks of observations in each of the six classrooms, I was troubled by the amount of test preparation I observed, even at the beginning of the school year. I saw no manipulatives, no centers or workstations, and no truly authentic learning. Everything students worked on was out of workbooks or worksheets. There were rarely questions or conversations beyond the most basic knowledge and comprehension. And so I sat, and

reflected, as I watched the in each of the classrooms. I could not help but wonder where the fun and creative lessons went, or how students were supposed to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills when all they did was bubble in answers on a worksheet. Where were the creative processes inspired by hands-on learning, opportunities to explore the world around them, moments of wonder and fascination? There is such a huge push for the use of technology in classrooms, but at what cost? What are we losing in the process? There was no excitement about learning, no questions that inspired more questions, no investigations. Did we even realize that our classrooms were so compromised?

I watched the children in these classrooms and thought of my students in university classrooms, who struggle to think without a rubric, who do not know how to study for an exam, who cannot write a paper, who do not know how to locate a book in the library, and who cannot think critically – and who want to be teachers.

### **Constraint Removal**

Much as the performers of early burlesque, performers today create routines that portray the rejection of conventional social norms. Historically, burlesque provided a space within which performers portrayed their struggle with, and liberation from, norms that bind, define, and constrain – that dictate acceptable ways of being (Allen, 1991; Lee, 1999; Minsky & Machlin, 1986; Shteir, 2004).

Early burlesque saw women remove their clothing on stage, heard women speak on stage, and was one of the only professions that paid women as much as, or more than, what men were paid. Burlesque shows were frequented by women, as well as, men, and became a source of public influence. Burlesque trends influenced women's fashion, women's

presence in public spaces that had traditionally been for men-only, women's roles in the workplace, and women's roles in the home. Burlesque offered women the opportunity to define themselves, to challenge traditional gender roles.

Similarly, burlesque performers today challenge oppressive politics and policies, and resist discriminatory ideologies that constrain the expression of identity. Burlesque still provides a space for liberation from normative social constraints.

### *Beauty Queen*

Big blonde hair piled high on her head, with a tiara perched among the waves and curls, she sashayed onto the stage in a frothy, tea-length gown of sea foam green. She wore silver gloves that reached her elbows, and silver strappy heels. In the shadowy half-light, it seemed there was something not quite right about her face. As she moved into the full brightness of the white spotlights, I could see she wore an opaque mask. Plastic. Grotesque. Its smile was stretched unnaturally wide, and frozen, as were its other features. Make up had been applied to the mask, heavy and bright, like for a beauty pageant. Fake. She raised her arm at the just the right angle, tilted her head from one side to the other, and rotated her hand in a perfectly executed pageant wave.

When she turned, slightly, to traverse the stage, I noticed words written on the back of her arms. It was then I realized that she wore what appeared to be a flesh-colored bodysuit beneath her pageant dress. My suspicions were confirmed as the first garments were discarded. Her silver gloves, peeled slowly down her slender arms, revealed hateful, demoralizing, dehumanizing words, scrawled in heavy black paint; "repulsive" on the back of one arm, "worthless" on the other. As she continued to disrobe, more words became

visible: “ugly”, “bitch”, on her arms; “whore” was written across her buttocks; “horrible” and “hideous”, down the backside of her thighs; “bad” across her breasts; “gross,” “vile,” and “fat” were written across her belly. It went on and on, every word that appeared, a new gash on the pale fabric; “awful,” “nasty,” “trashy,” “hateful,” “unlovable,” “shameful.” Finally, it seemed she was finished, but then she reached up and removed her tiara, her wig, and her mask. I was not prepared for what I saw next.

Beneath the twinkling tiara, the blonde cascading curls, and the plastic mask, her entire head was wrapped up – bound – her mouth was covered with wide, heavy tape – and over it was written, “stupid.” She’d been silenced. She struggled against all the binding and tore it from her head and face. Then, she dragged herself out of the bodysuit. She was completely stripped down – no make-up, basic silver pasties and very pale, opaque, flesh colored panties with minimal silver sequins and rhinestones. By the end of the performance, she celebrated herself, laid bare and vulnerable, but free of the social constraints centered on the body and the norms that have come to define beauty. Freed from the vocabulary so frequently used to define women, she stood, as herself, worthy, valuable, and visible.

Society has similarly constructed definitions of children and childhood – has assigned expectations for behavior, for thought, for academic and social development. Expectations that, for many children, bind, constrain, and stifle identity.

#### *UnConditionally*

*It was only the ninth day of school. There were still routines and procedures to be learned – even for third graders. The teacher seemed scattered and unorganized. She spent*

*twenty minutes on her explanation of an assignment called “Twelve College Words,” because she frequently interrupted one thought with another random thought. While she explained the word ‘anonymous,’ she detoured to the spelling of the word and how she wanted students to do their best to sound out words that were new and unfamiliar when they tried to write them. She detoured again to her expectation for the way she wanted their papers turned in. And then detoured again on the procedures for the distribution of privacy screens, before she finished the discussion and directions for the actual assignment. On and on she droned.*

*Remarkably, the majority of the class managed to sit quietly even if they were not actively engaged. From one desk though, there came a clang-clang-clang – tap – tap – tap; a pencil thudded inside a desk. The student, glassy-eyed, did not appear to be aware of the noise he made – tap-clang-tap-clang. Other students grew restless, too, and the random chair scooted on the tile floor, as others’ feet bounced against desk legs.*

*Frustrated with these fidgety behaviors, the teacher approached the boy who continued to tap his pencil. Crankily, she stood before him and stated, “You’re important to me. OK?” The boy nodded sheepishly and she proceeded, “You’re important to me, so I’m going to help you.” She took his pencil from him and placed it inside the desk, turned the desk around so he could not put his hands inside it, then turned and walked away.*

Students in the third grade class rarely spoke at all – ever. They never, that I observed, ever exhibited any sense of excitement or enthusiasm about their learning. Initially, during the first few minutes of my first visit, I was impressed with the third grade teacher’s favored method of redirecting student attention as it appeared similar to what

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) referred to as a “warm demander.” For example, one student was distracted and thus, gave an incorrect answer when the teacher called on him unexpectedly. The teacher told him, “You are an intelligent young man. You are far too intelligent to behave unintelligently, so I am going to help you, ok?” The child nodded, “Ok,” and the teacher proceeded to restate the information he had missed, and then asked him the question again. When he answered correctly, she moved on to the next thing without further comment. As the class period progressed, I heard the teacher make similar comments to various students, usually male, and usually African American. Sometimes, however, it seemed that her use of the strategy, or the way a comment was phrased, was misused or misstated. A warm-demander is a teacher who persists with students, encouraging them without tearing them down, who builds their confidence without undermining it – but ultimately – that’s not how the third grade teacher operated. There were times when students made mistakes though they were on-task and had exhibited legitimate effort and yet received a similar comment that suggested they had somehow done something wrong or unintelligent. I left that observation determined to specifically watch for that strategy in future observations.

The next time I visited that class, the teacher introduced a new management strategy. The intention of the new method was to help students think about their behavior, to personally evaluate whether or not their choices added value to the class. In part, the teacher explained, she wanted them to be able to recognize, for themselves, when they had done well, so they would know when to feel good about themselves. She went on to express how everyone needs recognition for good work, for making good choices, and for

having good character. Then she further explained that there would be times when there would not be anyone else to tell them what a great job they had done or to give them a prize, so it was important for them to know when to pat themselves on the back, and when they needed to do better. She described the idea of added value as making deposits in a bank account. Less than stellar behavior was described as making a withdrawal from their bank account. Throughout the lesson, she stopped periodically and asked different students whether they had just made a deposit or withdrawal. A student who had helped a classmate with the answer to a question had made a deposit. One who had distracted other students made a withdrawal. It was a concept to which the class adjusted quickly and responded positively. It was, however, another strategy awkwardly applied, that fit some situations very well, but fit others inappropriately. There was, for instance, a time when a student simply gave an incorrect answer to a question and the teacher asked if he made a deposit or withdrawal. The student answered, “withdrawal,” the teacher asked him if he could self-correct and moved on when he indicated he could.

On each of my subsequent visits to the third grade classroom, I noticed the teacher’s frequent use of both of these strategies. On the surface, both strategies appeared to be effective. They seemed positive, but they bothered me. I left her class in a deeply disturbed state of mind on more than one occasion. Though it seemed obvious once I recognized the patterns – the problem – it took several visits to her classroom, and much reflection, to find the reason for my discomfort with her methods.

Superficially, it seemed the teacher was supportive of her students, and in all honesty, I believe that she truly thought she was supportive of them. Her strategies,

however, undermined her students – especially those who were most in need of support. In the first example, students only ever heard comments of affirmation when accompanied with a reprimand, “You are intelligent, but...”

Both methods are problematic in that they negatively impacted students who struggled academically, as well as those who had difficulty with lessons that required long periods of sustained focus. Students who performed well academically were called on more often, received frequent verbal praise, and received special privileges such as “table secretary.” They were held up as examples and often lauded for questions they correctly answered and explained. Conversely, students who struggled received fewer opportunities to participate in class discussions and heard far less positive feedback from the teacher. They were more likely to receive a double-edged compliment, as mentioned previously, and when they answered a question incorrectly, they were expected to publicly acknowledge that they had made a withdrawal and had thus taken away from the class’s value.

Consequently, over time, I noticed those students raised their hands less, took fewer risks, were hesitant to respond even when called upon directly, and were increasingly disengaged from class activities. This teacher constructed borders that children were required to navigate, physically and mentally as their bodies and minds were confined and students learned, on a daily basis, which behaviors and what ways of thinking were valued – and whose behaviors and thoughts were valued. They learned that they only had value if they fit within the constraints applied by the teacher, that there was no value in incorrect responses, or active bodies, or divergent thinking. And some learned silence.



## *Hot Potato*

*The dismal expressions on their faces matched the dreary, gray afternoon sky. Their footsteps thudded, hollow, on the gray-painted plywood ramp as they approached the portable classroom, hands behind their backs, eyes forward, silent. Uncertainly, they entered the room, behind the teacher, and quietly moved to be seated. At the front of the room, the teacher pounded his fist against a small poster taped to the whiteboard, “Quiet! You know what to do!” Little bodies flinched. With furtive glances at their classmates, they took their seats, placed their folded hands in the center of their desks, and waited. He sharpened their pencils for them, and then passed out rulers – for a lesson on fractions. Seconds later, the scene shifted, a surreal landscape.*

*The teacher turned his back on the class, fixated on drawing a perfect octagon-with a ruler - on the board. Behind him, all hell broke loose. The entire first row of students started a sort of Hot Potato game where they passed their rulers up and down the row, and back again – they exchanged wooden rulers for plastic ones, one color for another. Other students had their pencils poked through the holes in the center of their rulers and spun them like helicopter blades. Another child sat and whacked his ruler against his head while two others had a sword fight with theirs. He missed it all. Though he turned from the board periodically and attempted to redirect their off-task behavior, he was more focused on drawing – and re-drawing - an octagon. The class continued to talk and play until, satisfied with his drawing, the teacher returned his focus to the class.*

*He was ready to give directions for the fractions worksheet, but the students were not focused. The teacher yelled at them, “who can handle using a ruler today? Don’t just*

*tell me what I want to hear! Show me with your actions! Who can tell me if rulers are toys?" The class responded with an over-exaggerated, "N-o-o-o-o-o!" Appeased, the teacher turned back to the board. Behind him, helicopter blades twirled, swords thwacked, drumsticks rat-a-tat-tatted, and the whole first row played Hot Potato.*

His militant bearing was unnerving, as was the trance-like manner in which students entered the classroom. Their quiet, orderly, entrance into the classroom, the way they quietly put their lunchboxes and jackets away, and then silently took their seats, indicated they were following classroom procedures and expectations. They were already seated quietly, with hands folded on their desks, as they waited for him to begin the math lesson, but he barked orders anyway. Structure, routines and procedures are one thing, but this, this was something else entirely. These kids looked scared. They remained quiet, seemingly catatonic, while he wrote the math assignment on the board. He directed them to take out their math books, find the correct page, and put their names on their papers.

One child asked to sharpen her pencil. He took it from her, went to his desk, and as he sharpened it for her, twenty-one little bodies lurched from their seats when he called out, "Pencil check!" Though they waited quietly for the most part, the spell of stony silence was broken.

The teacher failed to engage the class from the very beginning of the lesson. Though the lesson title on the board indicated they would work on fractions for the day, the teacher walked up and down the rows and passed out rulers. Beyond that, there was no use of manipulatives, no activation of prior knowledge, no discussion of fractions or

related vocabulary – no discussion of any kind. He gave the students no explanation or expectations.

He simply, silently, returned to the board and began to draw his first attempt at an octagon with perfectly straight, perfectly equal sides. He drew it – and erased it – over and over again. The class was fairly quiet, and ruler play was minimal until, after one of his many failed attempts to draw the octagon, the teacher looked over his shoulder and remarked to the class that he knew it was not perfect. Then, in a whiny voice, he mocked them, and asked them why no one complimented him on his work the same way they expected him to compliment them. The room descended into absolute chaos when the students began to shout compliments and teased him in return. And he got angry –again. He failed to recognize that he repeatedly gave the class mixed signals. He created chaos and then punished the kids. When they had calmed down, he returned to his work at the board – back turned to the class – and the ruler games began. When, at last, the octagon was drawn to his satisfaction, and his comic routine was over, the teacher finally turned to face the students and continue with the lesson.

The lesson was problematic in that it lacked high cognitive demand, required no critical thinking skills, and his delivery of the content was troublesome. There were no real-world, outside the classroom, connections that lent meaning or relevance to the lesson. He used the octagon he had drawn to show the class how to divide the shape into halves, and then fourths – with a ruler – but that was the only example they saw for the lesson before he expected them to begin to work on their own. There was no way for students to make sense of the assignment. They were just supposed to use the rulers to divide the

shapes in their workbooks into equal parts. Therefore, when the teacher asked questions and students offered conflicting answers, students ended up in arguments and yelled at each other across the room. They had no basis on which to justify their responses, so they fought over whose answers were correct. When they finally began the independent practice portion of the lesson some of the students needed little assistance, but others, understandably, were frustrated.

Rather than move from desk to desk to assist those who had questions, the teacher stood at the front of the room, and when a student had a question, he stopped the whole class and asked them all to watch as he explained how to work, and answer, the problems. Everything about the lesson indicated that he lacked anything but the most superficial content knowledge; his inability to use vocabulary related to fractions, his inability to ask questions or otherwise scaffold student thinking to help students build on their prior knowledge, his inability to model explanations instead of simply giving students answers – all pointed to his lack of content knowledge for fractions. Even his obsession with drawing a perfect octagon on the board – and the instructional time lost – suggested that he was unclear on what knowledge was most crucial for students to understand. Even the kids who could have completed the work independently ended up frustrated due to all of the interruptions, and off-task, distracted, behavior increased.

Unable to redirect students' focus, the teacher lashed out and directed sarcastic comments at specific students as he attempted to shame them into compliance. His poorly planned and executed lesson, coupled with his inconsistent and contradictory behavior expectations, created an unstable, unsafe, classroom environment. His behavior led

students to engage in a struggle for power. They gave the appearance of following directions, but did as they pleased when the teacher turned his back. They let him believe he was in control, but the kids had the power, and they knew it. They removed their constraints.

### *Whirling Dervishes*

*Dear God, the classroom space was stark and completely devoid of warmth. The quiet stillness was unsettling, like the hollow vacuum before a tornado. The atmosphere in the classroom was heavy, stifling. Tension permeated the space. The only noise made by students was the random pencil tapping, a kicked chair leg, or a scooted desk. The silence was unnatural.*

*The teacher paced the narrow space in front of the board as she explained to the class how she expected them to write out the date with the name of the month instead of the numeric representation. She explained the assignment and discussed examples, and then she taught the procedures for distribution and use of privacy screens. She expected her students to work independently, and silently.*

*Privacy screens distributed, students set them up and settled in to work on their assignment. They were quiet, attentive. I saw him, when he peeked around the edge of his privacy screen. I watched him as he transferred the word "September" to the top of his paper. The teacher saw him, too. "What are you looking at?" She demanded. "Why is your head poked around your privacy screen?" Eyes ablaze she strode toward him. He looked startled, and maybe a little scared. Honestly, he answered, "The date." She railed at him and fumed that there was not a thing on the board that he needed. Then she told him he*

*was very intelligent, and therefore he needed to behave intelligently. Bewildered, he nodded, replied, "Yes, Ma'am," and resumed his work with his head bowed behind the blue privacy screen.*

*When their daily work was done, the table helpers put their materials away while the rest of the class gathered their belongings in preparation for a class change. The teacher waited until every child was seated with their heads on their desks, perfectly still and perfectly quiet before she called for the girls to line up to leave. In an instant, the girls sprang from their seats and raced to the door. When she called for the boys to join them, they, similarly, exploded from their chairs and launched themselves at the door.*

*The teacher called them all back to their seats and reprimanded them, but they were running late for the transition to their next class, so the teacher could not hold them any longer. They were more orderly when they lined up the second time. They could not wait to leave.*

No one pushed, or shoved, or shouted. There was no race to be first in line. It was not the typical noisy dash for the door. There was something different – rather than just running with disregard for the classroom rules. Their discomfort was nearly palpable. I was uncomfortable in the space, too, and was more than ready to end my observation when the students left.

To be fair, the teacher did a commendable job communicating lesson expectations to her class. She was consistent in her routines and procedures, and she had taken the time to teach her students her classroom expectations. The problem was not that she had high

expectations for her students, but rather her rigidity. She did not leave them any room to breathe – to be eight years old.

Even though they completed their tasks, her students were not excited about learning. They didn't engage in conversation that stretched their thinking, or encounter thoughts and ideas other than their own. There were no opportunities for creative expression of thought, or to engage collaboratively with their peers. There was no differentiated instruction. Children in this classroom worked in silence, isolated behind privacy screens.

Students in this class learned there was no room for them in the space – that their thoughts and ideas were of little importance. They learned that the only bodies that had value were those that were compliant – the ones that could sit still and be quiet – that met the required standard of containment. In this classroom, even the tiniest infraction, like leaning around the edge of a privacy screen to look at the date, earned students negative consequences and harsh ridicule.

The teacher colonized their bodies and their minds. There was only one right way to be, and they could only tolerate those expectations for so long. The children in this class, however, freed themselves from the rigid, constraining expectations of silent stillness and complete obedience when they fled the classroom – rules be damned.

### **Fierce (a poem)**

A thousand angry thoughts BEAT at my consciousness ENRAGED POWERLESS to stop him.	I could not have HATED him – her 'teacher' more  SHE Made me SMILE  She hammered right Back at him UNAFRAID  FIERCE  Inwardly I CHEERED and Reveled in his misery as	She mocked him She mimicked him She LAUGED at him  And he could not stop HER  I Was PROUD Suspended In that Moment  I wished for her EVERYTHING For which she STRUGGLED	Her dignity Her humanity Her SELF  I HOPED for HER That she would Never GIVE IN Never GIVE UP Never QUIT FIGHTING For her own JUSTICE  PRAYED That this world Would not rob Her of her STRENGTH or  MURDER Her For It.
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The second grade teacher of record went on leave mid-way through the semester. The principal hired a long-term substitute teacher, and was pleased with what she seemed to think was progress in that classroom. It made me wonder how often she had been out to visit and see what was really going on. And it made me curious as to what she counted as progress. Was she only looking for someone who could keep the kids quiet in the hallways? Someone who would keep them out of the office? Or did she want someone who would actually teach the class? What I observed was not teaching. He was menacing, and unorganized. He did not seem to know enough content to actually teach



with any real meaning or relevance. He was, in my opinion, crowd control. The damage he did to those children along the way, though, was something that alarmed me. Yet, there was little I could do. I watched him antagonize the class, then yell at them when they reacted to his behavior. I watched him tease and play with them, like when he tossed “imaginary M&Ms” at them as a “reward” for correct responses to questions – and then punish them when they acted silly. What did he think was going to happen? But there was one little girl who, for some reason I couldn’t identify, seemed to make him angry now matter what she did. She was active, yes. She was vocal, yes. But she was the only student in the class who acted halfway interested in what he did, who seemed enthusiastic about learning and had dozens of questions about every lesson. She participated eagerly. I would have loved having her as a student, but this man, he punished her at every turn. The most beautiful thing about her, though, was that she remained undaunted. When he tried to silence her, she was more persistent. When he tried to shame her, she mocked him in return. Maybe I should have seen her behavior as disrespectful, but she only engaged in those behaviors when he treated her with disrespect. I admired her for her courage and wish that I’d had half the spunk she did when I was a kid – that I’d been brave enough to stand up for myself. She was smart and quick witted, and hungry to learn but he couldn’t see her, couldn’t see her boredom, couldn’t see she was ready for a challenge. He was so busy chastising her that he couldn’t see she was trying to please him – in the midst of the noise and the mockery and the backtalk, she liked him and wanted him to like her, too.

## Voice

In early burlesque troupes, like Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, women had speaking and acting parts that weren't "pants" roles – but they also frequently broke the fourth wall and spoke directly to their audiences. Though once a treasured hallmark of the burlesque stage, vocal women became problematic as burlesque gained a stronger foothold in American society and became a staple of American entertainment. Coupled with their scantily clad bodies, women's voices posed too much of a threat to conventional social norms. Gradually, as more of their clothes came off, the less women were allowed to speak on stage, until finally, they were silenced completely.

Though some performers do sing as part of their routines, burlesque performances today are unlikely to feature any spoken parts. However, performers still make their voices heard. They use their bodies to speak. Their routines embody their own experiences and empowerment. They find ways to connect with their audience.

### *Rainbow Connection*

I was at the House of Blues in Dallas, for the 2015 Dallas Burlesque Festival, the very first time I saw Vivienne Vermuth perform. My seat was in the balcony, first row, first seat, stage left, right on the rail. The theater was dark but for the footlights at the edge of the stage. The music began to play, but the curtains did not open immediately. The song – Rainbow Connection – sung by John Denver and Kermit the Frog – instantly transported me back to my childhood, watching *The Muppet Movie*. I sat there, leaning forward, grasping the rail in front of me with what I know had to have been a silly, lopsided grin on my face thinking – simultaneously – “I know this song!” and, “Wait!

What on earth?! How is this song relevant here?” Then, from behind the curtain at the edge of the stage, an enormous Muppet head – “Animal” – appeared. The audience laughed and screamed uproariously, as she came fully onto the stage in her Animal head, with enormous rainbow colored “Pride” fans. With the Muppet mask and her fans, one held in front of her and one behind, all that was visible were her legs and her shoes – the most glorious shoes – silver but completely encrusted in rhinestones and crystals, so that rainbows glinted in the refracted light – in every direction – at every turn. The fan dance was sublime, and over all too soon. When she was finished, the roar from the crowd was deafening. As tears coursed down my cheeks, I clapped and cheered as loud as I could, too. It was the first routine that had moved me in such a way. This routine was an invitation – a hand – extended in warmth and welcome – to everyone. It was also a statement. The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) was deliberating *Obergefelle v Hodges* (2015), and only a few months later, ruled 5-4 in favor of Marriage Equality. Vivienne’s routine spoke to the struggle in the LGBTIQ+ community, the losses, the love, the strength, the hope, - the unity – the Pride. It was one of the sweetest, most powerfully tender, things I have ever seen. At prelims, Dr. Lincoln had spoken of burlesque as a bridge, and just days later, in this routine, I witnessed that truth.

The song from my childhood, coupled with her routine, took the audience right to that bridge between traditional, conventional society, and a community of acceptance. Her performance invited us to cross over – made it possible to be united – to celebrate our shared humanity. The spectacle she created spoke to, and raised awareness for, those present but not part of the LGBTIQ+ community. And while it was truly a performance

about embracing each other – the connections that we share – it was also a message of resistance – clearly stated – “We choose love. There is no room for hate.”

Like women silenced on the burlesque stage found a way to raise their voices, children will also find ways to be heard.

### *Yellow*

*Quietly seated, hand raised, he squirmed in his seat. Uncomfortable, he turned in the chair, arched his back, then raised his other hand. For nearly twenty minutes he wiggled and twisted, he stretched, and he raised one hand, then the other. He never spoke to anyone, never disrupted the learning environment in any way. He waited. He followed the rules and he waited.*

*At the back of the room stood the teacher, disengaged. Every few minutes she changed places and stood in close enough proximity to a table as to give the appearance of monitoring and assisting her students. The most she ever said, however, was “You know what to do!” “Get busy!” “You should be working!” Students around the room finished their work and had nothing to do. Still, he waited, quiet, hand raised.*

*It should have been a fun assignment – Skittles Math. Brightly colored candies filled tiny bowls at each table. Students had to share the candy, but complete their work independently. They were learning about bar graphs. Pencils in hand, they were supposed to sort and count the Skittles, by color, and then color in the appropriate number of spaces in the corresponding columns on the graph. He waited.*

*A little girl who had finished her work called out to the teacher from across the room to ask what she should do next. The teacher answered her and resumed her*

*detached, preoccupied stance. Having observed this, the little boy who had been waiting so quietly, patiently, for so long – asked, “Will you help me?” And she bellowed, “Why are you talking?!” His head snapped back in surprise. “Be quiet! You know you aren’t supposed to talk! Raise your hand if you have a question!” He was visibly shaken. Silenced, he turned away from her and, once again, raised his hand. And waited.*

*Minutes passed. One arm raised, then the other, he watched as another child left her seat, walked over to the teacher, and asked a question. The teacher responded and the child returned to her seat. He waited a moment, then ventured out of his chair. He had only taken a step or two when the teacher screeched at him, “Why are you out of your seat?!” His eyes darted in the direction of the student who had preceded him as he started, “But...” And she railed, “Go! Sit down now! If you need help, raise your hand and wait!” He shrank away. Back in his seat, he raised his hand again. And waited.*

*Eventually, the teacher meandered over to his seat. With an angry huff, she perched on the corner of his desk, faced him and asked, “Now. What’s your problem? You know what you’re supposed to do. Why aren’t you working? You should be finished!” She fired questions at him so quickly, he had no chance to respond. Infuriated, she jabbed her bony finger at the color words on the worksheet and asked him how many of each color he had, but when she pointed at “yellow” he did not recognize the word. She fussed again, “You know this word! Say the word! What is it?” A single tear leaked down his cheek. She finally told him the word was “yellow” and asked him what sound he heard at the beginning, but he could not identify /y/ as the onset sound. She repeated the word “yellow” and told him to, “Say it!” Over and over*

*again she pointed at her mouth and told him “Look at me!” “Look at my mouth” “Look at what I am saying!” “Tell me the first sound!” With a terrified look on his face, he tried - but when he repeated the word, “yellow” – he said, “lellow.” Enraged, she griped, “Look at what I am saying! I didn’t say Lellow!” Her face was bright red, her eyes wide with anger when she pointed to her mouth and yelled again, “Yellow!” Ashamed, he looked away. Head down, eyes averted, he picked up his pencil and went back to work; counting yellow Skittles and coloring in the bar for “yellow.”*

I do not know why that teacher was so upset with the little boy that day. I certainly had not seen him do anything to provoke her wrath. Behaviorally, he had followed the rules. When he did breach the boundaries, it was only after he had seen other students, who got their needs met, do so, too. Developmentally, the letter /y/ and words that begin with /y/, like yellow, pose challenges for the very young, and pronouncing the /y/ as an /l/ is not uncommon. As there was no apparent, legitimate, cause for her rant, I could only surmise that she was angry and mean because she did not want to help the boy. However, several things could have potentially enabled the boy to complete his work without her help at all – but it would have required that the classroom be a kid-friendly space, and it was not.

The walls of a first grade classroom, in the U.S., should be filled with teaching aids like posters, number lines, anchor charts, letter cards, word walls, and bulletin boards filled with student work. Yet, this classroom had none of those things. The walls were completely blank – ugly, sterile, beige. However, had there been posters or pictures – something- that portrayed colors with the corresponding color words, perhaps he could

have puzzled it out on his own. What's more, students were not allowed to use crayons to complete their Skittles bar graphs. They were only permitted to use a pencil.

However, crayons have paper labels with the color words printed on them. Again, had the child had the opportunity to use crayons, the more appropriate tool for the assignment, perhaps he could have worked out the problem on his own. Further, another child could have reviewed the color words on the page with him, and though some did talk quietly at their tables, the expectation was for them to work silently. The teacher, quite effectively, cut off every avenue by which this little boy could have gotten help, and then she denied him access to her assistance, as well.

The teacher created a hostile learning environment for this little boy. Repeatedly, she silenced, shamed and humiliated him. She overlooked and ignored him, though she helped others, at whom she did not yell. She discouraged and punished his attempts to advocate for himself and get what he needed. She denied him access to the tools he needed, access to his peers, and access to her. Essentially, she denied him access to learning at every turn, and then punished him because he had not been successful on the assignment.

She taught him it was okay for other students to ask for what they needed, for others to get what they needed even if it meant breaking the rules – getting out of their seats, or speaking without raising their hands- but not for him, a Black boy, to get what he needed. She did not shame any other students who needed help. She did not even fuss at the Hispanic boy who wet his pants. But she yelled at him because he didn't know the

word “yellow.” She taught him he was deficient and somehow worth less than other students in the room. She sent them all very powerful messages.

That day, she taught her students that it was permissible to degrade those who need help. She taught her students to blame those who have no resources or tools, that their failure is their own fault – that we do not have any responsibility to care for, assist, or support others when they struggle. She taught her students that meaningful learning is only for those who are chosen by the teacher, who meet some particular, invisible, set of criteria. And she taught her students to isolate those who are somehow different from the majority. Whatever her reasons were, she did not like this little boy, and consistently cut him off – she built walls around him – reviled him to such an extent that it would have been unsafe for other children in the class to talk to him or help him in any way lest they suffer the same plight. In fact, she isolated him to the point that the children at his own table, only inches away from him, would not acknowledge him at all.

No matter how well he behaved, the boy was punished. He tried to follow the rules but he was ignored. He used his voice to speak up and ask for help when he needed it, but he was silenced. He used his body and stood up to go and ask for help but was yelled at to return to his seat, follow the rules, and wait. Then, when she finally acknowledged his request for assistance, she berated and blamed him for needing help.

The teacher abused her power repeatedly. Rather than taking the opportunity to build a bridge – a relationship with the child – she shamed and humiliated him.



*“Yep!”*

*Workbooks opened on their desks, students squirmed and fidgeted as they watched the video that delivered the computerized version of the math lesson on addition. A blue bird, or some other critter – chirped its way through the steps to solving addition problems. The six-year-old students were expected to work along in their books. The teacher stood at the computer station and clicked the “next” and “play” buttons as prompted. The students were passively engaged. There was no joy or curiosity, no questions or enthusiasm, only robot-like trances as they stared at the screen.*

*The video portion of the lesson ended and students were directed to complete the practice page independently, silently. The teacher moved around the room – and to anyone who walked past the door, or entered the classroom unexpectedly – it would have appeared that she monitored the class while they worked. In reality, she idly roamed the room and did not monitor or assist anyone beyond quipped comments like, “You know what to do,” and “put a bubble in your mouth,” “there should be no talking,” or “be quiet.”*

*They worked one problem at a time and the teacher told them the answer. Students who understood the work finished each problem quickly; and then had to wait long periods of time for their classmates to finish before they could move forward. Though they were expected to wait silently, some of them chatted quietly while they waited. None of them were noisy or silly or otherwise disruptive. However, unsurprisingly, the teacher brought out two privacy screens and set them on the desks of*

*the two African American boys whom she frequently punished. They were not the only two children who talked, but they were the only two she isolated.*

*One of the boys progressed through his work quickly, but was then stuck while he waited on the class to finish – or for the teacher to check his work – before he could move forward. The privacy screen did not deter him. He, or a tablemate, simply leaned around it and carried on with their conversation while they waited.*

*Minutes passed, and as the teacher ambled aimlessly about the classroom, she noticed their conversation. “Oh, perfect!” she chided from across the room. She called his name and in a sinister voice that dripped with sarcasm, she said to him, “You’re talking so that means that you’re finished. I’m going to see a beautifully done, perfectly completed problem, right?” The boy slowly, purposefully lifted his head and matched her gaze – his eyes locked with hers – and said, “Yep!” His confident response obviously caught her by surprise – and immediately, she was angry. She stopped moving, momentarily frozen in place. It appeared that she had expected the boy to cower at her query, as her dropped jaw and widened eyes indicated that she had clearly intended that he stop talking. As her cheeks reddened and the pink flush spread down her neck, I had to bite back a grin.*

*Outraged, she stopped the entire class, interrupted their work, and announced that the student was so sure he had the correct answer that he would tell them all the answer and explain how he had solved the problem – and he did it. He gave his answer – the correct answer – explained how he had come to his answer, shared the information*

*he needed to solve it, and how he was certain that his answer was correct. It was perfectly executed.*

*Everything about her behavior indicated that her intention was that he be humiliated; her posture, hand on her hip, then rigid at her side; her facial expression, complete with eye-roll; and even an exasperated huff as she turned and walked away from him. She wanted him to fail, but he had done everything right. She did not acknowledge or congratulate him at all. There was absolutely no recognition of what he had accomplished on his own, in his own way.*

*His expression remained neutral throughout the entire exchange – until the teacher turned away – when his mouth twitched with the tiniest of smirks before he face beamed with a huge smile. He was proud of himself.*

The classroom was quiet. Too quiet and still for it to be full of first-grade students. There was little of the chatter so typical of six-year-olds, and there was almost no movement at all. They had their math workbooks open and waited for the math lesson to begin.

The teacher worked at the Digital Classroom station where she appeared to be flustered and unprepared. The digital lesson began. Students, nearly imperceptibly, turned to each other with confused expressions on their faces, looked quizzically at their books, and then back to the teacher – but none of them said anything. A few moments later, the teacher realized she had selected the wrong lesson, from the wrong grade level, and stopped the video. The class waited in near silence for her to find the correct lesson, and then began again.

It was disheartening to see such young children denied not only the use of manipulatives to explore mathematical concepts, but also any kind of relevant discussion. They did not have the chance to ask questions, nor did the teacher ask them any questions to check their understanding. She just moved them straight from the guided practice to the independent practice portion of the lesson.

They worked one problem at a time and waited for her to circle the room and look at their work individually. The teacher required that they “use their strategies” on each problem. If they did not show strategies, she marked the problem wrong, even if they had the correct answer. Several minutes passed between each problem. Though they remained relatively quiet, the class became bored and restless.

Students worked independently, but quiet chatter in between math problems increased. Though most children did talk, none of them were loud or disruptive. The only truly disruptive behavior occurred when the teacher stomped across the room, noisily dragged out two privacy screens, unfolded them and then flopped them onto the desks of the two African American boys – the same two she punished by way of discipline referral or phone calls to parents, on every other occasion when I’d visited her classroom. Never mind that on those same occasions, I’d observed nothing that merited a warning, let alone anything more severe. She treated them so much more severely than other children in the classroom, I could only surmise she despised them. And to make matters worse, they sat at separate tables so, besides her fussing being disruptive to the entire class, she further disturbed two table groups of students who had to stop their work and move materials around to make room for the privacy screens. As it turned out,

the privacy screens were ineffective. Kids at both tables completely disregarded them. The boys, or their neighbors, simply stood up and looked over the top of the screens, or they leaned around the sides of them. Though the teacher was not amused, it seemed the students regarded the screens as a farce. They seemed to recognize that punishment had been meted out unfairly. Unfortunately, the teacher did not seem to realize she had, again, treated these two boys unjustly. Instead, she showed her class her bias against the two boys. She demonstrated, for them, the ways in which, though everyone with in the space may break the rules, only a few will be held accountable. She acted on, and reinforced, stereotypes – that Black boys are behavior problems and need to be disciplined, while somehow, other students’ identical behaviors are less problematic. She revealed her investment in her deeply held beliefs, not only in the way she treated the two boys, but also in her reaction to the boy’s response, “Yep!”

When the teacher barked at the boy for talking, and made the sarcastic comment about how she was sure he had the correct answer, she did not intend for him to respond. Her tone indicated that her intent was to intimidate him into silence. Her method of communication; she asked a question that implied her expectation – that he stop talking – is frequently employed by Whites. It is not, however, a typical style of communication amongst other ethnic groups, whose communication styles are more explicit (Delpit, 1986, 2012). Therefore, when the boy responded to her question with, “Yep!” she was not just mad, she was enraged.

Clearly, she did not understand that a difference in styles of communication contributed to this situation. If she wanted and expected the boy to comply without

comment, her query should have instead been a command – an explicit statement of her expectation. However, it seemed she did not know her students or understand even the most basic differences between her own culture and theirs. Even so, the rage she expressed was extreme in comparison to the perceived infraction.

What I found of particular interest, however, was that while the teacher lacked understanding of the differences in mode of communication, the boy did not. It could easily be argued that he misunderstood, that he missed a social cue, but the tone of his voice, the expression on his face, and the daring look in his eyes suggested that he knew exactly what she intended – but rather than allow her to silence him, he challenged her.

Present on his face, in the set of his jaw, and in his posture, was a sense of determination. “Yep!” was much more than an answer in the affirmative. “Yep!” meant that he was, indeed, confident in his answer to the math problem, but “Yep!” also meant that he knew how she felt about him, that he knew she treated him unfairly. It meant that he saw that she treated him differently from other students because he was a Black boy. “Yep!” meant he would not allow her to take his pride in himself, and in his good work, away from him. And so, he sat proudly while he boldly explained his work to his classmates. His confidence was not shaken when, after he had successfully articulated his conceptual understanding of the math problem, his teacher, who should have been proud of him and shared his joy, instead, turned on her heel and stalked away. He didn’t say much – “Yep!” – but he said enough to let her know he saw her – enough to let her know he knew perfectly well she wanted him to fail, enough to let her know that she had not silenced him.

She had the perfect opportunity to turn the entire situation into a positive experience – to reach out, to cross the bridge between them – to create a relationship, to find some common ground to share. She could have celebrated the boy’s success, could have built his confidence, could have encouraged him to keep up the good work. She chose rage – and hate.

**Yellow (a poem)**

<p>I JUST wanted to SCREAM “Shouldn’t this be FUN?!”</p> <p>But she wouldn’t even LOOK at him, YELLED instead, “Get your work DONE!”</p> <p>He tried. I watched him While he Waited Waited Waited</p> <p>20 Minutes then</p>	<p>She FUSSED and FUMED WHIRLED and HUFFED “What do you want?!” “You know that word!” “Now look at me and SAY IT!”</p> <p>One silent tear Slid Down his cheek</p> <p>He looked at her And whispered, “Lellow?”</p> <p>“NO!” She spewed “You KNOW that’s WRONG!” “That word right there is YELLOW!”</p>	<p>He tried and tried, and tried again, “Lellow” “Lellow” “Lellow”</p> <p>Enraged She walked away</p> <p>I never would have Imagined That YELLOW could be CRUEL Its shine turned DARK And icy cold</p> <p>But that room became a DUNGEON And YELLOW felt like HELL</p>
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Since the day I watched this happen, the color yellow has never been the same. Though it does not haunt me quite as badly now, there were months following this event that I couldn’t look at anything that was yellow without being reminded of it. Observations in this classroom caused me grief beyond words. Most days when I left

that room, I had to find a quiet place to weep before I could go on to the next observation. The inhumanity with which that teacher treated the children in her classroom was beyond almost anything I've ever seen. This particular instance portrays a moment when she first ignored, then yelled at, a child for needing help. He waited twenty minutes for her to acknowledge him. When other students got out of their seat and approached the teacher, or spoke out across the room to get her attention, she responded to them, helped them, was kind to them. But this little boy, who'd been seated quietly with his hand raised since I'd walked in the room, she completely ignored. He wiggled and squirmed as his arms got tired, and he'd raise one, and then the other, while he waited. He never complained. Never created a disturbance at his table. Her behavior made no sense. I understand that, perhaps, there were difficulties of which I was unaware, but in that moment, he was doing everything right. Why not acknowledge that and encourage the desired behavior, if that was indeed the case? In that moment, in that space, the atmosphere felt heavy – like a wet blanket weighing on the space. It felt like, to me, she hated that child – and it seemed, from what I saw, that the rest of the students picked up on it, too. They were not mean to him – they just ignored him.

She treated him like that every time I visited her room. And every single time, I wondered what he had done to deserve such harsh treatment from her. Even if he had been a particularly difficult student, there was no just cause for her to treat him like she did. I left that classroom feeling bruised and bloody after every visit, and I'm not six years old. I cannot imagine what it must have felt like for the first graders in that class. Finally, I decided I needed to talk to the principal about it as I didn't feel that I could



continue, ethically, to visit that classroom without making sure someone was aware of what was going on.

### **The Returned Gaze**

Perhaps one of the best known mechanisms of resistance within the world of burlesque, the returned gaze is a significant feature of most all burlesque performances – both old and new (Allen, 1991). The returned gaze is the performer’s acknowledgement that she’s being watched, by watching the audience in return. The performer’s gaze is present within her tease, in her wink and her smile, and in her come hither gestures. Her returned gaze is deceptive in its playfulness though. A performer makes it her job to enter into a five-to-ten minute relationship with her audience – where she appears to make herself available to her onlookers – who may or may not objectify her (personal communication, CocoLectric, 2014). She appears to fulfill a fantasy – to be obtainable. She appears to give the audiences its wishes, but she is in control – of the fantasy – the tease – and of herself (Allen, 1991; Lee, 1999; Minsky & Machlin, 1986; Shteir, 2004). She knows herself.

### *Chola Magnolia*

The first time I saw Chola Magnolia perform was at the TXQF 2016. Her costume was just gorgeous, sparkly turquoise blue and with a truly epic headpiece with enormous flowers and feathers. But she did the whole routine in a mask and blindfolded. It was beautiful, but part of what made it so was her vulnerability. I do not know if I would have fully grasped the significance of that if I had not gone to Unicorn School and heard her explain it during her class. I thought she could see through the fabric that

covered her eyes, but she said she could only see the edge of the stage and the tables at the front – she could not see any faces. She talked about how she is aware of how she looks – that all her life people have told her she is beautiful – and while she appreciates that, when she’s performing she wants people to really see her – so when they cannot see her face, they have to pay more attention to the routine and the rest of what she is doing. One of her signature moves is she when open-handed smacks herself on the chest – like she is demanding, “Look at me!” It was stunning to behold. As I watched her slap herself, I could hear those slaps over the insane amount of noise. I had never heard Viva’s that loud before, but still, I could hear her slap herself. And it just reminded me all over again, about how important burlesque is, how it gives space for voices that are not heard anywhere else. It leaves room – creates space – for expression where words fail. Looking back on her performance still brings tears to my eyes and leaves me just a little breathless.

I have since seen Chola perform several times, but for me, the routine she performed for the Big Band Burlesque show was the most powerful – the most special. It was a little different because the band was live, so there was an added sense of fun and playfulness. The band had never played a burlesque show – most of them had never even been to a burlesque show – so to see their shock and awe, and their amusement when the dancers flirted with them, while they stripped, was quite hilarious.

Chola even walked up beside the trombone player and shimmied right beside him as he played. His eyes got great big and he blushed from his ears all the way down to his bowtie, but he kept right on playing. Chola headlined the Big Band Burlesque show. Her

performance for this show reminded me of her performance at TXQF – a saucy number performed with a flair and style that spoke, unmistakably of her Latina heritage. There was, however, in this performance, something I had not recognized the first time I saw her perform. Chola was fierce. On her face, I recognized her knowledge of her power as woman – not the use of sex or sexuality as a means of power – she understood – and portrayed – that being a woman is power. It was fleeting – but it was so clear, absolutely undeniable, incredibly beautiful to watch – and rare. I have seen many confident performers and many beautiful, sexy, routines by dancers who are truly talented, but that glimpse of Chola, that singular moment – was the epitome of returning the gaze and taking pleasure in her identity – as female, as queer, and as Latina. A similar knowledge of self, of identity, and the returned gaze, was present in the lives of children, as well.

*I'll Blow Your House Down*

*He huffed when he pointed and called out, "This one is on you!" He puffed and pointed again, "and this one is on you!" He added two more tally marks on the board, took away two more minutes of recess from the whole class. Angry, they chided their classmates. Each time he called a child's name, the class fussed at the student. Then, the teacher yelled at the class for scolding other students, and added more tally marks on the board. A few moments later, while the teacher worked at the board, a frustrated student whined, "I'm not good at this." To which one girl replied, "Try your best!" Other students echoed the sentiment and, "Try your best," rippled throughout the room. Another child answered a question correctly and the girl hollered, "Good job!" Again, the class echoed, "Good job!" He changed tactics and zeroed in on the girl who had*

*been cheering for her classmates, with laser-like focus, “Why do you have a tissue stuck in your nose? It really doesn’t look good.” She didn’t miss a beat when she retorted, “because probably I have snot in it!” From then on, she challenged him at every turn.*

*She talked across the room, talked to the students beside her, behind her, talked to herself, and talked to the teacher. He fussed at a student for off-task behavior, asked him, “What exactly, is your problem?” The boy explained that his shoe had fallen off. The teacher told him, “Well stick it back on!” and the girl, followed by the rest of the class, chimed, “Well, stick it back on!”*

*Clearly flustered, the teacher reprimanded the student who sat directly behind the little girl. Again, she mimicked him. For the rest of the lesson she repeated every word he said, mimicked every gesture, every inflection, matched him tone for tone. Utterly exasperated, he turned to her and demanded, “Are you done yet? Are you done repeating everything I say?” She parried. Her repost quick and flawless, she delivered the final blow, “Why don’t you just tell me to shut up?”*

*No matter how disruptive any of the other students may have been, when the teacher got angry, he aimed at her. The first student, in the first row, at the front of the room, she was easily the most vocal child in the class. And she was an easy target for the teacher. Confident in herself, in her identity – she was bold. Fearless.*

On that particular day, the teacher stopped instruction and reprimanded her for every instance when she was off-task in the slightest. She baited him into a battle of wills. When he corrected her for talking to the student beside her, she turned around and talked to the student behind her. She talked to a student across the room. She talked to

herself. She corrected classmates even when she was wrong. She protested when she was unhappy about one thing or another. And, she was brazen enough to correct the teacher, too. The teacher reprimanded her when she corrected her classmates, and after that, each time a student answered a question correctly, she celebrated them. She shouted, “Good job!” or “Way to go!” The rest of the class followed right along behind her and echoed her sentiments. Every time. In other circumstances, in another class, perhaps this could be perceived as a supportive classroom environment where students celebrated their classmates’ successes, but in this class, it was an act of subterfuge – a method of purposeful disruption in which the vast majority of the class participated. As a group, they mocked the teacher.

The girl was not deterred by the teacher’s attempts to force her into compliance through intense scrutiny and repeated reprimands. Instead, she inverted the power structure of the classroom when she made a spectacle of herself. Essentially, she acted as a mirror of his own bad behavior. Her spectacle indicated that she saw his judgment of her. She knew his actions were wrong – and she returned his gaze – gave it right back to him. She turned the teacher’s efforts to shame her into humorous escapades that essentially united the class against the teacher. She wrested control from him and he could not do anything about it. I’m not even sure he realized he’d lost control. He continued to put tally marks on the board and took more time away from recess – but it had ceased to hold any power over the class. They had all doubled-down with the girl in the front row. They owned that classroom.

This teacher lacked respect for his students. His attitude was that of one who expected – nay, demanded – respect because of his position. It was quite clear, that as the teacher of this class, he believed he deserved the students’ respect just because he was the adult in the room. He controlled – or rather – attempted to control – the class by force, through harsh discipline and punishment. He attempted to turn students against each other as he singled-out and blamed individual students, by name, when he randomly imposed consequences for behaviors that annoyed him. I say randomly, because there never appeared to be any sense of clear expectations for this class. Therefore, consequences were applied when the teacher was irritated by student behaviors that arose due to his own ineptitude and poor classroom management skills. He attempted to rule by brute force.

He, quite literally, colonized the students by behavior – students whom he perceived to be the most difficult were placed at the front of the classroom, while those deemed less problematic were seated at the back of the room. In and of itself, the strategy – proximity – is not problematic, and can be quite effective when it is used as a method to genuinely help students. In this classroom, however, the teacher disproportionately blamed and punished students at the front of the room while he completely ignored similar behaviors at the back of the room. Further, except for one boy at the front of the room, he disproportionately disciplined girls more than boys.

This teacher erected gender borders when he rewarded girls who were quiet and compliant while he punished those who were vocal and less demure – who did not quietly defer to his position of authority. He used sarcasm and derisive statements when

he addressed girls who were off-task, but he used humor with boys. He very clearly conveyed to the class that boys were superior to girls and should be respected – that they were privy to a separate set of rules with fewer, and less severe, consequences – and that their off-task behaviors were somehow funny while the off-task behaviors of girls were punishable offenses.

In the end, he had no more control over the class. In fact, some of the boys were emboldened and engaged in play and off task behavior at will, with little concern or regard for potential consequences, while girls also continued to engage in off-task behaviors, albeit quietly and surreptitiously. And the girl in the first chair, in the first row – remained bold and fearless.

*From Iron Man to Ashes*

*They tumbled through the door of their classroom, sweat sheened faces, a halo of laughter about them – pure – five-year-old joy. It was almost Halloween and they had all worn their costumes to school. Batman, Princess Leia, Spiderman, Cinderella, Iron Man, and Star Lord skipped and hopped to the brightly colored carpet at the front of the room. Settled into their assigned spaces, they began their daily calendar and math routines. Seated crisscross-applesauce, they reviewed the days of the week, the date, and the pattern on the calendar. Then, as if on cue, they all stood up in their spaces, and sang along with a CD, a song about the months of the year, set to the tune of – and with the movements to – the Macarena. Some of them participated more adeptly than others, but they all participated happily.*

*Without being prompted, they immediately launched into the next song with so much enthusiasm that they did not even wait for the music to start, so they had to stop and then begin again once the music played. Dum De Da Dum! Snap! Snap! Dum De Da Dum! Snap! Snap! They sang the days of the week to the theme song from the Addams Family. The snaps were random, the movements over-exaggerated, but they sang, and they snapped, and they were excited about learning. As the song came to a close, they collapsed in giddy giggles, sat back down in their spaces and turned, again, to face the math wall. Their routines continued as they estimated the number of large plastic buttons in a jar, reviewed coins, counted by fives and tens, and used the number line to find one more- and less-than the number of the day. Simultaneous “YAY!’s” erupted as classmates answered questions correctly.*

*As the routines portion of their math lesson came to a close, the teacher asked, “Who can tell me what we learned in math yesterday?” Tiny hands shot up as answers were shouted excitedly without waiting to be called on. The teacher reminded them to wait their turn and to talk one-at-a-time, and quieted, their hands shot up again. The teacher gave each child a chance to respond and replied positively to each before she returned to the child who had responded with, “Addition.” She asked, “Who remembers what addition means?” Students responded with, “It means to add.” “It means to put stuff together.” And “It means numbers.” Children continued to offer responses while the teacher turned to the document camera where there was a workbook page displayed. The class watched quietly as the teacher worked one problem to demonstrate the part-*



*part-whole concept for addition. When she finished the problem she called students by table group to come get a worksheet from her and then return to their seats.*

*Feet shuffled, chairs scooted, and crayon boxes snapped, as the class prepared to complete their assignment. Red and blue crayons in hand, they slowly worked the example problem that had been modeled for them. The teacher circled the room as they worked, and waited. They could only work one problem at a time. The teacher read each problem, circled the room while they worked, checked each child's work, and then, when they had all finished, she asked for the answer. Only then did they proceed to the next problem. Quiet chatter about Trick-or-Treating and costumes, requests for water and restroom breaks filled the long minutes between problems. "I can help because I'm Team Iron Man!" one little boy exclaimed to one of his tablemates. Then, from across the room, the teacher retorted, "But Team Iron Man is supposed to be quiet and not talking!"*

*Quieted momentarily, students worked the next problem, but as they grew bored while they waited to move on, they played with their costumes, and giggled with their classmates. Then, all of a sudden, in the middle of working a problem with the class, the teacher turned to me and exclaimed that she did not like costumes at school anymore, and followed it with a statement about disrespectful behavior. I was completely dumbfounded. I had not seen any behavior that remotely resembled disrespect. I asked her if she realized that active behavior – verve – is a cultural attribute and that it is not in any way disrespectful. Eyes widened, hand on her hip, she said, "Oh, really?" "Because that one over there," she turned and pointed, "needs to go to the doctor and*

*get medicated for ADHD.” “And that one,” she waved her other hand, “is already on ADHD meds.” “That one over there needs SPED services. And that one is getting tested for SPED services.” “That one probably needs SPED.” “And that one has a BIP.” And when she was finally finished spinning and pointing and waving, she had identified every single Black male child in her room as somehow deficient.*

Every child, it seemed, wore a costume and a silly grin. It was the Friday before Halloween and they had been allowed to wear their costumes to school. The school felt festive. Kids were giddy but not out of control. Everyone was smiling as I made my way to the Kindergarten classroom.

The students were still at recess, but the teacher was in the room. She invited me to sit with her for a few minutes before the kids came back, so I cleared my place at the table and we chatted for a bit. She warned me that her class was wound up due to Halloween festivities. The school had been taking Halloween photographs as a fundraiser, so all of her students wore their costumes. I tried to reassure her that it would be just fine, that they were only five-years-old, and I understood completely. She waved her hand dismissively, as if there was no way I could possibly imagine what she was talking about, and then she dropped a bombshell.

I can only hope that my facial expression was less than horrified, as one of passivity or neutrality was impossible. She said she was worried about her Black students because she did not feel that they respected her, and she suspected it was because she was White. I was completely surprised by her statement – especially since I had not seen any of the Black children in her class behave any differently than any other

child. All I had seen during my previous observations were children who behaved as kindergarteners.

When the class returned from recess, I was sure to pay specific attention to the African American students, but even as closely as I watched, they never exhibited any behavior that could even remotely be perceived as disrespectful. There were several instances of students, particularly boys, who engaged in silly antics related to their costume characters, but only when they got bored when they had to wait for the teacher to move to the next math problem.

As I watched one of the Black boys, I noticed that he clearly understood the mathematical concepts, and was so focused on his work that he worked ahead of his teacher. He wrote the number sentence and had the problem solved before the teacher told them what to write. He waited, and waited, while other children struggled to write the numbers. He did not talk to his neighbors. Instead, he waited quietly. The only thing he did, while he waited, was to fidget with the ties on the back of his costume. During the teacher's rant, I nodded at him and mentioned what a great job he had been doing, how he understood the work and was doing it on his own, but she just shook her head. She rolled her eyes and commented that he was smart but that he needed to be medicated. She shook her head and turned back to the document camera.

The class continued to work and I mused to myself that the whole class had been remarkably well behaved, especially considering their costumes, interruptions for pictures, and it was after lunch – when wee ones get tired and irritable. In spite of those challenges, they did an incredible job.

I was stunned speechless at such a blatant breach of student confidentiality – and sad – because she was blind to her own bias. I took a moment to look around the room, and wondered what I had missed. All of those little boys. Little – African American – boys. Every one of them was seated, quiet, attentive, engaged in their work, or waiting patiently for their teacher’s directions. There were, however, other students out of their seats, on the floor, disruptive – a White boy and a Hispanic girl. Once the teacher was back on task, so were they. The teacher did not acknowledge their off-task behavior at all. Nor did she identify any other children as in need of medication or SPED services.

I understood that she was frustrated and tired, and I knew perfectly well that teaching can be overwhelming, and that she perceived me as an ally. I understood how she felt that I was someone in whom she could confide – especially since she did not feel supported by the school’s administrators. The breach of confidentiality as well as her identification of Black males as the only children who were in need of some kind of assistance were both problematic, particularly given the fact that from what I had observed they actually exhibited fewer off-task or behavior related problems than other students.

Her own bias led her to create a socially unjust classroom – an inequitable learning environment. She openly – loudly – marginalized the African American children in her classroom and in so doing, communicated to every child in that classroom that bad behavior was only intolerable if committed by Black children. And further, that Black children could be blamed and punished for things they had not done, while other children could actually do those things and get by with it, without suffering

any consequences, and in some cases, without even being noticed. To her Black students, she communicated that even when they had done nothing wrong, they were still bad, still needed to be punished, to be medicated, still needed SPED services. She taught her students shame. She taught them that there was shame in needing medication, in needing SPED services, as if those were things over which anyone has control. She created an us/them, good/bad, normal/abnormal border in her classroom. The message she conveyed was that the students who do not need medication were normal but that there is something wrong with those who do; that those who did not need SPED services were normal, and those who did were not. The irony in the situation though, was that she failed to recognize her complaint against her Black students had been that they did not respect her, yet none of the things she had identified, ADHD, SPED, BIP, actually had anything to do with respect, or the lack thereof. And yet, she taught those five-year-old babies that they were somehow wrong – somehow broken – because they were Black.

She colonized, and then recolonized, her students. First, she claimed that her students – particularly her Black students – were rude and disrespectful – and that she believed their attitudes were due to the fact that she was White. I offered her a valid explanation that is supported by substantial research and offered to send her articles, if she was interested in reading them, but she could not hear it. When she was offered an explanation that legitimated student behaviors, she found another way to blame them. She very publicly detailed confidential information about her students. She located whatever issues she perceived as problems within her students rather than in herself. She constructed the borders within which her students were expected to function – and when

it seemed like those borders wouldn't maintain her construction of them, she moved, changed, and reconstructed the borders – and redefined her students. With labels, SPED, BIP, ADHD. Labels that would follow them throughout their years in school and perhaps even into their later lives. Not only did she ensure that she retained her power, and assure herself that her students were the problem – she also ensured that the Black boys in her class would have even more narrow margins within which to operate. Her construction of these students, the labels she was willing to place on them instead of examining herself and her own practices, didn't just stand to alter their experiences within her classroom – they had the potential to alter their existence. Forced into those labels, those little boys stand to be subjected to a system of surveillance and control that will monitor them and subjugate them throughout their lives.

I felt helpless as I sat there that afternoon – and hopeless. I watched those little Black boys watch her as she pointed at them, blamed them, shamed them. I watched them look at each other while she ranted. And then I watched them look at me.

I had already offered her an explanation, had already offered her research – and I had only made it worse for them. She was convinced, and committed to the stance, that there was something wrong with each of those little boys. Nothing I could say in that moment would have changed her mind.

It didn't make sense to me, though. I didn't understand what made these boys problematic for the teacher, why they threatened her so much that she felt compelled to humiliate them – to subject them to long-term subjugation via SPED services, Behavioral Intervention Plans (which make it easier to have a child sent to a behavioral

unit, or an alternative education placement center with a police presence), and ADHD medication. What did seem clear, however, were the borders – those dividing lines – between the Black boys in her class, and everyone else. In the borderlands of Blackness that she created for them, even their existence was resistance.

The boys though, they never flinched. Nothing about their facial expressions changed. Nothing about their posture. They just kept working – silently. Their furtive glances at each other, and at me, suggested they understood everything she said – as well as those things left unsaid. They, I believe, let her see exactly what they wanted her to see. It seemed, to me, that at five-years-old, these little boys already understood what it means to be a Black male in America – that they already understood there is a separate set of rules by which they are expected to abide. They had already learned that they had to pretend to be a different person within this classroom space. They saw her – their lack of reaction was their returned gaze.

#### *Taking the Temperature*

*Most of the class was seated, with their science workbooks open before them on their desks. The lesson for the day was about types of clouds. The teacher read to the class but paid no attention to the students. The longer he droned on, the more the kids fidgeted. He reached the end of the reading passage and told the class to answer the questions. When they could not complete the work independently he stepped behind his desk, where he abruptly flung open the back door and stepped out onto the porch. The light of a misty gray sky drifted through the open door, and dense, swampy humidity along with it.*

*Without any discussion or explanation, the teacher called for volunteers. Every hand shot up; some waved, some excitedly pleaded, “Oh! Me!” He selected two students who, amidst disappointed groans, made their way out onto the small porch. He asked them to each take a guess at the temperature. Confusion clouded their faces. Shrugged shoulders and palms turned up with empty hands indicated they did not understand what he wanted them to do. They knew enough to know that temperature tells how hot or cold it is, but not enough to estimate an actual temperature like eighty-three degrees. So, they stood there on the porch while he tried to explain to them what temperature is – ranges on a thermometer, how they would know if they needed to wear a coat, or if they could go swimming, and so forth. While he focused the majority of his attention on the two students who stood on the porch, the rest of the class lost interest. By the time the teacher tried to approach the idea of condensation, one girl was up out of her chair, twirling around her seat. Two others had scooted their desks close together to play with some toy in a pink box. One boy pounded out a rhythm on his desk. All of those behaviors went either unnoticed or unaddressed, but to an African American boy in the front row, who was off task and turned to talk to the child behind him, the teacher rounded on him, jabbed his short pudgy finger at the boy’s face and sneered, “ I don't need any monkeys in my class!”*

The science lesson was not an authentic lesson, nor was it anything the teacher had actually planned to do, which was obvious as I sat there watching things unfold. He was unorganized, seemed flustered – and maybe a little frantic. The purpose of the assignment was to give the class a bunch of busy work that would keep them quiet and



occupied so he could cover the instructional information on the walls before the benchmark exams. However, it looked as though he had expected the students to be able to complete the work unassisted. To his disappointment, the class did not have enough background knowledge about weather to be able to do the work on their own, so he had to at least give them enough information that they could muddle through the assignment. It was clear to me he was not interested in teaching them the lesson. He rushed through the reading, gave a cursory review of the associated vocabulary, and then expected that to be enough. Hence, when he had to stop and explain temperature and condensation, he was angry. He did not stop to ask questions, to check for understanding, or to discuss the information. He simply plowed through the reading. He was not even aware of whether or not the students were on the right page or paid attention. Rather than redirect the off-task behavior, he ignored it. The African American boy at the front of the room had not done anything other students weren't doing – and he was less disruptive than most – but he was the one the teacher singled out.

I could not believe my ears. I felt the blood drain from my face as I sat there, stunned. That middle-aged white man had just told a Black child, in a room full of Black and Hispanic children, that he did not need any monkeys in his classroom. Unbelievable! After he said it, it was as if someone pushed a pause button, and he was momentarily suspended in time and space. The expression on his face was all that changed. Seated at the back of the room, I saw his face when he realized what he had said, which meant the class saw him, too. If his words alone were not enough to betray him, the “Oh, shit! I can't believe I just said that out loud!” expression on his face did. He wasn't ashamed or

remorseful. He was caught. He looked at the little boy, then he looked at me, before he looked away.

The class was silent. Still. A vacuum. Whatever feelings this teacher might have managed to hide about his students previously – in that moment, he was unmasked. He knew it and so did his students. He had revealed his racist bias – revealed the borders he had erected – revealed his hostility toward Black children. Revealed why some children faced harsher consequences for their behavior than others.

During prior observations, I had seen him flip-flop between a drill sergeant persona and a good buddy persona with the class. It seemed that, at times, he may have realized that his drill sergeant persona had come down too hard on them, so a few minutes later, he acted playful and lighthearted, as if he was their friend. He tried the same thing after his monkey comment. He tried to joke and tease with the class, to ease the tension, but they had seen him. And they were silent. In their silence, they rejected him – resisted – returned his gaze.

Like the fleeting look on Chola's face, each of these acts of resistance were brief. And, like that expression on Chola's face revealed her knowledge her personal power – so, too, did these acts on the part of the very young, as they dared to look back at their teachers – to return the gaze.

### **Black Does Not Mean Broken (a poem)**

How do I tell her –  
One White girl to another –

That there is no  
CRIME  
In COLOR?

How do I explain –  
The job is HERS  
To figure out  
What her STUDENTS  
Need?

What will make her  
UNDERSTAND  
The biases are  
HERS? And

She's the one who has  
To LEARN  
A culture not her own

She's the one who has to  
Take a step  
OUTSIDE herself  
To know

There's more than one  
REALITY

How do I describe for her –  
So she can truly  
Grasp it –

DIFFERENCE makes us  
All UNIQUE and  
BLACK  
Does NOT mean  
BROKEN?

Kindergarten. Maybe I have it all wrong, but to me, kindergarten should be a place of discovery. It should be a place where five-year-old kids can wiggle and chatter and figure out the world around them. There should be dancing and painting and puppets and play doh` and make-believe. Sure, there should be reading and writing and math, but fun stuff, without the emphasis on testing and technology. Without listening to your teacher ridicule and label you, especially to a stranger. To watch her that day, so hell-bent on finding fault with her students, was heart-wrenching. She'd started out telling me she felt like her Black students didn't respect her because she was White, but then, as soon as I offered her an explanation, a different perspective, she immediately listed deficiencies – her perceived deficiencies- in them. It made no sense to me. How did she

make that leap? And why was she so determined to find something wrong with her students instead of teaching them? Why locate the problems within the children instead of examining her own practices? Why did it not enter her mind to change the way she taught her class, to try something new, to make things more interesting and more student-centered? And as I sat there, I realized, again, nothing has really changed. In over sixty years since *Brown v Board of Education*, nothing has really changed. Students get held accountable, parents and families and communities get held accountable. But who holds us accountable? Who holds White people, White teachers, accountable, for ensuring that their students, all students, have access to equitable outcomes? Testing doesn't do that. Thanks to this classroom teacher, as well as the others I observed, watching how teaching and learning has devolved, even since I left the classroom six years ago, I am now more convinced than ever that testing is a mechanism designed for the purpose of keeping kids of color from high levels of achievement.

### **Spectacle**

Everything about burlesque is spectacle. From choice of music, to props, extraordinary costumes, and outlandish antics, burlesque performances tell a story. Performers display themselves - their bodies – as art – as protest; to make a point – to be remembered (Allen, 1991; Davis, 2002; Lee, 1999; Minsky & Machlin, 1986; Shteir, 2004).

#### *Proud to be an American*

It was the Fourth of July weekend – the Star Spangled Spectacular Show at Viva's in Dallas. I had looked forward to this show because of the guest performer from

New York – Ula Uberbuson. The owner at Viva’s had told me she thought I would like Ula, that she was very political, very feminist, and that she wanted my thoughts on her after the show.

The Star Spangled Spectacular is one of Viva’s most largely attended shows, and the performers are always top-notch. Every routine was great that night, but I found myself anxiously anticipating Ula. I wondered if she would live up to her description, wondered if I would like her, how she would compare to my favorite performers – and prepared to watch her routine with a critical eye – to scrutinize for substance. Finally, the emcee announced her and the house lights darkened.

My heart plummeted when the first strains of Lee Greenwood’s *God Bless the USA* began to play. I should not have been surprised, it was a Fourth of July show, after all. But that song is so old and tired and overused. I will admit, every time I hear it, it brings a tear or two to my eyes, but it was not at all what I expected for a burlesque routine. Determined, however, to give her a chance, I focused again, on the routine. Her costume was beautiful – a patriotic red, white and navy blue number, of course – with enormous navy blue fans of ostrich feathers. And she had big hair – lots and lots of big blonde hair curled and teased and piled up high on her head. With a huge smile on her face, she twirled, she tip-toed, she slowly peeled off her garments one piece at a time – fans, gloves, blue skirt, blue bra, red and white fringed shorter skirt, red and white fringed bra – until all that was left was her sparkly navy blue corset. She stood in the middle of the stage, rhinestones and sequins ablaze in the spotlights as the music crescendoed – “And I’m proud to be an American, where at least I know I’m free” – her

corset fell away and revealed – FUCK TRUMP! – drawn on her stomach in thick, black letters. As the song came to a close, she slowly raised her right arm, middle finger extended, in cynical salute. The audience went absolutely insane – with cheers and jeers – but mostly in support. I could not possibly have screamed any louder. I loved it!

This routine is an example of how burlesque performers use spectacle to make themselves heard - as a method of resistance to oppression. Though Ula never actually spoke, her choice of music – a song long associated with patriotism, infused with emotion – her costume, at first, reminiscent of high school drill teams, baton twirlers, and dance recitals – a representation of iconic American past times, parades, and apple pie – illustrate the acceptable norm; love and support of country. And at the last moment - because it was subversive – she used her body and expressed her own feelings about the President of the United States (POTUS). She used her performance as a platform to make a statement – her statement. There was a unifying aspect of the performance, as well. Ultimately, her performance does not change anything politically – it does not change women’s reproductive rights or access to healthcare, it does not change travel bans or mass deportations, or gun laws, and it won’t feed the homeless - but it did change the margins of the performance space. Her routine served to unite – even if only for a little while – those within the audience who love our country but grieve this presidency and abhor everything for which it stands. In its own way, her performance offered hope. It lauded what it means to be “American” – and at the same time recognized the un-American behaviors and political choices of the POTUS. And in that space – brief though it was – there was reprieve – a moment to take a deep breath – to

realize, “I’m not alone here.” A moment to recognize each other – to embrace – in kinship - within political borderlands. To collectively, raise our middle fingers in cynic salute, and together say, “FUCK TRUMP!”

*“Ants!”*

*Self-absorbed. Puffed up with self-importance. The teacher stood at the board in his stiffly starched white shirt – back turned to the class. He might as well have been talking to himself. The kids were zoned, completely disengaged. They passed notes, talked with neighbors, shuffled papers, drew on folders, tapped their feet, played drums with their pencils, and one laid down in his chair. Two students kicked and tossed a dirty Kleenex at each other. The tissue drifted out of reach and the two boys quickly engaged in more off-task behavior. At first, it looked like they, and the two girls beside them, were kicking and stomping on each other. Then, one of the girls squealed, and the two boys leapt from their seats and stomped more vigorously while the girls giggled.*

*Enraged, the teacher spun around from his place at the board and demanded to know what on earth they were doing. Simultaneously, the boys screeched, “Ants!” “Hundreds of ants!” one declared. Not to be outdone, the other yelled, “No! Thousands of ants!” Genuinely alarmed, the teacher dashed over to check out the situation. He looked down to where they pointed and back at them. Perplexed, he fumed, “Where? Where are the ants?” They pointed again, “Right there!” Eyes wide, nostrils flared, the teacher spun on his heel and went back to the board before he bellowed at them, “One! One ant! I need to teach y’all how to count! You need to learn more math!” With a*

*scowl on his face, he added tally marks to the board, and like a petulant child, turned back to his monologue at the front of the room.*

There was nothing student-centered about this lesson. In fact, it was not truly a lesson. The class had taken an assessment over fractions the previous day and he had returned their tests for review. By review, I mean he stood at the board, asked them what answer they selected, and then told them the correct answer. There was no discussion over what made an answer right or wrong. If a student was confused, the closest he got to an explanation was to draw a picture on the board. The students remained confused and disengaged due to his inability to address misconceptions. The class had, from what I could ascertain, been tested over fractional parts of a whole, and fractional parts of a set, but they did not understand the difference and he could not explain it to them.

He did not have the background, or the content knowledge, to teach them. He did not prepare developmentally appropriate lessons that engaged students. He asked low-level questions that required no higher order thinking skills to answer. The cognitive demand was low. Those things were the teacher's responsibility and he failed miserably, but he did not suffer the consequences. The kids paid the price.

The class got punished for his ineptitude. They were punished for their boredom, confusion, and lack of engagement, which occurred due to his inability to plan or execute an effective lesson. They also suffered because he could not deliver the content they needed to be successful academically. These are both mechanisms of colonization. Additionally, rather than effective, child-friendly, classroom management strategies, he employed shame, humiliation, and silencing – also mechanisms of colonization – as



methods by which he tried to control children. And yet, the school administrators thought this guy was just great.

It has to be stated, when the principal of the school spoke of this man, it was with high regard. She commended him for his classroom management skills, and applauded him for what she perceived as progress with these students. The class walked in a straight line. They were quiet in the hallways. This. This was what they wanted from the children – what they considered important. Straight and quiet lines. It seemed no one questioned the methods or considered the costs of those straight and quiet lines. It seemed, no one ever stopped to consider the deeper, underlying, reasons for why the class behaved as they did. No one asked what the children needed. Instead, they wrote them off.

This class may have been compliant in the hallways, but in the classroom, they actively resisted the teacher's unfair practices. The students drew attention to the problems in the classroom by making spectacles of themselves. They knew how to behave in a classroom, knew what was expected of them. They understood perfectly well that they should have been paying attention to the lesson. Their behavior should have been an indication that something within the larger scope of things was very wrong. Instead, all of the responsibility and blame was placed on the children.

It appeared, to me, that their spectacle was their way of acknowledging that they knew they needed and deserved more than that which they were receiving. They behaved as they did because they had learned no one expected more of them than to walk in straight and quiet lines. No one expected them to learn. The school turned its

back on that entire class. And the kids – the kids flipped off the patriarchy and stomped ants. They made a spectacle.

### *Hopscotch*

*The large area rug at the front of the room was decorated with educational images that made for a fantastic, albeit modified, hopscotch board. Part of the rug was divided into five colored rows, each of which were divided into five sections, such that students could have their own square in which to be seated.*

*Three boys jostled each other as they hopped from square to square on one foot. Row by row they jumped. They challenged each other to make each task more difficult. In bigger bounds, they leapt from one row, over another, and landed in another. From the very outside row at the edge on one side of the rug, they heaved themselves toward the outer row at the opposite edge, and landed with a somersault. Then, back again. They hopped and skipped. They jumped and plunged. And they laughed as they tumbled over each other.*

*Three feet from where the boys played, the teacher sat at her podium and completely ignored them. Eventually, she helped one of the boys with his work and sent him back to his seat where he crouched, and then squatted in his chair before he leapt back into the fray on the rug.*

I was confounded by the classroom management, or lack thereof, in the fourth grade classroom. The majority of the class was seated in table groups with four or five desks in each group. Around the outer edges of the room, individual desks were spaced far enough apart that the students who sat in those chairs would be considered isolated,

and there was one desk completely separate, by the door and as far away from the other students as possible. Except for occasionally monitoring the noise level there was no indication that the teacher had any expectations for the students.

As on other days when I observed, the teacher sat on a stool at her podium in the front of the classroom. From her perch, she delivered direct instruction and checked student work – always worksheets - individually. Though she was in the classroom, it was as if her students had been left unattended. While she sat at the podium, the class was in a state of chaos. Students who were not in line waiting for her assistance, were scattered about the room. Though students were supposed to work collaboratively with their groups to complete the assignment, they instead talked with friends, were noisy, and were otherwise off task. In general, the teacher paid no attention to what went on around her. When she did address a problem she was ineffective as she merely made a token effort to redirect students. For example, on one occasion, when students were talking while she explained an assignment, she paused briefly, stated, “I’m talking, you’re not!” and proceeded even as students continued their conversations.

In the group seated closest to me, only one student did all of the work while the rest of the group talked about other things. The only boy in the group did nothing except blow in the cap of a pen so it made an incredibly shrill whistling sound that disturbed everyone in the room. When the teacher finally said something to him, she asked him if he had discussed the math assignment with the group. He nodded in the affirmative though he had contributed nothing. She nodded back at him and then turned her attention to the student at her podium. Though she eventually moved the boy to the seat by the

door, she never actually addressed the disruptive behavior and he became even louder and more disruptive. Still, she never moved from her stool at the podium.

My observation in her class that day was basically the same as other days, with some variation in student shenanigans. As such, it was interesting to me when, while she passed out worksheets for homework, the teacher approached me and apologetically explained, “It’s chaos. We have a teacher out today.” I understood she meant that there was no substitute for the teacher and they had split her students amongst the other teachers in the grade level. However, I had not noticed anything any different than any other day I had observed. When she had distributed the worksheets, she stood at the back of the room, near where I was seated, and announced, “We have a guest and you’re not impressing her at all.” They turned and looked at me and then turned right back to their other conversations, and the teacher went back to her podium.

The fourth grade teacher did not, that I observed, implement harsh consequences for behavior related issues. Instead, what was most significant was that she made little to no effort to create a classroom geared to learning. She neglected her students, and in so doing, communicated to them that they were not worth her effort – that she did not care – she was not interested or invested in them or their learning opportunities. Her neglect conveyed her low expectations, as well as her belief in their inability academically, socially, and behaviorally. Her neglect left her students further marginalized – colonized – because her lack of commitment increased the likelihood that her students would struggle in the future – she actively chose to decrease their chances of success.

Students in the fourth grade class made spectacles of themselves in response to their classroom environment and teacher expectations. The fourth grade teacher did not appear to have any rules or procedures by which students were expected to abide. Thus, the students resorted to spectacle as a means of exercising their own control. Sometimes, the spectacle was solitary, and a single student disrupted the entire class, purposely, like the boy with the pen cap, and other times, multiple children were involved as in the hopscotch game. The children's spectacle told their story.

Children created spectacle. They stomped ants, played hopscotch, and twirled in circles, – behaviors that reflected low-expectations, inequitable learning opportunities, and unjust, stifling, classroom environments that failed to meet their needs. They used the bodies, like Ula Uberbuson, to tell their stories.

### Imagine Superheroes (a poem)

Their actions told  
The  
Story

Of  
The  
CLASSROOMS

Where they  
Languished  
In their  
BOREDOM

Some slept  
Some played  
Some talked  
To one  
Another

And some  
DARED to  
IMAGINE

ACROBATS  
They LEAPT and  
ROLLED and  
BOUNCED  
Across the floor

SUPERHEROES  
SAVED the day  
Those ANTS  
Are gone  
For SURE!

One took the  
RISK  
To ask a  
QUESTION  
She tried to  
UNDERSTAND

But got sent  
BACK to her  
SEAT

ANGRY and  
DEFEATED

Teacher sat  
Upon the  
STOOL or  
LECTURED from  
The BOARD

It was like she  
Could not  
SEE THEM

The STUDENTS  
In her room

Waiting to  
Be FREE to  
LEARN

DESPERATE to  
Be  
HEARD

Near  
BEGGING  
Her to  
TEACH  
them

In the case of the second and fourth grade teachers and students – whom this poem is about, I came to believe that the students' behaviors were a reflection of the teachers' attitudes. Children didn't appear to care because their teachers didn't appear to care. Students weren't attentive to their work because teachers weren't attentive to theirs. Had the teachers been paying attention, they perhaps, would have recognized this as a sort of accusation by their students. Teachers should have recognized the reflection of themselves and been ashamed, but they were completely disconnected from their students, un-invested, disinterested, unaware, uninvolved, absent. It seemed to me their students were acutely aware of the circumstances, the lack of interest, the lack of commitment. It also seemed to me that their behavior, rather than being random and disrespectful, occurred because students wanted to be engaged in learning. Yes, they were distracted and yes, they were noisy and talkative and sometimes incredibly silly, but in the midst of the chaos, they still tried to do their work, they still tried to meet the expectations, they still tried to learn. And so I sat, again enraged, over lazy teachers and the unfortunate kids who would inevitably suffer long-term, perhaps lifelong, consequences of their teachers' ineptitude.

### **Pleasure in Identity**

Burlesque is an effective medium of resistance because of its revelry in self. Performers, and community members, know full well how the world views them and are not defined, or controlled by, those views. Burlesque performers are visible, they can return the gaze, step out of the constraints that would bind them, they can make themselves heard, and make spectacles of themselves, because they take pleasure in their identity. Their identity is their strength, and lends them the power to resist the forces that press for normalization, for assimilation.

When Gypsy Rose Lee teased and flirted with her audiences, when Sally Rand rode nude, on horseback, through the Chicago State Fair, and when Little Egypt performed

her cootch dance, it was as much a celebration of themselves as it was a show for their audiences. Today, the burlesque stage is a place for the celebration of transformation because the burlesque community is an open and accepting space that readily, happily, celebrates identity. There is no wrong way to be oneself in the burlesque community. The community has gone to great lengths to cultivate inclusive attitudes and practices – and have created a space where people celebrate who they are, and take pleasure in their identity.

### *8 Miles*

It was the *Way, Way, Off Broadway Show* at Viva's. I had gone to the show alone – my now much preferred way to attend a show. I sat in my typical seat – first chair on the aisle, second row, in the center section. It had been a fun show – a funny show. While it, too, was humorous, I was not prepared for Lillith's performance.

I had never heard the song she used, *8 Miles Wide* by Storm Large, before that night. *All of my life/ I've never fit/But I won't complain and I won't quit/ I am enormous/get used to it. Everyone tells me I'm too much/Maybe it's just you're not enough for me/ can't you see/ I'm the kind of woman I'm supposed to be./* As tears welled in my eyes, and then slid down my cheeks, I was grateful for the darkness. And tears be damned, I cheered anyway.

The power in her performance was not a dance – she mostly strutted from one side of the stage to the other. Neither was it a vocal performance – she lip-synced it. The power in the performance was her celebration of herself as a woman who is enough – in and of herself – who does not need another in order to be complete – who is not



diminished by her femaleness – who is still wholly female – and sufficiently feminine because of her strength rather than in spite of it. The power – her power – is that she is the woman she is supposed to be – whom she chooses to be – as defined by herself. She celebrated her identity without taking anything away from anyone else. She does not shrink so as not to intimidate anyone else. *I am enormous. Get used to it. I'm the kind of woman I'm supposed to be.*

In her silver strappy heels and layers of her pink furry feathers, she crossed from one side of the stage to the other. The humor in the performance lay in her over-exaggerated facial expressions and gestures. *Tell me what is womanly to you/ strong but not too much of a brute/ it's cool if she's powerful/ but way better if she's cute/ For all of us girls who don't fit in/ I say go Amazonian/ you can be a kick-ass bruiser/ and be feminine.*

She discarded one garment after another, pink satin gloves, the frothy pink feathery skirt, the pink and white, fringed bra. *My vagina is 8 miles wide/absolutely everyone can come inside/if you're ever frightened just run and hide/my vagina is 8 miles wide.* When she removed her pink skirt, she had on a shorter skirt of black fringe. Attached to the front of it was a pink, rhinestoned, vagina. And when she removed her corset and bra – she revealed pink rhinestoned vagina pasties that matched.

Neither the routine nor the song, as the final verse reveals, were really about sex or even sexuality. *Now I am not loose and I'm not a whore/ this is a metaphor for/ my super viganastically mystical goddess core.* They both were, instead, about the power of womanhood and femininity – about the struggle many women face to be their true,

powerful selves – or to play small – so as to be attractive, appealing, and non-threatening. This routine celebrates what it means to be powerfully female – to rise up to be one’s whole and true self – to be Amazonian – instead of shrink to invisibility in order to play a traditional gender role, or preserve someone else’s ego. It is a beautiful act of resistance as it rejects assertions that displays of feminine strength and power are masculine. Thus, rather than trying to conform to the social norms and acceptable displays of femininity – Lillith’s performance encouraged celebration of the strength and power of womanhood.

I left that show a different person. I had received affirmation and personal insight. I found the song and played it over and over again. It perfectly described much of what I’d felt about being female since childhood. It helped me understand and articulate my experiences in church and why I had been called rebellious in spite of being a quiet and compliant child. This performance gave me a reason to hope, a reason to see myself differently, and a reason to celebrate myself – to find pleasure in my own identity – in my own particular version of femininity. I left that show feeling a little taller on the inside. I let myself feel things that I’d been taught were prideful, and therefore, wrong. I left – feeling happier with myself – feeling okay with who I am. In the burlesque space, I am not too much – I can be Amazonian. I can be all of the things that make me myself but are not often acceptable otherwise.

Lillith’s performance, like the others, contained elements of spectacle, and voice, the returned gaze, constraint removal and visibility, because of her pride and pleasure, in herself – in her identity. The elements overlap in all performances, but it is the authentic

joy in personal identity that makes all of the other elements possible. People do those things because they believe in themselves – believe they have value – because they like who they are and are confident enough to resist the powers that normalize – to resist assimilation, to resist colonization.

Kids in the classrooms I observed did the same thing. And, like burlesque routines, their performances contained overlapping elements that suggested they were happy, confident, and secure in their personal identities – and therefore, burlesqued their oppressive classroom systems. They maintained pleasure in their identities in spite of classroom practices. Though each of the vignettes spoke to the power, the knowledge, and children’s understanding of oppressive classroom practices, there was one, in particular, that spoke to the power of the pleasure in identity.

*“Whew!”*

*“Whew!” she giggled, as she reached up with one hand to brush the hair out of her eyes, “I am out of control today!” she exclaimed. She answered the next question in her test-prep packet when the teacher read it, and then crawled under her table where she spun in circles on her knees. She hopped back in her seat for the next question and then, hands raised in front of her, an imaginary baton between her fingers, she faced her privacy screen and began to sing as she conducted her imaginary choir. She stopped to answer the next question and then played with her glasses; let them slide down her nose, leaned her head forward and let them swing from her ears, reached behind her ears and wiggled them so they bounced up and down on her face – and giggled the sing-song giggle of a five-year-old. Glasses once again firmly in place, she explained to the class*

*that these glasses were her old ones and that they did not fit, but that she had to wear them because she had broken her other pair. When the test-prep session finally came to a close, she bolted from her chair and ran to the carpet at the front of the room, where she stretched out her arms, threw back her head and began to sing as she twirled in circles with her eyes closed.*

Stillness and quiet were the expectations as tiny bodies bent behind blue privacy screens. Tongues tucked in the corners of their mouths, with pencils gripped tightly in their fingers, and laser-like focus, they did their best to fill in the small circles. District benchmark exams approached – it was time for test-preparation.

The teacher meandered through the room as she read each question at least twice. Time dragged while she roamed from table to table to ensure everyone answered the right question before she moved on to the next. Initially, the breeches in expectations were relatively minor. For example, as students finished a question and waited for others to finish too, they leaned around their privacy screens, sat on their knees and looked over them, or otherwise found ways to talk with the children at their table. Some students simply turned in their seats and talked to friends at other tables. The teacher tried to redirect their attention with positive reminders like, “Thank you, Red Table, I like the way you’re all sitting quietly,” and the other three tables were quick to do the same. However, as the test-prep dragged on, some students grew increasingly restless and resistant to the expectations. They became more vocal and physically active.

There were individual distractions, as well as distractions that affected the whole group. Some played with their privacy screens; drew pictures on them, poked holes in

them, folded and unfolded them. One student said her answer out loud and then ducked behind her privacy screen while she laughed. Another asked when they would get to work in their groups again, and another talked about what he had watched on television the night before. They were bored and restless.

When they had reached the bottom of a page in their booklet, the teacher told them to turn the packets over, to the page with the rockets on top. Immediately, one of the students shot his fist into the air and shouted, “To the rockets!” which prompted several other students to do likewise, and the room erupted in a chorus of, “To the rockets!” and tiny hands thrust into the air, as if their pencils were rockets they launched into space.

On the surface, perhaps imaginary choirs and rocket-pencils blasted into space would not seem particularly subversive, but rather the subjects of children’s play. Taken in context, however, it is easier to understand how their behavior was, in fact, a challenge to the teacher’s authority, and to a testing environment that was the very antithesis of the developmental needs of five-year-old children.

There were four round student tables in the room, with four to five students seated at each. In front of each child stood a glossy-blue, three-sided, cardboard privacy screen. Students were expected to stay behind their privacy screens – to ensure no one cheated, of course. They were to be still – no squirming. And quiet – no talking. As the teacher wandered the room between math problems, she repeatedly reminded them to be still and quiet. Over and over again. But five-year-old bodies are not built for stillness and quiet – or standardized tests. Thus, the maneuvers and machinations of five-year-

olds, around the unreasonable and unjust expectations meant to contain them, were comedic spectacle. And, for at least one little girl, the testing protocols held no power, as she unshackled herself from the stringent requirements, abandoned classroom expectations, and happily engaged in imaginary play – content in the pleasure of her five-year-old identity.

Testing environments can be particularly brutal for very young children. While the kindergarten teacher was not especially unpleasant in regard to her expectations for the classroom testing environment, she was tense, and created a degree of tension in the room amongst the children. She paced between the tables and made them feel anxious, so they rushed to respond to the questions. She droned on and on, between questions, about quiet behavior and the importance of the test. Rather than create a classroom where kids were encouraged to explore, discover, investigate and play as the engaged with new ideas, the teacher imposed constraints on their bodies and their minds. She emphasized compliance with the rules and expectations for testing. She herself felt pressure for her class to score well on the benchmark exams, and instead of giving students creative opportunities to engage with the content they needed to learn, she saddled them with test prep, testing rules, and the associated test anxiety. And with that – saddled them with the conformity required by conventional society, conformity that colonizes, conformity that serves the powerful.

Implicitly, they learned to shun the child who did not conform. Though the teacher was never particularly harsh toward the little girl who sang to herself and conducted her imaginary choir, she did consistently praise students who followed the

rules. She complimented them, rewarded them with special classroom jobs like being the teacher's helper. They learned to accept compliance as the norm, and to reject deviation from the norm. They were not mean to the little girl, or ugly to her in any way. They just acted – like the teacher – as if she was not there. They were learning to colonize each other, learning to order each other into constructed spaces of acceptability and unacceptability, to structure their environment so as to maintain whatever little shred of power they obtain, to hold onto a favorable position, at all costs.

### **FROM MY PERSPECTIVE: RESEARCHER'S POSITIONALITY**

I didn't want my research to be yet another study that casts teachers in a bad light. I tried to go into each classroom observation with an open mind, open to reporting whatever findings there were to report, without bias for or against any of those who participated in the study. Writing these findings was difficult because I am a teacher. I haven't been gone from the classroom for so long that I have forgotten the struggles, the exhaustion, or the frustration. Neither have I forgotten the abiding sense of hope that underscored it all – the, sometimes, tiny flicker that reminded me of why I got up and did the job every day. Hope. Hope that in some small way I'd get to help a child find what they needed to make their way in this world. If I hoped to see anything from any of these teachers, it was that. Hope.

In spite of what's been reported in this chapter, I am still pro-teacher and pro public education. I do not believe that any of the teachers did anything intentionally harmful to their students. I do, however, believe that much of what occurred could be avoided if teachers were better educated and prepared to teach rigorous lessons, to

differentiate instruction, and to do more than test prep. And I do, also, believe that much of what I observed was the result of the general state of education in Texas – with heavy emphasis on test results at even the kindergarten level, and heavy consequences (lost jobs) for teachers and administrators who don't deliver desirable results. In the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, from a teacher's perspective, I think they were indifferent and disconnected from their job and their students. There was nothing in either of their classrooms, or their behaviors, that indicated to me that they were invested in their students, or interested in doing a good job. But the others, they cared. Yes, they made mistakes, and yes, there were things that could have been done differently, but they cared. The reason, I think, that I even recognized some of their mistakes was because I had made them myself. And in each of these instances, I think it should be known that they all asked me for feedback, to let them know if I saw something I thought could be better. The only teacher I offered feedback to was the kindergarten teacher – via a conversation that was already in progress – and that turned out to be disastrous – as previously detailed in one of the vignettes.

My experience in observing these teachers, gave me cause to reflect on my own teaching career, and reminded me how fortunate I was to have, for the most part, incredibly supportive administrators. I not only had administrators who supported me when I needed help with student discipline, I had administrators who invested in my professional growth and development. Through in-house professional development, conferences, leadership opportunities, and book studies, I had the chance to learn to be better. That doesn't mean I didn't still make horrible mistakes – but most of those



horrible mistakes – like asking students to speak English in my classroom – were made really early in my career. I had the chance to learn from those mistakes and not repeat them. However, it seemed to me, that teachers at this school had very little support of any kind. That lack of support could have easily affected classroom dynamics, could have easily, especially over time, contributed to teachers’ indifference and eroded morale.

From a researcher’s perspective, there were instances at each grade level where I found evidence of borders erected, mostly based on gender and ethnicity. Black boys were the most frequently punished students, even when they did not exhibit behaviors any different from their classmates, like in kindergarten and first grade. But in second grade, it was a Black female student who got corrected while boys were far more disruptive. From what I ascertained, this particular student had become a favored target for the White, male, second grade substitute teacher. On many of the days I observed classrooms, I left angry and sad, fighting back tears as I struggled to cope with the way children were treated, knowing there was little, nothing, that I could do about any of what I had seen. And so I held onto hope. Again. Hope that what I learned from this research might somehow serve as a catalyst for change somehow, somewhere.

The occurrences described in the vignettes were among what I believed to be the best examples of borders that were not only erected in classrooms, but also, how children dealt with those borders when they were encountered. From the perspective of a teacher and researcher, it was clear to me that these teachers needed support. They needed help from administrators in regard to students who needed disciplinary

intervention, but more than that, they needed the training and resources for dealing with those issues on their own instead of so frequently disrupting class time to write referrals or call parents. They needed to be taught how to prepare and deliver engaging lessons, and to be held accountable for doing so, which could have avoided many of the off task, potential disciplinary issues, I observed. And, they needed to be taught about culturally responsive pedagogy. Most, if not all, of the borders I observed in classrooms could have been avoided if teachers had been aware of their implicit biases and had even a basic understanding of how to teach children from cultural backgrounds different from their own. Stifled by restrictive, overly punitive disciplinary measures, poorly planned lessons that lacked depth and rigor, and teachers' ignorance of cultural differences, it should be no surprise that students engaged in behaviors that disrupted and interrupted classroom power structures, and in so doing, burlesqued their teachers, traditional classroom norms, and the education system in general.

Having experienced burlesque culture, as an audience member/participant – researcher – changed my life. I gained a better understanding of myself, found an acceptance of myself as a woman and scholar that I have never had before – like I've been able to step into my identity – into myself. There is a sense of freedom that accompanies that – a sense that anything is possible, that there is nothing in my way anymore, unless I allow it to be.

I have attended shows, and conducted interviews and followed Facebook conversations – I have listened and asked questions. I have heard from many performers about the open, loving, accepting space that is the burlesque community. But I have also

read and heard about the struggles that people of color still face in finding performance venues, in getting accepted into some festivals and competing on a level playing field. Much of the community is open, but there are still some places where it is harder than others for people of color to gain access. There are still instances of White performers who appropriate cultural images for their routines, which always creates a stir within the community, especially performers in blackface, and those who don Native American attire. The community is not without its problems, not without insensitive individuals, but most everyone I have talked to, formally and informally, admit freely that the community is a work in progress. It's fluid and ever-changing. They are constantly learning, educating each other and themselves.

One of the most valuable insights I gained into the burlesque community is that everyone's voice has value. When someone has a question or concern, they are heard, their concern is validated and addressed. It seems like such a simple concept, yet it makes a huge impact on the community as it lends credibility to the claim that everyone is welcome. I think this is one of the greatest contributing factors as to why the burlesque community has been successful in establishing such an open space. It was hearing these experiences that brought me back to my wondering from early on: if the burlesque community could create a community like this, a community open, welcoming, supportive of all who enter, why can't we do the same thing in elementary classrooms? Due to what I have learned from the burlesque community, I am now further convinced that we can do exactly that; if we truly want to teach all children in open and accepting classrooms, we can.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter revisits my research, reviews the problem statement, and the methodology, as well as provides a summary of my results. I present the significance of the research study, theoretical implications, and the suggestions for future research. The chapter ends with some personal reflections, followed by a concluding narrative.

In this chapter, I discuss my observations of the burlesque community and elementary classrooms, along with information gleaned from interviews with members of the burlesque community. The discussion that follows addresses the strategies used by the burlesque community to maintain a space of openness and acceptance, obtained from interviews and observations. It further explains not only the manner by which teachers I observed actively constructed borders within their classrooms, but also the ways in which children resisted oppressive forces.

#### **REVIEW OF METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study investigated the burlesque community as metaphor for public education in early childhood and elementary classrooms. I wanted to know what steps the burlesque community took to remove social borders and create a community of acceptance, what strategies they used to maintain that sense of openness and welcome, and to determine which of those strategies, if any, might be adapted and applied to early childhood and elementary classrooms such that social borders that leave children marginalized are minimized.

Further, I wanted to examine the norms within which teachers operated, and to determine how they used those norms to construct and maintain borders within classroom spaces. Finally, I wanted to investigate the ways children maintain their cultural identities while they are subjected to norms of acceptance and exclusion; school and classroom norms and expectations that are both absorbed and reinforced by conventional social norms and identities.

For the study, I conducted observations at ten burlesque shows in order to gain a better understanding of the burlesque community, the relationships within it, and how they functioned professionally. I also conducted interviews with nine members of the burlesque community. Most of them were performers who also produced shows, and who founded and managed their own troupes. Some of them acted in other capacities within the community; as milliners, as seamstresses, and burlesque instructors. Only one was not a performer; he was a photographer for the burlesque community.

I also conducted approximately 30 hours of observations in K-5 classrooms. There was one teacher from each grade level represented in the study. Four teachers were White females, one was a Black female, and one was a Hispanic male. Teachers were asked only to allow me to observe the natural classroom setting. I wanted to understand the phenomena that occurred within each classroom on a daily basis. I also wanted to understand the relationships between teachers and students, to observe the power dynamics, and the atmosphere within which children were immersed each day. For my data collection, I used the following methods because they were best suited for enabling me to answer my research questions: Participant observations at burlesque

shows, interviews with burlesque community members, and direct observations of natural classroom environments.

## **SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS**

While observations of classrooms revealed that teachers actively construct borders in their classrooms, frequently stifling students' cultural identities, and further marginalizing them, I also found that students are, in some cases, able to navigate those borders and boundaries in such a way that they are able to maintain their identities. As discussed in Chapter 4, teachers punished Black male students more harshly than others, as in the instance of the first grade teacher who placed privacy screens around two students who were talking, though she said nothing to the rest of the students who were also engaged in conversations, and then went on to single out one of those students and attempt to publicly shame him by demanding that he explain his math work aloud. When he did so successfully, she became angry and dismissed the student's success. The student was able to disrupt the teacher's oppressive intentions as he essentially returned her gaze and answered the problem correctly, including thoughtful justification for his response.

I also found that the burlesque community not only purposely planned and constructed a space that is safe, open, accepting, and welcoming – they also remain collectively engaged in maintaining that space by actively working to ensure that the potential for building borders that could divide the community are minimized. To do so, they consistently employ several strategies: 1) The burlesque community functions as a collective that works together to uphold community values and achieve community

goals. There is a collective ownership and responsibility for the success of the community. 2) Burlesque members work collaboratively to meet the individual and collective needs of the community. 3) The burlesque community addresses issues as they arise. Problems are dealt with according to depth and breadth and handled in private or as a collective, whichever is merited. 4) The burlesque community is dedicated to the education of its members – for professional development, but also to preserve and protect communal values. 5) The burlesque community is supportive of its members and works to serve, coach, and mentor anyone who may face difficulties within the community, but if a member continues to be problematic, they eventually find themselves removed from the community, unable to find venues that will hire them. 6) The burlesque community is strategic, purposeful, and intentional, ensuring – at every step - that they make the effort to meet the needs of the community members – performers, audience, support staff like photographers, literally, all who are part of the community in any form. They are intentional about relationships. 7) The burlesque community is authentic and accessible – truly open, honest, and caring for any who choose to join them, and invested in social and political activism.

Further, I deconstructed four burlesque texts: *Horrible Prettiness* by Richard Allen (1991), *Minsky's Burlesque* by Morton Minsky and Milt Machlin (1986), *Gypsy: A Memoir*, by Gypsy Rose Lee (1999), and *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*, by Rachel Shteir (2004). My deconstruction of these texts revealed six mechanisms burlesque performers used to subvert, transgress, interrupt, and disrupt borders commonly constructed via conventional social norms: 1) They made themselves

visible. 2) They removed their constraints. 3) They made themselves heard, by being vocal in times and places where society would have silenced them. 4) They returned the gaze. 5) They created spectacle. 6) They took pleasure in their identity. Evidence indicates that burlesque performers today make use of the same mechanisms.

Observations of burlesque shows provided multiple examples, as presented in Chapter 4, of burlesque routines that made use of these mechanisms to contest the status quo. Routines represented the struggle some people face to feel visible, as though they have value. Others demonstrated how people remove the constraints placed on them by social norms, like for women to fit certain body type expectations, and the shame heaped upon them when they don't meet those expectations. One performance demonstrated the performer's ally-ship with the LGBTQ community, while another represented the power within the returned gaze, that represents the power in knowing oneself, in knowing that while the gaze of the outside world would objectify, the power in the returned gaze resists that objectification, and turns the gaze back, against those whose gaze would otherwise subjugate them. Performers used their bodies to create spectacle and engage in protest against the current White House administration, and to engage in the celebration of personal identity.

Similarly, my observations in K-5 classrooms indicated that children, too, make use of these mechanisms to exert their own agency, and maintain their identities as they resist oppressive forces in their classrooms. Essentially, they burlesque their teachers and the education system that marginalizes them. In this study, children made themselves visible when they resisted classroom rules that would silence them or render them



powerless over their ideas; they removed their constraints when they defied classroom rules that bound them to their seats without talking or moving by erupting from their seats and racing to the door when it was time to leave, and through off-task behaviors such as spinning rulers like helicopter blades when their teacher's back was turned; they made themselves heard when they mocked every word the teacher said, and sometimes, they spoke the loudest when they silently followed the rules and waited, and waited, for their teacher to help them with the word "yellow." Children returned the oppressive gaze of their teacher when they stood up for themselves, knowing when they had the right answer and boldly sharing it even when the teacher intended for them to remain silent. They created spectacle in a classroom where there were no expectations of them, where their behavior shone an accusing light at their teacher, letting it be known that they knew they deserved better from her. And finally, students reveled in the sheer pleasure of their identity as they lost themselves in imaginary play in spite of the mundane test prep packet that would standardize patterns of thinking and being. In each case, children demonstrated their ability to make a mockery of the conventional social norms that governed their classrooms.

Therefore, I believe the burlesque community does offer valuable insights into minimizing borders that commonly divide us all along the lines of conventional social norms – and that the strategies they use could be easily adapted and applied to schools and classrooms, to make them open and accepting spaces, as well. I believe that teachers function within, and are privileged by conventional social norms. The theories discussed in Chapter Two, Postcolonial Theory and Border Theory, further provide us with

insights into how this occurs. Finally, the data collected for this study suggest that it is possible to minimize those marginalizing borders, if educators are sensitive to the needs of their students and are willing to do the work.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Several strategies observed within the burlesque community could be easily modified and applied to teachers and classrooms, practices that could deeply impact classroom culture and meet the needs of students in meaningful ways. In fact, some of the strategies used in the burlesque community, are not so different from those used in education; the difference is the consistency with which they are applied.

The study provided data to support that the burlesque community does indeed engage in the use of strategies that could be beneficial to elementary classrooms, with very little modification. The first strategy used by the burlesque community to create an accepting space, was that the community works collectively to uphold community values and achieve community goals. Applied to a school setting, schools could, and many do, establish a set of goals for their learning community, and adopt strategies for how they're going to meet those goals as a team, highlighting what each person may be able to contribute to the team, what each grade level may contribute to the team, and how those contributions will help the school achieve those common goals. And, like the burlesque community, determine how to work together collaboratively and consistently, not only to reach standardized test goals, but to educate children, to make learning spaces challenging and rigorous, spaces that focus on the development of the entire child, socially, emotionally, and academically, with their own cultural identities in mind,

as well. Schools could address issues as they arise, deal with areas where more professional development is needed, identify areas where teachers need support and make that support available. Districts, as well as individual school administrators need to ensure they continuously educate teachers, like the burlesque community educates its members; not only for professional development, but also to preserve and protect the ideals of public education. Mentors and coaches could be made available to teachers at all different levels of experience, with older, more experienced teachers mentoring those younger than them, and younger teachers assisting novice teachers, similar to the way burlesque maintains a communal structure where members are consistently available to each other for educational purposes. Also, one of the key aspects to keeping borders within the burlesque space at a minimum, is the removal of those who individuals who cannot or will not comply with the community's expectations of care, compassion, respect, and support for everyone. As sad as it is to say, bad teachers, those who will not do the job, or cannot do the job, who cannot or will not make necessary changes to their practices so that they successfully serve children, should be removed. And finally, schools should be strategic and intentional, purposely planning, openly discussing strengths and weaknesses, honestly assessing ways to do and be better educators.

None of these strategies seems all that different from what I experienced as a teacher during my classroom years, and all of these are possible within the scope of what schools and teachers do on a daily basis. Again, I believe it is the consistent application of the strategies, the constant attention and collective engagement in achieving the

desired outcomes that is what makes the difference and makes an open and welcoming community possible.

The study also provided data to support that children are indeed capable of exerting their own personal agency, rooted in their own cultural identities, to burlesque traditional classroom norms and expectations. What this then implies is that, as researchers such as Lisa Delpit, Christine Sleeter, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Geneva Gay all assert, that many teachers, especially White teachers, do not understand, and are not equipped to teach, children from backgrounds different from their own, that multicultural education, and culturally responsive pedagogy are necessary if we want to truly educate all children. Further, my research confirms my earlier beliefs, that like what Zora Neale Hurston wrote, children show us what they want us to see, that they are able to protect and conserve their cultural identities while they have to operate within mainstream cultural norms and expectations. While there is plenty of literature that discusses cultural mismatch, and cites miscommunication as a contributing factor in the overrepresentation of children of color in disciplinary referrals and suspension rates, what is missing is the intentionality on the part of students who purposely use their sophisticated cultural understandings to burlesque oppressive classroom structures. Teachers need training in multicultural education strategies, in how to be culturally relevant, but they also need much deeper understanding of the children they teach, whose cultures go largely unrecognized. Further, teachers need to hear from children, parents, from community members, the consequences of their negligence, the real life, lived realities of how our shortcomings as educators in classrooms play out for students.

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Where public education functions as a mechanism of postcolonialism, burlesque is the antithesis of postcolonialism. Postcolonial efforts move everyone toward sameness, toward the same standard of normalcy, in service to dominant, capitalist, imperialist, interests. Burlesque, on the other hand, de-centers dominant ideals of “normal;” there is no “normal” in the burlesque community. The burlesque community is a space where one’s personhood is validated; where race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, the language(s) one speaks, body shape and size, social status, and immigration status, are recognized as valuable and celebrated.

Postcolonialism in early childhood and elementary classrooms exerts hierarchizing power over young children, who are subsequently labeled and erased. They struggle to exist in a space that insists on normalizing and standardizing them into socially acceptable categories and ways of being. Those who do not, or cannot, fit within those parameters of normalcy and acceptability, cease to exist as people who have value. Burlesque, though, mocks the imperialist, postcolonial effort to categorize humanity into debilitating hierarchies and thus denies its marginalizing influence that would otherwise relegate those deemed deviant to the borders of existence.

Unlike education, where curriculum, lesson plans, grading, classroom management strategies, and discipline management plans are generally one-size-fits-all, burlesque is tailored to the needs of the community and audience interests. As reported by burlesque participants, when producers -who are truly invested in the community and in the preservation of burlesque as an art-form - put together a show, they don’t make

decisions based on personal interests or what's easiest. They ensure that shows are inclusive of the best routines submitted for consideration, but also, that a show is diverse; that the line up of performers is representative of the community, in addition to producing shows that will draw audiences. The diversity of audience members I've witnessed personally, speaks to the fact that audiences are drawn by the representation and inclusiveness of the community – and the diversity on stage.

Furthermore, as scripted curriculum and standardized tests that treat all students the same in the trek toward assimilation and compliance with dominant social norms, burlesque is unique to, and for, every individual. Burlesque performers create routines that are relevant to their personal lives. Whether based on some personal experience, or learning and implementing a new skill, performances hold personal meaning.

Both Postcolonial Theory and Border Theory serve us well in illustrating the damage done by an imperialist agenda that subjugates and exploits Others for its own gain; to maintain its economic and political control in its quest for global domination. However, both theories still hold White, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class men as the central figure; the norm for comparison; the model by which the Other is established. The same can be said of anti-bias curriculum, multicultural education strategies, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Though they are all useful, and necessary as they offer us much needed information and desperately needed insights into skills development for teaching children from many cultural backgrounds, they have all been available and in various states of implementation for decades, yet the same dehumanizing classroom practices that yield severe educational inequities and unequal outcomes persist.

Burlesque, in contrast, acts as a humanizing pedagogy; a genuine act of liberation as it refuses comparison to a standard of normalcy within its community. This then, is also the challenge for educators, to de-center “normal.” What comes next, therefore, should be methods, curriculum, policies and practices that de-center “normal” and establish classrooms as inclusive, accepting, humanizing spaces of liberation where, like burlesque, every person is celebrated for who they are, and the unique qualities that they bring with them to the community.

### **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Taking my years of experience, my familiarity with the district, and further, my familiarity with the school where I conducted my research, a series of six one-hour classroom observations in each grade level, K-5 grade, seemed sufficient. However, I wanted to randomly observe classrooms rather than scheduling them with the teachers, as I felt that I would be more likely to observe an authentic day. While ideally, that would have been best, the random nature of my visits posed issues with classroom availability as there were a number of times when I went to the school only to find that a class was testing for the day, out of the building, or something had come up that altered their daily schedule and made it impossible to conduct an observation. While the number of hours I was able to observe classrooms did yield sufficient information to form conclusive findings, more hours over a longer period of time could have been beneficial.

Establishing relationships with teachers also proved to be an issue. Initially, I just introduced myself to them and explained the research project. My intention was to intrude as little as possible, to disrupt their classroom as little as possible, and to ask for

as little of their time as possible. All of the teachers indicated their willingness to help and never expressed any concerns to me; however, there were occasions when the third grade teacher expressed that it wasn't a good day and she'd rather me not do an observation. The fourth grade teacher also, on more than one occasion, seemed uncomfortable with me in her classroom, feeling that she owed me an explanation as to why students behaved as they did, due to having extra students in her room because a teacher was out, or because of some other event. Looking back, taking the time to establish better rapport with all of the teachers, building a relationship with them so they believed they could trust me, would have been beneficial to the study. Though I was able to collect data that contributed meaningfully to my research, well-established relationships could have potentially granted me access to classrooms on those difficult days, where more robust examples of student resistance might have been on display.

I started observations of the second grade classroom with the second grade teacher of record. However, mid-semester, she went on administrative leave, so I finished my observations with the long-term permanent substitute teacher. Ultimately, this did not have a significant impact on my research, as I was still able to conduct direct observations of the natural classroom environment and I was still able to observe students' reactions to teacher practices, and borders they encountered within the classroom space, ideally, I would have preferred to finish the study with the teacher of record.

Finally, the teacher's behavior toward some of the children in her first grade classroom were so extreme, and so abusive, that ethically, I had to report the behavior to



the building administration. Though I assured teachers data collected would be confidential, I didn't feel I had a choice as the welfare of children took priority over my research agenda. I was able to continue to conduct classroom observations and the research was not negatively impacted by this choice.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In general, I believe my research in this study points to the need for further investigation into resistance strategies employed by young children, in particular, resistance strategies rooted in children's performances of culture that enable them to protect and maintain their identities.

More specifically, research devoted to outcomes experienced by children whose teachers are not well-prepared for teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds, should be conducted and then presented to teachers so they understand the ramifications of their classroom practices and expectations.

The findings from this study indicate that a longitudinal study on the effects of cultural awareness training has on teachers and classrooms, as well as school and district policies, could be beneficial.

As national politics continue to endorse racist, misogynistic, anti-immigrant, homophobic agendas, and permit states to do the same, research on overt teacher bias, the resulting oppressive borders and marginalizing practices, and student resistance could serve to inform future education programs and policies.

Additionally, research that explores education as a parody of itself – a mockery of its promise to be the great equalizer, a parody of *Brown v Board of Education*, and a

mockery of the American people who cannot see what public education has become, or the ramifications of electing a President like Donald Trump, or an Education Secretary like Betsy DeVos, who would rather see education privatized than see all American children educated, could serve as a reflection on the highs, the lows, and the liberating potential of public education that yet remains.

Finally, personally, I'd like to write more poetry based on my experiences conducting this research, and see the work turned into a spoken word presentation for teachers, for school and district professional development sessions, workshops, for teacher practitioner conference presentations, and other venues where those making educational decisions regarding poor and marginalized children are confronted with the realities children face in today's classrooms, and the long-lasting effects those decisions play in educational outcomes. I'd also like to complete an artist's installation that could travel, and be presented along with the spoken word presentations.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

As bizarre as it may sound, burlesque is significant to early childhood and elementary classrooms in public schools. The burlesque community is a subculture represented by those who, within mainstream society, would likely find themselves marginalized, discriminated against, due to race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social status, or size. Aware of this, the burlesque community has effectively managed to maintain a safe space in spite of outside pressures that would attempt to normalize its members. It is because burlesque resists assimilation and normalization that it is of importance to the education community.

The greatest attribute of the burlesque community is the celebration of difference, the commitment to preservation and protection of authenticity and uniqueness as essential aspects of identity; whereas teachers in this study viewed difference as problematic qualities that needed to be changed, or at the very least, controlled. My research revealed several specific strategies used by the burlesque community that, as previously mentioned, could be adapted for use in classrooms, strategies, ultimately, that could enable teachers to create inclusive spaces, and that could then empower children as their identities are validated.

I recognize that my own experiences and opportunities have shaped my current perspective, which has given me cause to reflect on my career as a classroom teacher, as well as my journey through graduate school. Looking back, I know I made mistakes, many of them, as I mentioned, not so unlike some made by the teachers in my study. I do believe however, that a fundamental difference in outlook is what brought me to where I am currently. I always understood that I was the outsider in the community where I worked. I understood, intuitively – because it was never taught to me – that I was the one who needed to change and adapt to meet the needs of my students, rather than expecting them to change for me. But even then, my real understanding and ability to serve students multiculturally, were minimal. Even early in my career, I knew I could never understand the oppression, racism and discrimination my students and their families dealt with every day. So, teaching issues of equity and diversity was awkward and intimidating, and frightening. I wanted to help, to make a difference, to earn my place as an ally, to teach children meaningfully, without doing harm. But I didn't know how.

Graduate school helped, but I'd been teaching for twelve years by the time I finished my Master's Degree, and it wasn't until I was nearly finished with it, that I took the single Diversity and Equity in Education course required, in fact, the only one available. I learned so much in that class, so much that could transformed my teaching practices, and so much that would have been beneficial had I learned it sooner, that maybe could have prevented some of the mistakes I made. Then, a year after I finished my Master's Degree, I started work on my PhD, and left the classroom, essentially retiring as a classroom teacher.

Those first few weeks of my first semester, I remember sitting in classes with cohort members and looking at each other, asking, "Why didn't we know this before?" And so I wonder now, why did we have to get to the level of PhD before we learned things that would have so deeply impacted our classroom practices when it mattered the most – when we were serving children?

Teaching at a university for the last few years has given me a different perspective on preservice teacher training. I realize that there are only so many hours we can require, so many classes they can take, and so much theory we can teach, before we have to let them go be teachers, in real classrooms, with real children, but I do not understand why we do not work harder to equip them to teach children from backgrounds other than their own. Multicultural studies is only offered at the Master's level – one class. Culturally responsive teaching practices are supposedly taught in content areas, however, from what I have observed, preservice teachers actually get very little exposure to multicultural education strategies. And due to the growing diversity in

student populations across the country, exposure to culturally responsive teaching theory and practices, and issues of diversity and equity in education is needed at the college level; in addition, ongoing training for inservice teachers is also necessary. Ongoing follow-up and training could provide teachers with the support they need to meet the needs of diverse students, and could substantially increase teacher's knowledge base of current research. If we fail to provide courses and ongoing training for teachers, if we neglect to educate them so they can effectively serve all of their students, then we contribute to their marginalization, to the construction and maintenance of the barriers that leave children stranded in classroom borderlands.

### **BACK TO BURLESQUE**

December 27, 2013 seems like such a long time ago, but that first show, where I gave up my virginity and popped my burlesque cherry, still seems almost like yesterday.

For the first year or two, I went to see mostly Ruby Revue shows at the House of Blues, but then, when Viva's Lounge opened in their new location, I chose a show – my first Cirque du Burlesque show – and found myself in a place far beyond anything I could have imagined. It was in the space at Viva's where I began to see more clearly some things that I had first glimpsed at some of the festivals I had attended. I did not know what I had been missing by only attending Ruby Revue shows. The shows were always fun, the performances were always beautiful, productions were well planned and professional, and I got to sit with the cast and meet fabulous people. It wasn't, however, until I stepped out of that space and spent time at Viva's and other venues that I realized what a sanitized version of burlesque I had experienced. It's where I saw the difference

between burlesque as a business, and burlesque as a way of life. For some, burlesque gives meaning to their existence, it is their culture. The more shows I attended, the more I realized that I could, very frequently, pick out those performers whose lives were dedicated to the craft, the culture, its history, and its preservation, and those who were “playing dress-up.” In some of those instances, I wondered if, perhaps, what I actually noticed were the performers who simply had the most experience, and therefore appeared to be more committed. So, I watched myself, as I watched performers – I paid closer attention to what drew me in to some routines while I felt completely detached and uninterested in others. I noticed that there were some performers, whose costumes were beautiful, whose music was timeless, and whose performances were flawless – yet – I felt nothing except that I had seen a pretty dance. And then, there were others whose costumes malfunctioned, who may have wobbled, or slipped, or fell, whose performance was less than stellar – who, nevertheless, left me with tears streaming down my cheeks. I realized, the more I learned about burlesque, the more shows I experienced – the more keenly aware I became. It became easier to recognize subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) challenges to social norms, statements that embraced identity, encouragement and empowerment for women, ally-ship, and resistance. The more time I spent in the space, the more I realized which dancers were authentically invested in burlesque and its preservation as an art form, and which ones were involved because they liked the costumes. I think, those insights – though I know there is so much more to learn – are what made some performances particularly profound for me. And, as I gained insight into the burlesque community, I also learned more about myself.

While some routines were profound due to their content, others were profound because they challenged my personal perceptions and revealed my own implicit biases that I still needed to address. There have been routines that, in a sense, troubled me. I had to spend some time thinking, reading, asking questions when I could, puzzling out my thoughts, feelings, and reactions. For example, I had seen one performer several times – and every time, I felt perplexed. Their performances generally didn't make much sense to me. Honestly, I think part of it (most of it) was my inner human struggle to be able to understand people or things by placing them in some kind of category, but they – defied that – denied me that – and forced me to consider other ways of thinking. Until Unicorn School, at Texas Queerlesque Festival, I could not decipher if they were performing in drag, or if they were trans, and then I'd ask myself why it mattered, why I needed to know. Then, I had the opportunity to hear them speak on being gender nonconforming, being non-binary, and for the first time, learned about preferred gender pronouns and how they/them/their are acceptable terms of reference in regard to gender. That performer was different from anyone I had ever encountered and I grappled with my own not knowing – and realized yet another degree of privilege and safety of which I had previously been unaware. As I examined my feelings – they were not feelings of disgust or repulsion – and the only anger I felt was at myself and my Southern Baptist upbringing. My struggle was not with the performer's identity, but with what I still need to learn and understand so I can be a good ally.

I have, undoubtedly, learned much from the burlesque community, and from sharing spaces with them. Yes, I have experienced love and acceptance in these spaces

in incredibly sweet ways, and I am forever grateful for that, but I have also had myself revealed to me in those spaces. Understanding that I have privilege and watching, experiencing, feeling, that privilege as it plays out in the social world are two very different things. I have come face-to-face with that reality on several occasions; perhaps most profoundly, at the Texas Queerlesque Festival, where the producers made the restrooms Unicorn Friendly, so that trans people could feel comfortable using the restroom, and also hired extra security for the weekend as it so closely followed the Pulse massacre, at least that's why I thought they hired extra security. But now, over time, what I have come to understand is that they would have hired extra security anyway – because the queer community is always at heightened risk – just for existing.

The Texas Queerlesque Festival, has been, by far, my most favorite of all the festivals I've attended, but a devastating sense of grief, a keening deep in my soul came with that. I caught, in the midst of the pride and the sappy good cheer – the reason why spaces like these are so important. That jubilant freedom – for those few hours – is a reprieve from, often, brutal realities. I got a tiny glimpse of how exhausting it must be to live life afraid – every moment of every day, just for loving who you love, for being someone on the queer spectrum; how difficult to not be able to socialize with groups of friends without fear of harm. In the middle of that beautiful celebration – in every smile that met my own – in every embrace – I was confronted with the safety inherent in my privilege. The necessity of the burlesque space took on a new meaning for me – an even deeper meaning – and I fell in love with it even more. I gained a new perspective on the significance of relationships within the burlesque community.



It took me some time to begin to feel like, as merely an audience member, that I was truly part of the community – not because of the burlesque members – only because it took me some time to trust and believe that I was truly as welcome in the burlesque space as I was. It took some time to feel truly comfortable going to shows alone. For awhile, it felt awkward, and I worried about the burlesque community’s perception of me, worried that they would not trust that I was devoted to the community far beyond whatever I needed for research purposes. Over time, it got easier. The more time I spent at Viva’s the easier it became to talk to audience members who sat near me. I have had some super fun conversations with burlesque virgins, met other graduate students, talked with visitors from out-of-state who were visiting friends performing in shows. I have cheered for brides-to-be at just about every show I have attended, and have seen a number of birthday spankings and marriage proposals.

As I reflect on my personal experiences with members of the burlesque community, inevitably, what comes to mind is accessibility and authenticity. I recognize that I was/am open to what the community stands for, and I whole-heartedly embrace them all, but there was no obligation for them to embrace me in return. Yet, over and over again, I have found myself in the company of incredible individuals who seem glad to have me around. I am always honored when performers are willing to visit with me. Sometimes, the conversations are about my research, about how I found burlesque, and my progress, and others, we spend time catching up on their most recent travels, their newest routines, acts they’re developing, and upcoming show dates – and always, there are updates on children and pets. There have been times when I was the familiar face in

the crowd where a performer didn't know anyone else. There have been many times when I walked into a venue and was greeted by a performer with whom I had only previously connected on social media. Any apprehension I may have felt upon that initial meeting quickly faded as I was eagerly embraced.

One of the most memorable of these meetings was at Viva's. Roxxy Reckless was volunteering for the Dem Damn Dames show. I had arrived early, as usual, and stood with her at the table where she was working. The first time I had seen her perform was with Penny Ruffles when they debuted together a few weeks before. We talked about their performance and her plans, about how I found burlesque and what it means to me. As the venue began to fill and her table got busier, our conversation came to a close. But, before I left to take my seat, she said something I will never forget. She thanked me for keeping her company, for sharing my story with her, and then she said, "I see one of us in you."

*July – in Dallas. Hot – beyond hot – scorched earth, Hell hot. Sky bleached white, dry bones hot. Too damn hot to stand in line outside, so I was relieved to see the doors were open on time and there was no line, when I arrived at Viva's. I've been here so many times now that the doormen greet me by name, no I.D. required. My wristband was waiting for me at the ticket window, they'd seen me walk in and had it ready for me. Kerry and Shoshana, co-owners of the venue greeted me with hugs and asked me about my dissertation – am I finished yet – and keep up the good work.*

*Past the entry, beyond the heavy red curtains held back with gold cords, into the main room, it's cooler, darker, louder. Stage lights turn, the smoke machine belches at*

*measured intervals as the disco ball turns from the center of the ceiling, and music blasts from enormous speakers on either side of the stage – Bobby Darin currently crooning Beyond the Sea on the night’s playlist. I cannot help but sing along, “Somewhere, beyond the sea, somewhere waiting for me – My lover stands on golden sand, and watches the ships that go sailing...” I turned when I heard my name, and there, on the granite bar-top, the bartender had my drink ready for me – a double Jack and soda with two limes. It was going to be a great night – I could feel it. And, oh, how I had missed this place – it had been awhile since I’d had time to catch a show. The lights, the music, the anticipation, and familiarity of the space washed over me. I am at home here. It felt good to just sit in my seat and enjoy the space as it began to fill with people.*

*I was looking forward to the night’s performances for this year’s Star Spangled Spectacular. There were no headliners from out of town on the line up this year, but the local performers were some of my favorites – especially Donna Denise and J.D. Hickcock. I couldn’t wait to see Miss Malicious and Smolderin’ Scully do their Top Gun routine again. The first time I saw them do that performance was in Houston – it was the first time I’d seen two women perform together – and they were so convincing that I actually thought, for awhile, they were partners. It is entirely possible that both they, and their boyfriends, still get a good laugh out of that. It would be great to see J.D. again and Kitty’s balloon girl performances are always a treat.*

*Closer to show time, I noticed that there was a really good crowd in the house – already loud, and the show hadn’t even started yet. The emcee, Patti Le Plae Safe, a drag queen, was out and about. Her costumes are always a surprise – they’re either*

*extremely glamorous, or outlandishly bizarre – and sometimes – a combination of the two. Tonight’s costume was one of those combinations. The navy fabric was lovely – the weird stiff neck that stood up like a peacock’s tail, not so much. Sometimes Patti is funny, but generally, her humor borders on mean and nasty. You never know who, from the audience, she’s going to pick on, so I’m glad I was not sitting in my usual spot. The darkest place in the very back of the room was the perfect seat for this show. I’ve talked with Patti at the bar before, and she’s pleasant enough, then – but I do not enjoy her as an emcee.*

*Donna Denise opened the show and was stunning as always. Her joy on stage is contagious. I can’t help but smile when I watch her just because she’s having so much fun. It was no surprise that Miss Malicious and Smolderin’ Scully got the huge, happy response they did, either. The performances that caught me by surprise though, were both routines by Honey Hula-La. One in the first half, and one in the second, both of her routines were tributes to Selena, and her Hispanic heritage. And neither of them were a striptease. They were, hands-down, my favorite performances of the evening. I’m not sure why, except that they were both about her heritage, and I think, they were of particular significance because of the recent arrest of so many Hispanic immigrants at the border, and the subsequent separation of families, imprisoned in detention camps. There is irony here, I think – and a bold statement of resistance – to celebrate her Hispanic heritage and their contributions to this country, while at the same time, so many Hispanic immigrants are detained for seeking asylum here. Her beautiful routines drew stark contrasts to the immigration travesty.*

*I soaked in every routine, enjoyed all the music, reveled in the cheers and excitement – and all too soon, it was over. Performers returned to the stage for their curtain call and cast photos, and then there was a mass exodus as the audience streamed out the doors. Lines backed up at the bar as people closed out their bar tabs, and cast members posed for pictures with anyone who asked. I just sat in my place and watched for a few minutes. Kerry came back to the sound board and started the playlist again. Most of the people left now were friends with performers or somehow affiliated with Viva 's, and as usual, there were burlesque performers who 'd attended the show as guests, but had not performed.*

*As I made my way toward the bar area, where everyone congregates for the after-party, I was glad to see MaryLynn Mayhem, finally up and around after back surgery. I sat and talked with her for a few minutes. Donna Denise came by and said hello. There was a big man with her, tall, heavy but not necessarily fat. I'd never seen him before, but many of the performers seemed to know him. She introduced me to him (Jim, Jeff, Bob? His name escapes me) and said that he used to produce burlesque shows in Dallas, and that he was just a fabulous human being. We shook hands and they meandered away.*

*MaryLynn and I continued our conversation. J.D. joined us, and then ShelBelle Shamrock, and then Donna Denise came back over and joined the conversation. Minutes passed. At some point, her guy friend – Jim-Bob-Jeff – came back over and just stood, at the outside edge of the circle, watching and listening. Gradually, people wandered off to the dressing room, or joined other conversations nearby. When MaryLynn, Donna*

*Denise and I were the only three left talking, Jim-Bob-Jeff interrupted us. And with a somewhat incredulous expression on his face, he looked at me and in all seriousness asked, "What have you got?" I had no idea what he meant, so I asked, "Excuse me?" Donna and MaryLynn looked confused, too. He asked again, "What have you got?" Still confounded, I lifted my half-empty drink and offered, "Jack and soda?" Exasperated he said, "No." He raked his eyes over me and asked again, "I mean. What have you got? Who are you? Who are you, and what do you have – that you've got the most gorgeous, talented, and popular people in the room all standing around, talking to you?!" Unsure how to respond to him, particularly because I wasn't at all certain he meant it kindly, I shrugged, "I don't know..." And then MaryLynn stepped in, "She's Julie. Julie has love – she's FULL of LOVE. She loves us. And we love Julie."*

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**APPENDIX A**  
**CONSENT FORMS**

## **Consent to Serve as Research Participant**

### **Teachers and Burlesque Community**

Project Title: The Burlesque Community as Model for Community of Acceptance: Transforming Learning Spaces by Deconstructing Borders in Early Childhood and Elementary Classrooms

**You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Julia Persky, a doctoral student researcher, and Dr. Radhika Viruru, from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.**

#### **Why Is This Study Being Done?**

The purpose of the research project is to identify strategies employed by the burlesque community to create a community of acceptance, to observe, and identify the possible construction and maintenance of borders in classrooms that keep learning communities divided and interfere with authentic learning and students' academic and social success, and the ways in which students may navigate those borders.

#### **Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are either a member of the burlesque community or you are currently an early childhood or elementary classroom teacher.

Burlesque participants will be asked to participate on the basis of: performance interests/genre, gender, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and age – in order to ensure a broad spectrum of viewpoints and experiences, and to ensure the inclusion of those who are most marginalized by mainstream social norms such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, gender identity and sexual preference.

Teacher participants will be asked to participate with the intention being that participating teachers will be representative of as many grade level (PreK-5<sup>th</sup> grade/GenEd and BILed) and subject areas (reading, math, science, social studies, music, art & PE) as possible.

#### **How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?**

To ensure an adequate number of participants from the burlesque and teaching communities, 60 burlesque performers will be asked to be in the study, and 40 teachers will be asked to be in the study.

#### **What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?**

None, the alternative to being in the study is not to partici

**What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?**

Burlesque participants will be asked to participate in a series of two-three one-hour interviews. Classroom teachers will be asked for the opportunity to observe the natural classroom setting and relationships therein for up to one-hour, 2-3 times a week, for 2-6 weeks, as well as answer interview questions.

**Are There Any Risks To Me?**

The things that you will be doing are no more or greater than risks that you would come across in everyday life. Your participation will be confidential.

Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel some questions asked of you may be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

**Will There Be Any Costs To Me?**

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

**Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?**

You will not be paid for being in this study.

**Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?**

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only the study researchers, Julia Persky and Dr. Viruru, will have access to the records.

Information about your participation will be stored in computer files protected with a password in a locked office space.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

**Who may I Contact for More Information?**

You may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Radhika Viruru, Ph.D., to tell her about a concern or complaint about this research at (979) 845-8384 or [viruru@tamu.edu](mailto:viruru@tamu.edu). For alternative contact, you may also contact the Protocol Director, Julia Persky, (972) 822-7969 or [jcpersky@tamu.edu](mailto:jcpersky@tamu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to provide input regarding research, or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Research Protection Program office by phone at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**What if I Change My Mind About Participating?**

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. By signing this document, you are giving permission for the investigator to use your information for research purposes. Thank you.

Dr. Radhika Viruru, Principal Investigator  
Julia Persky, Doctoral Student Researcher, Protocol Director  
Texas A&M University, College of Education and Human Diversity  
801 Harrington Tower, College Station, TX 77843-4222 (physical address)  
4222 TAMU, College Station, TX, 77843-4222 (mailing address)  
(979) 845-5311 (phone)      (979) 846-6129 (fax)

Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature and Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator’s Affidavit**

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

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Signature of Presenter \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

---

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**  
**OBSERVATION RUBRIC**

### Observation Rubric

Participation in class discussions/activities	
Safe learning environment	
Classroom interactions	
Cognitive demand	
Access to materials, resources, teacher assistance, peer assistance	
Implementation of classroom management strategies	
Implementation of discipline management plan	

**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

### **Interview Protocol for Teachers:**

Would you tell me about your certification process and certificates/endorsements you hold?

Would you talk to me about your years of experience, including where you taught, grade levels, and content areas?

Would you discuss some of the challenges to building a classroom community?

What are some of your approaches to establishing a safe and accepting classroom environment for all children?

How do you deal with situations where a particular child may be ostracized by the group as a whole?

Would you explain your methods for establishing classroom procedures, including rules and consequences, discipline management plans, rewards and incentives?

What do you do when there are children who perpetually resist conforming to classroom norms?

Have you ever experienced a time when certain rules or procedures just did not work for some children but were effective for others (i.e. children from varying cultural backgrounds)? How did you deal with the differences?



## **Interview Protocol – Burlesque Participants**

How did you come to be involved with the burlesque industry? And how long have you been involved?

Would you tell me about your roles and responsibilities within the burlesque industry? How do you feel about your job roles? Is there anything you would change?

What role does burlesque play in your life (full-time job, part-time job, hobby, etc.)?

How do your roles and responsibilities in burlesque compare to your roles/responsibilities in other job(s)?

What is it that keeps you involved with burlesque?

What are the things that make burlesque different from other live theater?

What are your most and least favorite aspects of the burlesque industry?

Do you ever have to do things that are uncomfortable in the completion of your roles/responsibilities in burlesque?

Do you ever feel judged negatively from people outside the burlesque industry? Or inside?

Do you ever find yourself harassed by men/women in a sexually exploitative, or objectifying, manner?

What are your long-term plans/goals involving burlesque?

What burlesque groups/troupes are you involved with? If you've worked with multiple troupes/producers, etc., compare the experiences.

What are some of your favorite shows/performances/memorable moments? Why?

What goes on behind the scenes?

You must see performers at their best and at their worst, what are some of your most remarkable experiences, positive or negative?

What are some of your best and worst experiences with audiences/audience members?

Are there ever moments when you're uncomfortable doing a show? Examples?

Have you ever felt like there were some people who are more welcomed in the industry than others, and others who are purposely excluded?

What are some boundaries/barriers you experience within the industry, if any?

What inspires you?

There seems to be a real spirit of camaraderie – a sense of family and acceptance – is that a professional façade, or is that how the industry really is?

How are you able to put together a show so that it's about more than naked bodies?

What are the differences in the ways burlesque is perceived in the different cities you visit?

## **Interview Protocol – Burlesque Participants – p. 2**

What strategies has the burlesque community employed to create a community of acceptance? How is it maintained?

What do you think can be learned from the burlesque community?