Raising the Hemline: Towards a Feminist Anthropology of Beauty Practices

TRIENEKE LEAH GASTMEIER

ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of feminist theory and its articulation with contemporary beauty practices and hyper-sexual forms of femininity. Using an ethnographic methodology and feminist understandings, it sets out to accomplish two things: first to provide an analysis of the literature surrounding this topic—which often denies women agency and precludes their voice—and then to incorporate some preliminary ethnographic fieldwork for additional insight. In the ethnographic section, the paper broadens the discussion by viewing beauty practices, forms of hyper-sexuality, and feminism from the perspectives of women involved in such conventions. Those interviewed included a pole dancer, a burlesque dancer, a makeup artist, and one of the co-founders of the Toronto SlutWalks. The diversity, and yet also similarity, of viewpoints offered is significant. These women utilize the language of 'control' to describe the benefits of their practices, noting the embodied and figurative sense of power they feel they achieve. Moreover, while feminist ideals are advocated, for the most part these women perceive an overall sense of isolation from the movement. In part this is because of the stringent anti-feminist backlash that has cast the movement in a negative light. In part, however, it is also because they feel their perspectives have been denied by feminism, and that it has in turn existed as another force patrolling their bodies.

Lipstick, Lingerie, and Line-Crossers: On Feminist Theory and Femininity

“Even in those centuries which seem to us the most monstrous and the maddest, the immortal thirst for beauty has always found its satisfaction” (quoted in Taussig, 2012).

“Was I? Was I conquered? When I wore 'sensible, modest clothing' was I conquered because I had bought into the myth of what a decent black woman looked like? Or, was I conquered if I dressed 'scandalously'? Perhaps I was simply conquered

TRIENEKE GASTMEIER, Department of Anthropology, University of Waterloo
Would you ever do this?” I ask an old school friend as we sit down at a gritty pub in the heart of Southern Ontario. The burlesque show is about to begin. It's approaching midnight and we've come to see Miranda Warner—aka Imogen Quest—a burlesque performer of Guyanese descent and a good friend of ours. Along with the half dozen or so other women who make up the Girly Show, Miranda crouches behind a makeshift curtain in preparation for their Punk Rock Burlesque extravaganza. The bar is warm and dim, and as I glance through the crowd, I'm surprised to see so many small business owners, 'educated' types, and in particular women, clustered among the hard-smoking, hard-drinking locals.

"Are you kidding me!?” my friend laughs in response. “I'm way too insecure about my body! I'd make the costumes but I don't have the guts for that! Besides,” he notes, “it's usually only women who do this sort of thing.” His comments prompt me to recall Miranda's earlier statement that most men she's come across chicken out at the idea of taking their clothes off onstage, that only women are usually brave and strong enough to do so. I keep thinking of this as the performers dart back and forth from the dressing room.

Finally, the show begins and the music picks up as Miranda struts onstage. She's dressed in the style of the early 1900s with a long buttoned up shirt and skirt. Coyly, she begins to undress. She's a suffragette—a key point she excitedly informed me of earlier that day. Little by little and bit by bit, she peels away layers of old fashioned and old feminist clothing, history. Finally, she's left naked except for two glittering pasties and a 'barely-there' pair of underwear. The crowd cheers and Miranda beams.

The events that occurred in this small pub near the end of August, 2011, allegorize this paper. On one hand, they reveal the recent shift in dominant forms of femininity, from the fully covered and 'private' female form to the ever popular and exposed 'woman,' whose naked body and sexuality have become increasingly visible and embedded physically (if not already theoretically) in the public realm. On the other hand, the event is telling of the related changes in popular forms of feminism, and the evaluation of the feminist movement more generally. As a skit, the burlesque show is by nature a lampoon, or comedy. Here, what's satirized is feminism itself. Surely a suffragette, or any other good feminist popularly conceived, would never do such an unseemly thing as to strip down to her unmentionables in public! As Miranda slipped off each layer, she playfully distanced herself from and commented on an 'outmoded' perspective and identity:
Raising the Hemline: Towards a Feminist Anthropology of Beauty Practices

**vis-à-vis: Explorations in Anthropology**

the feminist here is mocked as somehow tightly wound, archaic, and uncool. At the same time, the new and undressed woman is applauded wildly by the locals, the academic and business bourgeoisie, and indeed by Miranda herself. Proceeding through history from the 'virginal' feminine ideal (Brumberg, 1998) to the playfully sexualized po-mo glam of today, she is a hyper-girly celebration—a kind of “empowerment,” to use Miranda’s words—and perhaps even, for both her and the pub patrons, a new form of ‘feminism,’ if not by that name.

This shift towards a new brand of femininity as demonstrated by Miranda and the 'issue' of women's bodies— their sexuality, and appearance—is topical. Our obsession with it dominates popular imaginations and television shows from “Toddlers & Tiaras” to “Plastic Wives” and can be seen in the number of purity balls cropping up throughout the United States. The SlutWalks, which commenced in Toronto in 2011, evolved initially as protests against Constable Michael Sanguinetti’s remark that women should “avoid dressing like sluts” if they want to avoid being victimized (Bell, 2011: para. 3). Simultaneously, the New York Times published a piece by journalist Lisa Belkin concerning the apparent change in views towards “the sexualization of women as fun and funny rather than insulting and uncomfortable” (Belkin, 2011: para. 4) and the collusion of many women with that shift (“After Class, Skimpy Equality”). Added to all of these considerations is the debate over the veiling practices of women in Afghanistan, France, and elsewhere. Despite the fact that dominant Western beauty practices have been a running point of concern within feminist and other academic and non-academic circles for a long time, the topic has yet to be taken up within anthropology.

Thus this paper examines the hegemonic performance of contemporary feminine beauty and its relationship with feminism using an ethnographic and feminist approach. Specifically, my aim is to accomplish two things: first to unpack the contemporary literature on the topic and subsequently to provide some initial ethnographic research in response to the gaps presented. Following the literature review, the second half of the paper focuses on learning the perspectives of women in Southern Ontario who participate in the beauty industry (in one form or another). My interests lie in how such women interact with, evaluate, and experience the dominant forms of hyper-sexual feminine glam—where “silicone breasts, expanded ass, and liposuction thinness” rule (Taussig 2012: x)—within the context of an anti-feminist backlash, a neoliberal turn. How do women narrate their experiences of femininity and the beauty industry, and what are their motivations for participating in it? Likewise, how do they experience, evaluate, and possibly recreate ‘feminism’—a movement that has traditionally been critical of both beauty practices and femininity more generally? What does a feminist analysis of the beauty industry look like? If the traditional ethnographic model is to make the foreign familiar, my aim here is to make the familiar foreign, while at
the same time revealing the logic behind my informants' participation. Like Miranda, my aim is to strip away layers of femininity and feminism to expose a level of greater understanding.

**Disrobing Feminist Discourses on Beauty Practices**

I am a feminist, but I'm not a feminist without pause. As an advocate, I am altogether frustrated with the anti-feminist (or perhaps more accurately, anti-subaltern) policies that normally limit the discussion of this subject. But I am also aware of the perception of feminism as a white women's movement. Of feminism cut up into wealthy, white-washed 'waves'—focused on 'men' and 'women' and unfocused on 'race' and class and the anti-oppression movements that came before. Of feminism's inaccessible language and inactivity within the academy—ultimately, of academic feminism's glaringly anti-feminist position. My stance here is not an attack on a movement I identify with but an interrogation of some of its pretexts which I argue may be racist, classist, and sexist.

The crux of this project arose out of my own experience as a young woman growing up in North America where I was overcome by the imagery and codes of feminine performance. Both of my parents, one Jamaican and one Canadian, contributed to feminist journals in their youth and viewed the beauty industry as suspect. Despite this, many of my female relatives and friends have dedicated much of their lives to the contemporary hyper-sexual feminine body project to their own apparent fulfillment—through modelling, studying esthetics and receiving plastic surgery—leaving my own perspective on the matter altogether conflicted.

The cast of women who became my key informants in this project all either come from or live within Southern Ontario, and, when I interviewed them individually in late 2011, were within their mid-twenties through thirties. Joanne, a friend of a friend whom I've known socially for several years now, was my first interviewee. Down to earth and somewhat shy, she tells me over tea that she was "born and raised in this town," and on the heels of receiving a degree in psychyology, she now cuts her time between three part-time jobs to hedge off student debt. Besides her roles as a clerk at a throwback cinema and a postal outlet attendant, Joanne's main passion is working as a pole dancing instructor—something she became after three years of lessons from the same studio as part of a New Years Resolution. "It was something I always wanted to try but was afraid to do – I was intimidated by the thought of it." Now a lead instructor, Joanne regards herself as an advocate of pole dancing for women of all ages in the region.

Sonya, one of the co-founders of the Toronto SlutWalks, was another interviewee. While I had not known her previously, she was similarly easy to
connect with although in this case largely due to her high media profile. Given her hectic schedule as a graphic designer and the deluge of emails and media requests she receives relating to the SlutWalks, Sonya preferred to conduct the interview via email, making her the only woman I did not speak with in person.

Next came Elsa, the high fashion/celebrity makeup artist and former model. Tattooed on her wrists with an orange lily—a tribute to her Northern Irish heritage—and ironically makeup-free, we meet for lunch on the outskirts of a small industrial city in a dimly lit restaurant. On vacation from her hometown of Brighton, England, Elsa arrives early with her witty and wizened father—a friend of the family—who sits in the corner playing cards and cracking jokes. Elsa is easily likeable and her unassuming personality contrasts sharply with her glamorous career. In her mid-thirties, she heads a successful high fashion and celebrity makeup artistry business, the list of personalities she has worked with is impressive and includes such figures as fashion guru Jean-Paul Gaultier, model Kate Moss, actresses Helen Bonham Carter and Drew Barrymore, and the late singer Amy Winehouse. Her background also includes working on cover models for such illustrious magazines as Vogue and Elle.

And finally, Miranda—the burlesque dancer and cofounder of the Girly Show troupe—is a good friend of mine whom I came to know while attending university. When I meet Miranda at a small coffee shop in the rain, she enters carrying a miniature umbrella—not for the weather outside, I learn, but as a parasol she's hurrying to alter for an upcoming performance. Originally from Guyana, Miranda grew up near Ottawa “and I lived there for most of my life. I went to a private school in Brockville, then moved to Waterloo for University...studying technical theatre and theatre design. I dropped out to take a job working in a theatre in New Delhi, [India] then moved back to Kitchener to finish my degree.... Now I work at a bookstore. I do burlesque too.”

As disparate as their practices may seem, these women all display elements of the popular stream of femininity and aesthetic that has come to dominate in the aftermath of the contemporary feminist movement as described by critical theorist Angela McRobbie (2009). Exposed skin pared with an increased consumerism, femme couture, an element of the tease and a sensibility of equality are all characteristic features and have become part of the political battleground. McRobbie has (problematically) termed this era 'postfeminist', arguing that femininity and empowerment have become equated with the consumption and performance of a hyper-sexual, hyper-girly, and neo-liberal femininity, or the stereotypical masculinist wet dream (McRobbie, 2009: 5-8)—think the Spice Girls' "Girl Power." While my opinions often diverge from McRobbie's, I do acknowledge this apparently new brand of femininity as my starting point, and have both limited my analysis and used as a crutch 'female-bodied' women in this regard. Women and femininity are not one and the same, of
course. Importantly, it should be remembered that beauty practices are performed by all genders, not only 'women,' whom I focus on here.

....

In carrying out academic fieldwork on the topic of 'beauty' or feminine appearance, my research encounters life as it is lived—a rarity within the discourse analyses that dominate this subject. While the archetypical academic focus is on abstraction, depth, and logic, beauty is in many respects sensual, superficial, and often seemingly irrational. But, does that make it dismissible? Should we view aesthetics as mere ornament? In what Marcel Mauss described as “the total social fact,” the aesthetic and magic are inseparable from the economic (Taussig, 2012). Thus in this holistic synergism, cannot aesthetics likewise be seen as a driving force, helping to animate society and history—not simply superstructure, but infrastructure and superstructure, as Michael Taussig argues (Taussig, 2012)? From the glut and gaudiness (the ugliness?) of our current economic structure, to the beauty of the Trobriand Islanders' gardens (Malinowski, 1922), to the aesthetic of terror and gargantua that current military and police forces ascribe to (Taussig, 2012)—aesthetics permeates everything and should not be regarded as a mere secondary lens (an accessory) through which to view history. We are missing out if we do. Indeed, such existentialists as Frederich Nietzsche and Jean Paul Sartre have interrogated the longstanding valuation of the abstract over 'appearance' (Edmonds, 2010: 17). In the first half of this paper, then, my aim is to take up appearance directly—to analyze the academic literature surrounding this topic, illustrating where we stand today.

Throughout the early chapters of 'second wave' feminism, scholars—liberal through radical—took issue with femininity and beauty ideals. Many regarded them as largely reflecting patriarchal ideologies and inequalities (Freiden, 1963; Dwarkin, 1974; Mulvey, 1975; Daly, 1979; Bartky, 1990; Wolf, 1991; Faludi, 1992; Bordo 1993). While most of these scholars were white and upper middle class, discourse on the topic was far from homogenous. Many individuals in the black power movement, for example, argued for the inclusion of women of colour in the category of 'beauty' rather than wiping out the concept altogether (Pedwell, 2011: 192). Still others saw the female body as a site of sensuality and possibility (hooks, 1994:73-75). These were not concerns invented with the 'second wave' (Groeneveld, 2009: 84-85); nevertheless they became widely publicized during this time and much of the literature emerging from the movement informs and is often in conversation with contemporary analyses.

Today scholars can broadly be organized into three categories: those that evaluate the feminism/femininity binary negatively, those that evaluate it positively, and those offering a more nuanced critique. McRobbie (2009), for example, criticizes the shift in the women's movement—or what she
comprehensively terms 'postfeminism,' but which has alternatively been called 'third wave' or 'girlie feminism'—for heralding beauty practices as one of the pinnacles of female empowerment. According to the author, in this postfeminist era, feminist ideals have been taken up and incorporated, but in a rather chameleonic way such that the dominant neoliberal structures go unthreatened. Beauty and fashion, she argues, are the Lacanian Symbolic's response to the threat posed by feminism. Similarly, others take issue with what they believe to be a 'postfeminist' fracturing from attention on the social to a focus on the individual (Budgeon, 2011; Lazar, 2011; Waters, 2007; hooks, 1994). Indeed, Sheila Jeffreys (2005) goes so far as to argue that the entire Western industry of beauty and fashion should be included and scrutinized under the “Harmful Traditional Practices” sheet of the United Nations. Politics are reduced to the right of self-expression. “It is a difficult task to simultaneously give recognition to the multiple positions, experiences, and priorities which constitute women's lives and place limits on the ethic of inclusivity in order to demarcate where a feminist articulation of identity lies” (Budgeon, 2011: 289).

In terms of the second more 'positive' side of these arguments, scholars such as Joan Brumberg (1998), Wendy Steiner (2001), Joannne Hollows (2000), Jessica Valenti (2010), and José Teunissen (2007) proffer more positive understandings of normative femininity. Brumberg questions the assumption that women are much better off now than in the Victorian era while Hollows discusses how feminism has often been based on a rejection of femininity and the popular, creating itself in opposition to these realms. Valenti makes the case that what's at issue is not women's apparent 'sexuality gone wild,' but rather how women are evaluated in this sense and essentialized by the larger patriarchal society. Conversely, Steiner argues that the misogynistic forces of modernism oversaw both the abandonment and disdain for female subjects and their beauty. According to Steiner, modernism is associated with the sublime, science, 'the machine,' and masculinity, and their advent oversaw both the abandonment and disdain for female subjects and their beauty. Interestingly, for Teunissen, whose work is more descriptive than Steiner's, anti-adornment sentiments resulted in a reactionary focus on glam, sexuality, adornment, and classical femininity (as represented by Jean-Paul Gaultier's designs for Madonna). Teunissen notes how we are essentially left with a shattered, problematic image of femininity, resulting in ever more abstract interpretations (Teunissen, 2007: 195-199). Fabric and form are idolized, while the models themselves are diminished in priority. In past eras, women were the designers' muses, acting as inspirations and an ideal of femininity. Cat walks and models were at the heart of the fashion world. Now, perhaps revealing individualism, the focus is on the creator, while any 'muse' must create herself (Teunissen, 2007: 172-175).
Finally, the third group of authors (Davis 1995, Edmonds, 2010, Gagne 2011, Gimlin 2002, Hill Collins 2010, Holland & Attwood 2009, Pitts 2010, Popenoe 2004, Press 2011, Taussig 2012) are all similar (and unusual) in their efforts to incorporate women's perspectives—or at least approach a model I am interested in. The degree to which they are successful, however, varies widely. For example, in “Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture,” Gimlin attempts to complicate previous conceptions of beauty as monolithic by interviewing women to see how they negotiate the beauty industry from within different institutions: a hair salon, an aerobics class, a plastic surgery clinic, and NAAFA: the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. While Gimlin's research is noteworthy against the list of works above, she lacks self-reflexivity and the narratives she presents are often fragmented and used sporadically to justify points she herself makes, losing the flow and possible inherent contradictions within each narrative. In other words, this is not an ethnography, nor does it offer the richness of an ethnography. As such, the focus shifts from the women themselves to the author, Gimlin. The women never 'speak for themselves.' Gimlin also collapses all strains of feminism into the realm of 'anti-beauty,' and interviews largely only white middle class women without noting the limitations on her research findings. Indeed, these is in large part a criticism I have of most all of the authors who have attempted this feat.

Given that there is neither one 'feminism' nor one type of 'femininity,' it is not surprising that the current literature presents a variety of perspectives on the matter. While the disciplines that take up this issue span from cultural studies to literary studies, and history to sociology, beauty in anthropology has until recently only been engaged in an ancillary way. Even where they do exist, however, anthropological analyses are not Western- but 'other'-focused—as in Alexander Edmond's (2010) and Michael Taussig's (2012) works on plastic surgery in Brazil and Columbia, respectively, as well as Rebecca Popenoe's (2004) ethnography on fatness, beauty and sexuality among a Moor community in Niger. I engage with these further below. Despite this, anthropology has many field-specific characteristics that can contribute greatly to the conversation and fill in some areas where much of the research falls short.

What would an ethnography of North American beauty practices look like? Perhaps most glaringly in contemporary analyses (see McRobbie, 2009; Budgeon, 2011; Lazar, 2011; Waters, 2009; Munford, 2009; Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; hooks, 1994; Jeffreys, 2005; Brumberg, 1998; Hollows, 2000; Steiner, 2001; Teunissen, 2007; Valenti, 2010), the trend has been to focus on visual and literary texts or grand narratives often at the expense of women's lived experiences. While such analyses are worthy in their own right, they only tell half of the story and are often conflated with or generalized to comment on the 'culture of femininity' as a whole. Women's voices, in other words, go unheard, or worse
still, disregarded. This also proves to be the case even when interviews are conducted (see Davis, 1995; Edmonds, 2010; Gagne 2011; Gimlin, 2002; Hill Collins, 2010; Hollard & Atwood, 2009; Pitts, 2010; Popenoe, 2004; Press, 2011; Taussig, 2012). The informants' perspectives stand out as of secondary importance. The literature thus ignores how women navigate and experience these aspects of life for themselves, presenting a distorted snapshot of the phenomenon.

The frequently moralizing focus of these discussions (as either positive or negative, or more infrequently grey) is also both reductive and restrictive. Issues of beauty and 'normative' femininity are much more complicated and draw on many more aspects of life than a simple question of morality. Not only does this prevent more comprehensive and complex understandings of the issue (something exacerbated by the lack of detail or depth in many of these pieces), but it also reveals a form of academic elitism. Much of the research completed on the topic thus far denies women and girls their agency, and in turn, assumes it is something that can be given back to them (presumably by feminism). Agency, in other words, is seen to come after the constitution of the subject, rather than something the subject is constituted through (Pedwell, 2011: 194-195). Conversations are shut down as women are denied agency, preventing us from developing more nuanced understandings and teasing out the internal logic within the practices themselves. In Alexander Edmonds's work, his primary goal was neither to advocate nor disdain conventions of plastic surgery, which would have been an act of imposition. Rather his aim was to attempt “to understand what this medical practice meant to the people who practiced it and claimed they benefited from it” (Edmonds, 2011: para. 5). Upon entering the field, he viewed the industry as saturated with neoliberal ironies; as his fieldwork progressed, he did not necessarily disregard this perspective but came to see it as limited as the motley ways in which plastic surgery is used and valued across lines of difference were revealed to him. In this way, his initial perspectives were simultaneously confirmed and undermined (Edmonds, 2010: 18-20).

While interrogating contemporary practices and representations is extremely important as always, this moralizing trend within the literature pits 'academic' feminism against femininity and the 'unschooled,' popular versions of feminism (whether 'pro' or 'con'). It also frequently presumes one correct (read: ivory tower) stream of feminism, thus overlooking difference and, again, neglecting to incorporate women's voices. The literature pretends 'proper' consciousness instead of 'false consciousness', and, oftentimes, a 'correct' feminine performance. To quote Pitts, “Any critique of women's body practices as inherently deluded and self-hating must reveal and critique its own assumptions of the truth of female embodiment and subjectivity” (Pitts, 2010: 277). This type of 'feminist' research removes itself from the general conversation, remains inaccessible as it is situated in the academy, and stands as prescriptive. As per
usual, whiteness is also often assumed, glossing over varied experiences of 'race', not to mention class (the obvious exceptions here being hooks, Hill-Collins, and a small handful of other conscientious authors).

If feminism is the goal to end sexual oppression (and all the other forces of oppression that entails) (hooks, 1984), overlooking how these discourses are played out on the ground level—and ultimately extending analyses of representations to speak for women—really misses the point. Indeed, in a similar fashion to Gayatri Spivak's (1988) questioning of postcolonial theory and its supposed position of undoing imperialism, these 'feminist' analyses are in some ways complicit with patriarchal forces. While the recent feminist movement made avoiding gender issues within academia impossible, this does not mean what has been incorporated is 'feminist.' This is exacerbated by the widespread absence of self-reflexivity among the primarily white, middle-class writers, who disregard how their identities both inform their perspectives and every step of the research and writing process. It is important to note here that popular manifestations (or representations) of feminism, such as Bitch and Bust magazines do include women's perspectives on these topics; my focus of analysis here is specifically feminism within the academy.

Where does anthropology fit into all of this? Obviously not all works suffer from all of these criticisms—Edmonds’, Popenoe's, and Taussig's inquiries are noteworthy examples, as is Debra Gimlin's project. What anthropology has to offer, I think, is the ability to both politicize and vitalize the research completed thus far. Anthropology unlike many disciplines has a prominent tradition of self-interrogation at times to the point of effacement, taking very seriously criticisms of the subaltern in an effort to decolonize itself. While the ivory tower in general has a saga of reproducing power relations, anthropologists, perhaps because of their key practice of actually speaking with people, are sensitized to these issues. This is not to say the current literature offers no insight; indeed, many important concerns are raised. Rather, I write this in an effort to expand the project.

In turn, I think anthropology would also benefit greatly from delving deeper into this topic. As noted, I am critical of the feminist approaches utilized in the works discussed above for, among other things, overlooking difference, identity politics, and issues of voice representation. These are topics that various strains of feminism have critiqued historically. Nevertheless, like many realms of scholarship, anthropology has largely drifted away from any explicitly feminist analyses. Indeed, while the anthropological works of Taussig, Popenoe, and Edmonds provide many correctives given their ethnographic methodology and focus on their informants' perspectives, these works do not take up feminism in and of itself. Intermittently, Popenoe's work uncritically alludes to 'scientific universalisms' surrounding beauty culture, which at times seems less than in line with feminist and queer literatures, which almost by definition question
essentialism. While women are often represented in anthropology, interrogating issues with a feminist lens has seriously declined. And so, in evaluating the relationships between feminism and femininity, then, my aim in the preliminary ethnographic research that follows is both to bring an anthropological approach to the topic and to re-emphasize feminism's role in and importance to the discipline.

Encountering Identity, Ethnography, and the Field

This second half of the paper looks at some initial fieldwork conducted surrounding this topic and the how the findings stand in relation to previous academic work. In setting out to conduct anthropological fieldwork on a topic of feminist concern, a host of theoretical questions quickly became apparent. In part, these emerged out of a consideration of the history of my discipline. In part, they came from my own identity, the identities of my informants, and the very nature of the project itself. While there is no unique strain of methodology termed 'feminist' (nor indeed one strain of 'feminism'), many of the theoretical concerns I raise here emerged from various feminist criticisms.

In terms of my discipline and its characteristic methodology—ethnographic fieldwork—anthropology has historically ignored 'female' experiences and more broadly been the handmaiden to colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy (Deloria, 1969). Linked to various nefarious endeavours throughout history, the ethnographic association with systems of domination is a trend that continues into the present, as in the case of the Human Terrain System (Price, 2010). My interest in conducting feminist research, then, has clearly required that I engage in a careful scrutiny of my disciplinary context and starting point. The ethnographic model itself emerged out of Enlightenment philosophy, with a strong Eurocentric and colonial focus on classification, observation, mind-guided rationalism, and control ('masculinist' thinking) (Skeggs, 2001). In this stream of thought, subject is separate from object, as is fact from value. These positivist assumptions remain popular despite heavy criticisms.

In attempting to undermine the silencing effects of modernism, many feminists have emphasized emotionality, irrationality, and the like (Harding, 1991, Martin 1991), ultimately reinforcing rather than dismantling dualism. This has made the need for an embodied, holistic approach all the more pressing.

Following the contemporary feminist movement, anthropology shifted such that it now strives to include the voices of women (although, whether many of such works are actually 'feminist'—or simply a case of 'add-women-and-stir'—remains to be seen). More broadly, the ethnographic approach came under fire from various subaltern groups for its less than sensitive and “innocent” history,
requiring anthropologists across the board to rethink their positions within structures of power (Deloria, 1969). The degree to which this has been taken up, while promising, does not undo such relations per se, but at the very least acknowledges them. Thus, anthropology wears its historical baggage in a constant state of decolonization, like feminism itself. In part, I think this is why many feminists have argued that there can never be a purely 'feminist' methodology: while struggling to resist power structures, these approaches have often reproduced them in turn.

My interest in the ethnographic method arises from the fact that anthropology is one of the few disciplines that takes these criticisms seriously; the movement towards self-reflexivity, 'collaboration,' and 'polyvocality' bears witness to this (Canella et al., 2008). The trend has helped to focus on the voices of those one is attempting to represent, as well as complicated the relationships between the 'self' and 'other' (Mohanty, 2003). How can we represent the 'other'? Who has the power to represent? Who has the right? (Canella et al. 2008, Mohanty 2003, Skeggs 2001).

Through the newfound understanding of positionality, feminists have advocated attempts to break down barriers between researcher and researched, empower the 'other,' and labour towards actively subverting oppressive structures rather than just studying them (Jones et al., 1997: xxx). Nevertheless, these contemporary strains should not be held as the historical 'solution' we've all been waiting for: as noted such techniques are still loaded and at times presumptuous and patronizing. The anthropologist in whose interest these studies take place often remains dominant. While true equality is not necessarily possible, at least taking responsibility for the reproduction of power relations is. In the context of this study, I recognize that my educational opportunities set me aside as privileged, giving me a 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1996) different from many of my informants. My status as researcher also privileges me in this project, as, despite the ample space I have attempted to provide for my participants to speak, my own voice and perspectives guide this work. While this work has been fully fashioned by me and is as such my own 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988), it is my hope that the reader will take as seriously the opinions of the women whose voices I have attempted to represent, as they do mine. Ultimately, while theoretical analyses may provide insight, they do not necessarily offer the fullness of peoples' lived experiences.

Do Effeminate Women Really Need Saving? Initial Ethnographic Research and Reflections

Do effeminate women really need saving? Here I reflect on the diverse viewpoints extended by these women in an effort to situate their stories in various circuits of power and understanding. In taking a deeper look at our conversations,
I focus on two central themes that emerged throughout each discussion, in many cases attempting to let the women's voices and analyses speak for themselves. The categories of interest I have noted are my own, and perhaps others would find different elements of the interviews more pressing. Given that all of these women do have some form of postsecondary education, they are to some degree in a position of privilege, which clearly limits my analysis. Miranda is the only woman of colour I interviewed. It is also important to emphasize the difference in these women's perspectives as much as the similarities to move beyond the feminist history of assuming sisterhood (Mohanty 1988, hooks 1984). Throughout this undertaking, I call attention to points of contradiction, including internal ones, that arose from our conversations. Finally, I relate these themes back as a whole to the current literature so as to glean a greater understanding of what these perspectives bring to the theorization of feminism, femininity and our so-called 'porno-chic' culture at large (McNair, 2002).

**Control**

The stories these women shared prompted me to examine the issue of 'control,' or power. As our dialogues unfurled and took form, the importance of this theme was revealed through its repeated reference as something that both gave meaning to and helped shape their experiences. Each woman touched on the concept of control in various ways, including in terms of strength, directing one's life, and monitoring the gaze (or the politics of representation). They also conveyed the notion in relation to its absence and what that entailed. Some of the more recent scholarship on beauty culture by academics such as Pitts (2010) and Gimlin (2002) have similarly noted the language of control, power, and reclamation in their discussions with women on bodywork. I draw on this work and others in trying to understand what these women derive from beauty culture.

'Control' manifested itself physically and figuratively for these women. Joanne and Elsa in particular spoke of feeling healthy, strong, and powerful—concepts they located both in their bodies and in their sense of themselves. It provided them with sensations of resiliency and empowerment, which they carried with them into other areas of their lives. According to Joanne, pole dancing “makes you feel stronger in your body” and “gives you a sense of mastery and confidence in what you can accomplish.” Similarly, for Elsa, makeup artistry is “transformative,” helping people feel “healthy” and “good about themselves”—concepts indexing mental health that developed in the postwar era (Edmonds, 2010: 78-80). It is something she says that can ultimately help you on your “own path.... I just always loved beauty and I love the transformation of makeup and I always think of the face as something that, rather than a blank
canvas, you have a three dimensional kind of face that you can do whatever you want with. The thing that really gets me is that when you work with a model or someone of the general public, you see this kind of transformation that happens. And you can almost see when you really help someone by teaching them how to enhance their features or do something that makes them feel good about themselves.... I don't think there's anything negative about helping someone make themselves feel better—it's empowering....” Aside from historical aspects of these points, here I am primarily interested in the embodied manifestation of the broader attainment of power and its potential renegotiation that these women experienced through their practices.

Related to this in some ways, controlling the representation of women's bodies (or those of one's own) is a further layer of this theme. Indeed, this formed the basis of Sonya's activist efforts as co-founder of the SlutWalks, her aim being to unpack the gaze directed at women—or in her words, “to draw attention [to]...sexual profiling.” To sidestep for a moment the actual efficacy or inclusivity of the SlutWalks (which has been attacked for among other things, buttressing the madonna/whore complex [Dines et al., 2011], assuming whiteness [Aguilar, 2011], and contributing to the “pornification of protests” [Yarrow, 2011: para. 4] – recalling in some ways the critiques of the aesthetic of Pride by the queer community), for Sonya, the movement called into question the authority of the police force and other governing bodies to define female sexuality and appearance. In turn, rather than questioning the binary altogether, she sought to redefine the same profile ('slut') in question using positive terms in an effort to take “shame away from” a particular identity. This definition, for her if not for other women, and her ability to determine its meaning proved powerful. “Slut for me,” she says, “is someone who is in charge of their sexuality, and is not ashamed of it; someone who can have multiple partners. This isn't someone who is dirty, cruel, [or] a 'home-wrecker,' less deserving of respect. SlutWalk isn't forcing people to take on 'slut' as an identity. It's [trying] to show that no matter what your sexual proclivities are, you should never be ashamed of them, nor expect violence.”

Miranda and Joanne had similar concerns over controlling the gaze. For these women, this element was a defining indicator of whether or not something was 'empowering'. Having gained more confidence in her body image from burlesque, Miranda describes her performance as a methodology of both monitoring and determining how people view her, sexualizing herself in a way that she feels in control and diffused of tension. “It takes off a lot of pressure and concern and tenseness in terms of sexuality,” she describes, characterizing the stage as a “safe space” in a female-dominated performance. Miranda emphasizes that putting herself in a sexualized “position makes it a little bit easier than if someone else puts [her] in it.... You end up dominating a room when your shirt's
off...and that's actually intimidating to a lot of men.” This aesthetic of Being seen, in other words, has moved from the passive to the active realm. As Taussig aptly notes, there is something to be said “of the observer's conceit that he, like the fabled flaneur, is seeing without being seen seeing” (Taussig, 2012: 81).

By adding a comical element to sexuality, creating her own routines, and deliberately making a sexual spectacle of herself while feeding off a live audience, Miranda does not view herself as a victim. Rather, she views herself as ultimately destabilizing a sexual politics that would seek to profile her or force her into an identity without her input—while simultaneously fulfilling her “desire to be ogled at” and the intense sense of pleasure she gets from performing. While parody by itself is not necessarily subversive, for Miranda, there is a strong sense that she is negotiating her own femininity, her own sexuality. As Ferraday (2007) notes, “the very idea of women parodying femininity works to queer both feminist and popular notions of femininity that equate it with passivity, with false consciousness.” At one point Miranda compares this control with the Muslim practices of veiling: in both cases, she feels, you are only allowing people to see what you want them to: “It's sort of the same thing but on the opposite end of the spectrum.” This, of course, is reminiscent of Lila Abu-Lughod's (2002) questioning of whether Muslim women—those 'women of cover'—need saving, given the often liberating way in which the veil is viewed by its wearers. Of course the way such performances get taken up by audience members varies as described by De Certeau (1984), making the concept of fully 'governing' one's own presentation somewhat dubious. However, the sense of power and energy Miranda obtains from deliberately revealing and concealing aspects of herself, while guiding her audience and inciting their reactions is significant.

Miranda's comments are also of particular interest given the history of burlesque. Having its roots in 19th century music hall and comic opera, burlesque has (along with pole dancing, which first emerged in 1980s Vancouver strip clubs) been critiqued as morally dubious by both the State and the Church. In 1937, for example, the Supreme Court of the United States banned burlesque for its perceived role in the instigation of “many of our sex crimes” (quoted in Lindsay, 2011: 14), while in 1968, the Theatres Act in England finally revoked the 30 year standing enforcement that women could only appear nude on stage if they remained absolutely stationary, resembling a Greek statue (Lindsay, 2011). In the new burlesque, which began in London and New York clubs, performers and audiences invoke this 19th century history (and other 'risque-for-their-times' forms of femininity such as the 1950s pinup). The active roles both Miranda and Joanne define for themselves, moving in sensual, emotional, and at times comical ways flies in the face of this history.

While Joanne differs from Miranda in that she deems performing for money and in front of men as not as empowering (something Miranda does
regularly to help support herself), controlling the gaze is also emphasized, this time in the form of privacy: “If we were [performing] in the public eye and for money then I would [think] that it might not be very empowering. But here, the women are doing it for no one other than themselves....” While for Miranda, control comes from monitoring how one is seen, for Joanne who one is seen by presents itself as of more importance. Joanne repeatedly emphasizes the individuality of the act, and how the classes are performed in female-only spaces with veiled windows. “Women are more comfortable when they're starting off just to do it with other women. There are some sensual moves that you do—it's supposed to be kind of sexy and some women might feel uncomfortable if there's men there. But if you're all women, you just kind of laugh at yourselves and goof around.... Everything is covered; no one can see us practice. No one has ever seen me perform [other than my classmates].” Although she jokes that it's fun to tell others that she's a pole dancer, in her mind the performances themselves are heavily private: they are for the individual's own pleasure and her studio does not put on performances.

While I have already noted the embodied strength and control Joanne gleans from her practice, this form of guarding the gaze, I think, is another source of power. This interests me in particular given the historical renegotiation of public and private spaces in relation to female sexuality. Dancing a highly sexualized routine historically performed for men in strip joints, Joanne upends this tradition by making it an individualized, private form of exercise, geared towards strengthening oneself physically and emotionally. Focused on self-fashioning rather than the male gaze, as she argues, Joanne's experience resonates with the pole dancers interviewed by Holland and Attwood (2009) who engaged in the practice to 'spice up their lives,' exercise without noticing it, and have a good laugh. Holland and Attwood's interviewees likewise viewed pole dancing as entirely empowering in that it made them feel more independent and powerful in a female-centred space, something these women viewed as re-shifting the focus from men to women (Holland et al., 2009). Interestingly, while these spaces may be similar in that these women regard them as 'female-centred,' difference in terms of such things as sexuality should be noted. How does heterosexuality fit into these women's engagement with bodywork and feminism? The burlesque and queer community, for instance, have some overlap (the development of 'Queerlesque' aside, burlesque politics often explicitly take up queer politics both in terms of queer spaces for lesbian audiences and in terms of dismantling conceptions of femininity [Ferreday, 2007]). This may be less dominant in other realms of women's beauty culture where hegemonic gender norms may prevail. Thus, the level and degree of negotiations that take place vary.

Ultimately, the various facets of control these women receive through their engagements with femininity allow them to create pockets of subversion
against normative social hierarchies. Even while they may not be actively resisting anything—nor even label their practices as a form of resistance—I think they do receive sources of power from their work in unexpected ways—power which they may not otherwise claim. While the discourse on female sexuality has increased, in this case, at least these narratives are deriving from the women themselves.

In a sense, these findings mirror those of both Gimlin (2002) and Edmonds (2010). Like the hairdressers in Gimlin's book, these women are creating their own hierarchies where they are positioned at a level of authority and strength—whether it's through “helping people” who may not know how to help themselves for Elsa or dominating an audience and defining her own sexuality for Miranda. In this sense, following Edmonds, their practices can also possibly be viewed as a sort of 'capital' (albeit in different ways). Edmonds discussed how Brazilian women used their sexuality as a tool to transcend other avenues of oppression. Popenoe (2004) makes a a similar argument, noting how body practices offer an opportunity for female power among the Sarahan community she studied. I think the women I spoke with similarly tapped into their femininity to variously transcend other issues in their lives—by countering profiling through the pairing of hyper-sexual femininities with terms of empowerment (Sonya); or by mastering difficult techniques as a way to feel strong and beautiful in oneself, and to impress others, if only verbally (Joanne). Repeatedly, femininity was paired with a sense of ability and strength. At the same time, the control these women gained (in addition to the way they discussed their practices in general) was not 'limited' to the realms of gender. While their experiences and the topics they speak on are indeed gendered, other issues figure prominently in their discussions, which I think is critical to recognize given the strong focus on gender at the expense of 'other' aspects of life in the literature. For example, Miranda discusses tackling issues of race, while Joanne speaks in terms of confidence and strength, and Elsa discusses makeup artistry in terms of health and helping others.

My intention here is not to label these women as 'activists'—especially given that this is not a term some of them would use to brand themselves. Indeed, many of their perspectives could also be seen as upholding various structures of power, such as free market ideology (which of course is the reality of the world we all have to navigate). The actual 'efficacy' of their potential subversions where they do exist, moreover, remains to be seen in their relations with other fields of power. Of course, their views on these points don't always match, as seen prominently in the discussions of Miranda and Joanne. As noted for Joanne, practices may not be as empowering if they are performed for men and money. Miranda, who does both of these things, rather sees the line being crossed when individuals (such as “strippers” or “bar-hopping women”) are not “in control of the gaze.” While I think these points are noteworthy for revealing difference in
perspectives and preventing us from viewing the cases homogeneously, I also think they raise important questions and relate back to issues of profiling without understanding—something I think a lot of feminist literature is guilty of.

**Feminism**

The second theme I would like to draw attention to here is feminism. As discussed, much of the academic work that concerns itself with contemporary feminism in particular is highly critical of the movement. While authors such as Steiner (2001) hold criticisms against the 'second wave' for disdaining adornment, scholars of the current brand of feminism, which is what concerns us here, deride it for its apolitical shift towards an identification with and reinforcement of patriarchy—something they see as most brazenly evident in its supposed alignment with women's bodywork.

To reflect on the women I interviewed, across the board a general sense of hesitancy to identify with the feminist movement prevailed. And yet, despite this fact, all of the women identified with the general tenets of feminism (if liberal). Even Elsa, the only woman who described herself as “anti-feminism” because it has never really “come into my life,” advocated women to “go for it....” Overall, the feminist perspectives of these women may be described as reform-focused or 'liberal'—the term “equality” defining everything they viewed as positive about feminism.

While academic literature holds the current feminist movement as apolitical (McRobbie 2009, Lazar 2011, Waters 2007, Budgeon 2011), this is not entirely reflective of these women's experiences. Sonya's position as a self-described “activist” and the organizer of large protests which theoretically call into question various forms of authority is perhaps the most obvious example. “It's amazing how many people we've come across that just want to maintain status quo,” she laments, “that people shouldn't demand change of broken systems.” The large public response to the SlutWalks—whether for or against—is a further testament, many of the criticisms poignantly calling into question issues of power and privilege.

Joanne's volunteering at a women's shelter, and Miranda's prescient evaluations and routes of resisting her own racialization as a Guyanese woman, as well as her critical reflections on contemporary “white” feminist movements (the SlutWalk and Vagina Monologues), can also be regarded as political acts in their own right. At one point in our discussion, Miranda related to me that in her sense, there has been a rise in activist movements of late. Descriptions of the contemporary feminist movement as 'apolitical,' then, begs the question as to which feminist movement (as if there is only one)? All of these women identify
with feminist sentiments (if not the term itself), at times often speaking in political language, even if liberal. All of them have diverse, at times conflicting, perspectives. In this sense, I do not think their positions are fully aligned with what McRobbie describes as “postfeminist.”

At the same time, this is not to delegitimize the analyses of such scholars as McRobbie, who describe the current political climate as apathetic and neoliberal. Indeed, her critiques reflect my own experiences, and are evidenced in Elsa’s comments when she says, for example, that feminism is “not something [she] feels [she] has to be an advocate of,” and that “anyone can do whatever they want...there should be no obstacle.” It is true also, following these scholars, that the new version of “feminism” or feelings of “women’s empowerment” is heavily tied to bodywork, as described above. The aspect of this connection that interests me here, however, is not only the positive, reformulated relationship as defined by these women, but also the way in which the traditionally negative connection between feminism and femininity is mobilized as one of the primary reasons these women are hesitant to identify with feminism.

Time and again, academic feminism’s historically antagonist attitude towards beauty culture is alluded to as something these women strongly disagree with. It’s described as an “overreaction,” “ridiculous,” and a “black and white” way of looking at things—even while they may remain critical of aspects of the culture themselves. While feminism has been heavily derided within popular culture and elsewhere as part of the anti-feminist backlash, the poor connection these women have with a movement that is supposed to be in their interest is multifaceted, and indeed is in line with the arguments of Popenoe, who states that “these ideals persist not primarily because of their imposition by [media pressure or male fantasies], but because they are deeply embedded in wider cultural values and social structures that we are all party to” (Popenoe, 2004: 1). The backlash certainly plays a pivotal role; feminism has not been received well by patriarchy. Indeed, as noted, some branches of feminism have offered very positive analyses of femininity. Nevertheless, in part, I think it can also be attributed to feminism’s shift towards becoming inaccessible in the academy as feminism has disassembled itself by (very necessarily) asking questions about foundationalism and universalism. It can also be attributed to the strict regulatory regimes some strains of the movement have ironically laid out on women’s bodies, as well as its related dismissal of such practices as the ones these women enjoy and in turn see as empowering. In other words, I think feminism has failed these women in many ways—even while I see it as one of the most integral movements of the past century. The absence of their voices from the conversation that is feminism does not go unnoticed by the women I interviewed.

To begin with Miranda, although she ultimately identifies as a feminist, the ambivalence she holds towards the movement is readily apparent. It can be
seen, for example, in her suffragette parody (described above), and given the fact that the Girly Show was in part founded as a way to “get back at the second wave feminists.... [T]hey're the ones who would protest a burlesque show as being offensive to women, which is something you'd say if you haven't been to one of our shows.... But, second wave feminists aren't going to come anyways because they assume they'll be offended. But then there's all of these awesome ladies that do come, who end up getting empowered [by] seeing these regular women that are really confident in their bodies taking their clothes off.” Miranda describes 'feminists' as being conservative and denying the agency of women such as herself, noting that her reason for entering burlesque was a “choice,” a form of “empowerment”—not something she was “forced into.” For Miranda, feminism is entirely removed from efforts to understand how burlesque could be a source of sexual strength and liberation.

A further source of frustration for her arises from the sense of “white privilege” she perceives a lot of feminism to endorse, which marginalizes her as a woman of colour. For Miranda, this can most recently be seen in the SlutWalks and the Vagina Monologues: “I'm not going to support SlutWalk because it gives sluts everywhere a bad name,” she says, animated. “Calling each other sluts and whores just makes it OK for guys.... [I] would never want to be associated with such a derogatory term. It's the same way I feel about the Vagina Monologues, like reclaiming the word 'cunt.’” Ultimately, she describes feminism as advocating the idea that “a white woman is better than a black woman,” something that undermines the entire effort. As bell hooks (1984) chronicles, many women of colour have resisted identification with feminism precisely for this reason. While perhaps unsurprisingly, Miranda (the only woman of colour) was the only respondent to comment on issues of racialization, feelings of being misunderstood or misrepresented likewise run deep in the other women's responses.

Both Joanne and Sonya were perhaps the most critical of the beauty “ideals” for women. And yet, both also saw “those feminists” as somehow missing the mark: while Joanne recognizes that the name has been slandered, noting that “obviously we've come a really long way, but I think we still have a long way to go,” she is disapproving of what she sees as an uncompromising stance that feminists take on beauty culture, including pole dancing. It's not “black and white,” she notes, “they immediately assume you're a stripper.” While there can be issues within both beauty culture (where women no longer “respect themselves” and “go ridiculously far...like in eating disorders”) and feminism, for the most part, she feels that feminists have not bothered to understand what they are critical of. The issues at hand, she says, are much more “complicated” than what has been proffered. Ultimately, she argues that pole dancing “focuses on the health aspect, welcoming women of all shapes and sizes and ages and making
them feel beautiful and good about who they are, as they are. In that sense, I actually think [it] is kind of an aspect of women's liberation.”

Sonya's comments, on the other hand, that she did not originally deem the SlutWalks to be a feminist movement are telling. She relates experiences of constantly being “attacked” by feminists: “I never used to consider myself a feminist. I've always identified as someone who stood up for her rights, no matter my gender and am a huge advocate of women's rights. But, I'm often wary [of feminism]. It is an interesting movement, one that often moves sideways or not at all instead of forward.” While I think repeated interrogations of any activist movement are necessary to avoid reproducing structures of oppression, it is clear that Sonya likewise feels marginalized by a movement she sees, again, as being critical “without bothering to research what we're all about.” The issue most often alluded to in this sense is the usage of the term 'slut,' and the hyper-sexual appearance of many of the protesters—identities that are often demonized. This dominant image of sexualized women that has come to the forefront of the SlutWalks is interesting and has a nuanced relationship with the popular representations of women that Sonya is critical of: “Women are held to a certain standard, all based on fictional ideals. If more people like those who create SlutWalks around the world start standing up for more respect, and calling out protective service, judicial, and media systems that promote out-of-date ideas and ideals, we may actually start moving forward as a society, all on equal footing.”

Finally, of particular interest is the case of Elsa, who notes that feminism has “never really come into my life,” and that it's not something she feels the need to “be an advocate of.” Situated in a profession dominated by 'successful' women (where the only men present are “all gay”—undermining, she says, the quip of the 'heterosexist male gaze'), Elsa's experiences do not lend themselves to viewing women as 'oppressed.' She carries this perspective even in terms of the controversial representation of women: “I mean, everybody wants to look glamorous, everybody wants to look beautiful.... I don't feel that the media or fashion portrays an image of the way you should be.... My job is to make the model look as beautiful as she can.... I don't think that women looking at the beauty pages are going to say, 'Oh I could never look like that.' You know what I mean: you could look like that, you can.” Her only critiques arise from the tabloid rag: “In my experience, I may have been with her [Amy Winehouse], and she hadn't had a drink or she hadn't had anything. But someone will take a poor photo of her where she looks sleepy and put it all over the papers to sell them, you know? So, in that sense, I find the media's representation of women can be very evil.” Elsa's position is unique in that she sees the transformation process of makeup on models, rather than just the final product, as most of us do. This, I think, contributes to her view of the beauty industry as democratic. Her disregard for the feminist movement can thus be seen as perhaps a disconnect between her
experiences and her understandings of feminism. For her, the tenets of feminism have nothing to say about and are not reflective of her life. Once again, this is revealing of how feminist doctrines concerning the politics of appearance haven't attempted to enter the beauty world, but have (for the most part) rather criticized it from afar.

In sum, what I think can be taken away from these women in relation to feminism—and in turn what I think they bring to the literature on the topic—is this sense that their life experiences have not been taken seriously by the movement. Given my former critiques of the academic literature, this seems accurate. Rather, the cause has largely reflected someone else's life histories and understandings, which have been used to discuss their practices without their own input. While elements of feminism are beginning to shift in an effort to understand individuals before ipso facto labelling them as victims devoid of agency, the historically stringent anti-femininity doctrine has in many ways not left room for femininity, perhaps helping to further enlightenment and patriarchal doctrines as noted by Steiner (2001). Indeed, Edmonds discusses how, “Within the West there has been a moral discourse attacking cosmetics as 'artificiality'...often equating it misogynistically with femininity....” (Edmonds, 2009: 242). Perhaps we are merely afraid of another layer of 'fabrication' (beautification) in an already inauthentic world. Attempting to speak for other women, feminism has unintentionally asserted the inferiority of many women. This has not gone unnoticed by the women I spoke with, who emphasize in unison that they feel misunderstood, their viewpoints not represented.

Academic feminism has also acted as a further source of body and appearance regulation for women, defining what is and is not empowering, only recently beginning to take note of the complicated ways in which people navigate, question, and potentially subvert power structures. At the same time, while the interviewees tended to carry a homogenous view of feminism as anti-beauty culture, much of the literature again until recently has in turn tended towards dealing with women's bodywork as a uniform culture, overlooking the varied experiences and perspectives within different streams. While ultimately Elsa and Sonya both feel as though feminists have failed to attempt to understand their perspectives, both of these women approach the politics of appearance in disparate, if at times conflicting, ways: for Elsa, women are not oppressed based off of their appearance, while for Sonya, they remain strongly so.

Thus, feminism exists as a contradiction for these women. While they agree with many of its major tenets, the isolation they feel from the movement (in conjunction, of course, with the contributing backlash doctrines), is sufficient enough to cause tension for them. Feeling their practices repeatedly deprecated, they are hesitant to identify with a movement that has historically called into question their own morality, intelligence, and self-worth, without engaging in
efforts of dialogue. I believe that feminist thought in this sense has become academicized and authoritative, in the process making itself inaccessible and making non-academic feminists’ and women's lives and voices less central. While of course remaining critical of the power dynamics each woman brings to the discussion is crucial, it is not surprising that they have all called for a 'new' feminist movement in their own way—one where you can “curl your hair and wear lipstick” without feeling guilty that “it's not a feminist thing to do,” to quote Miranda. What of women's bodywork as *both* subversion and conformity, like so many branches of feminism itself?

**Conclusion**

Returning to the scene we began with—the burlesque hall wherein a tightly buttoned suffragette unclothed herself to become a half-nude seductress—I think we can begin to view the recent shift in popular femininities and feminism with new eyes. The performative commentary in this dance is much more readily understood given the varied voices of the women I spoke with: in the dance as in their dialogues, feminism is something that has been straight-laced and somehow at odds with the hyper-feminine expressions and sexualities they have come to embrace as empowering. These are experiences that have evaded investigation. There is nothing wrong with female sexuality, and perhaps to take issue with it is yet another example of the long history of the patriarchal fear of women's bodies. Rather, following Valenti (2010), at issue is the cultural contexts and constraints: how women's sexuality is used and abused, strained and directed.

While the points raised by these women did not always mesh with my own experiences—leading me at times to disagree—throughout this piece, I have tried in a preliminary way to bring new voices to old questions using an ethnographic approach. Ultimately, I feel that feminism, a movement I see as crucial to untangling geographies of oppression, has failed to unpack its own position within structures of power. The situation at hand is very complex. Nevertheless, before one can judge appropriately—before a movement that seeks to decolonize can move forward—it is necessary to both understand and experience the subject positionings of those one seeks to defend. There is clearly much space to expand, not only in terms of this research, but all areas that concern the intersection of women and sexuality. Jessica Valenti (2010) makes the crucial point that our focus in the West is often on popular representations of women, rather than on the thousands of women and young girls who are trafficked annually and coded as criminals. It is perhaps also more than telling that many of these women come from lower classes and/or are women of colour—in contrast with the dominant beautiful representations of white women.
Building solidarities across lines of place, identity, work, class, and belief is what underpins this effort. To quote, Chandra Mohanty, “In these very fragmented times, it is both very difficult to build these alliances and also never more important to do so” (Mohanty, 2003: 250).

References

Abu-Lughod, Lila

Aguilar, Ernesto

Attwood, Feona

Bartky, Sandra

Baumgardner, Jennifer, and Amy Richards

Belkin, Lisa

Bell, Sarah

Bordo, Susan

Bourdieu, Pierre

Brumberg, Joan Jacobs

Budgeon, Shelly

Canella, Gaile and Kathryn Manuelito
2008 Feminisms From Unthought Locations: Indigenous Worldviews, Marginalized Feminisms, and
Raising the Hemline: Towards a Feminist Anthropology of Beauty Practices


Crane, Shabiki

Daly, Mary

Davis, Kathy

De Certeau, Michel

Deloria, Vine

Dines, Gail, and Wendy Murphy

Dwarkin, Andrea

Edmonds, Alexander

Faludi, Susan

Ferreday, Debra.

Freiden, Betty

Gimlin, Debra

Groeneveld, Elizabeth

Haraway, Donna
Harding, Sandra

Hill Collins, Patricia

Holland, Samantha, and Feona Attwood

Hollows, Joanne

hooks, bell

hooks, bell

Jeffreys, Sheila

Jones, John Paul, Heidi Nast, and Susan Roberts

Lazar, Michelle M.

Lindsay, Sarah

Malinowski, Bronislaw

Martin, Emily

McNair, B.
Raising the Hemline: Towards a Feminist Anthropology of Beauty Practices

• vis-à-vis: Explorations in Anthropology

McRobbie, Angela

Mohanty, Chandra

Mulvey, Laura

Munford, Rebecca
2009 Bust-ing the Third Wave: Barbies, Blowjobs, and Girly Feminism. In Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture.

Pedwell, Carolyn

Pitts, Victoria

Popenoe, Rebecca

Press, Andrea L.

Price, David

Skeggs, Beverley

Spivak, Gayatri

Steiner, Wendy

Taussig, Michael
Teunissen, José

Valenti, Jessica

Waters, Melanie

Wolf, Naomi

Yarrow, Allison Gaudet
Raising the Hemline: Towards a Feminist Anthropology of Beauty Practices

• vis-à-vis: Explorations in Anthropology

Author contact information:
Trieneke Leah Gastmeier
Department of Anthropology
University of Waterloo
200 University Ave W, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1
trieneke.gastmeier@gmail.com

vis-à-vis is online at vav.library.utoronto.ca