

**WOMEN WHO FLY: AERIALISTS IN MODERNITY**  
**(1880-1930)**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Around 1900, Charmion (alias Laverie Vallée) introduced a provocative ‘trapeze disrobing act,’ combined with feats of strength to her audiences in vaudeville theaters in New York. She was one of a wave of female aerialists whose performances quite literally ‘flew’ in the face of Victorian values. Trapeze artists in circuses and in vaudeville theaters, as well as stunt flying aviators showcasing their courage and abilities during local fairs or aerial exhibitions from the 1910s on, indeed pushed the boundaries of what was deemed possible in terms of the human body’s physical capacities while challenging traditional notions of gender, race, class, and sexuality through their unconventional performances.

In this study I explore three cases of aerialists who navigated both the demands of managers/spectators for spectacular and titillating acts and their personal aspirations within the confines of the increasingly capitalist entertainment industries in the West between 1880 and 1930. Besides Charmion, my study takes shape around the performances of “Barbette” or Vander Clyde who took Parisian theaters by storm with an amalgamation of trapeze artistry and female impersonation in interwar France; and Bessie Coleman, the first African American woman to gain a pilot license and to set up her own flying shows throughout the United States in the 1920s. For each case study I conducted exhaustive archival searches and analysed relevant newspaper articles, magazines, show reviews, photographs and silent film.

I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, and on Victor Turner’s concept of liminality to illustrate how aerial performances between 1880 and 1930 functioned as sites of creative resistance, opening up possibilities for a rethinking and redefinition of social categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality. I show how the performances of Charmion, Coleman and Barbette simultaneously reflected and challenged the

anxieties and optimism of a society forced to revisit traditional beliefs regarding the gendered/racialized/classed/sexualized body. In demonstrating how these performers helped question modernizing beliefs regarding the human body's capacities, and the female body's physical abilities and appearance in particular, I argue they suggested new types of embodied agency for both women and men at the time.

## PREFACE

A modified version of Chapter V has been published in *Stadion* in 2011. Bieke Gils. “‘The Only Race Aviatrix in the World’: A Tribute to Bessie Coleman (1892-1926),” *Stadion* 37 (2011): 55-81. A modified version of Chapter III has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Sport History* and will be published early on in 2014. Bieke Gils, “Flying, Flirting and Flexing,” Charmion’s Trapeze Act, Sexuality and Physical Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Sport History* (2014).

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FAI:	Fédération Aéronautique Internationale
BNF:	Bibliothèque Nationale de France
UBC:	University of British Columbia
WASP:	Women Airforce Service Pilots

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## **DEDICATION**

*To my parents and sisters  
who encouraged me to spread my wings and take off*

## Chapter I: Women Who Fly

### Introduction

On December 25, 1897, Laverie Vallée, better known by her stage name Charmion, made her debut in Koster and Bial's vaudeville theater in New York City with a provocative undressing act on the trapeze. "A crowded house was present and nothing but the sensation which Charmion was expected to make was talked about," a reporter of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* wrote. He continued:

It had been whispered around that her act would be startling, and the photographs exhibited in the lobby seemed to give color to the rumor. When her number was put up the house was darkened, and opera glasses were put into use. Max Gabriel's band struck up "On Broadway," and a pretty woman walked out from the wings dressed in the latest fashion. With a Frenchy shrug of the shoulders she climbed the ladder and stepped into the net. A few steps brought her to the rope by which she was hoisted on the trapeze. She then attempted one or two tricks, but seemed to find her clothes a bother, so she began to unhook her waist. When she began to take it off she exhibited all the shyness of a timid girl. Finally the waist came off. Then she hung by her feet, and the skirts, etc., naturally fell down over her head, leaving a view of lace unmentionables, black stockings, purple garters, and a large amount of pink silk fleshing between the garters and her hips. This part of the exhibition was received with a mixture of laughter, applause and hisses. The next move was to stand on the trapeze and loosen the hampering skirts, unmentionables, etc., which were dropped in a bunch to the net below. She was then clad in a chemise, which she removed while hanging head downward. Then she sat on the trapeze and removed her buttoned shoes, garters and stockings. Her large hat was then thrown aside, and she was revealed in conventional costume of the female acrobat. Her work from this point on was certainly excellent, and she was applauded frequently.<sup>1</sup>

Charmion was just one of a large number of aerialists around the turn of the twentieth century whose performances evoked both praise and criticism among audiences, critics, and moral reformers because they quite literally "flew in the face of Victorian values."<sup>2</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Dramatic Mirror*, December 25, 1897, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895–1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004), 9, 115. Though the notion of 'aerialists' in its broadest definition may include various types of performers whose acts have aerial action in common, like ballooning, parachuting and even ski-jumping or

aerial acts by muscular women like Charmion were daring and hence questionable in light of both medical and popular views of the female body as passive, weak, nervous, and destined primarily to bear and raise children. Like many other female aerialists at the time, Charmion destabilized traditional notions of gender and femininity through aerial action. Trapeze artists in circuses and in vaudeville theaters, as well as stunt flying aviators showcasing their courage and abilities during local fairs or aerial exhibitions from the 1910s on, indeed pushed the boundaries of what was deemed possible in terms of the human body's physical capacities while challenging traditional notions of gender, race, class and sexuality through their provocative and unconventional performances.

In this study I explore individuals like Charmion, who navigated both the demands of managers/spectators for spectacular and titillating acts and their personal needs and aspirations within the confines of the increasingly capitalist entertainment industries in North America and Europe between 1880 and 1930. Besides Charmion, my study is shaped around the performances of American born "Barbette" or Vander Clyde (1904–1973),<sup>3</sup> who took Parisian theaters and circuses by storm with a clever amalgamation of trapeze artistry and female impersonation in interwar France, as well as aviator Elisabeth, or "Bessie" Coleman (1892–1926), the first African American woman to gain a pilot license and to set up her own flying shows throughout the United States in the 1920s.

In some respects the grouping of these performers in my study can be viewed as a 'collective biography.' As Cowman points out, collective biographies usually focus on individuals who are involved in/affected by similar structures, networks and ideologies, or who

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diving for example, in this study I focus on aerialists who performed on the trapeze or flew airplanes between 1880 and 1930 in North American and European contexts.

<sup>3</sup> Controversy exists about his exact year of birth. Several sources quote 1899 instead of 1904.

are connected through family relations, *métier*, and/or politics. The individuals in my study were certainly affected by similar structures and bodily ideologies and were “linked by a theme rather than intertwined through deep personal connections.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is unlikely that the individuals in my study ever met each other, but they did share a common interest (theme) in aerial performance.

Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman are three examples of performers who took advantage of the opportunities offered by the booming entertainment industries in the United States and Europe between 1880 and 1930. Industrialisation at the end of the nineteenth century, accompanied by a rise in urbanisation and overall leisure time, had contributed to a growing demand for, and consequent expansion and commercialization of entertainment in many cities in the West. Circuses, theaters, music halls, casinos, and nickelodeon movie houses proliferated, providing the swelling group of male and female consumers with a series of new forms of cheap leisure and entertainment.<sup>5</sup> Such forms also provided new employment opportunities for aspiring dancers, singers, comedians, acrobats and aerialists like Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman.

The life stories and careers of these three performers were different and unique, but also had much in common. As previously mentioned, they shared an interest in aerial activities and, each in their own ways, destabilized traditional notions regarding the gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized body through their daring and provocative performances that involved the artful and skillful combination of technology (flying through the air on a trapeze or in an airplane) and the body. Barbette, Coleman and Charmion were performers who engaged in different forms of aerial acrobatics: Charmion displayed her physical prowess on the static

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<sup>4</sup> Krista Cowman, “Collective Biography,” in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Kathy Peiss, “Going Public: Women in Nineteenth-Century Cultural History,” *American Literary History* 3 (4) (1991): 824.

trapeze; Barbette engaged in tight rope walking and aerial tricks on the flying rings and flying trapeze; while Coleman executed stunts like loops, figure eights and parachute jumps with/from her airplane.

Much of these performers' popularity stemmed from their ability to combine femininity with physical prowess, technical skill, and risk.<sup>6</sup> The dangerous nature of aerial performances was certainly one reason for aerialists' popularity among entertainment managers and spectators, and fatalities were not uncommon. Both trapeze and airplane accidents occurred frequently and many aerialists in fact died during their performances. Stunt flyer Bessie Coleman for example, died in an airplane accident in 1926. Lillian Leitzel, headline trapeze performer for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus in the 1910s, died when she fell from a height in 1931.

To survive in the physically demanding and financially competitive atmospheres of their trades, Charmion, Barbette, and Bessie Coleman also had to be business-minded and entrepreneurial. They had to be innovative in their performances and preferably be the first to execute tricks and stunts to be successful. They were relatively independent in their endeavours and had to play their cards well to gain financial support to keep their businesses (and themselves) alive.

The trades of these performers also required them to be extremely mobile geographically. They travelled to various places in the world in pursuit of the most lucrative contracts and never

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<sup>6</sup> An early and historically significant example of the uproar women's aerial performances could cause was the death of tightrope walker Selina Powell in 1863 in Ashton Park, Birmingham, England. Powell, according to the reporter in the *Miner and Workman's Advocate*, was six months pregnant when she fell when the rope collapsed on which she was walking blindfolded. Her death, Assael notes, sparked a nationwide outcry against "dangerous performances" and unleashed debates between moral reformers, who were opposed to dangerous and unrespectable performances like that of Powell, and managers and artists who supported "free trade and fair play."<sup>6</sup> In England, such accidents paved the way for the Dangerous Performance Act in 1879, targeted at children under the age of fourteen and women engaged in certain kinds of gymnastics and high-wire acts in circuses and theaters. See the *Miner and Workman's Advocate*, "Shocking Death of the Female Blondin," July 25, 1863; Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 108; Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 172.

remained in the same place for a long time. Though it was necessary for aerial performers to travel extensively, it also gave their profession a free and hedonistic allure, as Le Roux and Garnier pointed out in 1890:

Earth contains no guests more free than these [wo]men... Lords of their own will and time, they obey no laws except the terms of their voluntary engagements. They fly from war, pestilence, and ruin. When the heavens darken, they strap up their trunks, go on board a steamer and journey to other countries where gaiety and gold are to be found.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea of travelling performers embodying an ideal of freedom can also be found in Brown’s conceptualization of Charles Baudelaire’s ‘*flâneur*.’<sup>8</sup> Baudelaire’s *flâneur* originally referred to the well-to-do male city dweller who strolled in the city to both see and be seen, while staying anonymous amongst the moving crowds of people. “The flâneur,” Small notes, “was an urban observer whose eyes and feet were mobilized in the delineated spaces of the city to take in the expressions of contemporaneity around him. He was typically male, of the middle class, and inevitably white.”<sup>9</sup> Although this *flâneur* mentality, associated with a seemingly new kind of urban freedom and mobility in modernity, is not generally associated with women, it does provide one useful way of describing female performers’ presence in the city at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The notion of the “female *flâneur*” can be seen in the existence of the performer as a traveler or ‘drifter,’ going from city to city, country to country to perform. Aerialists like Charmion, Bessie Coleman, and Barquette indeed seemed to go wherever they pleased and embodied a kind of freedom out of reach of most women, and even men, at the

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<sup>7</sup> Hugues Le Roux and Jules Garnier, *Acrobats and Mountebanks* (translated from French by A.P. Morton) (London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1890), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>9</sup> James Smalls, ““Race” As Spectacle in Late Nineteenth-Century French Art and Popular Culture,” *French Historical Studies* 26 (2) (2003): 355.

<sup>10</sup> See also Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 2 (3) (1985): 37-46.

time. All three performers travelled throughout the United States and Europe and their flamboyant personalities - in the case of Charmion and Barquette evidenced by glamorous pictures and movies - gave them the free and hedonistic allure Le Roux and Garnier wrote about.

In reality, this appearance of freedom was sustained by misconception, and the actual freedom of aerial performers had its limits. To view aerialists as fantastic performers who defied all scientific and social laws to embody ultimate freedom and emancipation, was to ignore the many hours of training and dedication their performances required. Indeed, the aerial body was in most cases a well-rehearsed one. Assael points out, on the one hand, that the female aerialist was “emblematic of nineteenth-century individualism, liberated from the industrial world of the machine, particular and irreplaceable.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, as noted earlier, aerialists not only possessed unique physical prowess, they were also business-minded, a requirement to survive in the hard and competitive entertainment circuit. On the other hand, Assael notes that their seemingly liberated bodies were dependent on new technologies, and that they had to adhere to a strict discipline in rehearsal, performance, and business-related tasks like securing and maintaining engagements. Aerialists thus contributed to a “perfect assembly line of production.” While on the surface they may have appeared unique and autonomous, in reality they were also disciplined and part of an organic whole.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in the context of circus Stoddart points out:

There is ... a congruence between the presentation of the female aerialist’s body and the image that the circus as a whole has presented of itself. ... the circus ... promotes an idea of itself in the popular imagination as embodying a lifestyle unfettered by conventionality or by social and legal restraint; a freedom which was echoed in performances which foregrounded the illusion of ease. Behind the image lie levels of physical discipline, bodily regulation and hardship which are unrivalled by any other western performance art.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, 175.

## Destabilizing Categories

Associations of aerial performers with unrestricted freedoms were also a function of their seeming ability to blur social categories of gender, race, class and sexuality. By 1931, French screenwriter Pierre Bost had already noted that the identities of aerialists were becoming indistinct and seemingly suspended while in the air. Having watched a performance of flying trapeze artists, he wrote:

... l'éloignement même des voltigeurs, sous la coupole du cirque, au-delà du filet, contribue à les isoler comme dans un autre monde, où ils développent leur puissance librement, on dirait presque sans s'occuper du public. Nous distinguons mal leurs visages; l'étroitesse de la plate-forme où ils se posent, ne leur permet pas les saluts et révérences; est c'est toujours de très bas que leur arrivent les applaudissements.<sup>14</sup>

... the distance of aerialists, under the big circus top and above the net, isolates them as if in a different world, where they develop their power freely, one could say almost without taking note of the audience. We cannot distinguish their faces very well; the narrowness of the platform where they stand, does not allow for salutations and bows; and it is always very far down that that applause is given.<sup>15</sup>

The view that aerialists performed 'in a different world' and that their gender identities seemed to fade while in the air has been more recently elaborated on by aerial historians Peta Tait and Helen Stoddart. According to Tait, the female aerialist at the turn of the twentieth century "transgressed the fixed order of gender behavior imposed on social bodies." While destabilizing limits to the actions and movements of the physical body, she also "rearranged cultural categories of the feminine body."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Helen Stoddart writes that "[t]he aerialist constructs and operates within a fantasy space in which the body is at once made insubstantial and unclassifiable and is thereby liberated from the limitations normally attached to bodies

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<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bost, *Le Cirque et le Music-Hall* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1931), 124.

<sup>15</sup> Author's own translation.

<sup>16</sup> Peta Tait, "Feminine Free Fall: A Fantasy of Freedom," *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996): 30.

physically marked out in terms of their gender or race.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, “the success of aerial performance was a response to a social desire for a physical state which falls away from social categories.”<sup>18</sup>

The view that aerial performances were capable of rendering traditional social and physical categories of the body temporarily insignificant and/or indistinguishable is also at the core of my analyses of Barbette, Charmion, and Coleman. To add more depth to my case studies, I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895–1975) concepts of the carnivalesque and the grotesque and on the liminality concept of Victor Turner (1920–1983), in order to examine how aerial performances functioned as sites of creative resistance, opening up possibilities for a rethinking and redefinition of social categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In my study, I argue that the festive carnivalesque or liminal atmosphere, generally associated with circuses, vaudeville theatres, and airplane exhibition grounds, softened the provocative and risky nature of aerial performances and provided aerialists platforms from which they could challenge social categories without too much criticism. Following Bakhtin and circus historian Bouissac, my argument is based on the notion that popular entertainment between 1880 and 1930 was central to an interrogation of discourses regarding the gendered/sexualized/racialized/classed body and its (physical) abilities. While aerial performances, at first sight, may have seemed “socially peripheral” because of their associations with magic and fantasy, I suggest that they were in fact at the heart of North American and European culture and society between 1880 and 1930.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, 175.

<sup>18</sup> Tait, “Feminine Free Fall,” 34.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture. A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 9; Peter Stallybrass, and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 5.

Aerial performers like Charmion, Barquette, and Coleman created a spectrum of possible interpretations in terms of the abilities of women, decency, sexuality, and so on. Each of them defied gravity in spectacular ways which also seemed to suspend restrictive social categorizations. Female trapeze acrobats like Charmion were as muscular as some of their male counterparts, yet presented themselves as feminine in tights and revealing costumes. Female aviators like Coleman wore manly leather flying jackets with flying cap and goggles covering their hair, masking gendered and racialized categories of the body. Female impersonator Barquette quite literally ‘flew in-between’ genders, playing with categories of feminine grace and male muscularity. More generally, flying speed, when combined with the distance between aerial performers and their audiences, smoothed out gendered and racial physical characteristics, making the aerial body seem unreal and non-human.

The view of the aerial body as ‘non-human’ oscillated between superhuman and freakish or grotesque. This was also a point where meanings associated with the female and male aerialist seemed to diverge. Muscular and virile male aerialists, including trapeze flyers and aviators, were often described by bird- and god-like metaphors, perceived as real-life demonstrations of scientific progress, and even notions of Darwinian evolution.<sup>20</sup> While the female aerial body was not devoid of associations pertaining to progress, it was certainly read in different ways. On the one hand, female aerialists embodied the ideal, perfectly fit, and healthy looking ‘New Woman’<sup>21</sup> and an example of what all women should strive for. Indeed, physically strong trapeze artists like Charmion, for example, were able to justify their unusual competence and muscular

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<sup>20</sup> Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies. Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 3; See also Jane R. Goodall, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> See Janet M. Davis, *Culture and Society Under the American Big Top. The Circus Age* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 82-3.

build in light of the increasing popularity of gymnastic schools for “ladies and girls”<sup>22</sup> and the ‘physical culture craze’ in North America and Europe.<sup>23</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century an increasing number of women were practicing gymnastics and engaging in sport activities.<sup>24</sup> Yet, while functioning as role-models, female aerialists seemed ambiguous and threatening because they transgressed and confused traditional notions of the female body. They appeared both “available and resistant” to the impositions of social categories of gender and femininity,<sup>25</sup> and thus literally ‘flew in-between’ strict social prescriptions regarding the active female body.

### **Contextualizing the Case Studies**

Events at the turn of the twentieth century offer a rich arena and a fertile starting point for my analyses of the aerial performances of Barbette, Coleman, and Charmion. These performers operated in different socio-geographical contexts and time frames and each represented different aspects of a modernizing era. The booming entertainment industries, with the performing body at their center, were emblematic of the social and cultural shifts that characterized American and European societies at the time. Indeed, as Vertinsky points out, “[i]n the leap from the nineteenth

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<sup>22</sup> Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, 135. Emphasis hers; “Muscular womanliness,” Tait writes, “had to be framed in ways that acknowledged impressive physiques while avoiding any obvious implication for transforming everyday relationships.” See Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine. Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997); David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Susanna Hedenborg and Gertrud Pfister, “Ecuyères and “Doing Gender.” Presenting Femininity in a Male Domain – Female Circus Riders 1800-1920,” *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum* 3 (2012), 34.

<sup>25</sup> Tait, “Feminine Free Fall,” 33.

to the twentieth century bodily practices were a potent barometer of cultural transition...<sup>26</sup> The aerial body especially seemed to reflect much of the anxieties of these societies in transition.

As Showalter indicates, the turn of the twentieth century, often referred to as the onset of a modern époque or ‘modernity,’<sup>27</sup> was a socially and culturally turbulent period, full of both social optimism and anxieties about the potential crumbling of traditional values pertaining to race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, an increased emphasis on scientific rationalization, new inventions like electricity, automobile, airplane, cinema, etc., and an apparent desire for more ‘liberated’ and eclectic forms of art, music, and fashion were representative of this “complex passage from Victorian culture to modernism.”<sup>29</sup>

Profound changes around the turn of the twentieth century stemmed (among others things) from shifting definitions of what it meant to be a woman or man. Long-held beliefs about what constituted appropriate female and male sexual identity and behaviour started to falter. The terms ‘feminism’ and ‘homosexuality’ were coined at this time and definitions of what and who was considered sexually deviant (e.g., strippers, prostitutes) gave rise to a number of purity campaigns and increased restrictive legislations and censorship.<sup>30</sup> The turn of the twentieth century was perceived of as a period out of control: a time of anarchy and profound cultural

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<sup>26</sup> Patricia Vertinsky, “Ida Rubinstein: Dancing Decadence and the ‘Art of the Beautiful Pose,’” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* (forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> Though, as Wolff points out, any attempt to date the onset of modernity is arbitrary, the modern period is typically defined in terms of accelerated urbanization and transformations in work, housing and social relations brought about by the rise of industrial capitalism. Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse,” 38.

<sup>28</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements. Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, NY: Temple University Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>30</sup> See also John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

insecurity. Not surprisingly, these social uncertainties intensified a desperate longing for control over everything that seemed to destabilize familiar cultural values and beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

A particular need for control was manifested around the issues of sexuality and gender. According to Foucault, 'sex' became an object of regulation and control. Rooted in eighteenth century Christianity that "tended to make the flesh into the root of all evil,"<sup>32</sup> the turn of the twentieth century invested the body with scientific and medicalized discourses that attempted to regulate and control appropriate sexual behaviour for men, and especially for women. Sex and sexuality no longer referred solely to male and female biological characteristics, they had become cultural constructions, powerful discursive tools.<sup>33</sup> As Smith-Rosenberg notes, the turn of the twentieth century was a "golden age of scientific determinism, of social Darwinism and eugenics."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, not only did sex and gender become objects of scientific scrutiny and regulation, racial differences too were now explained in terms of 'scientifically proven' white supremacy notions by the eugenics movement. In scientists' search for control and attempts to establish the boundaries of 'normal' human sexual behaviour, sexuality became an object of intense study and classification. These scientists or 'sexologists,' Smith-Rosenberg explains, organized "specific sexual acts, fantasies, fetishes, sensations" according to taxonomies that helped them chart degrees of abnormality and perversion.<sup>35</sup>

The body was believed to be a closed energy system and women especially were warned to be careful not to waste this energy on intellectual labour and physical activity. According to

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<sup>31</sup> Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 3, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books Random House, 1980), 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985), 267. See also Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 267-68.

medical beliefs, they had to use this energy to bear children and take care of husband and family. Scientists warned that women who did not marry and comply with heterosexual family values risked becoming mentally ill and hysterical.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, unmarried women who undermined the established system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles were often associated with hysteria. The fear was that they embodied women's potential for increased power and rights.<sup>37</sup>

University-educated and sexually independent 'New Women' seemed to pose a threat as they criticized the insistence of society on marriage as a woman's only option for a fulfilling life, and many of them joined the proliferating women's colleges in search of education and independence. The New Woman was feared because she threatened to become man's equal in education, art, and the home.<sup>38</sup> This 'New' or 'Modern Woman' clearly violated normal gender categories. By blurring male-female boundaries she became viewed as the embodiment of social disorder.<sup>39</sup> Anxieties about men turning into women and women into men, and the effects of this on societal order, were exaggerated and out of proportion. Women may have been able to redefine social categories pertaining to sexuality and gender, but they did not turn around the established patriarchal order. The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century may thus not have been as anarchical as many believed, but rather, as Showalter notes, "the embryonic stirring of a new order."<sup>40</sup>

The seemingly blurred gender boundaries in the late nineteenth century went hand-in-hand with anxieties about women venturing out from the privacy of their homes into the public sphere. Women began to enter the realms of politics, education, labour, and commerce, which,

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<sup>36</sup> Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 10; Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 199-215, 262.

<sup>37</sup> Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 19, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 38; Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 245, 247, 254.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>40</sup> Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 18.

for a long time, had been mostly male bastions. Leisure time expanded and so did recreational possibilities in which women increasingly wanted to participate.<sup>41</sup> Despite anxieties about women stepping outside of the conventional private sphere, the desire of many women for economic independence helped them venture outside the home to make a living. Some of them started careers as entertainers in theaters, in circuses, or, later on, as actresses in movies.<sup>42</sup>

Women who made a living in entertainment industries in North America and/or Europe at the time came from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Davis notes in her work on actresses in the Victorian era that female performers “were recruited from all classes of society,” that their “incomes spanned the highest upper middle-class salary and the lowest working-class wage,” which “made them anomalous among middle-class professionals.”<sup>43</sup> This was equally true for performers who sought employment in the North American and European entertainment industries in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. In the case of aerialists like Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman, their salaries depended on the success and spectacularity of their acts. Their careers were often relatively short as a consequence of the intensely physical and dangerous nature of their professions. Their contracts ended when they were no longer capable of performing spectacular aerial routines, became injured, or lost their lives while performing.

It is in the context of shifting notions of the gendered body and the purity campaigns at the turn of the twentieth century that the performances of Charmion should be understood. Her

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<sup>41</sup> Peiss, “Going Public,” 824. It needs to be stressed that the distinction between private and public could not as easily be made for black women. Like many black men, they typically worked outside of the home to provide for their families.

<sup>42</sup> Angela Woollacott, “Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siècle Popular Stages of London and Paris: Experiment and Advertisement; Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern,” *Women’s History Review* 20 (1) (2011): 174.

<sup>43</sup> Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women. Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 3.

popularity coincided with the image and activities of the aforementioned ‘New Woman’ and women’s suffrage movements in North America and Europe. While each of these women, in their own way, strove for women’s progress and emancipation, female performers like Charmion were often less likely to be seen as a threat to patriarchal values because they operated in a presumably imaginary and fantastic realm. Also, despite apparent similarities between these women, female performers were less likely to have been believed to have political motives of some kind.<sup>44</sup> Instead, as Woollacott points out, their performances, creativity, and bodily display took them into the spotlights and on transnational tours. Their performances were crucial vehicles “through which women shaped racialized and gendered conceptions, and indeed modernity itself.”<sup>45</sup>

Charmion, born in Sacramento, California in 1875, performed primarily in vaudeville theaters in the United States, though she also toured Europe, including England, France and Germany. Her career as an aerialist spanned the years of 1897 and 1910, and her early performances took place in what Davis calls “the Naughty Nineties,” a “decade punctuated by successive conservative backlashes against liberalism in sexual and political realms.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, and as mentioned earlier, sexually titillating performances like those of Charmion were often hot topics of debate among authority figures and moral reformers, sometimes leading to their removal from theater bills because of their supposedly indecent and immoral nature.

In Charmion’s case study, I discuss this push-and-pull between performers, their managers, and moral reformers over sexually transgressive acts, and how Charmion negotiated

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<sup>44</sup> See Catherine Hindson, *Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siècle Popular Stages of London and Paris* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 40.

<sup>45</sup> Woollacott, “Female Performance Practice,” 174.

<sup>46</sup> Tracy C. Davis, “Sex in Public Places: The Zaeo Aquarium Scandal and the Victorian Moral Majority,” *Theatre History Studies* X (1990): 12.

such tensions. I also suggest that unconventional performances of gender and sexuality like those of Charmion helped redefine traditional attitudes towards the female body and its physical capacities. What is also significant in Charmion's case is that she made good use of the developing photography and print industries to promote her act. Not only did she distribute pins and so-called *cartes de visite* with her alluring image to her audiences,<sup>47</sup> she also agreed to be filmed while performing her disrobing act and so became the subject of one of Thomas Edison's early movies around 1901. While photography and cinema at the turn of the twentieth century were lucrative means for performers and their managers to promote their acts and programs, in my study of Charmion, I illustrate how they also contributed to an objectification of the female body as a sexual commodity.

Two years after Charmion had left the entertainment industry in the United States, Barbette made his debut as a circus trapeze performer. Though initially not well known, around 1922 he started to develop his own solo act in which he executed tricks on the high wire, the rings, and the flying trapeze in vaudeville theatres while dressed as a woman and began to receive more newspaper coverage. While Barbette learned his acrobatic skills in the United States, it was in interwar Paris that he became very popular and was praised by a large number of French literary critics and artists like Jean Cocteau and Man Ray. His career as an aerialist ended when he was injured in 1938, though he carried on in his beloved profession as 'aerial choreographer' for various circuses in the United States.

My study of Barbette is set against a background of postwar anxieties in France. It was believed that the atrocities inflicted by World War I on the bodies of male soldiers had weakened

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<sup>47</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness. Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 270. These were postcards with performers' professional pictures.

the French race, and the country as a whole. Barbette's female impersonation act was particularly timely and daring in light of fears of this so-called 'emasculatation' or 'feminization' of men, certainly because cross-dressing also signified homosexuality.<sup>48</sup> Homosexuality in interwar France had a rather ambiguous status. On the one hand, it was suppressed and seen as a sign of weakness, while on the other hand, it flourished underground and in the works of homosexual artists like Jean Cocteau.<sup>49</sup> It was Cocteau who, quite literally, fell in love with Barbette and brought him fame by raving about his gender-ambiguous act. Cocteau's praise was soon followed by a large number of reviews by French art critics who commented on the beauty of Barbette's act and the ingenuity of his gender transformation. I suggest that Barbette's performance both embodied and played upon contemporary anxieties about the degeneration of the French race in a postwar context. His case study also illustrates the fluidity and changeable characteristics of the meanings of gender and sexuality during this time.

Barbette's success as a female impersonator was, among many other things, the result of the opportunities offered by the entertainment industries in Paris, where audiences seemed more receptive to unconventional gender-bending performances than those in the United States. Entertainment in Paris also seemed to be recognized as more central to the fabric of society than in the United States, where it was seen more as a form of 'low' culture. In fact, both trapeze flying and aviation had their roots in France. It was the young Jules Léotard who had started to experiment with trapezes in his father's gymnasium and became credited with inventing trapeze flying when he performed in public in the 1860s.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> See for example Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes. Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Galignant, "A Very Extraordinary Performance," *Spirit of the Times; A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage*, Jan 21, 1860, 29, 50.

Like Barquette, who owed a large extent of his success to the artistic atmosphere of Paris, Bessie Coleman must also be understood in the context of the increased interest of women in aviation in the 1920s, the pioneering role of France in this industry and its welcoming attitudes towards black individuals at the time. While the Wright brothers were credited for making the first successful powered flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina in 1903, French inventors had also been experimenting with aircraft alongside their colleagues in America and other aviation enthusiasts in Europe. It was in 1905 in France that the first organization in charge of aviation guidelines was established: the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* (FAI).<sup>51</sup> The first woman credited to fly an airplane and gain a pilot license in 1910 was French Raymonde de Laroche (1882–1919). Many other French aviation pioneers, including Louis Blériot (1872–1936), the first aviator to fly across the English Channel in 1909, and Henry Farman (1874–1958), would produce commercial aircraft that were known for their good quality and used by leading aviators of the time.<sup>52</sup>

Bessie Coleman's career took off around the same time Barquette debuted in Paris. Her interest in aviation came at a time when many male pilots, who began their careers during World War I, were out of jobs and performed airplane stunts and acrobatics for curious crowds to make a living. These 'barnstormers,' as they were called, were mostly men, though many women were involved both as aviators and as aerial acrobats. They performed acrobatics on the wings of planes while in flight, or while hanging on a trapeze or ladder from the underside of the aircraft.

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<sup>51</sup> The *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale*, established in France in 1905, was the official organization that mandated the first air safety guidelines in 1910 for France, the United States and sixteen member nations. It still exists today and governs the eligibility guidelines for acquisition of an international license, and validates flying records. See Freyberg, Elizabeth Amelia Hadley, *Bessie Coleman. The Brownskin Lady Bird* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 82.

<sup>52</sup> For more information on the history of aviation in France (as well as the close connections between French and Belgian aviators and industries), see for example my earlier work: Amey Thomas, Bieke Gils and Pascal Delheye, "Belgian Pioneers in Rally Racing and Aerial Sports during the Belle Époque," *The International Journal for the History of Sport* 28 (2) (2011): 205-39.

Lillian Boyer (1901–1989), for example, was a wing walker who executed daring stunts on flying aircraft, as well as automobile-to-plane transfers and parachute jumps in the 1920s.<sup>53</sup>

While Bessie Coleman did not seem to have engaged in wing walking, she performed figure eights and loops with her plane and occasionally executed parachute jumps. It is in the context of stunt flying in the 1920s that Coleman’s aviation career also needs to be understood.

Coleman would become the first black female aviator, though not without the necessary challenges. When she could not find a flying school in the United States that would accept her as a student, she turned to France. It was in June 1921 that she received her pilot license from the FAI after passing her exam at a flying school in Le Crotoy. Though newspapers indicated that while in Europe she flew in France, Germany, and Switzerland (among other countries), her major aerial exhibitions took place in various locations in the United States. Coleman died under controversial circumstances in an airplane accident in 1926.

Coleman’s case must be viewed in light of racial segregation/discrimination in the United States, the booming aviation industry in the West, and France’s more welcoming attitude towards black Americans, enabling a small number of individuals like her to gain a foothold and make a living in the entertainment industry. Paris in the 1920s was a major hub for art and entertainment and often associated with “colour-blindness.”<sup>54</sup> Many of the large numbers of black soldiers the United States had sent during World War I (especially in 1917 and 1918), had remained in France after the war because of violent racism in their home country. Instead of the greater acceptance they had hoped for upon returning home given their contributions to the military, tensions between blacks and whites in America escalated in 1919 and gave way to what

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<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMDDCnHUo3c> for video footage of Boyer’s wing walking stunts [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>54</sup> See For example Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry L. Gates, Jr., “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes, *Critical Inquiry* 24 (4) (1998): 903-34.

was called ‘the Red Summer,’ a period of massive riots in many cities. According to Stovall, these postwar riots, as well as an upsurge in lynching, were mostly instigated by white vigilantes who feared the (presumably) newly assertive black population. These and other incidents reinforced the belief of many black Americans in the contrast between a tolerant France and a racist United States and contributed to the rise of a black expatriate community in interwar Paris.<sup>55</sup>

While racial discrimination in Paris was not as obvious as in the United States, where segregation laws applied to most entertainment venues, interwar Paris was by no means as colourblind as many liked to believe. France’s tolerance of black Americans did not stem from a belief in racial equality, but mostly from racist views on black women and men as ‘born entertainers,’ and sexually available. As Stovall writes; “the vogue for blackness and colonialism so characteristic of interwar France, a vogue with a powerful sensual theme, tended to surround black American women and men with an allure of tropical sexuality.”<sup>56</sup> Also, the black expatriate community formed such a small minority that it was not perceived as a major danger to French notions of racial purity.<sup>57</sup>

While entertainment was for the most part a segregated activity in the United States, during the 1910s and ’20s the lines between elite and mass culture became more ambiguous and people from different classes, races, and sexes began to interact in the public realm.<sup>58</sup> Interest in African American art, music, dance, and theater grew amongst the white population, and a system of patronage, which spurred the phenomenon of the ‘Harlem Renaissance,’ originated in

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<sup>55</sup> Tyler Stovall, “Gender, Race, and Miscegenation. African Americans in Jazz Age Paris,” in *The Modern Woman Revisited. Paris Between the Wars*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer, 21-33 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 25.

New York.<sup>59</sup> So, while black performers were excluded from many white entertainment venues, theater stages and other entertainment spaces became key sites for the expression of black female and male identities, the circulation of expressive forms,<sup>60</sup> and the intermingling of individuals from different racial backgrounds. It was this increasingly open attitude towards racial intermingling in the United States and the opportunities provided by the French aviation industry that helped Bessie Coleman establish her career.

The case study of Coleman uncovers anxieties about black performers entering into a white field of endeavour. Analysis of the experiences of black individuals like Coleman demonstrates ways in which blacks negotiated discriminatory practices and sought out their personal aspirations in North American and European entertainment industries. It must be noted, however, that while there was a considerable group of white female aviators in the United States at the time, Coleman's career was rather unique since she was the only black female aviator in the 1920s and does not seem to have interacted with other female aviators of her time.

## **Thesis Structure**

In this chapter, I have sketched a preview to my study by providing insight into the socio-historical contexts in which the case studies of Charmion, Barbette, and Bessie Coleman must be understood. I have also referred to the concepts of Bakhtin and Turner - carnivalesque, the grotesque and liminality- that inform the theoretical framework of my study. In Chapter II, I elaborate on these concepts and point out intersections between Bakhtin and Turner's thinking about the possible meanings and functions of carnivalesque or liminal spaces and illustrate how

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 5, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 5.

these thinkers' concepts can be applied to aerial performances. Complemented with current-day understandings about agency by authors like McNay and Butler, I illustrate how the ideas of Bakhtin and Turner regarding societies and bodies in a continuous process of 'becoming' provide useful insights for my study on the history of aerialists.

In the second part of Chapter II, I provide insight into the methodological underpinnings of my thinking, emphasizing the importance of exploring categories like race, class, gender, and sexuality, both simultaneously and in relation to one another, rather than separately. I discuss challenges faced when attempting to reconstruct and understand the life stories and motives of performers when they did not leave much of a trace, other than a few newspaper reviews, photographs, and in some cases, film footage. Biographical case studies, as I illustrate, provide nevertheless useful avenues for exploring the life and work of performers like Barquette, Coleman, and Charmion, even though my reconstructions of their careers and performances are incomplete and leave much to the imagination. At the end of the chapter, I address and reflect upon the specific source materials used for each performer's analysis, setting the stage for the introduction of their case studies in Chapters III, IV, and V.

In Chapter III, entitled "Flying, Flirting and Flexing: Charmion's Trapeze Act, Sexuality, and Physical Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," I study Charmion's career as trapeze artist and strongwoman, suggesting a reading of her controversial performances as both liberating and restricting of women's agency at the time. Her clever use of the developing photography, print, and cinema industries contributed to her popularity as an icon of female health and beauty, though also encouraged an objectification of the female body as a sexual commodity.

Chapter IV, entitled “Le Numéro Barbette: Destabilizing Gender on the High Wire, the Rings, and the Flying Trapeze,” provides insight into Barbette’s controversial aerial performances as a female impersonator and suggests that his gender-bending acts allowed his spectators to imagine different gender possibilities without fear of repercussion. Indeed, since his performances took place in a carnivalesque/liminal atmosphere where, as Cocteau has noted, “truth ha[d] no currency,” and “anything natural ha[d] no value,”<sup>61</sup> his physically and socially daring performances were not immediately perceived as threatening, but were instead welcomed with much praise and applause.

In Chapter V, “Bessie Coleman: “The Only Race Aviatrix in the World,” ”I have set Coleman’s story against a background of the booming aviation industries in the United States and Europe in the 1920s. I suggest that Coleman’s aerial performances on the intersection of changing gender, race, and class definitions were unique - though emblematic of African Americans’ struggle to enter aviation, a white field of endeavour. Coleman’s clever play with categories of racial and gendered identity was effective in establishing her career as a well-respected and skilled aviation pioneer.

In my last concluding chapter, I revisit theoretical and contextual connections made throughout my study, while suggesting new avenues for future research. I draw parallels between my study and current events, in which I see aspects of my study reflected and suggest that the topic of aerial performances in the past as well as in the present leaves much more to be discovered and explored.

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<sup>61</sup> Jean Cocteau, “Le Numéro Barbette,” Extrait de *la Nouvelle Revue Française*, July 1st (1926): 35-36. Translation by Francis Steegmuller. Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau A Biography* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company (1970): 366.

## Chapter II: Framing and Tracing the Aerial Body

### Framing

The flier momentarily acts out the desire of physical bodies to defy the gravity of social categories, before returning to familiar territory when he or she halts the free fall and reinstates gender identity and the material order of bodies. Physical bodies in circus are viewed within the spectator's perception of physical freedoms which extend beyond social categories.

Peta Tait, "Feminine Free Fall," 33-34.

The importance of performance and its centrality within culture, as advocated by Paul Bouissac in 1976,<sup>1</sup> has been explored by authors such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and Victor Turner (1920–1983). Both men were inspired by folklorist writers like François Rabelais (c.1494–1553) and Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957) and their works were published around the same time. Turner's book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (1969) appeared only one year after Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* had been translated to English (1968). Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and Turner's concept of liminality, as I will demonstrate, have much in common and are particularly appropriate for generating a more detailed understanding of the aerial performances discussed in my study. While these theorists did not explicitly address gender, race or sexuality in their works, I will show how their thinking nevertheless proves useful in analyzing the racialized/gendered/sexualized and/or classed aerial body between 1880 and 1930.

### Introducing Bakhtin

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and novelist whose controversial work produced in the Soviet Union in the 1920s did not receive much

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture. A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 9.

attention until it was (re)discovered in the 1960s. His writing about carnival is known primarily through his book *Rabelais and His World*. In this work Bakhtin addresses ideas and writings of French Renaissance novelist François Rabelais (c. 1494–1553) and uses them to express his own dissatisfaction with the autocratic Russian regime in the 1920s and '30s. That his book was not allowed to be published until 1965<sup>2</sup> was not surprising since it was believed to be “a hymn to the common man,”<sup>3</sup> an advocacy on behalf of the lower classes in society, a celebration of the unofficial, and a mocking of authority. As Holquist points out, *Rabelais and His World* was “an attempt to show the ways in which the Russian revolution had lost touch with its roots in the people and a valiant effort to bring the folk with its corrosive laughter back into the work of politics....”<sup>4</sup> While *Rabelais and His World* was not translated into English until 1968,<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin’s ideas regarding carnival and the carnivalesque are now used widely in various academic disciplines, including medieval history, art, literature, and feminist studies.<sup>6</sup>

The carnivalesque in Bakhtin’s work historically refers to the temporary suspension of social hierarchies, as was characteristic of medieval carnivals. During carnival, for example, the minstrels would typically mock the king. These inversions of polite society were accepted only within the confinements of a particular time and place (the period of carnival) and were not tolerated outside of that. In other words, society was expected to return to its original hierarchies

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Holquist, “Prologue,” In Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, xiii-xxiii (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1984), xxi

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>5</sup> Krystyna Pomorska, “Foreword,” In Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, vii-xii (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1984), vii.

<sup>6</sup> I would also say that in the particular domains of sport and gender history/sociology, Bakhtin has yet to receive the attention he deserves.

and social conventions once the period of carnival was over. Carnival was thus associated with fantasy, though there was always the fear that this ‘utopian’ social model might become reality.<sup>7</sup>

Underlying much of Bakhtin’s thinking is his concept of ‘dialogism.’ Simply stated, dialogism refers to the idea that it is only through dialogue or a sharing of texts (also often referred to as ‘intertextuality’<sup>8</sup>) — that knowledge can be generated and (re)shaped:<sup>9</sup>

...we are actually dealing with someone else’s words more often than with our own. Either we remember and respond to someone else’s words ... ; or we represent them in order to argue, disagree, or defend them ... ; or finally, we carry on an inner dialogue, responding to someone’s words .... In each case someone else’s speech makes it possible to generate our own and thus becomes an indispensable factor in the creative power of language.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, according to Bakhtin, we cannot exist outside of dialogical relations. It is through dialogue, be it speech, gestures, performances, symbols, or art that we understand and shape our reality.

Dialogism also has another function: that of resisting authoritative discourses. Dialogism, Bakhtin argued, opposes authoritarian monologues that are characteristic of those in power in society.<sup>11</sup> Dialogue provides marginalized groups with a means through which dominant discourses can be challenged. Moreover, Bakhtin also pointed out that although those in authority often attempted to avoid association or dialogue with those in the ‘lower strata’ at all cost, this was virtually impossible. As Stallybrass and White explain,

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<sup>7</sup> See Neil Ravenscroft and Paul Gilchrist, “Spaces of Transgression: Governance, Discipline and Reworking the Carnavalesque,” *Leisure Studies* 28 (1) (2009): 45, 35-49. See also Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> The term intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s and derived from Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism and polyphony. See Joan W. Scott, “Feminist Reverberations,” *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (3) (2002): 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Kay Halasek, “Feminism and Bakhtin: Dialogic Reading in the Academy,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22 (1) (1992): 68.

<sup>10</sup> Pomorksa, “Foreword,” ix.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

the 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other... but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central.... This is evidenced by the history of representation of 'low' entertainment and the carnivalesque...<sup>12</sup>

### *Carnival and the Carnavalesque*

Carnival, a festive European tradition generally associated with the Middle Ages, was a period of time during which societal hierarchies were suspended or inverted, providing all social classes (at least in theory) with the opportunity to mingle and interact. Carnival provided a space for dialogue between high and low, a space where both could behave in ways that were not usually acceptable outside of the time of carnival. In addition, carnival provided a platform for marginalized classes to mock those in power and to suggest new possibilities in terms of the organization of society and its categories that were normally taken for granted.

“As opposed to the official feast,” Bakhtin explained,

the carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.<sup>13</sup>

The temporary suspension of hierarchies created a special kind of communication that was impossible in everyday life. Characteristic of this new way of communicating was “market place speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact

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<sup>12</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 5-6. Italics are original.

<sup>13</sup> Mikail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984 (1968)), 10.

with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.”<sup>14</sup>  
The period of carnival meant “a second life, a second world of folk culture, ... a parody of the extra-carnival life, a ‘world inside out.’ ”<sup>15</sup>

A “world inside out” was also what the popular entertainment industries offered its audiences between 1880 and 1930.<sup>16</sup> Circuses, vaudeville theaters and open-air fairs were spaces in which people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds could mingle and interact. These spaces were considered separate from everyday reality and were generally associated with fantasy. “Full of ambivalent laughter,”<sup>17</sup> these spaces permitted performers to mock the “official culture”<sup>18</sup> and criticize societal hierarchies and (constraining) ideologies. In one way, these spaces presented an ideal world, a utopia in which total freedom was permitted.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, however, this sense of freedom was “accompanied by the fear that this potential subversion [of hierarchies] may be generalized,”<sup>20</sup> and thus be extended beyond the realm of the fantastic into everyday reality.

According to Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, it is naïve to think of Bakhtin’s carnival as a space in which ‘total freedom’ was permitted. While this may have *seemed* the case, carnival, as well as popular entertainment in North America and Europe between 1880 and 1930, functioned more as a means for those in power to maintain control over practices that were considered deviant, than an actual celebration of unrestricted freedoms. Allowing deviant practices within

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>16</sup> Of course parallels between the concept of the carnivalesque and today’s forms of popular entertainment (e.g. sport games, theater, ballet, ...), social ‘deviant’ festivities (e.g. Halloween), or social revolts (e.g. the 2013 Vancouver Winter Olympics riots) can be drawn and studied.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Carnival and the Carnavalesque,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture. A Reader*, ed. John Storey, 250-259 (London: Prentice Hall, 1994), 256.

<sup>18</sup> Pomorksa, “Foreword,” x.

<sup>19</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Bouissac, *Circus and Culture*, 8.

well-defined spaces such as theaters, circuses and open-air fairs, provided spectators and performers with a sense of freedom. However, this freedom was indeed rather artificial because it seldom led to (political) change outside of the carnivalesque space.<sup>21</sup>

Though entertainment venues offered platforms for transgressive behaviours, “the license to transgress” was always “a bounded license.”<sup>22</sup> In the context of this study, aerialists constantly had to balance their personal aspirations with societal norms in the ways in which they constructed their performances. If they wanted to be provocative, they had to be careful not to be too transgressive and ensure they worked within the existing ideological framework that stipulated ‘appropriate’ behaviour and performance. At the core of Bakhtin’s carnival is thus “a hegemonic struggle for the positioning and repositioning of moral codes,”<sup>23</sup> fuelled by a constant interplay and tension between transgressive and disciplinary practices. Such tensions also had to be negotiated by aerialists like Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman.

### *The Grotesque Body*

Also central to Bakhtin’s work on the carnivalesque is his discussion of “grotesque realism” and more specifically, the grotesque body. The “bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete”<sup>24</sup> body, celebrated in *Rabelais and His World*, represented “the people” and stood in sharp contrast with the “classical,” “strictly completed, finished” body representing the bourgeois society. Unlike the grotesque body of the people, all signs of the classical body’s “unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its

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<sup>21</sup> See *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40- 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 9.

protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities ... smoothed out, its apertures closed.”<sup>25</sup>

Following Bakhtin's description, both female and male aerialists' elegant and muscular bodies do not seem to fit within the category of the grotesque, but appear more aligned with the classical body ideal. Contemporary associations of the aerialist's body with perfect muscularity and strength, physical health, and societal progress were indeed not uncommon,<sup>26</sup> especially where male aerialists were concerned. Male trapeze flyers and aviators between 1880 and 1930 embodied masculine virility in a time of strong anxieties about the seeming crumbling of the Victorian male-female binary and the 'emasculatation' of men as a feared consequence.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, it was harder for female aerialists, and women in general, to escape associations with the grotesque. Since classical Greece, as Smith-Rosenberg argues, men had insisted that man represented the mind and woman the body, man the creative principle, woman the reproductive impulse, man the “heaven-born aspect of human nature, woman its earth-bound component.”<sup>28</sup> The similar Christian medieval view of the female body as earth-bound and defined by its unique reproductive capacities was also at the heart of Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque:

“Downward” is earth, “upward” is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts) .... Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies. Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

<sup>27</sup> See for example, Angela Dalle Vacche, “Femininity in Flight. Androgyny and Gynandry in Early Silent Italian Cinema,” In *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diana Negra (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985), 258.

<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

In Bakhtin's mind, the grotesque body with its ability to conceive, to grow, and to renew what was old<sup>30</sup> was entirely positive. It was only after the Renaissance, he wrote, that the grotesque became misunderstood as "a purely negative phenomenon"<sup>31</sup> and began to be associated with the marginal and the low - the direct opposite of the classical body.<sup>32</sup>

Mary Russo, in *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995), provides a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between the aerial and grotesque female body. Drawing on Bakhtin's work, she argues that the view of the female aerialist as deviant and grotesque stems from her status as entertainer and risk taker. Meanwhile, she also suggests that risk taking was the only possible strategy for women to survive in the aerial entertainment circuit around the turn of the twentieth century. Using the example of female stunt flyers in the early decades of the aviation entertainment industry (1910s–20s), Russo explains how stunt flying became associated with female deviance.

In the early days of flying (1920s) many women worked as stunt flyers and airplane demonstrators for manufacturers. Their important role as promoters of the aviation industry, however, diminished when aviation became professionalized and women were relegated to its margins. They were excluded from positions as transport and military pilots.<sup>33</sup> Although stunt flying was constitutive of early flying practice and lay at the basis of professional flying in later years, stunting became an abnormal and increasingly liminal activity within the realms of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>31</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph J. Corn, "Making Flying 'Thinkable': Women Pilots and the Selling of Aviation, 1927-1940," *American Quarterly* 31 (4) (1979): 556-57.

flying.<sup>34</sup> Women in these positions became disparaged, Russo explains, because “they were increasingly a sign of the counterfeit, exhibitionistic, unprofessional pilot.”<sup>35</sup>

While female stunt flyers were intriguing to audiences and drew large crowds, according to Russo, they remained suspect. This becomes apparent when she explains that the word “stunt:”

bifurcates the notion of the extraordinary into 1) a model of female exceptionalism (stunting) ... and 2) the double, dwarfed, distorted (stunted) creatures of the sideshow which stand in as the representatives of a well-known cultural representation of the female body as monstrous and lacking ...<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the female aviator was celebrated in her role as stunt flier, but was not allowed to fly professionally because of her alleged nervous, biologically unfit – and thus ‘stunted’- characteristics. For example, references to her ‘inherent’ nervous nature, especially during menstruation, and her consequent inability to steer an airplane, were not uncommonly used to keep women away from jobs as airline pilots.<sup>37</sup> The trapeze performer’s extraordinary skills were also admired and celebrated as long as grotesquely muscular and physically strong females did not threaten to become accepted as ‘normal’ in society.

Russo also notes that stunting or stunt flying was (and still is) a tactic for used by groups or individuals in risky situations in which a pre-conceived strategy was not possible. Stunting, she argues, belonged “to the improvisational, to the realm of what was possible in the moment.”<sup>38</sup> Russo’s perspective of stunting thus suggests that the activity provided a means of ‘survival’ for women aspiring to be involved in the male dominated entertainment industry.

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 23.

<sup>37</sup> See George Palmer Putnam, *Soaring Wings. A Biography of Amelia Earhart* (New York 1939), 159-160. See also M. Andrews, “Daredevils and Ladybirds: Gender and the Aviation Industry Before World War II,” *Essays in Economic and Business History* 13 (1995): 277-288.

<sup>38</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 22.

Importantly, similar to Bakhtin's carnival, it also suggests a temporary and ambivalent agency confined to a well-defined time and place and only possible provided that the aerialist did not fail in her dangerous performance.

The grotesque, as theorized by Bakhtin, is useful for my study because of its main focus on deviant bodies engaging in deviant practices from a place of creative resistance. Following Bakhtin and later theorists such as Russo, the grotesque body signifies both "debasement"<sup>39</sup> and possibilities for growth and renewal. It implies a body that is oppressed but that is also able to challenge this oppression in creative ways. Moreover, the carnival is not "merely oppositional and reactive,"<sup>40</sup> but entails a creative manipulation of dominant ideologies and restrictions by turning them upside down and by making them the objects of mockery and desire.

Using a Bakhtinian framework also poses challenges. Like any other theory, Bakhtin's thinking regarding the carnivalesque and the grotesque has its flaws and limitations and requires modifications when used in a different socio-historical setting than the one in which it originated. Many of Bakhtin's critics have pointed to his glaring omission of women's voices, to his failure to address gender or race in all of his work, and to his frequent insinuations of the female body as inherently grotesque. In what follows, I will demonstrate how Bakhtin's seemingly antifeminist stance can be turned into a workable rationale suitable for my study on the gendered and/or racialized and/or classed and/or sexualized aerial body.

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<sup>39</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 240.

<sup>40</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 62.

## *Bakhtin and the Omission of Women's Voices*

Most feminist critiques of the work of Bakhtin are directed towards his notion of dialogism and his idea that under no circumstances monologue is possible. “We are constituted in polyphony,” according to Bakhtin, meaning that “we have all inherited languages from many different sources,” making any “attempt to rule out all voices but “my own” ... at best an artificial pretense.”<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin’s opinion on the impossibility of monologue and his claim that dialogue is a necessary condition for socially marginalized groups to resist and challenge dominant discourses are contradictory, and even ironic, when considered from a feminist viewpoint. At no point in his work does Bakhtin seem to consider the possibility that women’s experiences and opinions may be different from that of men, let alone important enough to mention. Particularly with regard to *Rabelais and His World*, Wayne Booth points out that, not only are there no significant female characters, but “even the passages most favorable to women are spoken by and addressed to men who are the sole arbiters of the question.”<sup>42</sup>

It is not that Bakhtin was unaware that his work was open to feminist critiques. This becomes clear when, in *Rabelais and His World*, he defends Rabelais (c. 1494–1553) — the French Renaissance writer on whose work Bakhtin’s novel is based — for not taking a feminist stance. Best known for his book *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (16th century), Rabelais used carnivalesque inversions to express a utopian longing and freedom from authority. Depictions of women in his work involved grotesque images and metaphors emphasizing the reproductive capacities and biological characteristics of women. Instead of suggesting that *Gargantua and*

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<sup>41</sup> Wayne C. Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1) (1982): 51.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

*Pantagruel* could have been advanced by ‘allowing’ women into the dialogue, Bakhtin made the same mistake as Rabelais and adopted much of his thinking without criticism.

Bakhtin defended Rabelais for not taking a stance in the *querelle des femmes*, a dispute that raged between 1542 and 1550 among French poets, writers, and philosophers about the position of women in society.<sup>43</sup> Most of the works produced in light of this dispute were hostile against women — if not misogynist. Rabelais did not want to join the “Gallic tradition,”<sup>44</sup> which “saw in women the incarnation of sin, the temptation of flesh,”<sup>45</sup> nor the “Platonist” tradition that exalted womanhood.<sup>46</sup> Although, according to Bakhtin, Rabelais was more aligned with the tradition that defended women, he did not join that camp because “he did not believe that this new philosophy could survive in the crucible of laughter without being burned up.”<sup>47</sup>

Bakhtin also did not regard views that saw women as either “related to the material bodily lower stratum,” “the principle that gives birth,” “the womb,”<sup>48</sup> or “the inexhaustible vessel of conception,”<sup>49</sup> as problematic. These views were “in no way hostile to women,”<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin claimed, and were entirely justifiable since laughter through mockery was fundamental to the popular comic tradition in which Rabelais wrote.<sup>51</sup> That Bakhtin did not see any problems with such depictions is probably most obvious when he suggests that the “Kerch terracotta ... figurines of senile pregnant hags”<sup>52</sup> are excellent examples of what the grotesque entails:

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<sup>43</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 239. See also Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the “Querelle des Femmes,” 1400-1789,” *Signs* 8 (1) (1982): 4-28.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque .... They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body.<sup>53</sup>

Even if we agree with Bakhtin that images of the female body as grotesque can be justified when seen in a context of “ambivalent laughter,”<sup>54</sup> depictions of women, such as that of the pregnant hag, that are “loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and aging,”<sup>55</sup> are too ambivalent to be neutral. In addition, the question still remains: Who laughs and “who are those to whom the defense is being written, who are those who are healed by this laughter?”<sup>56</sup> As soon as we raise these questions, Booth indicates,

we see that just as the original *querelle des femmes* was conducted largely by men, accusers and champions, this exoneration of carnival laughter is conducted by and for men, ignoring or playing down the evidence that the book itself largely excludes women. A man of great genius wrote a book offering a rich imaginative experience to men of sensitive and liberal spirit, and a male critic of great genius wrote a defense of that great book, addressed to other men.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, in sharp contrast with Bakhtin’s own claims regarding resistance through dialogue, is the unsurprising discovery that the works of both Rabelais and Bakhtin are male monologues.

The omission of the female voice by Bakhtin, and thus his failure to “incorporate the social relations of gender,”<sup>58</sup> may not seem unusual in light of the timeframe in which the novel was written. The lack of women’s perspectives is not strange if we view Bakhtin in the light of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 25, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Bakhtin, “Carnival and the Carnavalesque,” 256.

<sup>55</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 63.

<sup>56</sup> Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation,” 63.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 63.

Western literary criticism, which has seldom acknowledged separate female voices, Booth notes. Nor is this omission strange in the light of the almost exclusively male criticism in the Soviet Union during Bakhtin's lifetime.<sup>59</sup> Objections based on an appeal to historical placement, however, are quite troublesome.<sup>60</sup> Although historical placement arguments may be informative in terms of historical context, to use such arguments is to ignore, and simultaneously justify, women's absence from literary works in past and present.

If Bakhtin's work is indeed troublesome because it lacks the voices and presence of women, how can its use be justified in a study that emphasizes women's aerial performances? How can I use this work to promote feminist thinking<sup>61</sup> without having to excuse him? The answer lies, as several feminists would argue, in Bakhtin's work itself, especially in his thinking about dialogism. As Heikinen points out, several feminists have embraced Bakhtin's dialogism "for its ability to provide a platform for marginalized feminine voices to be heard above the din of the monologic, authoritative, and hegemonic voice."<sup>62</sup> Also, the suggestion of Bakhtin to read texts from an "internally persuasive" perspective,<sup>63</sup> a reading against the grain and against dominant ideologies, has encouraged feminist researchers to make new meaning out of male authoritative texts.<sup>64</sup>

In his discussion about the dialogic aspect of language and its ever-changing nature, Bakhtin suggests that we should appropriate the words of other people and make them our own:

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<sup>59</sup> Booth, "Freedom of Interpretation," 54.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>61</sup> See also Halasek, "Feminism and Bakhtin," 65.

<sup>62</sup> Denise Heikinen, "Is Bakhtin a Feminist or Just Another Dead White Male? A Celebration of Feminist Possibilities in Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*," in *A Dialogue of Voices. Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow, 114-127 (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 114.

<sup>63</sup> Halasek, "Feminism and Bakhtin," 70.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.<sup>65</sup>

It is precisely this that I have attempted to do in my study on female aerialists. I have taken Bakhtin's words — specifically his ideas regarding the carnivalesque and the grotesque body — and made them my own by transposing them onto a different socio-historical context and by writing on behalf of women whose histories have remained largely unexplored. By providing a useful paradigm of resistance through both language (dialogism) and deviant bodily conduct (the carnivalesque/grotesque body), Bakhtin does not need to be excused. A more productive approach, as Halasek also suggests, is to continue building on the ideas of Bakhtin and enrich them by incorporating that which is lacking. Thus, using a Bakhtinian framework while accounting for women's voices and experiences will contribute to making "the monologue dialogic."<sup>66</sup>

Since Bakhtin does not discuss possible gender or race-related struggles, his thinking may not seem appropriate for examining the ways in which the female body, and especially the black female body, was represented in modernity. One could indeed argue that using a 'white European male' framework to examine the lives of women of colour, whose histories have been greatly affected by European colonization, is controversial and will only reassert unequal power relations. However, I see value in addressing the gaps in Bakhtin's work while taking his

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<sup>65</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981 (1930s)), 293-94.

<sup>66</sup> Halasek, "Feminism and Bakhtin," 73.

thinking to another level. There seems to be something quite productive about not just taking an author's words for granted but to modify and appropriate his ideas to suit one's own arguments.<sup>67</sup>

I will now turn to Turner whose concept of liminality is closely related to Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque.

### **Victor Turner and Liminality**

Victor Turner (1920–1983) was a British cultural anthropologist. He and his wife Edith Turner are probably best known for their ethnographic studies of the Ndembu tribe in Zambia. Their work on ritual, religion, and performance has been, and continues to be, used in a wide variety of contexts and academic disciplines. Victor Turner's conceptualization of liminality, originally set within a context of tribal rituals, is especially useful for my study on female aerialists.

The term 'liminality,' derived from the Latin word *limen* meaning 'threshold,' was originally coined in 1960 by French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep.<sup>68</sup> With the 'liminal phase' he referred to the middle stage of the three stages he thought were characteristic of tribal *rites de passage*; separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation. He defined *rites de passage* as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age."<sup>69</sup> Applied to the transitioning of adolescents into adulthood in the context of tribal rituals, the first stage refers to "the separation from antecedent mundane life," where the adolescent is sent on a (spiritual) journey. The second stage is that of liminality, "a betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene." For example, the "neophytes," (referring to

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>68</sup> Graham St. John (ed.), *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 4.

<sup>69</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistructure* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), 94.

individuals in a liminal state) were often taken to secluded places, like forests and caves away from their tribes. The third phase then is the “reaggregation to the daily world,’ ” and thus a return to the familiar structure of the tribe and entrance into adulthood.<sup>70</sup>

Liminal spaces, according to Turner, are not always necessarily secluded; they can also exist in public spaces, especially in performative spaces like carnival, festivals, theater, etc. In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*, in which he elaborates on Van Gennep’s concept of liminality by applying it to different domains including performance, Turner wrote:

One of the best ways of learning by experiences is through our performative genres. In our daily life, social dramas, whether in small groups or large, continue to emerge – offspring of both culture and nature – but the cultural ways we have of becoming aware of them – rituals, stage plays, carnivals, anthropological monographs, pictorial exhibitions, films – vary with culture, climate, technology, group history, and the demography of individual genius.<sup>71</sup>

Most of these cultural performances, he said, belong to a culture’s “subjunctive” mood, referring to “that mood of a verb used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility, etc., rather than to state an actual fact, as the mood of *were*, in ‘if I *were* you.’ ” Ritual, carnival, festival, theater, film, and similar performative genres, Turner asserted, clearly possess many of these attributes.<sup>72</sup>

This “subjunctive mood,” is also characteristic of what Bakhtin has defined as periods of carnival. Carnival, according to Turner, can be seen as a public ritual that has its liminality in public spaces like “the village greens or the squares of the city that are ... ritually transformed.”

In line with Bakhtin’s thinking, Turner wrote:

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<sup>70</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and the Performative Genre,” in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle/ Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Inc: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1984), 21.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

It is as though everything is switched into the subjunctive mood for a privileged period of time – the time, for example, of Mardi Gras or the Carnival Carême. Public liminality is governed by public subjunctivity. For a while almost anything goes: taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, the low are exalted and the mighty abased; indicative mood behavior is reversed. Yet there are some controls: crime is still illicit; drunken bodies may be moved off the sidewalks. And ritual forms still constrain the order and often the style of ritual events.<sup>73</sup>

What Turner perhaps stressed more explicitly than Bakhtin was that even though hierarchies were lifted for a certain period of time, this did not necessarily mean that other structures or means to keep order were not in place - here referring to the fact that crime would still be punished and drunken bodies removed from sidewalks.

The idea that liminal spaces or liminal time periods lift certain restrictions usually imposed within an existing framework of authority and/or ritual is particularly useful for examining entertainment and aerial performances between 1880 and 1930. While aerialists stretched the boundaries of generally accepted ideas regarding femininity, masculinity, gender, sexuality and/or race, they would still have to comply with certain rules imposed on them by their managers or the owners of the venues in which they performed. Nevertheless, as Turner indicates, liminality in performative spaces and genres could provide “the scene and time for the emergence of a society’s deepest values,” and “may also be the venue and occasion for the most radical skepticism ...”<sup>74</sup> While ordinary life is itself a performance, as Goffman and others have noted (we play roles, occupy statuses, play games with one another, don and doff many masks), liminal performances, Turner wrote, are different:

They are more about the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures, than about putting them on and keeping them on. Antistructures are performed, too. But, still within the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 22.

liminal frame, new subjunctive, even ludic, structures are then generated, with their own grammars and lexicons of roles and relationships...”<sup>75</sup>

In other words, liminal performances, like aerial performances, provide arenas for the emergence of new ideas and new modes of expression, which may or may not have been adopted outside of the liminal spaces in which they originated.

As is the case with Bakhtin, Turner’s concept of liminality is also not without criticism. While the liminal (like the carnivalesque) space can be viewed as a space of creative resistance which suits my study on aerial performers rather well, the view of liminality as a space of possibilities cannot necessarily be applied to all those who are considered ‘at the margins’ of society. Eugen Weber, St. John notes, has pointed out that the potency and ambiguity of the limen or “border” and the subalterns occupying it has made the transcendent and apolitical limen something of a questionable model - at least within American studies. Indeed, St. John writes, “the optative” or subjunctive marginality implicit in Turner’s work may not always be suitable to perspectives on colonial history and/or gender politics.<sup>76</sup>

### **Bakhtin, Turner, and Agency**

As I have demonstrated thus far, both Bakhtin’s carnival and Turner’s liminality offer a framework for understanding creative resistance through transgressive practices that, under certain circumstances, may result into a redefining of established social categories. Like Rabelais and Bakhtin, who used their writing to explore “the holes in the walls between what was held to be punishable and what unpunishable,”<sup>77</sup> female aerialists performed on the edge of what was acceptable in terms of women’s behaviour and bodily display. They dressed in men’s clothes

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>76</sup> St. John, *Victor Turner*, 14.

<sup>77</sup> Holquist, “Prologue,” xvi-xvii.

while flying airplanes, they titillated audiences by taking off clothes on the trapeze, they swung from one side of the tent to the other in tight leotards, and performed the same aerial routines as their male colleagues. They either displayed their muscles or intentionally disguised them.

While Bakhtin saw the grotesque or deviant body as positive and in the ‘process of becoming,’ Turner also understood liminal performances as “a realm of pure possibility,” “a temporary breach of structure whereby the familiar may be stripped of certitude and the normative unhinged, and interlude wherein conventional social, economic, and political life may be transcended.”<sup>78</sup> “The processual project,” according to Turner

recognizes that society is in-composition, open-ended, *becoming*, and that its (re)production is dependent upon the periodic appearance, in the history of societies and in the lives of individuals, of organized moments of categorical disarray and intense reflexive potential.<sup>79</sup>

The idea of a performance or a performing body as ‘in a process of becoming’ is interesting in the context of aerial bodies and performances. As Tait and Stoddart have pointed out repeatedly, the body in flight seems not susceptible to social classification. The aerial body is a fantastic body, seemingly free from restrictions imposed on it by cultural prescriptions regarding gender, class, sexuality, or race. The aerial body, then, can be considered a body in the process of becoming, or at least with the capacity to become. It fosters possibilities while in the air. When the aerialist comes back down to earth, restrictions reapply. As Tait has pointed out (see introductory quote of this chapter): “[t]he flier momentarily acts out the desire of physical bodies to defy the gravity of social categories, before returning to familiar territory when he or she halts the free fall and reinstates gender identity and the material order of bodies.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> St. John, *Victor Turner*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Peta Tait, “Feminine Free Fall: A Fantasy of Freedom,” *Theatre Journal* 48 (1) (1996): 33-4.

The idea of the body as a process is also what is at the heart of Butler's conceptualization of gender and gender performativity. "Performativity," in the words of Butler, "must be understood not as a singular deliberate "act," but rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse reproduces the effects that it names."<sup>81</sup> Gender performativity, Hargreaves and Vertinsky explain, assumes that gender is not something that is " 'naturally' ascribed, but a changing social construct, concretely expressed, but also fluid and changing through public performance."<sup>82</sup> The seeming necessity of reiterating gendered practices to reinscribe gender-identity implies that the process is never complete and thus leaves room for agency. As Butler points out, "it is ... by virtue of its reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities" in the construction of gender, ..."<sup>83</sup> Synthesized quite clearly, McNay states:

Change arises from the constitutive instability of the symbolic and discursive structures which invest the body with meaning. The cultural necessity for a performative reiteration of these symbolic norms highlights the extent to which they are not natural or inevitable and are, therefore, potentially open to change through processes of resignification. ... By emphasizing the historicity of structure, the concept of the performative highlights how constraint is constitutive but not fully determining of gender subjectivity; in other words, a space for agency is outlined.<sup>84</sup>

Similarly Turner has noted that performances can be active agencies of change, representing, "the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs of living.'"<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Judith Butler, "Bodies that Matter," in *The Body. A Reader*, ed. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, 62-65 (London & New York: Taylor and Francis, Routledge, 2005), 62.

<sup>82</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky, "Introduction," in *Physical Culture, Power, and the Body*, ed. Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky, 1-24 (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 5.

<sup>83</sup> Butler, "Bodies that Matter," 65.

<sup>84</sup> Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 35.

<sup>85</sup> St. John, *Victor Turner*, 7.

Both Bakhtin and Turner suggest a framework that views agency as both socially transgressive and limited. While agency is transgressive during the period of carnival or in liminal performances, it can also be seen as relatively limiting because it is difficult to practice the same kind of transgression outside of the carnivalesque or liminal space. The inversions that are applauded in the circus tent and theaters are the same ones that are castigated once the show is over. Nevertheless, as Russo also notes, “the extreme difficulty of producing lasting change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of transgression, and the histories of subaltern and counterproductive cultural activity are never as neatly closed as structural models might suggest.”<sup>86</sup>

On an individual level, both the performances of female aerialists and their engagement are a careful navigation exercise between what is socially acceptable and what is not, and can be seen as practices of “regulated liberties.” Following Bourdieu, McNay explains that the idea of regulated liberties suggests “a form of change which emerges, not as opposition or externality, but as dislocation arising from the reinscription of the tools and symbols of the dominant into the space of the colonized ....”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, performances taking place in carnivalesque or liminal spaces such as theater, circus, and open-air fairs generally redeployed traditional social categories as defined by the dominant classes, and turned them into objects of mockery without being blatantly rebellious.<sup>88</sup>

Similar to the concept of regulated liberties is that of “technologies of the self,” coined by Foucault and referring to the techniques through which individuals create (and recreate) their

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<sup>86</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 58.

<sup>87</sup> McNay, *Gender and Agency*, 58.

<sup>88</sup> See Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 62.

own identities like a piece of art.<sup>89</sup> These technologies are “not devoid of rules or codes of conduct”<sup>90</sup> and they do not liberate an individual from all possible constraints, but help “build a certain type of identity within the relations of power by using one’s own power ethically.”<sup>91</sup>

What may make this concept difficult to apply to the performances of female aerialists is that it assumes that the individual problematizes the (transgressive) practices she engages in.<sup>92</sup> Many aerialists, undoubtedly, were aware of their unusual positions as women engaging in provocative and socially transgressive actions. There were others, however, who may not have questioned the transgressive nature of their performances; born and raised as aerialists and reliant upon their skills to make a living, they may not have thought in terms of gender politics or resistance against the established order. The notions of regulated liberties and technologies of the self are nevertheless useful to specifically problematize the agency of female aerialists as they focus on the individual construction of identity, whereas the framework of Bakhtin encompasses society as a whole.

## Tracing

It is one thing to imagine those bodies of the past, and it is another to write about them.

Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History*.<sup>93</sup>

Following my discussion on agency, there are three broad premises that underpin my methodological thinking. First is the idea that gender is socially constructed or largely

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<sup>89</sup> McNay, *Gender and Agency*, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Pirkko Markula and Richard Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 140.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>93</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History*. Bloomington (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9.

‘performed,’ and therefore changeable depending on its context.<sup>94</sup> Second, gender intersects with other categories of identity such as race, class, sexuality, age. Third, women’s voices and voices of those who were considered ‘different’ or ‘deviant’ have historically been neglected at the mercy of white, male, European voices. By writing the individual’s ‘different’ bodies and voices into history, I believe that history itself may take on a different dimension, becoming more productive and complete.

As pointed out previously, my aim in this study has been to critically interrogate categories of gender, race, and sexuality - an objective that has for long been also one of the main intentions and major strengths of feminist analyses. Joan Scott, among others, has repeatedly emphasized that feminist researchers should aim to deconstruct social categories and move away from any attempt to unify feminism, or to define ‘woman’ as a singular category. Instead, she calls for a more critical interrogation of difference and how such explorations may contribute to more inclusive and varied feminist thinking and historiography. Scott writes:

We need the feminist analysis of categories of identity not only to detect the differentials of power constructed by binary oppositions that are purported to be timeless, natural, and universal, but also to contextualize and historicize these categories. Feminist methodology has taught us to ask about variation, difference, and conflict whenever we are presented with neatly contained entities...<sup>95</sup>

The critical interrogation or ‘deconstruction’ of established categories that are taken for granted, as Scott points out, also involves a historical component. Feminist deconstruction means uncovering underlying power relations, while exposing the roots of long standing social inequalities. Examining social categories from a historical angle is of critical importance to be able to understand and act upon current-day inequities. The task of feminist historians, including

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<sup>94</sup> See Butler, “Bodies that Matter,” 62; Hargreaves and Vertinsky, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>95</sup> See for example, Scott, “Feminist Reverberations,” 11.

myself, is then to investigate how certain categories emerged, how they have been challenged throughout history, what purpose they served, what purpose they are currently serving, and how they can be used productively in the future.<sup>96</sup>

It also needs to be noted that the illusion of the category of woman as a neatly defined and closed-off entity, is illustrated clearly in my case study about Barbette. While Barbette was not a woman in biological terms, he did perform as one and confounded categories of gender and sexuality during his aerial routine. One of the reasons I have included his case study was an attempt to exemplify the necessity of taking ‘difference’ into account. Moreover, through Barbette’s story I illustrate the aforementioned idea that gender, like the category of ‘woman,’ should be considered changeable depending on context in order to be used productively in feminist analyses. Barbette rendered categories of gender temporarily invisible, supporting Tait’s notion that aerialism has the ability to render social and bodily categories temporarily obsolete. Just like Charmion and Coleman whose unusual, risky performances made them stand out as remarkable and/or unruly women, Barbette’s performances with his emphasis on the transformation from a ‘perfectly shaped’ woman to an androgynous being, helped extend, if not defy, the category of woman.

The notion that women’s experiences and identities must be studied at the intersections of categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, is often referred to as intersectionality. This idea stems primarily from black feminists’ dissatisfaction with white feminist thinking that privileged explorations of gender over race or class. Black feminists argued that the experiences and oppression of black women could not simply be understood in

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<sup>96</sup> See for example Elisabeth Grosz, “Histories of a Feminist Future,” *Signs* 25 (4) (2000): 1017-1021.

terms of gender, but required an understanding of race and class as well.<sup>97</sup> Among the first to articulate the unique challenges of black women at the intersection of race, class, and gender were Sojourner Truth and W.E.B. Du Bois. Contemporary black feminists, such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, continue the legacies of these earlier thinkers by focusing their research on the lived experiences of black women and by encouraging other researchers to account for difference.<sup>98</sup> In my study, I have also worked from the premise that inequality cannot be explained, “let alone challenged, via a race-only, class-only, or gender only-framework”<sup>99</sup> and that “single-axis thinking” undermines knowledge production and struggles for social justice.<sup>100</sup>

I have also worked from the premise that the experiences and performances of the aerialists I examine in this study were different from each other, and therefore each conveyed unique messages about the body and the culture in which it figured. To understand a culture and the place of the body within it, it is indeed important to study both the meanings a body may convey and how these meanings may change depending on context and time. The ways in which culture is inscribed onto the gendered, racial, classed, and/or sexual body can inform us about how power operates in a particular society: about who is most privileged, who is at the margins, and why this may be. The view of the bodily identities of women, as shaped by various cultural experiences and not just confined to that of gender or race or class, has also allowed me to

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<sup>97</sup> See Sue Morgan, “Theorizing Feminist History: a Thirty-year Retrospective,” *Women’s History Review* 18 (3) (2009): 392.

<sup>98</sup> See Rose M. Brewer, “Theorizing Race, Class and Gender: The New Scholarship of Black Feminist Intellectuals and Black Women’s Labor,” in *Theorizing Black Feminisms, The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, ed. Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia (London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

<sup>99</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, “Symposium: On West and Fenstermaker’s “Doing Difference,” *Gender and Society* 9 (4) (1995): 492. See also Creese, Gillian and Daiva Stasiulis, “Introduction: Intersections of Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality,” *Studies in Political Economy* 51 (0) (2009).

<sup>100</sup> Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs* 38 (4) (2013): 787.

provide a more detailed understanding of ways in which aerialists negotiated opportunities and struggles as active agents.

I have attempted to fill in some of the gaps regarding more general meanings of the aerial body and how this body was simultaneously molded and shaped by cultural prescriptions regarding the male and female body. I have also paid attention to inequalities resulting from aerialists operating with and against a patriarchal society. Moreover, while I have deliberately focused on the performances of three aerialists who are somewhat unknown, I illustrate how their performances sparked (and continue to do so) important discussions about the instabilities and fluidity of categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and also inform us about the dialectics between “body and society and between agency and constraint.”<sup>101</sup>

### **Reconstructing the Aerial Body**

What Budd points out in the introduction of his book *The Sculpture Machine*, which details the history of physical culture in North America, is also applicable to my study on aerialists in modernity. Budd writes:

Every age has its characteristic body politics. Their historical study charts changes in the way that a multitude of bodies – from the ‘natural’ to the symbolic – have been perceived and interpreted. We cannot think our way out of our bodies. Nor can we use the idea of a natural or more real body as a vehicle to escape from discourse and culture. What we can do is locate ourselves in relation to other bodies – historically and in the present – and to the institutions and discourses that seek to define and cater to them.<sup>102</sup>

Hence, the body, as Budd underscores, cannot be studied in isolation from contemporary discourses surrounding it. Discourses about the body, or the various meanings attributed to it in

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<sup>101</sup> Hargreaves and Vertinsky, “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>102</sup> Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine. Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), xiv.

specific socio-historical settings, can be found not only in text, but also in images, performances, bodily practices, tools, symbols, etc. The world, in this sense, can be seen as a text that is constantly being written, read, and interpreted. It is written and read differently depending on the background, location, historical time frame, and societal context of both readers and writers. What thus needs to be kept in mind doing historical research, as Valverde also points out, is that “language is not a transparent window giving access to the world but is rather itself part of the world” and thus “discourses are not an absolute beginning point but are themselves shaped by pre-existing social relations (mainly of gender, race, and class)...”<sup>103</sup>

Bringing the material body in dialogue with contemporary discourses regarding that body, however, is not always straightforward in historical analyses. The ways that performers in the past experienced their performances and bodies and the ways they were read by spectators and show-critics may well have been very different. While performing bodies, and the aerial body in particular, often evoked a sense of freedom, grace, lightness, and ease in the eyes of audience members, it did not show the hours of training, emotional investment, and injuries that often preceded the performance. While it is difficult to gain a profound understanding of the material aerial body or the aerial-body-as-flesh, certainly given the small numbers of sources in which performers like Charmion, Barquette, and Bessie Coleman talked about their experiences and bodies, it has nevertheless been important to my study to consider ways in which discourses “instruct” or discipline the material body,<sup>104</sup> and how this body, in turn, instructs discourses.

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<sup>103</sup> Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>104</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” in *Incorporations*, ed. J. and Kwinter Crary, S. (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 480.

The notion of “the performing body as text”<sup>105</sup> has been particularly useful for my exploration of aerial bodies. The very moment the aerialist appeared on stage, her/his body and the ways in which s/he moved were exposed to various readings. Depending on the context in which s/he performed and the cultural assumptions of the individuals in the audience (the readers), the aerial body was read as gendered, classed, racial, sexual, and/or (dis)able. Most of these readings were not registered since they happened at an unconscious level in the minds of both performers and spectators. The readings that did survive are embedded in various contemporary newspapers, magazines, novels, diaries, movies, photographs, and other artifacts. An analysis of these sources or ‘traces,’<sup>106</sup> providing insight into the discursive construction of the aerial body in modernity, is what my study is largely based on.

### *Biographical Case Studies*

The quasi-biographical case studies of Charmion, Barbette, and Bessie Coleman are meant to illuminate ways in which the aerial body was a site of contestation of cultural values and how s/he resisted and bent cultural norms to serve goals of her/his own. Providing insight into the lives and careers of individual aerialists serves to illustrate the different ways each individual responded to cultural norms and how s/he negotiated opportunities and constraints.

Biographical cases, widely used in historical research,<sup>107</sup> are not meant to generalize, but to

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<sup>105</sup> See Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>106</sup> Historian Peter Burke suggests that the use of ‘traces’ instead of ‘sources’ might be more productive for historical inquiry. Whereas ‘sources’ seem to refer to historians “filling their buckets from the stream of Truth,” ‘traces’ imply the fragmentary character of bits and pieces of documents, photographs and other artifacts the historian may find. See Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>107</sup> See for example Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990); and Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004).

illustrate the particularity and complexity of an individual or event and the circumstances (e.g., historical, social, economic, political) in which she, he, or the event was embedded.<sup>108</sup>

In most cases, as in mine, the author does not provide a full-length biography, but only highlights those aspects of a person's life that pertain to his/her particular interest and research questions. In my particular study, I have chosen to highlight the lives of aerialists who engaged in unusual and spectacular performances, but whose activities, struggles and accomplishments have not been addressed as thoroughly as they might have been by other researchers. While I am aware that aerialists' experiences and activities were highly unusual and not shared with most women or men in North-America and Europe between 1880 and 1930, the ways in which aerialists' bodies were constructed in discourses do tell us much about contemporary perceptions of the (fe)male body more generally. In addition, and as pointed out earlier, studying bodily practices of the past can teach us much about cultural tendencies and anxieties pertinent to a particular society in a particular time frame.

As I touched upon in my introductory chapter, the three aerialists' case studies can be read as a collective biography. Collective biographies do not necessarily involve a large number of subjects. On the contrary, writes Cowman, some of the most successful examples involve no more than two or three lives, "but pay constant attention to the connections and overlapping between them as well as the points at which they may have diverged." Also, collective biographies are typically more fragmentary than standard biographies, sometimes only considering a few years in an individual's life.<sup>109</sup> For Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman, I have

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<sup>108</sup> See for example Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), xi, 8; Robert E. Stake, "Case Studies," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 435-54 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2000).

<sup>109</sup> Krista Cowman, "Collective Biography," in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 97.

indeed only addressed and/or highlighted those episodes in their lives that pertained to their aerial performances.

While recognizing that collective biographies or biographical case studies are limited because they never fully capture lives of past individuals and are often heavily biased by the perspective of the historian and her selection of sources, they do illuminate past events, as well as individuals' actions, struggles, and beliefs. They also provide the reader with a broad and rich understanding of the context in which individuals lived and encourage reflection on how these circumstances may be similar to, or different from those in the present. Also, as Foster notes, by allowing the bodies of aerialists past “to carry their own inscriptive weight” and by giving them “more than just a sex or a set of regimented requisites, “they may empower us with a newly embodied sense of human agency.”<sup>110</sup>

### *Sources/Traces*

One of the challenges I encountered studying Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman was the difficulty of finding reliable and sufficient sources or ‘traces’ that enabled a reconstruction and critical analysis of their careers and performances. An additional difficulty encountered while examining practices such as flying was the reading and interpretation of bodies and bodily performances. Foster notes that performances, movements, and individually characteristic gestures, “elude translations into words,” and thus have “no facile verbal equivalence,”<sup>111</sup> complicating the writing of their history. Indeed, as Tait also notes, performances such as trapeze

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<sup>110</sup> Foster, *Choreographing History*, 12.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

tricks “do not leave behind tangible effects” and knowledge of such performances is often dependent on advertisements and reviews.<sup>112</sup>

Most aerialists did not leave written accounts such as letters, autobiographies, interviews, to enable the historian to better understand their personal aspirations and consequently, possible meanings of their performances. Nevertheless, the second-hand descriptions of performances, including a wide range of comments and criticisms that have been left reflect contemporary cultural tendencies and offer a window into perceptions of the aerial body for historians to work with. These traces, including reviews of performances, comments in newspaper and magazine articles, photographs, video footage, novels and poetry, provide valuable information and, set within a larger socio-historical context, assist the historian in imaging the past.

The majority of primary sources I have used in this study consist of a rather large number of newspaper articles found in both traditional and digital archives. One of the issues with archives, however, is that while they may contain a host of useful information, the information has gone through multiple ‘filters’ before it arrived in the archive or in the hands of the researcher. Indeed, long before historians can analyze these sources, other individuals have imparted rigorous selection on them. It is in this selection, as Trouillot suggests, that silences are created: that some events and individuals are left out, while others are not. “Power begins at the source” and

silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Peta Tait, “Re/membering Muscular Circus Bodies: Triple Somersaults, The Flying Jordans and Clarke Brothers,” *Nineteenth Century Theater & Film* 33 (1) (2006): 26.

<sup>113</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 19, 26.

Archives indeed tend to exclude less privileged groups in society by preserving certain documents, and therefore certain voices, over others. Since the study of history was originally considered a purely male endeavour while women were dismissed as incapable or uninterested in its pursuit,<sup>114</sup> women's experiences have traditionally been neglected or considered unworthy of preservation.

To counter the importance given to the archive as authoritative source of historical knowledge, I have combined these various sources (newspapers, photographs, film fragments) with secondary, often feminist literature to establish a context that focuses on the experiences of women. I have used the case studies of aerialists as “alternative sites of historical memory”<sup>115</sup> and shed light on the unusual and generally unknown performances of such aerialists.

In addition to archive-based newspaper articles, in my case studies I frequently refer to visual materials including photographs and film-footage. As Jordanova writes, such visual materials are part of the repertoire of most historians and can play important roles in reconstructing the past - if considered from an analytical rather than a purely decorative point of view. The same questions that are asked when analyzing textual documents are posed when examining photographs and images: who made them, what do they consist of, where were they produced and when, why did they come into being and how? There is usually no single ‘visual method’ that historians work with.<sup>116</sup> Instead, most historians try to place visual materials in their historical context while discussing some materials in more depth than others, depending on the specific portrayals and characteristics of the material that are of interest to the research question

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<sup>114</sup> Michelle T. King, “Working With/In the Archives,” in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>116</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, “Approaching Visual Materials,” in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 30-31, 34.

at hand. In this study, I have used photographs and film to contextualize the performances of my subjects and to gain a better understanding of what these performances might have looked like, how the performers represented themselves, and what reactions their performances may have evoked among spectators. In addition, I have used visual materials to analyze ways in which the aerial body was depicted and read as gendered, sexualized, and/or racialized.

### **Searching for Charmion, Barbette, and Bessie Coleman**

Searching for information about aerial performers Charmion, Barbette, and Bessie Coleman was not without challenges. Most difficult was finding sufficient primary sources to allow for a reconstruction of their performances and provide insight into their own motives and aspirations. As pointed out before, none of the three aerialists seem to have left written accounts such as letters or diaries, and the majority of materials left to work with, including newspaper articles and show reviews, cannot always be trusted for accuracy or bias. Not only did newspapers sometimes sensationalize acts to entice their readership, performers themselves created what Todd has called “stage biographies” in which they aggrandized their performances and sometimes made up certain facts.<sup>117</sup> For example, Charmion portrayed herself as French (and not American), and informed reporters she had measured her strength with Eugen Sandow, ‘father of modern-day bodybuilding,’ concluding she was almost as strong as him. Bessie Coleman told reporters that she had flown all over Europe and had ordered a number of aircraft for her personal use in the United States, though none of these facts has ever been verified.

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<sup>117</sup> See Jan Todd, “Sex! Murder! Suicide! New Revelations about the “Mystery of Minerva,” *Iron Game History* 10 (4) (2009): 8.

## *Searching for Charmion*

Charmion drew my attention when viewing her provocative *Trapeze Disrobing Act*, filmed by Thomas Edison in 1901.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, she was beautifully pictured on the cover of Chapman and Vertinsky's recent book *Venus with Biceps* (2010),<sup>119</sup> featured with flexed bicep and a fancy feathered hat, but very little appeared to be known about this fashionable and strong aerialist. Her absence in history books today is not surprising given the limited number of primary sources available on her career and performances.

My search began with visiting historian of physical culture and the body, David Chapman, in his home in Seattle, in the hope that his extensive collection of physical culture magazines would reveal more about Charmion. Chapman's collection did not contain much documentation on Charmion - except for three of the pins Charmion distributed to her audiences - though he did provide insight into entertainment newspapers of the time, including the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, *Variety* and the *Billboard*. These newspapers reported on the theater and circus scene around the turn of the twentieth century and informed about theater programs in and around New York City. Chapman also informed me about Theodore Hull's genealogical research on Charmion's family, which would prove useful. Following his recommendations regarding the newspapers, I was able to access them on microfilm and found seven relevant articles in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, covering the beginning of Charmion's career in New York (1897–1898).

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<sup>118</sup> See Thomas Edison, *Trapeze Disrobing Act*. Silent Movie, 1901.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYIYTmi4-Q> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>119</sup> See for example:  
[http://books.google.ca/books?id=gySNRQAACAAJ&dq=venus+with+biceps&hl=en&sa=X&ei=l\\_BdUdXACca6iwKI44CACg&ved=0CDgO6AEwAA](http://books.google.ca/books?id=gySNRQAACAAJ&dq=venus+with+biceps&hl=en&sa=X&ei=l_BdUdXACca6iwKI44CACg&ved=0CDgO6AEwAA) [accessed June 30, 2103].

My search continued with a visit to the archives of the H. J. Lucher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports in Austin, Texas,<sup>120</sup> which hold a host of information about circus performers and strongmen/women around the turn of the twentieth century. With the help of Dr. Jan Todd, Kim Beckwith and Cindy Slater I gathered much information, especially images, on theater/circus performers and female trapeze artists around the turn of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, though, I found only one picture of Charmion — in which she is seen flexing her left bicep.

In between my archival visits, I searched the Proquest Historical Newspaper database, accessed via the University of British Columbia (UBC) library, for information on Charmion. This database covers four newspapers: *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908–1997); *The New York Times* (1851–2007); *The Wall Street Journal* (1889–1993) and the *Washington Post* (1877–1994).<sup>121</sup> I found eighteen relevant articles in the *New York Times* and eight in the *Washington Post*. In another one of UBC’s collections, this time the ‘19th Century British Library Newspapers’ database, I found several articles about her performance in London, England. These papers included *The Era* (ten articles); *The Morning Post* (six articles); *The Graphic* (2 articles); *The Pall Mall Gazette* (2 articles); *The Standard* (2 articles); and *The Manchester Times* (1 article). I also searched the open-access Gallica database on the website of the *Bibliothèque National de France* (BNF),<sup>122</sup> resulting in four small articles in *L’Art Lyrique* and one in *Le Monde Artiste*, indicating that Charmion briefly performed in France, where it seems she was well-received.

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<sup>120</sup> See <http://www.starkcenter.org/> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>121</sup> See <http://resources.library.ubc.ca/?searchtype=keywords&search=historical+newspapers> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>122</sup> See <http://gallica.bnf.fr/> [accessed June 30, 2013].

Though by this time I had collected a large number of newspapers, they did not offer me much specific information other than some details about Charmion's act and some mixed comments by reviewers. However, a more extensive search online uncovered an open-access database called 'Fultonhistory.'<sup>123</sup> While this database, at first sight, may appear somewhat disorganized and confusing because of its various animations, upon clicking 'Enter,' a search engine appears on the left-hand side of the screen. The engine allows for a very detailed search of "over 21,790,000 Old New York State Historical Pages." Searching for "Charmion" and related terms, I found a large number of articles from a variety of New York newspapers. Some of them contained small interviews with Charmion, which allowed me to gain a better understanding about who she was and how she presented herself. Newspaper articles analyzed include, though are not limited to *Variety*, *The New York World*, *The New York Herald*, *The Syracuse Journal* and *The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*.

When accessing the American Circus Historical Society website<sup>124</sup> in search for more information on Charmion, I read an inquiry in their Message and Discussion Board section by Linda Hildebrand who wrote that Charmion was her great-aunt. I was able to contact her and she was pleased that someone showed interest in her ancestry. We exchanged several e-mails thereafter. While the enthusiasm of Hildebrand strengthened my belief that my research on Charmion was valuable, she also directed me to Theodore Hull who sent me Charmion's genealogical tree (at least on her father's side), confirming her Californian identity (and not French or Australian as some newspapers claimed), and indicating that she married twice and did not have any children. Hildebrand also sent me Charmion's marriage certificate and some photos

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<sup>123</sup> See <http://fultonhistory.com/> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>124</sup> See <http://www.circushistory.org/> [accessed June 12, 2013].

she had found on the internet, and was pleased to have contributed to the study of her great-aunt.<sup>125</sup>

### *Bringing Barbette to Light/Life*

I became interested in Barbette early in my research when seeing some of the gender ambivalent pictures that surrealist photographer, Man Ray, had taken of him. One picture, in which Barbette's male genitals are flattened by a girdle and his hair and make-up are that of a woman, is particularly intriguing since it erases those aspects of the body we normally use to identify its male or female identity.<sup>126</sup> During my preliminary search for materials about Barbette, it soon became clear that few researchers had made an attempt to capture his performances and/or personality in books or articles. I started with the UBC online Proquest Historical newspaper database, where I found about nineteen relevant newspaper articles in *The New York Times* and five in *The Washington Post*. During my visit to the H. J. Stark Center in Austin, Texas, I also searched the database of the University of Texas for information on Barbette. This resulted in an additional three articles from the *Boston Daily Globe* and three from the *Los Angeles Times*.

Since Barbette was born in Round Rock, Texas I had hoped to find more archival materials in the H. J. Stark Centre, though without success. Moreover, while I had e-mailed several individuals and archives who I thought would know more about Barbette, this resulted in only one (undated, though useful) article sent to me from the Harry Ransom Humanities

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<sup>125</sup> In one of our e-mail conversations she wrote: "You can be so proud of this accomplishment and I am certain if Charmion was alive she would be too. It is done so well that I now feel that I now know my great Aunt .... It was so kind of you to mention me in your work." Personal e-mail communication with Linda Hildebrand, January 20, 2013.

<sup>126</sup> See Amy Lyford, "The Lessons of Barbette. Surrealism, Fascism, and the Politics of Sexual Metamorphosis," in *Surrealist Masculinities. Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction France*, 165-183 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 172.

Research Center of the University of Texas, Austin. At the same time, I had started to explore the collection pictures taken of Barbette by Man Ray and brought together in a small book in 1988.<sup>127</sup> These pictures, in combination with written sources, proved instrumental in imagining Barbette's performance and on-stage personality.

Another fruitful avenue was an enquiry into the archives of the *Bibliothèque National de France* (BNF). Since Barbette had spent much time in France and was well known by influential writers and artists including Jean Cocteau, Man Ray and Drieu La Rochelle, it seemed likely that the BNF would have information about him. I ordered a copy of a file folder containing approximately forty reviews of Barbette's performances by French critics. The folder also included a poetic and influential description of Barbette's act by Jean Cocteau published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1926.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to the American newspapers, the French reviews, and Cocteau's legendary essay about Barbette, I relied heavily on Francis Steegmuller's interview with Barbette conducted in the 1960s, as well as insight on Barbette's act and personality from ballet dancer and friend of Barbette, Anton Dolin.<sup>129</sup> Information about Barbette was also extracted from Jean Cocteau's biographies by Claude Arnaud and Francis Steegmuller.<sup>130</sup> Barbette has often been described as a 'mystery,' especially around gender ambiguity, and in many respects he remains so today. Although he died relatively recently (in the 1970s), very little information about him

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<sup>127</sup> See Man Ray and Jean Cocteau, "*Barbette*," (Borderline: Berlin, 1988).

<sup>128</sup> Jean Cocteau, "Le Numéro Barbette." Extrait de *la Nouvelle Revue Française*, July 1st (1926): 33-38. The folder had clearly been put together by someone, though I do not know who it was, when it was put together, or for what purpose.

<sup>129</sup> Anton Dolin, *Ballet Go Round* (London: Michael Joseph LTD, 1938).

<sup>130</sup> Claude Arnaud, *Jean Cocteau* (Biographies *nrf* Gallimard, 2003); Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau A Biography*. (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1970).

seems available. Perhaps this is not surprising given that circus/theatre performers often fade into oblivion once out of the limelight.

### *Commemorating Coleman*

Bessie Coleman drew my attention when writing my Master's thesis on the history of female aviators in the United States between 1920 and 1940.<sup>131</sup> It was during my research that I observed that most mainstream sources on the history of women in aviation did not address Coleman's aerial performances as much as they mentioned and/or addressed the aviation careers of her contemporaries like Katherine Stinson, Ruth Law, Amelia Earhart, Louise Thaden, and other white female aviators.

To reconstruct the life and career of the only known black female aviator in the 1920s, I relied on two biographies: Doris L. Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator* (1993) and Elizabeth Amelia Hadley Freyberg, *Bessie Coleman. The Brownskin Lady Bird* (1994), as well as a large number of newspaper articles from primarily black newspapers. Most of these black newspapers I was able to access through the Proquest black newspapers database, which was made temporarily available to me by UBC librarian Keith Bunnell.<sup>132</sup> I was able to collect approximately 120 relevant articles from *The Chicago Defender*; 35 from the *Baltimore African American*, twenty from *The Pittsburgh Courier*; six from the *New Journal and Guide*; six from *The Philadelphia Tribune*; eight from *The New York Amsterdam News*; one from *The New York*

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<sup>131</sup> See Bieke Gils, "Pioneers of Flight: An Analysis of Gender Issues in United States Civilian (Sport) and Commercial Aviation 1920-1940," Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Windsor, Ontario, 2009). For an electronic version see: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1261&context=etd> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>132</sup> The UBC library does not have a subscription to the Proquest black newspaper database: <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/catalogs/databases/detail/histnews-bn.shtml> [accessed June 30, 2013]. In other words, the UBC library does not usually grant access to this black newspaper database and interested scholars may thus miss out on this rich collection of documents providing insight into African American (popular) culture.

*Times* (1922); one from the *Washington Post* (1922); and three articles from other newspapers (*Los Angeles Times* (1923); *The Evening Independent* (1926); *The Lewiston Daily Sun* (1926)).

While Bessie Coleman spent several months in Europe and France in particular, sources attesting her European flying performances remain undiscovered and her time there a mystery. French writer Jacques Béal wrote about Coleman in his recent biographical account *Coleman L'Ange Noir* (2008), relying upon some local French newspapers as his sources, including *La Technique Aéronautique, Revue Internationale des Sciences Appliquées à la Locomotion Aérienne* (1921–1940), and *L'Aérophile* (1893–1949). These sources, however did not offer information about Bessie Coleman herself when I looked through them on microfilm during my short visit to the *Bibliothèque National de France* (BNF) in Paris in December 2010. Béal most likely used them for general context about aviation in France in the 1920s.<sup>133</sup> The two newspapers that may have been able to shed light on Coleman's time in France, including *Pilote de la Somme* (1863–1944) and *Le Littoral de la Somme. Journal d'Abbeville Journal Maritime, Littéraire, Commercial, Agricole et d'Annonces de l'Arrondissement d'Abbeville* (1884–1944), were not accessible at that time. More fruitful perhaps was my contact with two members of the Bessie Coleman Foundation in Washington D.C., an organization that supports African American men and women in their pursuits of aviation. Coleman's accomplishments are clearly still alive in their community and Coleman seems to be the muse and source of inspiration of many black aviators today. Through my membership in the Bessie Coleman Foundation, I was able to obtain a copy of Elois Coleman Patterson's very short memoir about her sister Bessie,

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<sup>133</sup> Béal unfortunately does not work with references in endnotes or footnotes, though only provides a list of the sources used in the end of his book. It is thus difficult to connect facts to their respective sources.

which I was not able to find anywhere else. Patterson's account functioned mostly as a point of verification of what I had found in other sources.

Having established how I framed and traced the aerial performers in my study, the next three chapters, in which I present my case studies, will offer more in-depth insights into the performances, careers, and personalities of Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman. The chapters can be read as 'stand-alone' or as part of a bigger narrative on aerial history and the ways in which aerial performers helped destabilize gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized notions of the body and suggested new types of bodily agency in North American and European contexts between 1880 and 1930.

## Chapter III: Flying, Flirting and Flexing: Charmion's Trapeze Act, Sexuality, and Physical Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

### Introduction

In 1901, American inventor Thomas Edison (1847 -1931) produced *Trapeze Disrobing Act*, a three-minute-long silent movie in which a woman, clothed in a long skirt, undresses on a trapeze while two men watch the performance from a theatre balcony. As each layer of clothing is discarded, the men become more enthusiastic, especially when the performer also throws her garters in their direction. Once she is finally revealed in leotard and tights - the attire of a female trapeze artist - the woman performs several tricks on her trapeze, smiles at the camera, and with a sensual gesture of her arms signals the end of her performance.<sup>1</sup>

*Trapeze Disrobing Act* features Laverie Vallee, better known by her stage name "Charmion." Born in 1875 in Sacramento, California,<sup>2</sup> Charmion was well known for her provocative undressing act on the trapeze, as well as demonstrations of her muscular upper-body, in vaudeville theatres in New York around 1900. She also toured several European cities, where she was usually well received.<sup>3</sup> Most of her performances, however, took place in America. Here, after much initial criticism for her sensual disrobing act, she became a popular icon of

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\* Thanks to Charmion's relatives Linda Hildebrand and Theodore Hull for their enthusiasm and research help. Thanks also to David Chapman for his useful insights into the history of physical culture.

<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Edison, *Trapeze Disrobing Act*. Silent movie, 1901. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYIYTrni4-Q> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>2</sup> See genealogy by Theodore Hull. [http://web.archive.org/web/20030213013229/http://home.aol.com/~ht\\_a/pubdog/fam00187.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20030213013229/http://home.aol.com/~ht_a/pubdog/fam00187.htm) [accessed June 30, 2013]

<sup>3</sup> One account suggests that Charmion's act was not welcome in Berlin, Germany. According to *the Boston Daily Globe* her performance was considered "a grave offense against decency," and removed from the program. *Boston Daily Globe*, "Editorial Points," October 21, 1898, 6. She seemed, however, well-received in England and France, as a small number of newspaper articles indicate. *The Era*, a British theater journal even described her as "the acrobatic Venus." *The Era* (London, Eng), "The London Music Halls," August 13, 1898, issue 3125. In France, where she performed in the *Folies-Bergère*, *Le Matin* noted that "elle fera certainement courir tout Paris." *Le Matin*, November 4, 1898, 3.

female health, beauty and acrobatic skill. Nonetheless, despite her extensive transatlantic travels and long-lasting popularity on the vaudeville stage between 1897 and 1910, she has received remarkably little attention from historians.

Charmion was among the first female performers in American vaudeville to take full advantage of the developing photography, cinema and print industries to promote her act. As a prominent vaudeville performer and one of Thomas Edison's first silent movie subjects, she introduced a new dimension to trapeze acts by using her performance as a tool for the sexual titillation of audiences. Although the trapeze was used as early as 1830 for women's callisthenic exercises<sup>4</sup> and was typically associated with aerial performances of circus troupes, Charmion was one of the first to combine disrobing with swinging on the trapeze in a vaudeville setting. Her successful ploy was to offset initial negative reactions to her provocative disrobing by presenting herself as a physical culture advocate and dress reformer. In concurrence with increasing fascination with the well-developed muscular body during this era, as well as feminist campaigns to reform clothing that restricted a woman's movements, she framed her performances as instructional examples for women who wished to show their strong bodies and learn how to adopt healthy lifestyles. Her marketing style, which included distribution of professional pictures, postcards, posters, and pins depicting her image to audiences, resembled that of her contemporary, Eugen Sandow, the much celebrated strongman and father of modern-day bodybuilding. This strategy earned her the popular epithet of the "female Sandow."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Steve Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance, the Evolution of Trapeze* (Normal, Illinois: Illinois State University, 1994), introductory page. See also Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful. Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women (1800-1875)* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), 106-107.

<sup>5</sup> *New York NY World*, "A Woman in New York With the Muscles of a Sandow," December 19, 1897.

Charmion was just one among a wave of female strongwomen and trapeze artists at the time whose acts quite literally “flew in the face of Victorian values”<sup>6</sup> as they pushed the boundaries of traditional notions of femininity and demonstrated new ways for women to express themselves through bodily reform. In many respects, the theatre’s association with fantasy and spectacle, far-removed from everyday reality, provided a carnivalesque space where traditional notions of femininity could be challenged and destabilized with few repercussions. Unlike those suffragettes and female reformers at the time who were often heavily criticized for their outspokenness and progressive ideas about gender roles and women’s claim to authority over their body, female performers like Charmion tended not to provoke these same criticisms. “[T]heir active, familiar bodies,” Hindson notes, were “rarely directly linked with the politicked icons of change in gender roles, in spite of similarities between the performer, the New Woman, and the suffrage campaign’s links with the theatre.”<sup>7</sup> The popular stage was indeed one of the few places where women could gain rewards for their transgressiveness.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the increasing presence of female performers on the popular stage at this time, coupled with the public display of their images on posters and postcards, stimulated a questioning and subsequent destabilization of contemporary ideological values and aesthetic ideals regarding the active female body.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, performers like Charmion were powerful symbols of women’s physical emancipation and autonomy, encouraging a more open and free display of the female body. On the other hand, a consequence of the increasing reliance of both

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004), 115.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine, Hindson. *Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siècle Popular Stage of London and Paris: Experiment and Advertisement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 40.

<sup>8</sup> Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle. The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Hindson, *Female Performance Practice*, 3.

performers and their managers on newly emerging visual technologies, such as photography and cinema, encouraged a continued objectification of the female body as sexual commodity.

“Bodily (re)form,” as Reischer has noted, “both reflects and motivates processes of social reform,” but always occurs “within overarching social structures that ultimately index existing power relations.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, while performers such as Charmion encouraged female agency, they also had to work within the confines of a patriarchal entertainment industry that simultaneously offered and limited possibilities. Through creative bodily performances, artists such as Charmion were capable of producing new meaning, though they also reproduced existing power hierarchies through their participation in the male-controlled amusement industry.<sup>11</sup> Starting from the premise that Charmion’s performing body was the site of debate and struggle over the transgression and policing of gender boundaries, and following Foster’s (and others) claim that the body writes and is written upon,<sup>12</sup> my aim is to illustrate how Charmion walked a fine line between traditional and modernizing ideas surrounding women’s bodies and their physical capacities. While she alone did not dismantle patriarchal structures that tended to objectify women’s sexuality for the pleasure of men, she helped set new standards for female health and beauty that combined physical fitness, strength, and freer movement of the female body.

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<sup>10</sup> Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo, “The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 315.

<sup>11</sup> Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Reischer and Koo, “The Body Beautiful;” Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 15.



Image 1: Charmion with feathered hat and fancy dress on the trapeze. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

### **From Unabashed Burlesque to Respectable Vaudeville**

When Charmion introduced her underdressing act on the trapeze to her audiences in Koster and Bial's New York City Theatre in 1897, her performance was received with a mixture

of curiosity and criticism. The *New York Dramatic Mirror*, a prominent newspaper commenting on the city's theatrical scene, reported enthusiastically and at length on her performance.<sup>13</sup> Near the end of the article the reporter admitted, however, that her act was "a vulgar exhibition," and that it was "certainly to be deplored that any part of the public demands acts of this kind."<sup>14</sup> Such contradictory reactions were not unusual and were illustrative of the anxieties of a society in transition. Erotic stripping acts similar to Charmion's had long been associated with burlesque venues which fed working-class male appetites for vulgarity. However, the introduction of such material to middle-class audiences - both male and female - in vaudeville theaters caused a stir.

The atmosphere in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, prior to Charmion's work, was marked by theatre censorship debates and suppression of performances considered too controversial or sexually provocative. The Committee for the Suppression of Vice, established in 1872, was an initiative of Anthony Comstock, the first federally appointed censor in the United States, who believed that "obscenity – in pictures, magazines, newspapers, and books – was the most virulent foe that Christian Americans would ever battle. It caused crime, debased the institution of marriage, and threatened to corrupt children, particularly young males, the future of the nation and race."<sup>15</sup>

It was not a coincidence that the Committee for the Suppression of Vice had been established soon after the controversial Lydia Thompson and her 'British Blondes' had made an appearance on the stage in New York and had started to incorporate burlesque elements in their performances. Thompson and her troupe debuted with the comic play *Ixion*, in which they played

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<sup>13</sup> See page 1 of my introductory chapter in which I quote a large part of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* article in which Charmion's performance is described at length.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Dramatic Mirror*, December 25, 1897, 18.

<sup>15</sup> John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 36, 37.

male roles and poked fun at political scandals and recent divorce cases among the elite.<sup>16</sup> Though initially popular, the performers were later heavily criticized for their “sensual exhibitions of the feminine form,” and their “salacious music.”<sup>17</sup> They inverted categories of gender, used inappropriate puns, exposed arms and legs, and were therefore considered a disgrace to social mores and a threat to women’s traditional roles both inside and outside the theatre.

Reactions to Thompson’s supposedly ‘vulgar’ exhibitions seemed rather inconsistent when other performances at the time, such as ballet or plastic posing acts, produced similar degrees - if not more - nudity. In plastic posing acts, also called *tableaux vivants*, performers replicated well-known works of art, often partially nude and/or covered with a thin layer of silk or white dust.<sup>18</sup> Performers remained static or barely moved. These forms of erotic bodily display were deemed permissible because re-enactments of well-known paintings or Greco-Roman statues were associated with elite culture and therefore considered tasteful. Moreover, ballet was generally considered an activity far more elegant and sophisticated than burlesque performances or the trapeze acrobatics of circuses and theatres.

Further illustrious of such allowances within socially acceptable realms of artistic expression at the time were the views of Olive Logan (American actress, author, and suffragette) on nudity in theatres in the 1860s, when Thompson and her troupe were performing in the United States. Though Logan did not fully approve of the nudity displayed by female ballet dancers in *The Black Crook*, for example, she believed it should be tolerated because it served a higher ‘artistic’ purpose - and also because the performers were French and Italian. “Those women were

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Writer in the *New York Times* (November 8, 1868), 4. Quoted in Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 5. See also Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.

ballet-dancers in France and Italy,” she wrote, “and they represented in their nudityimps and demons. In silence they whirled about the stage; in silence trooped off. Some faint odor of ideality and poetry rested over them.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, wrote Logan, burlesque performers “are not devotees of any art ... they do not either act, dance, sing, or mime, but they habit themselves in a way which is attractive to an indelicate taste ...”<sup>20</sup> During a Suffrage Convention in 1869 she strongly advised women against performing on the stage because “a coarse rage for nudity” had spread in the theaters and had become “the ruling force.”<sup>21</sup> She wrote:

I can advise no honorable, self-respecting woman to turn to the stage for support, with its demoralizing influences, which seem to be growing stronger and stronger day by day; where the greatest rewards are won by a set of brazenfaced, clog-dancing creatures, with dyed yellow hair and padded limbs, who have come here in droves from across the ocean.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the denunciation of burlesque performances seemed more concerned with its class-associations than with any degree of nudity. The loud talking, singing, and dancing women who displayed bare legs and arms - and sometimes muscular backs and chests - stood in sharp contrast to the seemingly distant, silently moving ballet dancers or the motionless *tableaux vivants* performers who were generally associated with the elite. Clearly, suggested Janet Steiger, “nudity or the display of the anatomy of the body had meaning not in itself but within the circumstances of its representation.”<sup>23</sup>

It was exactly the ability of its managers to conceal nudity by representing it in a morally acceptable way that made the vaudeville industry one of the most successful mass entertainment

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<sup>19</sup> Olive Logan, *Apropos of Women and Theatres. With a Paper or Two on Parisian Topics* (New York Carleton, 1870), 135.

<sup>20</sup> Logan, *Apropos of Women and Theatres*, 115.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>23</sup> Janet Steiger, *Bad Women. Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 57.

markets in North America at the turn of the twentieth century. Vaudeville developed in concert with other emerging forms of entertainment such as casinos, music halls, and nickelodeon movie houses, and was popular because of its wide range of performers, including dancers, singers, acrobats, and comedians. In the hands of keen businessmen like Tony Pastor, B.F. Keith, and Edward Albee, vaudeville acts became not only a more-than-profitable business for their owners, but also for many performers.<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned above, the success of vaudeville lay in the ability of its managers and performers to maintain a veneer of purity and respectability. Although some of the acts included stripping and very much resembled those performed in burlesque theaters, managers promoted vaudeville as a pleasant leisure time activity for the middle class family.<sup>25</sup> As early as the 1840s, as Kibler indicates, theatre managers had begun to promote their programs as “educational, uplifting, and family oriented, particularly appropriate for mothers and their children.”<sup>26</sup> As more and more women began to attend performances at vaudeville theatres, managers forbade smoking and drinking because these activities were commonly associated with male culture and burlesque - and thus vulgarity.<sup>27</sup> Of course, these strategies not only enabled managers to cater to a growing group of female clients, but also held censors at bay and prevented theatre closings.

### **Charmion the Parisian Sensation<sup>28</sup>**

Theatre managers had to be strategic about which performers and acts to include in their programs in order to satisfy a variety of audiences. Furthermore, performers also had to navigate

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<sup>24</sup> See Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Dramatic Mirror*, December 25, 1897, 18.

between the sometimes different wishes of their managers and audiences, their need to make a living, and their personal attitudes and aspirations. To portray themselves favourably, many performers, including Charmion, created and advertised their own “stage biographies.”<sup>29</sup> Though born in Sacramento, California, on stage she introduced herself as French such that newspapers began to call her “the Parisian Sensation.”<sup>30</sup> Paris was considered a major hub of extravagant and liberal living, culture, and performing arts at this time. Thus, to maintain a naughty appeal that was also permissible, performers often used associations with the city. The choice of Charmion’s stage name was thus deliberate.

Adoption of a French stage identity by Charmion may also have been influenced by Florenz Ziegfield (1867-1932), well-known American Broadway impresario who was, according to one account, her manager at the beginning of her career.<sup>31</sup> Ziegfield often strategically associated his performers with French culture, linking his scantily clothed ‘Ziegfield Girls,’ for example, with the successful female *Folies Bergère* dancers of Paris in order to escape public censure in the United States. According to Robert Allen, Ziegfield’s secret lay in his ability to package feminine stage sexuality in such a way that his audiences did not connect the Ziegfield

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<sup>29</sup> In her paper on Charmion’s contemporary, strongwoman Josephine Blatt, better known as Minerva, Todd writes that “one of the problems with historical research related to circus performers and theatre people is that they do not only adopt stage names but also create “stage biographies...” Moreover, she notes that many circus and vaudeville performers had different acts during different stages in their careers and adopted different stage names, often making it difficult for historians to trace them. See Jan Todd, “Sex! Murder! Suicide! New Revelations about the “Mystery of Minerva,” *Iron Game History* 10 (4) (2009): 8, 7-21.

<sup>30</sup> *New York Dramatic Mirror*, December 25, 1897, 18. See also: *Glenn Falls Morning Star*, Tuesday, May 10, 1898, 2; *Syracuse Journal*, “Her Muscular Development,” September 1901.

<sup>31</sup> Robert H. Davis, *Over My Left Shoulder. A Panorama of Men and Events, Burlesques and Tragedies, Cabbages and Kings and Sometimes W and Y* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1926), 127. Whether or not Ziegfield was in fact Charmion’s manager is uncertain. It may well have been that she, like other performers, claimed association with the successful and popular businessman to promote her own act.

dancers with the working-class sexuality of burlesque, but rather associated them with “the cosmopolitan worldliness of Paris.”<sup>32</sup>

Charmion’s adoption of the trappings of a French stage identity to gain popularity was not the only trick in her repertoire. When asked why and how she conceived her act, her response was:

At the time that I thought seriously about disrobing whole on the trapeze, it was a novelty and a thing unheard of. I immediately resolved to adopt the measure. I thought just like this: it wasn’t extraordinary for a woman to perform on the trapeze, in fact it was so common that it was a difficult matter to make a novelty of it. ... As far as disrobing is concerned, the act is perfectly harmless; however, there is sufficient suggestiveness to it. ... That is what the people like, just a hint of suggestiveness and then they are eager to witness the performance even though they might criticize the feat.<sup>33</sup>

Charmion was clearly sensitive to the desires and apprehensions of her audience. As she acknowledged, work on the trapeze in itself was nothing new. However, disrobing in mid-air was unheard of and something that not many performers before her had dared to do. It was something worth trying. One reason for her success was thus her ability to breathe new meaning into the use of the trapeze.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, flying circus troupes most commonly consisted of three or more performers working on one or more trapezes. Charmion’s act, on the other hand, was a solo performance on a static or ‘fixed’ trapeze. The term fixed, however, did not imply that there was no swinging involved, but that the act primarily consisted of “various balancing feats,

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<sup>32</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness. Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 245. Similar strategies were adopted by other performers as well. Though not directly linked with Ziegfield, Vander Clyde chose the French sounding name “Barbette” and wore extravagant dresses ornamented with feathers and diamonds. Starting from a modest working-class background, Barbette’s exquisite performances were soon remarked upon by members of the French intellectual elite, including poet Jean Cocteau and photographer Man Ray. Raving about Barbette’s elegance, sophistication, and perfect performance, they brought him fame and made his connections with other famous artists and performers possible. See Chapter IV for a more elaborate description and analysis of Barbette’s act.

<sup>33</sup> *Syracuse Journal*, “Her Muscular Development,” September 1901.

such as the head stand and hanging by the instep, the heel or the neck.”<sup>34</sup> The solo-trapeze, like the flying trapeze, evoked a sense of freedom, though was not meant for performing big flying movements. Rather, it lent itself extremely well to sensual posing and gesturing, the elements upon which the appeal of Charmion’s act was largely based.

In their work on women’s aerial history, Tait and Stoddart argue that gender was performed differently by solo-trapeze performers compared to those working on the flying trapeze. Flying troupes often consisted of both men and women who executed similar acrobatic feats and thus required equal amounts of muscular strength and agility. In combination with the distance between audiences in the stands and trapeze flyers high above in the rooftop, gender categories could not always be distinguished clearly.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the female acrobat on a circus flying trapeze who could “only signify her feminine identity at the beginning and end of the trick, standing barefoot on her toes, one hip forward, her body at an angle, and one arm raised or in a backward bend,”<sup>36</sup> for female solo trapezists like Charmion, the performance of gender and sexuality “in the form of feminized static poses” constituted the very essence of the trick.<sup>37</sup> Her act on the static trapeze, especially the undressing part, was thus specifically designed to titillate her audiences. By contrast, the primary goal of flying trapeze performances was to successfully execute a difficult acrobatic routine, while any possible erotic character harboured by the performance was often (though not necessarily) a by-product of the act.

In circus and circuslike settings such as the vaudeville theatre, the blurring of gender boundaries was clearly permissible. These venues were topsy-turvy spaces that invited audiences

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<sup>34</sup> See Antony Hippisley Coxe, *A Seat in the Circus* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1980 (originally published in 1951 by Evans Brothers, London, England), 158.

<sup>35</sup> See Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies. Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Peta Tait, “Feminine Free Fall: A Fantasy of Freedom,” *Theatre Journal* 48 (1) (1996): 29.

<sup>37</sup> See Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 175.

into a realm of spectacle and fantasy. Moreover, as Shteir points out, the act of flying or being suspended above the audience on a trapeze “softened the salacious nature of taking off one’s clothes in public” because “the androgenous figure of the acrobat seemed closer to a supernatural being than a real man or woman.”<sup>38</sup> Charmion also confused her audiences by combining feminine and erotic undressing with muscularity, a characteristic generally associated with working class masculinity. Acts like hers were popular because they explicitly stretched the boundaries of socially accepted representations of the sexual female body without being seen as serious threats to the established gender order.

Though Charmion’s act played on the *fin de siècle* fascination with nudity, she did not strip entirely naked.<sup>39</sup> After disrobing she was “revealed in the conventional costume of the female acrobat,”<sup>40</sup> including a leotard and flesh-coloured tights. Although some censors at the time argued that Charmion’s acrobat attire was indecent, it was not her revealing bodysuit or her daring trapeze acrobatics that seemed to provoke their reactions. The titillating aspect of her act stemmed from the *process* of disrobing, not so much from its *result*. This became particularly clear in 1897 when she was asked to perform in the Astoria Theater in New York for elite members of the Society of Musical Arts. After several weeks of negotiation, a reporter from the *New York Herald* wrote that the Society had finally decided that Charmion’s act “would bring spice and relief to their confreres.” However, Charmion was asked to modify her act. The disrobing part, including the throwing of garters into the audience, was to be discarded and she “was simply to show what could be accomplished by [a] woman in the way of muscular

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<sup>38</sup> Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> The term “*fin de siècle*” originally referred to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the transition into the 20<sup>th</sup> in France, but is also often used in North American literature to indicate similar transitions in North-America.

<sup>40</sup> *New York Dramatic Mirror*, December 25, 1897, 18.

development without losing that symmetry of propriety which is one of woman's chief charms."<sup>41</sup>

When Charmion first appeared on stage at this performance, she was entirely enveloped in a white opera cloak. This was the *moment suprême* because the audience had to speculate what was hidden under the cloak. Was it a fully clothed Charmion - meaning she would perform her disrobing act - or was it 'just' Charmion the trapeze performer? "Who could compute or interpret the thousands of thoughts and fancies, hopes and fears that were thrilling the people before her?"<sup>42</sup> When Charmion threw off her cloak, she revealed pink tights, a green bodice, and trunks and held a bouquet of roses. A "sentiment of true disappointment pervaded the audience," the *Herald* reporter wrote, when it became apparent that "the most thrilling portion of Charmion's performance was to be eliminated."<sup>43</sup> Though her acrobatics on the trapeze, followed by an exhibition of her arm and back muscles seemed to have been well received, there was a clear desire to witness Charmion in the process of disrobing, rather than already disrobed.

With regards to undressing as far as tights and leotard without any skin being revealed, Charmion asked, "What harm can be there?"<sup>44</sup> Roland Barthes would suggest that disrobing - taking clothes off layer by layer - constitutes "a spectacle based on fear."<sup>45</sup> Though there was a clear desire on the part of the (male) audience to see the disrobed female body, there might also be the fear that once this body was revealed, there was nothing left to lust for. Once a body was revealed, the tension built up during the disrobing, involving erotic poses and gestures,

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<sup>41</sup> *New York Herald*, "Muscular Arms versus Musical Arts," January 19, 1898.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*, Trans. By Annette Lavers (Union Square, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 84.

disappeared because the female body was now “desexualized.”<sup>46</sup> The erotic appeal of performances like Charmion’s thus lay in the uncertainty, unease, as well as desire that emanated from the very *undoing* of clothing.

### **A Woman with the Muscles of Sandow<sup>47</sup>**

Part of what constituted Charmion’s attraction was her highly developed upper-body muscularity, which she displayed while striking daring, often erotic, poses.<sup>48</sup> “Young women who are ambitious to rival their brothers in muscular development,” the *New York World* informed, “would do well to follow the example set by La Petite Charmion” whose “muscles stand out like great knots when she strikes a pugilistic attitude.”<sup>49</sup> Charmion’s most provocative pose was probably the one where she flexed both arms over her shoulders and displayed her naked back, for this suggested that the front of her body was also naked. Few strongwomen at the time displayed this kind of nudity, though a notable exception was trapeze artist Luisita Leers who posed in a similar fashion to Charmion during her career in the 1920s and ’30s.

The exhibition of muscularity, by means of poses reminiscent of ancient Greco-Roman statues, was revived at the end of the nineteenth century by self-proclaimed physical culturist, Eugen Sandow. His fascination with sculpting the body brought him fame as an example of a perfect and racially superior white male. He organized competitions that sought out perfect

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. As also Showalter has pointed out, “... striptease is based on the logic of the male gaze. ... The dancer teases the audience as the text teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed, veil after veil, garment after garment is removed, but it is the *delay* in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself, because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another...” Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 166.

<sup>47</sup> *New York NY World*, “A Woman in New York With the Muscles of Sandow,” December 19, 1897.

<sup>48</sup> See David Chapman and Patricia Vertinsky, *Venus with Biceps: A Pictorial History of Muscular Women* (Vancouver, BC : Arsenal Press, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> *New York NY World*, “A Woman in New York With the Muscles of a Sandow,” December 19, 1897.

muscular development in men and so became the founding father of modern-day bodybuilding.<sup>50</sup> Supported by scientists, who shared his fascination with the ‘perfect’ male body, Sandow maintained a cult following and his posing was seen as an “act of mass self-definition.”<sup>51</sup> This new kind of masculine identity formation, according to Budd, was also a push “against the prevailing experience of the machine age,”<sup>52</sup> in which the body seemed to have lost all its significance. It was also an attempt to preserve white male supremacy, which had come under attack from immigrants, the working class, African Americans, and the New Woman.<sup>53</sup>

Charmion, like many performers at the time, claimed association with the popular Sandow to promote her act. The headlines for one of her first performances in 1897 pronounced her “a woman in New York with the muscles of Sandow” and added that she had a back and biceps like an oak tree and an arm larger than strongman Corbett’s.<sup>54</sup> According to another report, Charmion measured her strength against three strongmen, including Sandow, and “showed that she had nearly half as much leg and back power” as him.<sup>55</sup> It is unlikely that this competition actually took place, but it illustrates how Charmion used the popularity of other artists to advertise her own act and be regarded as an authority on women’s health and physical culture.

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine. Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997, 60-61; Jacqueline Brady, “Is a Hard Woman Good to Find? Reconsidering the Modern Amazon Project,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 2 (3) (2001): 217-18.

<sup>51</sup> Budd, *The Sculpture Machine*, 60.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>53</sup> Marcy W. Murray. “Strong Women and Cross-dressed Men: Representations of Gender by Circus Performers during the Golden Age of the American Circus, 1860-1930,” *Bandwagon* (May-June 2004): 18. For an extensive account of Eugen Sandow’s career and the history of early body building, see David Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent. Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Body Building* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> *New York NY World*, “A Woman in New York With the Muscles of a Sandow,” December 19, 1897. For more info on James J. Corbett, see Kim Beckwith and Jan Todd, “Requiem for a Strongman: Reassessing the Career of Professor Louis Attila,” *Iron Game History* 7 (2-3) (2002): 42-55.

<sup>55</sup> *Glens Falls Morning Star*, Tuesday, May 10, 1898, 2.



Image 2: Charmion flexing her right bicep. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Charmion was not the only ‘female Sandow’ at the time, nor the strongest. Katie Sandwina, with her six-foot height, 200-pound weight, and extraordinary feats of strength, also seemed to defy traditional definitions of femininity. She was praised as “Germany’s Beautiful Herculean Venus” and was often credited with the status of “the most perfect female figure ever

seen.”<sup>56</sup> Strong and beautiful performers who gained popularity in the public sphere at this time, like Sandwina and Charmion, were directly linked with important social movements of the day, as Todd points out. These included, especially, eugenics, women’s suffrage, physical culture and “New Womanhood.”<sup>57</sup> Like Sandow, described by eugenicists as a prime specimen of a superior race, Charmion and Sandwina were frequently referred to as examples of perfect female health and beauty and represented the ‘New Woman.’

The New Woman of the theatre and circus was not usually directly associated with any kind of radical women’s movement. According to Glenn, however, female performers between 1880 and 1910 constituted a kind of “proto feminist vanguard.” Before the advent of organized women’s movements, performers like Charmion played crucial roles in women’s demands for the right to sexual expressiveness and autonomy over their bodies and identities. Though there may not have been a widely shared set of ideological values or a specific political agenda among these performers, their unconventional acts laid the groundwork for feminism even before the term was coined.<sup>58</sup>

Both on- and off-stage, Charmion advocated female agency by encouraging women to be more physically active:

Every woman ought to exercise on getting up in the morning. Take a drink of cold water, then exercise with small dumbbells – if you have none, take flatirons – going through motions with arms up and down, bolding the weights out of arm’s length, etc.: keep this up for ten minutes. Be sure to take a little walk each day in the fresh air. If you stay indoors any length of time, say two days, without going out, as some women do, you will become melancholy. Remember that exercise

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<sup>56</sup> Jan Todd, Reconsidering the Career of Katie Sandwina: Germany's Herculean Venus – NASSH proceedings 2007, 64 (2 pages).

<sup>57</sup> Jan Todd, “Center Ring: Katie Sandwina and the Construction of Celebrity,” *Iron Game History* 10 (1) (November 2007): 6.

<sup>58</sup> Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 4, 6.

also works on the mind and really makes you enjoy life. You will never find an athlete, man or woman, nervous.<sup>59</sup>

To enable free movement of the body, she also advised women not to wear corsets or long skirts.<sup>60</sup>



Image 3: Charmion posing provocatively without corset, circa 1898. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

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<sup>59</sup> *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, "The Drama: Synopsis," Sunday, March 20, 1904; See also: *Marion Pilot*, "Woman's Department, "Charmion Rules," October 27, 1904. According to the *Utica Sunday Tribune*, Charmion even wrote a book for women on "how to enjoy life by taking simple exercises," which, according to the report, attained "an immense sale" and led to the adoption of her system in many leading schools and colleges for women around 1906. No information on this book has surfaced, however, and it may very well be that Charmion made it up as part of her stage biography. *Utica Sunday Tribune*, "Charmion, The Perfect Woman at the Orpheum this Week," November 23, 1906.

<sup>60</sup> *Sunday World*, "She Hangs by Her Heel in Mid-air," January 9, 1989.

Links between Charmion's act and phenomena such as physical culture and dress reform were clearly influenced by physical culture proponents and health reformers such as Bernarr Macfadden. Macfadden published a large number of articles in his *Physical Culture Magazine*.<sup>61</sup> In these articles, he strongly advocated against the corset and for gender equality through physical activity.<sup>62</sup> “[T]here should be but very slight differences between the strength of man and woman,” and “the proverbial feminine weakness is simply the result of growing into womanhood eased by the terrible corset,” he claimed. He also frequently used female acrobats, including trapeze performers, to illustrate the capacity of women to be as strong as men - while maintaining femininity. About the Moulrier sisters trapeze duo, who, like Charmion, also performed in New York around 1900, he said: “These sisters are but mere girls in age, and still they perform feats equal and even superior to some of the best male athletes...”<sup>63</sup>

Macfadden and Charmion thus promoted similar ideas: women's liberation from restrictive clothing, women's ability to develop muscular strength like men, and the benefits of such ideas for their health and well-being. Whether or not Charmion's strategies to popularize these ideas were successful remains questionable. Unlike Sandow, whose promotion of the muscular male body was perceived necessary for the preservation of family values, nation, and empire in a time of social anxieties around the “unman,”<sup>64</sup> strongwomen in vaudeville were often perceived to wear their bodies in “the wrong way”<sup>65</sup> and were taken less seriously. Whereas the

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<sup>61</sup> By 1901 the magazine had reached a circulation of 150,000. Endres, Kathleen L. “The Feminism of Bernarr Macfadden: *Physical Culture Magazine* and the Empowerment of Women,” *Media History Monographs* 13 (2) (2011): 4; See also Allen Guttman, *Women's Sports. A History* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1991), 98.

<sup>62</sup> See Endres, “The Feminism of Bernarr Macfadden.”

<sup>63</sup> Bernarr A. Macfadden, “Strong, Beautiful Bodies for Girls and Young Women,” *Physical Culture*, June 1900. See also Guttman, *Women's Sports*, 98.

<sup>64</sup> Budd, *The Sculpture Machine*, 61, 79.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 67; See also Murray, “Strong Women and Cross-dressed Men,” 19.

muscular male body such as Sandow's was perceived as 'in control,' the muscular and erotic female performer signified the opposite: she was out of her place and her body out of control.

One of the technologies that both enhanced and restricted a woman's agency around the turn of the twentieth century was the camera - or the "sculpture machine," as Budd puts it.<sup>66</sup> Muscular and/or erotic male and female bodies could now be "mass produced, mass marketed, and mass distributed."<sup>67</sup> Like Sandow, whose image could be found in various magazines, on postcards, and on posters, Charmion took advantage of the developing photography industry and distributed postcards and pins with images of herself flexing her muscles or striking sensual poses on the trapeze.

### **To View and Be Viewed**

The developing photography, print, and cinema industries at this time made it both possible and much simpler for managers and performers to promote acts through the widespread distribution of alluring images. Although advertising through photographic and cinematographic representations seemed effective ways to entice potential spectators, it also reinforced ideas about the female body as a sexual object. In the case of photography, Sontag has pointed out that it "turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed."<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Allen suggests that media representations around the turn of the twentieth century - be they postcards, mutoscopes, stereo viewers, or motion pictures - "reduced the subject of feminine sexual spectacle to a tiny icon, which could be bought or collected,"<sup>69</sup> and thus fetishized. In the case of the mutoscope

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<sup>66</sup> Budd, *The Sculpture Machine*, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Brady, "Is a Hard Woman Good to Find?," 217.

<sup>68</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, London: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1973, 1974, 1977, 1990), 14.

<sup>69</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 270.

(like a View-master), even the movement of a female character could be controlled by the spectator, who could decide the speed at which the cards flipped by.<sup>70</sup>

The increasing interest in viewing moving bodies at the *fin de siècle* was initiated by inventors and scientists who were fascinated with measuring various aspects of the human body, including the mechanisms of movement. Their studies, scientific at first, gave rise to the development of cinematography, a technology that would later become popular and commercialized, eventually taking over the role of vaudeville as the most widespread entertainment medium. During the first years of cinematography's development, however, vaudeville theatres played important roles in bringing cinema to the masses. Theatre managers used this new and fascinating technology of film to attract spectators, while continuing to provide staged entertainment. The synergy of vaudeville and the invention of cinematography permitted curious audiences to view moving bodies on display: either on stage, through 'peepholes,' or on the big screen.

Silent movies like *Trapeze Disrobing Act* followed earlier experiments of inventors and scientists that captured and registered the movements of animals and humans through sequencing drawings and photographs. Prominent figures in these pioneering works were French scientist Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904) and his contemporary, Anglo-American photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904). Though Marey seemed to approach his experiments primarily from a scientific angle, Muybridge was clearly more interested in the artistic value of bodies in motion, putting emphasis on narrative, costume, décor, and thus *mise-en-scène*.<sup>71</sup>

While Marey almost exclusively used male characters in his work, Muybridge photographed the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 270-71.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Technology and Sexual Difference: Apocalyptic Scenarios at Two "Fins de Siècle," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 9 (2) (1998): 10-11

moving bodies of both men and women, often both entirely unclad. However, clear distinctions between the depictions of each gender can be observed.

In Muybridge's work, as Allen suggests, male movement is represented in terms of athleticism or work, while female movement is presented as a sexual spectacle.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Muybridge's depictions of men often involved athletic feats (e.g. boxing, fencing, jumping, and running) without explicit contextualization. Depictions of women, on the other hand, emphasized gracefulness and/or were often set in a 'domestic' framework that involved being, or becoming, naked. In one sequence of photographs, for example, Muybridge depicts two naked women taking a bath (1884-85).<sup>73</sup> In another one, a naked woman goes to bed (1887),<sup>74</sup> and a final series captures two naked women dancing.<sup>75</sup> The difference between the depictions of men and women, in Berger's view, is that "men act and women appear." Men signify action and are the ones who watch. Women are the surveilled, the ones being observed by a male gaze.<sup>76</sup>

Muybridge was not the only expert whose work catered to a primarily male desire to view sexualized displays of (fe)male bodies. In North America, Edisons' Kinetograph Department, founded in 1894, as well as William Kennedy Dickson's (1860 –1935) Mutoscope and Biograph Company, established in 1895, produced a large number of short, titillating films. Before these movies appeared on the big screen, they could be viewed through kinoscopes or peepholes, which Edison had installed in cities across America.<sup>77</sup> In concert with other smaller

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<sup>72</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 263.

<sup>73</sup> See [http://www.masters-of-photography.com/M/muybridge/muybridge\\_bucket\\_of\\_water\\_full.html](http://www.masters-of-photography.com/M/muybridge/muybridge_bucket_of_water_full.html) [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>74</sup> See <http://images.wellcome.ac.uk/indexplus/image/V0048662ET.html> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>75</sup> See <http://beingsakin.wordpress.com/2011/03/26/if-you-dance-with-me/> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>76</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin books, 1972), 47. Italics are his.

<sup>77</sup> See, Smithsonian Institution, "Dancing in the Dark," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2006. Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20061111131341/http://www.smithsonianmag.com/issues/2006/march/presence.htm> [accessed June 5, 2012]; Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 265.

movie companies in North America and bigger ones in Europe,<sup>78</sup> Edison turned moving bodies into spectacles and movie making into a commercial endeavour.<sup>79</sup>

It was thus no coincidence that Charmion's vaudeville act became the subject of one of Edison's films. Her act fed the interest of audiences in sexual spectacle, and Edison opened one of his first kinetoscope parlours in close proximity to Koster and Bial's theatre in New York, where Charmion performed on a frequent basis. The cross-pollination between vaudeville and cinema, both depicting erotic bodies in motion, according to Musser, had already been initiated in 1894 when Edison recruited bodybuilder Eugen Sandow to pose with his muscles before the camera.<sup>80</sup> The first woman to appear in Edison's films was Spanish dancer Carmencita (1894).<sup>81</sup> Like Sandow and Charmion, Carmencita was a popular performer at Koster and Bial's theatre and her "intense sexuality,"<sup>82</sup> evoked by her flamboyant dancing, made her an interesting film character.

*Sandow* (1894), *Carmencita* (1894) and *Trapeze Disrobing Act* (1901), along with other movies produced by Edison and the Mutoscope and Biograph Company, could be categorized, according to Gunning, as "the cinema of attractions."<sup>83</sup> The term refers to early films produced

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<sup>78</sup> George Méliès, the Lumière and Pathé brothers in France; Robert W. Paul, James Williamson, G.A. Smith and Cecil Hepworth in England.

<sup>79</sup> See, Smithsonian Institution, "Dancing in the Dark;" Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 265.

<sup>80</sup> Charles Musser, "At the Beginning. Motion Picture Production, Representation and Ideology at the Edison and Lumière Companies," in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer, 15-30 (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 19-20; Thomas Edison, *Sandow*, 1894, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Pfqt0rMruo> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Edison, *Carmencita* (1894), see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-15jwb1ZTMA> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>82</sup> Musser, "At the Beginning. Motion Picture Production," 22.

<sup>83</sup> Tom Gunning, "Now you see it, now you don't," *The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions*, in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer, 41-50 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 42. This term offers a historical concept of film spectatorship which takes its cue from modes of fascination prevalent in early cinema, feeding on attractions such as the magical and illusionist power of filmic representation, its kinetic and temporal manipulations (not yet subordinated to character movement and the chronological momentum of linear narrative) and, above all, an openly exhibitionist tendency epitomized by the recurring look of actors at the camera. With the standardization of the narrative film (in the U.S. around 1906-07) such "primitive" attractions were

between 1893 and 1908, whose sole purpose was “to display,” and in some cases “to shock,” rather than to tell a story.<sup>84</sup> Like Edison’s *Sadow* and *Carmencita*, which present scenes without storylines and put emphasis on the body as spectacle,<sup>85</sup> *Trapeze Disrobing Act* also shows a series of actions and poses that are meant to titillate and shock, while lacking a clear narrative structure. As Gunning points out, movies like *Trapeze Disrobing Act* invoked “the temporality of surprise, shock and trauma, the sudden rupture of stability by the irruption of transformation or the curtailing of erotic promise.”<sup>86</sup>

How did meanings associated with Charmion’s performance on stage possibly differ from those associated with her performance on the screen, and what may the explosion of media images around the turn of the twentieth century have meant in terms of women’s agency more broadly? German literary critic Walter Benjamin believed that the introduction of photography and cinema at this time led to “a crisis of theater” and authenticity.<sup>87</sup> He meant that, while staged performance produced direct contact between performer and audience, cinema caused a temporal incongruence between the two. The camera made the performer and her/his image “separable, transportable,”<sup>88</sup> leaving her/him without any kind of interaction with the audience or control over its reactions.

Staged performances such as Charmion’s relied very much on interactions between performer and audience. Charmion herself kept up “a running talk” while doing her tricks and

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systematically suppressed – if not pressed into service – by narrative strategies of viewer absorption and identification. Rather than disappear, Gunning contends, the cinema of attraction continued “underground,” both in certain avant-garde film practices and as a component of particular genres (e.g. the musical). Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience,” *The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology*, *New German Critique* 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory (1987): 180.

<sup>84</sup> Gunning, “ “Now you see it, now you don’t,” 42, 49.

<sup>85</sup> Musser, “At the Beginning,” 20.

<sup>86</sup> Gunning, “ “Now you see it, now you don’t,” 49.

<sup>87</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968 (originally published in 1955)), 231.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

with her “peculiar chirpy voice” she held “conversations with two or three people in the audience all the time.”<sup>89</sup> She made direct contact with her spectators and seemed to verbally guide them through her performance. From short interviews in a number of newspapers, it becomes clear that Charmion intentionally used the stage as a platform to convey her beliefs on what the female body should look like and how women should aspire to be physical active, have a balanced diet, and remove clothing that would hamper free movement.

The particular interaction between performer and spectator that seemed so crucial to Charmion’s performance was absent in *Trapeze Disrobing Act*. Not only did the silent movie leave the interpretation of her act entirely up to her audience, it also “allowed for a view of the woman’s body whereby even if she returned the spectator’s gaze, it would always be incommensurable with the spectator’s.”<sup>90</sup> Referring to female dancers in the theatre, Allen suggests that the body of the performer and the gaze of the spectator, though separated by the footlights and their respective roles, occupied the same space, the same time, and the same materiality. In a photographic or cinematographic image, however, the female performer’s “returning gaze ha[d] less power to unsettle since the gulf that separated the displayed woman from the man who looked at her was an unbridgeable, material gulf.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, while photographic and cinematographic representations of female performers may have made the female body more visible to the public, such images took away, or at least changed, the relative agency that emanated from these women’s original performances.<sup>92</sup> The introduction of cinema

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<sup>89</sup> Dash, “Hammerstein’s,” *Variety*, 1909.

<sup>90</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure. Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 36.

<sup>91</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 271.

<sup>92</sup> Discussion exists about whether or not the early movies such as *Trapeze Disrobing Act* were voyeuristic, exhibitionist or both. According to Gunning, they were more exhibitionist than voyeuristic because the protagonist was fully aware of her audience and made eye contact with the camera on several occasions. Nevertheless, as

at this time thus intensified the divide between women pushing the boundaries as agents of their own sexuality and a movie industry that tried to capitalize on the female body as a sexual object.

Rabinovitz argues that *Trapeze Disrobing Act* was unlike some of Edison's other first silent movies in which women took the central role. In his movie *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York* (1901), for example, a woman is caught by surprise when she walks over an air vent that lifts her skirt to the amusement of some male onlookers. Unlike the action in Edison's *Trapeze Disrobing Act*, where Charmion makes eye contact with her audience (including the enthusiastic men on the balcony to her right and the camera), the woman in *What Happened on Twenty-third Street* is depicted as naïve and unaware of the public gaze.

Rabinovitz observes that Charmion's

inscribed look back at the camera suggests a tacit contract between her and both real and implied spectators, an agreement to her status as looked-at subject. ... Her movements, her stripping of clothes as she reveals more of her body, her athletic prowess on the swing makes her a different kind of subject [from the woman who is featured in *What Happened on Twenty-third Street*].<sup>93</sup>

### **Swinging Between Freedom and Constraint**

As the comparison between *Trapeze Disrobing Act* and *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street* indicates, women's increased visibility at the turn of the twentieth century can simultaneously be read as liberating and restricting. On the one hand, performers like Charmion challenged Victorian notions of femininity and the female body and encouraged women's freer bodily movement, expression, and display. On the other hand, the ways in which performers like Charmion marketed their stage identities by making use of new visual technologies contributed

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Musser points out, despite the film's seeming exhibitionist character, the two men on the balcony in *Trapeze Disrobing Act* "authorized the film spectators' voyeurism." See Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*. Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 179.

<sup>93</sup> Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure*, 30.

to a continued objectification of the female body as a sexual commodity. So while “the female body became the visual trope of the period’s new mass culture identities,”<sup>94</sup> it came at a cost. As Phelan notes, “[v]isibility is a trap, it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession.”<sup>95</sup> Moreover, normalization of the display of female nudity and sexuality represented by ‘perfectly shaped’ vaudeville performers, also increased the desire and seeming requirement for other women to live up to such standards. Charmion, for example, claimed that “her figure was within reach... and therefore ordinary women might be expected to have ‘perfect’ figures as well.”<sup>96</sup>

Regardless of whether or not performances like Charmion’s at the time were read as liberating or restricting, they helped question and challenge traditional notions of the (Victorian) female body as passive, weak, and physically unfit. At a time when fear was simmering that provocative performances by women (or performances by women *tout court*) “had the capacity to eradicate the boundaries between classes and genders, instigating political and sexual anarchy,”<sup>97</sup> Charmion played a pioneering role. And though female transgressors like her may not, at first sight, have been symbols able to move masses of women to oppose patriarchal values, at least they could show, Davis has noted, “the good that could be done by the woman out of her place,” and “had the potential to inspire a few females to exceptional action and feminists to reflection about the capacities of women....”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Hindson, *Female Performance Practice*, 42.

<sup>95</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 6-7.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 117.

<sup>97</sup> Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women on Top,” *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays*, 124-51 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), 133.

## Chapter IV: Le Numéro Barbette: Destabilizing Gender on the High Wire, the Rings and the Flying Trapeze

*...ne l'oubliez pas, nous sommes dans cette lumière magique du théâtre, dans cette boîte à malices où le vrai n'a plus cours, où le naturel n'a plus aucune valeur, où les petites tailles s'allongent, les hautes statures rapetissent, où des tours de cartes et de passe-passe, dont le public ne soupçonne pas la difficulté, parviennent seuls à tenir le coup.*

Jean Cocteau, "Le Numéro Barbette," 1926.<sup>1</sup>

Don't forget, we are in the magic light of the theatre, in this trick factory where truth has no currency, where anything natural has no value, where the short are made tall and the tall short, where the only things that convince us are card tricks and sleights of hand of a difficulty unexpected by the audience.<sup>2</sup>

In the fall of 1923, Barbette took Parisian theaters by storm with a clever though provocative amalgamation of trapeze artistry and female impersonation. Standing atop a staircase with a blonde wig, fashionable dress and large hat, his body adorned with feathers and gemstones, Barbette opened his act. With feminine gestures he walked down the stairs and balanced on the high wire on the tips of his ballet shoes. He descended the wire, lay down on a sofa and slowly started to take off pieces of clothing – one at a time. When revealed in tight shorts and a tiny brassiere, he performed a routine on the rings and the trapeze. After several bows and rounds of applause, Barbette took off his wig, while flexing his muscles and gesturing in masculine ways. Spectators who saw his act for the first time were often very surprised, some relieved and others offended.<sup>3</sup>

Barbette, born Vander Clyde in 1904 in Round Rock, Texas had never dared to dream of the spectacular success his act would become in Paris and other places in Europe during the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Cocteau, "Le Numéro Barbette," Extrait de *la Nouvelle Revue Française*, July 1st (1926): 35-36.

<sup>2</sup> Translation by Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau A Biography* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company (1970): 366.

<sup>3</sup> See also Lydia Crowson, "Cocteau and le Numéro Barbette," *Modern Drama* 19 (1) (1976): 80.

interwar years - between 1923 and 1938 to be precise. When he presented his act to audiences in several American cities at the start of his career, his performance did not catch on as it would later on in the 'City of Light.' Though Barbette, who had learned his aerial skills and his female impersonation while on the American circus circuit, was an accomplished and skillful acrobat, to a large extent he owed his fame to French poet and cinematographer, Jean Cocteau. Cocteau, a controversial figure, both because of his close connection with surrealist art and his open homosexuality, became enamoured with Barbette as soon as he laid eyes on him. To his friends, including artists, poets and literary critics, he raved about Barbette's beauty and creative deceptions. "Your great loss for 1923 has been Barbette – a terrific act at the Casino de Paris," Jean Cocteau wrote to his friend and artist Valentine Hugo. "Barbette is a young American who performs on the trapeze dressed as a woman. Ten unforgettable minutes. ... We all found him an absolute knockout."<sup>4</sup> In his poetic essay *Le Numéro Barbette*, published in 1926, Cocteau would immortalize Barbette while describing his own fears and desires that the performance inspired.

It was not Barbette's acrobatic skills that intrigued Cocteau, it was, suggests Tait, his performing body's physical suspension on the trapeze that echoed a form of identity suspension.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Barbette's mystery seemed to lie in his aerial transformation from woman to man during which the presumably distinct categories of masculinity and femininity became confounded. Barbette flew in-between genders and "treated her body as an elaborate screen onto which the beholder could project his or her own assumptions, fantasies, and desires."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography*, 312.

<sup>5</sup> Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies. Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Lyford, "The Lessons of Barbette. Surrealism, Fascism, and the Politics of Sexual Metamorphosis," in *Surrealist Masculinities. Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction France*, 165-183 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 174.

Barbette's act in interwar France was timely. The destructive results of World War I, especially with regard to the large numbers of physically and psychologically wounded soldiers, had left the country with deep concerns about the degeneration of the male body and the nation as a whole. The country's anticipated 'return to order' after the war did not go without opposition from liberal thinkers, such as Jean Cocteau and surrealist inspired artists like Man Ray and Drieu La Rochelle - to name a few - who saw in the postwar chaos opportunities for the discussion and/or establishment of un(der)explored gender relations. Though gender issues were at the heart of many postwar debates and anxieties in France, their interrogation took place less in public debates than in the writings, works of art and performances of these so-called radical individuals like Cocteau and his entourage.<sup>7</sup> As Chadwick and Latimer suggest, visual culture and performance in interwar France were "spheres of empowerment for some social subjects, spheres of subversion for others." Performances nonetheless, provided spaces in which gender and sexuality could be refigured and from which new contracts with society could be negotiated.<sup>8</sup>

The interwar culture in France, though fraught with worries about the degeneration of nation and race, has often been presented as a place where liberal arts, culture and performance flourished, where theaters and circuses provided ample room for performers from all over the world, and for performances so suggestive they would have been banned elsewhere. African

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<sup>7</sup> See analogous: Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes. Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 8, 15. She writes: "...the privileging of gender issues in the postwar confrontation with change has its historical roots in the war experience itself. The blurring of conventional gender roles was one of the most commented on of the war's effects;" and on page 15: "...because returning soldiers had trouble communicating openly or directly what they had seen and felt, and because the French often wanted to ignore the fundamental questions concerning the war's meaning, more oblique or 'disguised' forms of symbolic expression such as novels became a popular outlet for debate."

<sup>8</sup> Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer, "Introduction," in *The Modern Woman Revisited. Paris Between the Wars*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer, xiii-xxiv (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), xviii.

American Josephine Baker's erotic dancing and display of nudity was one such example and Barbette himself was certainly another one.<sup>9</sup> One way of interpreting this "frenzied hedonism" so typical of postwar France, Roberts suggests, was to view it as "a response to the trauma of the First World War and the dramatic changes that accompanied it."<sup>10</sup>

Barbette's provocative act offers a useful case for examining social anxieties about gender, masculinity and (homo)sexuality in interwar France. His performance contributed to debates about the constructedness of gender and was indicative of the tensions of a postwar culture that wanted to 'return to order.' Like Charmion, who performed provocative striptease in mid-air on a trapeze in vaudeville theaters, the aesthetic of suspension and flying in combination with the "magic light of theater"<sup>11</sup> made Barbette's act not only permissible, but also very popular. In Barbette's case, flying and being suspended in the air provided a metaphor for a liminal space where no boundaries existed, where 'things were possible.'

### **Barbette Beginnings**

Much of what we know about Barbette, the successes he enjoyed and the tragic end of his career, is thanks to Francis Steegmuller who interviewed Barbette in Texas, about ten years before the artist took his own life in 1973. Clearly marked with the "wounds of his devotion to

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Karen C.C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (4) (1998): 903-34. See also Elisabeth Ezra, "A Colonial Princess. Josephine Baker's French Films," in *The Colonial Unconscious. Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca and London, 2000), 97-128.

<sup>10</sup> Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> I here refer to Cocteau's quote at the start of this chapter. See Cocteau, "Le Numéro Barbette," 35.

his art,”<sup>12</sup> referring to both the physical and emotional pains that were tormenting him, Barbette told Steegmuller his story.

His earliest acrobatic exercise, Barbette recounted, was carried out on a stretched out, galvanized, iron clothesline in his mother’s backyard in Round Rock, Texas. Once finished high school at fourteen years of age he picked cotton to earn money and shortly after joined the “Alferetta Sisters World-Famous Aerial Queens” circus act.<sup>13</sup> One of the sisters had died and when a replacement was sought, Barbette responded to the ad and agreed to perform as a female aerialist.<sup>14</sup> It was certainly not unusual for young men to perform as women during aerial circus acts. As Tait points out, “[t]he cross-dressing of young males with upper-body strength for competitive advantage made the aerial act appear impressive ‘for a woman’, and ensured its hire over other male acts. . . . There was little advantage for females to secretly cross-dress, and acts of female-to-male cross-dressing in circus were far rarer than in theater.”<sup>15</sup>

Around 1914, after about two years performing with the Alferetta Sisters, Barbette joined ‘Erford’s Whirling Sensation,’ an act consisting of three people hanging by their teeth on a revolving apparatus and wearing large butterfly wings.<sup>16</sup> During one of these acts Barbette broke four of his teeth and fell from a height, otherwise without major consequences.<sup>17</sup> In his early twenties he began to develop his own act. The piece was a combination of skills he had learned during his training in circus, including aerial acrobatics and cross-dressing, though was designed to be performed in a theater-setting. It was then that he adopted the name “Barbette,” which

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, in Man Ray, Jean Cocteau and Francis Steegmuller, *Le Numéro Barbette* (Paris: Jacques Damase, 1980), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Announcement in *Billboard*, “Alferetta Sisters World’s Famous Aerial Queens,” Jan 27, 1917.

<sup>14</sup> Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 67-68.

<sup>16</sup> Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, 64.

<sup>17</sup> See Georges-Michel, “Psychologie de Barbette,” around 1929. Retrieved from *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Paris, 8-RO-16929.

sounded like a feminized version of the French word for beard, *barbe*, and was possibly intended to hint at his gender ambiguous performance.<sup>18</sup> Barbette himself said that his lucky choice of name made French people think of him as one of themselves.<sup>19</sup>

It was around 1919 that Barbette started to present his solo-act to audiences in the United States. He was received with mixed commentaries. In response to his performance in Keith's theater in Boston in December 1919, one show critic wrote that "[m]uch of the possible worth is lost because he evidently considers it necessary to use such bulk of makeup to disguise his masculine features. On the wire he does not do anything much but his trapeze work is a bit better."<sup>20</sup> A reporter in *Variety* had more praise for the performer and called him a "big time opener."<sup>21</sup> From these newspaper excerpts it also becomes clear that, at least in the beginning of his career, Barbette sometimes executed an 'iron jaw dervish whirl'<sup>22</sup> before unmasking his male identity. He seemed to have omitted this part later on,<sup>23</sup> possibly because he no longer deemed this dangerous and physically demanding feat necessary for the success of his act.

At the end of 1922, Barbette disappeared from the circus scene in the United States until about 1927, and travelled to Europe with William Morris as his agent.<sup>24</sup> After performing in England, he went to Paris in the fall of 1923,<sup>25</sup> reportedly with "twenty-five trunks of costumes,

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<sup>18</sup> Lyford, "The Lessons of Barbette," 165.

<sup>19</sup> Steegmuller. Interview with Barbette, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Len Libbey, "Show Reviews, Keith's Boston," *Variety*, December 1919, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Abel, "New Acts and Show Reviews," *Variety* 1919, 18.

<sup>22</sup> In this act he would hang by his teeth from a revolving apparatus (like the one with Erford) and spin or 'whirl' around, probably quite fast.

<sup>23</sup> Abel, "New Acts and Show Reviews," *Variety* 1919, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Joe E. Jeffreys, "Barbette: That Daring Young [Wo]Man on the Flying Trapeze," in *Art, Glitter, and Glitz. Mainstream Playwrights and Popular Theatre in 1920s America*, ed. Arthur Gewirtz and James J. Kolb (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), 206.

<sup>25</sup> Interview Steegmuller, 64; David Lewis Hammarstrom, *Behind the Big Top* (Cranbury, New Jersey: A.S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1980), 34.

scenery, and cosmetics for a dazzling female impersonation on the single trapeze...<sup>26</sup> Over the years, Barbette would reveal himself as a meticulous and perfectionist performer, always arriving two to three hours before his performance to put on his make-up and check his apparatus.

Anton Dolin, a ballet dancer with the *Ballets Russes* and Barbette's friend in Paris recounts how Barbette whitened his whole torso with a thick cream that was specifically prepared for him. He also whitened his hands and pink-tinted his nails. In line with the popular art of 'plastic posing' or the *tableaux vivants* performers as addressed in the previous chapter,<sup>27</sup> whitening one's body to invoke the image of a Greco-Roman body or statue, was deemed more artistic. No matter how many times a day Barbette appeared, after every performance he cleaned off his white layer and put it on again for the next show. His tights were specially woven for him in Paris and he never wore the same pair twice in an evening. He sent his blond wig to the hairdresser after every performance so it could be dressed for the next day. At least fifteen minutes before his act, he would be on the stage to test the trapeze, strengthening the steel supports of the wire rope, "his pink ballet shoes protected by large straw sandals, his hands encased in large chamois gloves."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hammarstrom, *Behind the Big Top*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> See Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004), 5. See also Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Anton Dolin, *Ballet Go Round* (London: Michael Joseph LTD, 1938), 304.

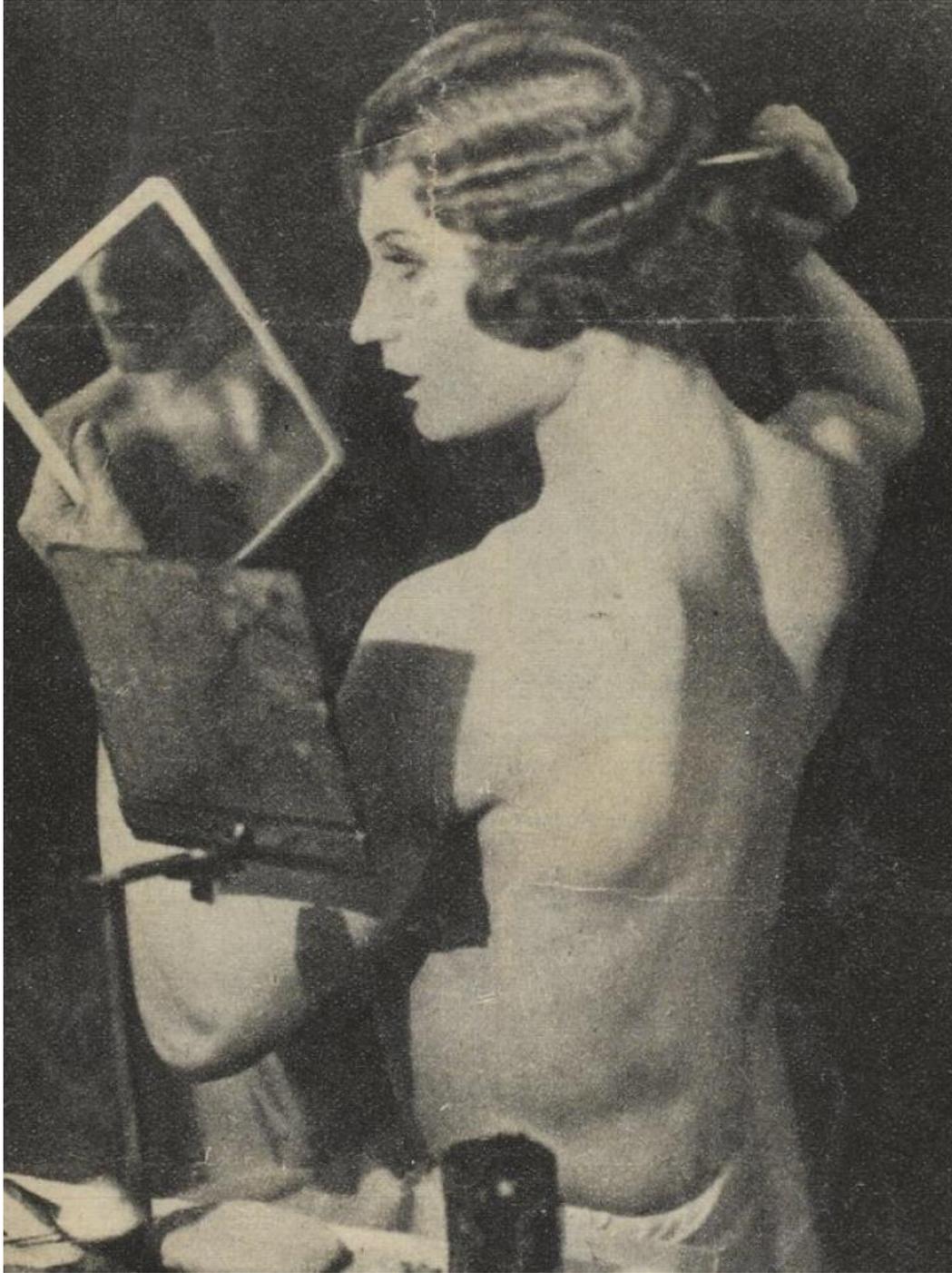


Image 4: Barbette prepares for his act. Courtesy of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*.

## Paris Was the Experience...<sup>29</sup>

“I felt that I’d found my city,” Barbette told Steegmuller, describing his arrival in Paris. At the theater, as opposed to the circus, “I could tell that the audience appreciated all the little refinements I’d worked so hard on” and soon “the most wonderful people began to come around to my dressing room.”<sup>30</sup> With the help of wealthy American expatriates who took him under their wings, he was introduced to other influential people, including poet Jean Cocteau and his artistic colleagues Raymond Radiguet, Man Ray, George Geffroy and Marie-Laure de Noailles, the latter, one of the most controversial and influential patrons of arts of the twentieth century. The writers, painters, composer and other artists he met, Barbette said, “sensed from seeing my act that we were artists together...”<sup>31</sup>

However it was Jean Cocteau’s praise and influential essay *Le Numéro Barbette*, published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1926 that gave Barbette’s performance the attention it received. Through his essay in which he praises Barbette for the beauty and ingenuity of his act, Cocteau, quite literally, ‘lifted’ Barbette’s performance to a level of artistry the aerialist himself had never dared to dream of. Barbette, who early on in his career said he thought of himself as a “female impersonator, and nothing more,”<sup>32</sup> later admitted that Cocteau saw more in his act than he had realized there was himself...<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Steegmuller, interview with Barbette, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 64, 66.

<sup>32</sup> René Bizet, “Le Double Visage. Dans La Loge de Barbette,” *Candide*, Jan 14, 1926. Retrieved from *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Paris, 8-RO-16929. Original words : “Je ne comprends pas pourquoi on met devant mon nom très souvent, sure les affiches, un point d’interrogation. Je me défends de la façon la plus absolue de faire quoique ce soit d’équivoque. Je suis un imitateur de femme. un point c’est tout...”

<sup>33</sup> Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, 66.

## Des Gens Ne Voient Dans les Spectacles Que Ce Qu'ils Sont<sup>34</sup>

What exactly made Barbette's performance so popular and intriguing often depended on what the commentator or spectator wanted see in his act. Some applauded his acrobatic abilities, others ensured that it was his immaculate female impersonation that did the trick, while some believed that it was the combination of both.<sup>35</sup> Though Barbette was a technically skilled aerialist, the acrobatics he displayed were neither outstanding nor innovative when compared to other aerial circus acts at the time.<sup>36</sup> According to Jeffreys, the aerial aspect of his act added a new element to popular drag performances. Whereas most female impersonators' ploys at the time were to impress audiences with fancy dress, dance and song, Barbette's act was spectacular because it was physically dangerous and because drag "surpassed itself as an end and became the kicker for an already sensational act."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Tait suggests that it was Barbette's innovative blending of aerial action and gender transformation that made his act stand out.<sup>38</sup>

The importance attributed to Barbette's acrobatic abilities versus female impersonation also very much depended on the particular venue in which he performed. Though his act, as he had said himself, was designed to be performed in a theater, in 1930 he accepted *Cirque Médrano's* invitation to appear in a circus setting. "The circus requires a different type of approach than the music-hall," Barbette told a reporter. "I have to somehow transpose my act. I have to walk differently and continuously be aware that I am now performing in a circular

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<sup>34</sup> Own translation: "The only thing people see in a performance is what they are." L'Archange du Trapèze," undated. Retrieved from *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Paris, 8-RO-16929.

<sup>35</sup> It is very likely that those reviewers who stressed Barbette's acrobatics skills may have done so to take attention away from his provocative woman to man transformation. See also Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 70.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffreys, "Barbette: That Daring Young [Wo]Man on the Flying Trapeze," 198.

<sup>38</sup> See Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 75.

setting. I have to fill the room with myself.”<sup>39</sup> To please spectators in a circus setting, Chabrier wrote, Barbette had to emphasize his strong, gymnastic abilities.<sup>40</sup> Novy noted that Barbette’s flying movements on the rings and the trapeze had become more gracious now that they could be observed from all angles. “One almost forgets about the magic of his female impersonation,”<sup>41</sup> she added. Another critic said that the open and circular concept of the circus allowed Barbette to use the space around him more freely so that his artificial and aerial beauty became even more remarkable.<sup>42</sup> Most commentators seemed to agree: Barbette’s acrobatic skills were much more impressive in a circus setting, though his stage props including stairs, his fancy dress and feathers, seemed out of place and only effective in a theater.<sup>43</sup>

Jean Cocteau, like others in his artistic circles, was less concerned with Barbette’s acrobatic abilities than with his act as a form of art and possible indicator of the instability of gender categories. “With Barbette, the acrobat is a pretext,” Cocteau wrote.<sup>44</sup> He was especially intrigued by Barbette because the acrobat’s aerial performance embodied his own idea(l) of art and poetry. In a letter he wrote in 1916 to Etienne de Beaumont from Flanders, he made the comparison between “a tightrope dancer’s skilled, perilous performance and the painful creativity of a poet.”<sup>45</sup> Arnaud, one of Cocteau’s biographers, suggests that Cocteau seemed to be talking about himself when he described Barbette as balancing “above the audience, above

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<sup>39</sup> Legrand Chabrier, “Barbette au Cirque Medrano,” December 2, 1930. Retrieved from *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Paris, 8-RO-16929. My own free translation from the original quote: “Le cirque exige un autre travail que celui du music-hall. Il faut que je transpose, en quelque sorte, mon numéro. On marche autrement, on doit constamment devenir un être circulaire. Il me faut emplir la salle de moi-même.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Yvon Novy, “Barbette au Cirque,” Dec 13, 1930. Retrieved from *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Paris, 8-RO-16929.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Patin, “Cirque Medrano: Barbette? Antonet et Bédy. Spectacle Divers,” *Figaro*, December 4, 1930.

<sup>43</sup> R. Fuzier, “Barbette en Piste,” *Le Soir*, Dec 4, 1930. Retrieved from *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Paris, 8-RO-16929.

<sup>44</sup> Cocteau quoted in Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography*, 368.

<sup>45</sup> The letter was addressed to Etienne de Beaumont from Flanders, Belgium. See Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography*, 364.

death, above ridicule, above bad taste, above scandal, without falling.”<sup>46</sup> Aside from the similarities Cocteau saw between himself and Barbette, his sexual attraction to the aerialist should not be overlooked.<sup>47</sup> Not only did Cocteau find a soul-mate in Barbette and vice versa, according to Dimock, they also had a brief romance.<sup>48</sup>

In *Le Numéro Barbette*, published three years after he watched Barbette’s debut in Paris, Cocteau describes how he met Barbette in his dressing room, how he witnessed his transformation from man to woman before his act, and how Barbette deceived his audience during his act. Barbette’s secret, according to Cocteau, lay in his ability to appeal to “those who s[aw] the woman in him, to those who sense[d] the man in him, as well as to others whose souls [we]re moved by the supernatural sex of beauty.”<sup>49</sup> Here Cocteau seems to suggest that Barbette’s act offered audiences the chance to imagine different gender possibilities and/or to identify with Barbette, without fear of social repercussion. At the same time, however, Cocteau did not see room for alternative genders outside of the carnivalesque space of the theater.

Historians have different views on the meaning of Cocteau’s essay. On the one hand, Cocteau seems to advertise a flexible and changeable conception of gender, while on the other hand, he expresses anxieties about gender transformation and associates it with the grotesque. The passage in which Cocteau describes his reaction to Barbette who is preparing for his performance in his dressing room, is particularly telling:

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<sup>46</sup> Cocteau quoted in Claude Arnaud, *Jean Cocteau* (Gallimard, 2003), 304. Original quote: “Ils se balançait sur le public, sur la mort, sur le ridicule, sur le mauvais goût, sur le scandale, sans tomber”, dira Cocteau, comme s’il parlait de lui-même,...

<sup>47</sup> Crowson, “Cocteau and le Numéro Barbette,” 80.

<sup>48</sup> Chase Dimock, “The Surreal Sex of Beauty: Jean Cocteau and Man Ray’s “Le Numéro Barbette.” <http://asitoughttobe.com/2011/06/02/the-surreal-sex-of-beauty-jean-cocteau-and-man-ray%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cle-numero-barbette%E2%80%9D/> [accessed June 2, 2011].

<sup>49</sup> Jean Cocteau, “Le Numero Barbette,” in Man Ray and Jean Cocteau, *Barbette* (Berlin: bordeline, 1988).

I felt at ease in that dressing room. I was smoking, chatting to a fellow sportsman who was having a wash before rubbing grease all over his face... Girls would come in, give a shriek and disappear again until Barbette, putting a dressing-gown on, opened the door to exchange a few words with them. ... It is not until he pulls on his blonde wig held by a simple elastic around his ears that he will take up – while putting a bunch of hairpins in his mouth – the slightest posture of a woman doing her hair. ... The transformation is complete. Jekyll is Hyde.... I am scared. I turn away. ... It is my turn to be intimidated. The doors open, the girls do not feel embarrassed anymore, they come and go as they please...<sup>50</sup>

Did Cocteau insert this passage simply to shock his readers, or was he genuinely afraid of Barbette's transformation? According to Franko, in *Le Numéro Barbette* Cocteau "consigns the figure of the androgyne to a "no man's land" outside the tight sexual polarity from which it emerged."<sup>51</sup> By insinuating the panic of being caught in a sexually indeterminable middle stage, Cocteau reaffirms "stereotypic male-female dichotomies while denying all possible traces of the middle ground to be traversed."<sup>52</sup> Franko also points to Cocteau's use of the term 'Jekyll and Hyde' which is historically associated with hermaphroditism and monstrosity. Barbette's ambiguous appearance thus seems grotesque, perhaps even freakish. It is not Barbette the woman who is monstrous in Cocteau's essay, but Barbette's first transformation from man to woman, which Cocteau did not describe. In Franko's opinion, "Barbette's changing sexual identity is accepted as a *fait accompli* but unexplored as a process, because the crossing of sex barriers, the bridging of incompatibles, is traditionally monstrous."<sup>53</sup> His analysis thus suggests that Cocteau's interpretation of Barbette's act reflected social anxieties about the blurring of boundaries between male and female. From this point of view, Cocteau seems to reinforce rather than challenge questions about gender and sexuality.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Franko, "Where he Danced: Cocteau's Barbette and Ohno's Water Lilies," *Modern Language Association, Special Topic: Performances* 107 (3) (1992): 596.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 597.

And what about Barbette himself? He clearly transgressed “the fixed order of gender behavior imposed on social bodies,”<sup>54</sup> and became seemingly “unclassifiable”<sup>55</sup> while in the air. Whether or not Barbette suggested, or intended to suggest, the possibility of alternative genders, remains an interesting question. Why did Barbette manifest his femininity so clearly in the beginning of his act and why did he show himself as a muscular and masculine performer at the end? Was he afraid of being perceived as caught in a middle-stage, neither man nor woman, but, as some reviewers depicted him, as “a strange creature,”<sup>56</sup> flying “along dream paths, in a place where sounds are no longer heard...”<sup>57</sup>

### **Their Love-life is Even Sadder...**

For they have their romance, their aspirations, their disaster. Some have at their disposal, to introduce sensuality or sentiment into their lives, a bare hour of night, a fringe of shadow, a narrow and restricted space. Their field of operations may not transgress that limit, that corner that alcove, beyond which there is an accusing streetlamp, a lighted road... One more step ruins their illusion, their hope – I won't add their security, for they have found no place for security in their existence.

Colette, *The Evening Star*, 1946.<sup>58</sup>

Cocteau's and Barbette's seeming reluctance to commit to the 'middle stage,' was not at all surprising when seen against a backdrop of postwar anxieties around gender and the increasing medicalization of sexuality and homosexuality in particular. In the above passage, Colette provides a depressing though telling description of the status of male homosexuality in

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<sup>54</sup> Peta Tait, “Feminine Free Fall: A Fantasy of Freedom,” *Theatre Journal* 48 (1) (1996), 30.

<sup>55</sup> Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>56</sup> Georges-Michel, “Psychologie de Barbette.”

<sup>57</sup> Cocteau, “Le Numéro Barbette,” 37.

<sup>58</sup> Colette, *The Evening Star. Recollections* (London: Peter Owen, 1946, translated by David le Vay), 58.

interwar France. Though there had been no anti-sodomy laws in France since 1791, anti-obscenity law was used to censor material with homosexual content and to repress homosexual activities. Until 1900, the dominant explanation of male sexuality was that a gay man had “a woman’s soul in a man’s body,” also termed “sexual inversion” and defined as a psychopathological condition.<sup>59</sup> In the postwar climate in which Barbette performed, homosexuality was seen as a threat to traditional family values, the male race, democracy, and the nation as a whole. In other words, links between war, violence, emasculation, and homosexuality put gay men in a situations where they had to hide -or at least be ambiguous about- their sexual orientation.

Despite the legal and medical repression of homosexuality, “the homosexual subculture in postwar Paris became both clandestine and, at the same time startlingly visible and well-integrated in the public life of the city.”<sup>60</sup> This was another one of those contradictions characteristic of France’s interwar hedonism; while homosexuality was often suppressed as an act of indecency, it also flourished, especially in the works of homosexual artists and writers for whom “homosexuality re-enact[ed] the trauma of war as the experience of spectacularly degraded manhood.”<sup>61</sup> However, homosexual writers like Jean Cocteau and Marcel Proust, to name two familiar ones, did not make any special plea for the tolerance or acceptance of homosexuality, though they used a lot of irony and double entendres on the topic in their writings.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Carolyn J. Dean. *The Frail Social Body. Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 131,138.

<sup>60</sup> Brooke Lindy Blower, “The Paris of Americans: Transnational Politics and Culture Between the World Wars,” Dissertation (Princeton University, History Department, 2005), 339.

<sup>61</sup> Dean, *The Frail Social Body*, 144.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*,162.

Barbette's performance was especially daring in light of these mixed sentiments about homosexuality in interwar France. Though female impersonation was common, especially for younger acrobats, a performance like Barbette's that was almost entirely based on gender transformation was particularly provocative since it also signified a homosexual identity.<sup>63</sup> Female impersonators both benefited and suffered from a culturally anxious and aware public, Jeffreys explains. "The new ideas, notions, and theories about sexuality helped create a drag-hungry public while at the same time fostering conflicted reactions to the performers."<sup>64</sup> Like other female impersonators, in their attempt to prevent rumours that stemmed from their gender-bending performances, Barbette liked to emphasise his masculinity when not on stage. Like female impersonator and Barbette's contemporary, American Julian Eltinge, who smoked cigars throughout interviews and told stories about fighting when he did not get his way,<sup>65</sup> Barbette dressed in a tailored costume with manly hat whenever he appeared outside of the theater or circus. And Frank Foster, ringmaster with the Bertram Mills circus in London who knew Barbette, recounted how the artist would get into fights when someone dared to call him effeminate.<sup>66</sup>

It seems plausible that Barbette's revelation of his masculine identity and flexing of his muscles at the end of his performance, was also a self-protection mechanism. However, according to Dimock, Barbette's display of male muscularity was also 'performed' and thus not an attempt to hide his sexuality or prevent rumours. "Barbette does not simply reveal his male identity and return to his true self, instead, he pantomimes and performs the masculinity

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<sup>63</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 75.

<sup>64</sup> Jeffreys, "Barbette: That Daring Young [Wo]Man on the Flying Trapeze," 207.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Frank Foster, *Pink Coat, Spangles and Sawdust. Reminiscence of Circus Life with Sanger's Bertram Mills and other Circuses* (London: Stanley Paul and Co. Ltd, 1948), 118-119.

supposedly revealed by removing his wig. His male sexed body and its expected postures and actions,” Dimock suggests, “are revealed to be as much a product of artifice and performance as the female persona he adopts on stage.”<sup>67</sup>

Unlike Eltinge, Barbette did not go through significant efforts to come across as heterosexual. While Eltinge ensured that he was seen around women and called one of them his wife, Barbette made no such effort. In his interview with Steegmuller near the end of his life, he did not seem reluctant (anymore) to reveal his homosexuality. In a short anecdote, he tells how Cocteau, Cocteau’s friend Maurice Rostan, and himself went to a brothel to see if they could rent a homosexual film.<sup>68</sup> “During the running of the only blue film available at Chez Aline,” Barbette said, “Maurice Rostand fell asleep and snored, and Cocteau kept up a commentary on the defects of the acting.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Une Eve Future**<sup>70</sup>

While Cocteau seems to have shied away from describing Barbette’s metamorphosis from man to woman in *Le Numéro Barbette*, he did produce a series of photographs in cooperation with his close friend and photographer Man Ray that specifically documented the process of Barbette’s transformation. Ray was probably most well-known for his unconventional and surrealist inspired portrait photography. One photograph depicts Barbette’s genitals flattened by a girdle, while his chest remains breastless and his face is made feminine with make-up and a

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<sup>67</sup> Dimock, “The Surreal Sex of Beauty.”

<sup>68</sup> Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, 69.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, “Barbette au Casino de Paris,” *Chronique des Spectacles, Nouvelle Revue Française*, January 1(1924): 97

blond wig.<sup>71</sup> As Lyford notes, the photograph registered anxiety about emasculation, and caused discomfort because the usual cues an audience would use to figure out Barbette's sexual identity were now inverted.<sup>72</sup>

The shock effect that Cocteau and Ray intended to create in their works of art and also with Barbette's portraits, was typical of the surrealists' agenda to "shock bourgeois society by presenting the unrestrained unconscious in the most ruthless forms."<sup>73</sup> However, while surrealists at the time asked provocative questions about the instability of gender, the movement was largely sexist and homophobic.<sup>74</sup> Dimock points out that some of the most iconic images of surrealism presented the female body as an object on which the sexual desire of the male artist and spectator performs violence. Belgian painter René Magritte's very famous *Le Viol* or The Rape (1935), depicting a female torso as a face with breast as eyes, serves as one such example. Also, founding father of the surrealist movement, André Breton, voiced his homophobic sentiments quite clearly, supposedly to target Cocteau who "employed the language and imagery of surrealism without allegiance to Breton's philosophy," and "also used it to openly theorize a queer eroticism through it."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Due to copyright issues I cannot display this image or any other images produced by Man Ray. To view Ray's work, see [http://www.manray-photo.com/catalog/advanced\\_search\\_result.php?keywords=Barbette&categories\\_id=&inc\\_subcat=1&products\\_themes=&product\\_years=&osCsid=d832072c80ef55ee127f8be7b2443cb3&x=-986&y=-116?keywords=Barbette&categories\\_id=&inc\\_subcat=1&products\\_themes=&product\\_years=&osCsid=d832072c80ef55ee127f8be7b2443cb3&x=-986&y=-116&largeur=1280](http://www.manray-photo.com/catalog/advanced_search_result.php?keywords=Barbette&categories_id=&inc_subcat=1&products_themes=&product_years=&osCsid=d832072c80ef55ee127f8be7b2443cb3&x=-986&y=-116?keywords=Barbette&categories_id=&inc_subcat=1&products_themes=&product_years=&osCsid=d832072c80ef55ee127f8be7b2443cb3&x=-986&y=-116&largeur=1280) [accessed July 9, 2013].

<sup>72</sup> Lyford, "The Lessons of Barbette," 172.

<sup>73</sup> Dimock, "The Surreal Sex of Beauty."

<sup>74</sup> As also Showalter has noted for the fin-de-siècle: "...the male rebellion against patriarchy did not necessarily mean a commitment to feminism. While the male avant-garde of the 1880s "were critical of the patriarchal order in which they lived and heralded its ends," they often "looked with fear towards the new feminist order." This paradox is at the heart of fin-de-siècle culture. Indeed, the strongly anti-patriarchal sentiments could also coexist comfortably with misogyny, homophobia, and racism." Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 10.

<sup>75</sup> Dimock, "The Surreal Sex of Beauty."

Though Man Ray was inspired by surrealism, his portraits of Barbette were not especially sexist, but rather intended to mock the violence inflicted by World War I and the fear of emasculation as a result. Man Ray's photographs indeed embodied the fears and desires of a "civilization without sexes," so termed by French writer Drieu La Rochelle.<sup>76</sup> La Rochelle had long sympathized with the surrealists and shared their belief that bourgeois culture was vulnerable if one attacked the strict categories of gender at the center of bourgeois domestic and public life.<sup>77</sup> Already in 1924 he had seen in Barbette an "*Eve future*,"<sup>78</sup> and admired his clever blending of both male and female characteristics. While asserting that the quality of Barbette's act was not determined by his acrobatic feats, but by the beauty of the performer, he wrote:

Barbette does not have hips: her athleticism and her negation render them invisible. She is muscular and ready for everything. She is draped in a piece of cloth, evocative of a banknote and wears pearls as those belonging to Venus.<sup>79</sup>

"What a difference," La Rochelle asserted, "between this majestic nervous amazon and the plump women one sees elsewhere, with their muscles packed in fat..."<sup>80</sup>

La Rochelle's comments about the blending of masculine and female characteristics would serve as pretext for his break with surrealism in 1925 and his turn to a more fascist agenda.<sup>81</sup> A collaborator with Nazi-Germany, La Rochelle saw in Barbette's muscular yet elegant body possibilities for the re-establishment of a strong and healthy European race. While artists like Cocteau and Ray viewed Barbette's performance as proof of the constructedness of gender and "the impossibility of re-creating a unified social body," to La Rochelle Barbette

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<sup>76</sup> See Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes*, 6.

<sup>77</sup> Lyford, "The Lessons of Barbette," 182.

<sup>78</sup> La Rochelle, "Barbette au Casino de Paris," 97.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-8. Original quote: "Elle n'a pas de flancs: l'athlétisme et la négation les tiennent effacés. Elle est musclée, prête à tout. Elle est vêtue d'un morceau d'étoffe, suggestif comme un bank-note. Et des perles, tout ce qui reste à Venus de ses origines."

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. Original quote: "Quelle différence entre cette grande amazone nerveuse et les grosses femmes qu'on voit ailleurs, aux muscles empaquetés dans la graisse, gênées par la grâce comme par un souvenir."

<sup>81</sup> Lyford, "The Lessons of Barbette," 177.

seemed to suggest a “protofascist body... in which the virile power of man would fuse directly with the beauty and creative energy of a woman.”<sup>82</sup> This becomes very clear in his novel *Gilles* (1939), which describes the encounter between Dora, an androgynous, beautiful, muscular, blond woman, reminiscent of Barbette, who embodies feminine power and reproductivity, and Gilles, whose body is “dis-integrated, split in two, partly virile and partly weak.”<sup>83</sup> In La Rochelle’s novel and imagination, as Lyford points out, the “ideal body did not resecure the boundaries between the sexes; rather, it fused the essential characteristics of the modern woman and the idealized action of the wartime man into a newborn fascist individual.”<sup>84</sup> So, while Cocteau and Ray saw Barbette’s performance as a clear illustration of the ways in which the war had shattered traditional values, as well as French society’s struggle to find a new balance, La Rochelle seemed to find that very balance, and thus a solution to male emasculation, in a strong, androgynous body like Barbette’s.

### **Un Hommage à La Femme**<sup>85</sup>

Though Barbette would probably never have made a link between his own performance and a fascist body ideal, he was flattered by the comments La Rochelle made in 1924 about his beautiful appearance that stood in sharp contrast with many female performers’ imperfect bodies.<sup>86</sup> In his attempt “to bring an act that could not be executed by a woman,”<sup>87</sup> Barbette claimed to eat and train very little in order to keep his muscles from developing too much and to

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 179-180.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>85</sup> Maurice Verne, *Musée de Voluptés. Le Secret des Nuits Electriques* (Paris : Editions des Portiques, 1930), 223.

<sup>86</sup> Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, 66.

<sup>87</sup> Bizet, “Le Double Visage. Dans La Loge de Barbette,” Original words: “je devais composer un numéro qu’une femme ne pouvait pas faire.”

maintain a thin waist.<sup>88</sup> “[W]omen today who come visit me in my dressing room and who find I have a fashionable body, spend time comparing their silhouette with mine in the mirror and are happy when they find out they are as thin as me,”<sup>89</sup> he told one reporter. He was clearly a style icon, representing a female body ideal that was also fashionable. It was not a coincidence that the much idolized “silhouette of la *femme moderne* - as a being without breasts, without a waist, without hips -” which Barbette so perfectly represented, “visually expressed the erosion of traditional cultural categories.”<sup>90</sup>

Taking on a female identity was one thing, but being able to keep it a secret until the end of a physically demanding performance was another. “With each motion, his body or his costume could have betrayed him since nothing he did on stage was passive,” Crowson notes.<sup>91</sup> Suppressing his masculine identity would have been difficult in non-demanding activities like walking for example, let alone while executing highly physical aerial acrobatics in very short attire.<sup>92</sup> In an interview in 1926, Barbette explained how he maintained a feminine identity on stage:

Don’t even think that that wig is enough: the dress makes my waist look very thin, but that still does not make my feminine image perfect. When I spread my arms out with my palms facing upwards, you will see my masculine biceps. If, on the contrary, I keep my palms facing downwards, my biceps are not visible anymore and my arms are like a woman’s ... Look at my back... if I keep my back straight, my shoulder blades stand out. If I bend slightly, I give my back a harmonious curve and have a back like a woman’s. And my knees? See, I have very pointy knees, and that is a masculine characteristic. I never keep my legs

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<sup>88</sup> Georges-Michel, “Psychologie de Barbette.” Original words: “Je ne mange rien dans la journée pour garder ma taille fine. Dans le temps, on mettait des corsets. Aujourd’hui il faut bien que je marche avec la mode, n’est-ce pas ;” Legrand-Chabrier, “Dans les Coulisses du Music-hall. Comment Barbette se Métamorphose,” *Le Petit Parisien* 17 (Feb 1935).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., Original words : “ ...les femmes d’aujourd’hui qui viennent dans ma loge et qui trouve que j’ai un corps à la mode, passent leur temps à comparer dans la glace leur silhouette a la mienne et elles sont enchantées quand elles se trouvent aussi plates que moi.”

<sup>90</sup> Roberts, *Civilization without sexes*, 71.

<sup>91</sup> Crowson, “Cocteau and le Numéro Barbette,” 80- 81.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 81.

straight, I always bend them slightly and try to keep one foot pointed as much as possible... Moreover, I am always moving during my performances, so the audience does not have the time to examine my legs closely.<sup>93</sup>

Though Barbette was a master of female impersonation, according to Vilona Pilcher's lyrical review, the audience must have sensed that he was not what they viewed as a typical woman. There was certainly something mysterious about him, something that they could not quite pin down. Walking down the stairs in a long, feathered dress, his legs close to one another and his toes pointed, accentuating his slim silhouette, may not have raised much suspicion about his real identity. During his aerial performance, however, his muscularity seemed more difficult to hide. Pilcher writes:

... study that bending back... Within its frail framework the most masculine of muscles are moving like levers, folding and unfolding as if their very friction would burn away the flesh. And observe that long bone of the back, when arched at its acutest angle. Like a bow it bends backwards, bending like a bow of brass stained for the flight of an arrow of iron."<sup>94</sup>

To keep his audience guessing about his 'real' identity, and to reassure the spectators that he was a woman after his first performance on the high wire, Barbette lay down on a couch set on stage and with feminine gestures slowly started to take off his layered clothing. "Long brittle fingers snap off a shiny slipper, slop off a silky sock, snap off a second shiny slipper, slip off a second silky sock,"<sup>95</sup> Pilcher wrote, accentuating Barbette's erotic undressing. Cocteau observed that Barbette's "scabrous little scene" on the sofa was meant to throw dust in the spectators' eyes

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<sup>93</sup> Bizet, "Le Double Visage. Dans La Loge de Barbette." Own translation from original quote : "...Ne croyez pas que cette perruque suffise pourtant: je suis très serré a la taille par la jupe, mais cela encore ne donnerait qu'une image féminine imparfaite. Que je tiens mes bras en croix, les paumes vers le ciel, on voit des biceps masculins, qu'au contraire je les tiens les paumes vers la terre, vous n'apercevez plus les biceps, j'ai des bras de femme... Regardez le dos... si je me tien droit, mes omoplates ressortent, j'ai un dos d'homme, si je me penche légèrement je donne à mon dos une courbe harmonieuse, j'ai un dos de femme. Et les genoux? Voyez, j'ai les genoux pointus, et cela c'est un signe masculin, jamais je ne tiens mes jambes droites, je plie toujours légèrement mes jambes et je me tiens le plus possible avec un pied sur la pointe... De plus, je suis toujours en mouvement dans mon numéro pour qu'on n'ait pas le temps d'examiner mes jambes trop à loisir..."<sup>93</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Velona Pilcher, "A Star Turn," *Theatre Arts Monthly* XIV (12) (December 1930): 1034.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

because he would need “entire freedom of movement” for his performance on the rings and trapeze.<sup>96</sup> In other words, his interlude on the couch served to reinstate his female identity for those who had started to question it.

Though Barbette took his female impersonation very seriously by studying women’s movements and claiming that his performance was “*un hommage à la femme*,”<sup>97</sup> it did not exactly put women in a positive light. Indeed, while Cocteau suggested play with categories of gender, he meant play from a male perspective only. Both Cocteau and Barbette seemed to take pleasure in their ability to create something that they believed was more beautiful and better than any woman in the world. Barbette made all women around him fade and look ugly, according to Cocteau.<sup>98</sup> The aerialist “sums up in one all the women he has observed, becoming then the typical female in such a convincing manner that he eclipses the prettiest women appearing before and after him. Thanks to Barbette,” he added, “I now understand that it was not only for the sake of decency that the great nations and cultures had men play women’s parts.”<sup>99</sup> Also Barbette made misogynist comments on more than one occasion. He told a reporter, for example, that his female fans really put him off. They sent him too many cards and gifts and, sometimes to his frustration, came to see him after his performance. They were not nearly as charming or discrete, Barbette indicated, as his male admirers who barely dared to pass him their cards.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Man Ray and Jean Cocteau, “*Barbette*” (Berlin: Borderline, 1988).

<sup>97</sup> Verne, *Musée de Voluptés*, 223.

<sup>98</sup> Arnaud, *Jean Cocteau*, 304. Own translation from original quote : “Cette créature ravissante tuais les petites femmes autour. Elles s’éteignent, devenaient laides. C’est qu’en jouant le rôle de la femme, il les résumait toutes.”

<sup>99</sup> Ray and Cocteau, “*Barbette*.”

<sup>100</sup> Georges-Michel, “Psychologie de Barbette.”

## Life after 1938

Having travelled around the world for more than twenty years, Barbette gave his final performance in 1938 at the Loew's State Theater in New York City. While sweating heavily after his act, he purportedly caught a chill in a backstage draft. The next morning he could hardly move. Diagnosed with pneumonia and sudden stiffness of his joints, he spent eighteen months in hospital for surgery and recovery. Barbette's illness did not only drain him financially (he had to sell his property in Texas), but also emotionally.<sup>101</sup>

"The Barbette act is finished for all time," he wrote to his friend and famous pianist Katharine Goodson.

Perhaps it was better so... No one will ever be able to say that my *last* appearance wasn't one of my best. I should have had to give it up some time. But I would have liked to have a little more time to adjust myself gradually. To have everything torn from you at once is a terrifying experience.<sup>102</sup>

During his recovery, he also exchanged letters with his friend Anton Dolin, in which he told him how he wished he had died during his operation.<sup>103</sup> Reminiscing about his career, Barbette wrote:

Too much has been written of the glamour and fascination of opening nights, applause, triumph, adulation, fame, and so little of the dreary struggles to get somewhere. Years of work, rehearsing, practising, hoping hopelessly against hope that your time will come, the unending succession of drab provincial towns, filthy dressing-rooms, poor food, miserable hotels. We must be indeed a breed apart to survive it all. And then when you do know anything approaching success, you forget all the unpleasantness, forget how you sat in dressing-rooms and cried hot scalding tears of despair.<sup>104</sup>

Surprisingly little is known about Barbette's life after his accident, as it seems typical for circus and vaudeville performers once out of the limelight, though some anecdotal information reveal his second career as a self-proclaimed aerial-choreographer starting around 1942. He

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<sup>101</sup> Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, 72.

<sup>102</sup> Dolin, *Ballet Go Round*, 306.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 307-308.

would be credited with inventing the aerial ballet spectacular, which after its inception became a standard part of many circuses.<sup>105</sup> Barbette trained young aerialists in several circuses in the United States and negotiated contracts with Hollywood studios to choreograph aerial scenes in a number of films. In 1958, for example, he was aerial director for the film *Jumbo* where his duties included teaching actors to walk the tight wire.<sup>106</sup> Around 1969, near the end of his career, he toured with Disney on Parade through Australia in charge of an electrical carousel on which six young female aerialists with butterfly wings performed.<sup>107</sup>

Hammarstrom who wrote about the life of John Ringling North and his circus, describes how Barbette, also billed as “the Entrepreneur of Enchantment,” once brought to the Sonoma County Fairgrounds Pavilion in Santa Rosa, California “a fascinating procession of theatrical trunks, odd mechanical contraptions, rough-looking roustabouts to put them together.... Huge butterfly wings, enormous deflated clown heads, piles of twisted cables and pulleys, silver bars and hinged platforms, light fixtures...”<sup>108</sup> Clearly, Barbette had not lost his fascination with extravagant aerial spectacle. The butterfly wings were to be used by his twelve female aerialists, which he had named the Aerialovelies. Hammarstrom recounts how “very few of the Aerialovelies ever tasted the thrill of victory” because Barbette, perfectionist as he was, was hardly ever entirely satisfied with them; he scolded them for chewing gum, for not showing up for training, and for not practicing hard enough. “When you are peeling, you’ll look like Bozo the Clown up there in the lights,” he told one of his pupils who had been sunbathing for too

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<sup>105</sup> Robert A. Burns, “Vander Barbette: Round Rock’s Gift to Paris,” retrieved from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Hammarstrom, *Behind the Big Top*, 37.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 30. This must have been around 1953. See *Ukiah News*, “Top Acts Listed by Shrine Circus,” April 23, 1953.

long.<sup>109</sup> Barbette, quite literally, hovered over his performers and equipment like a “possessed puppeteer in control of every string.” However, despite his reputation as an irritable perfectionist, he has also been described as humoristic and genuinely concerned with his performers. He would lobby to increase their salaries, gave them money out of his own pockets, even paid for abortions, and rarely got his money back.<sup>110</sup>

Barbette was clearly a man of contrasts. Besides his dedication to this work as aerial choreographer and the ambitious aerial spectacles he coordinated, he also revealed himself as a rather embittered man. During his interview with Steegmuller in 1926 in a coffee shop, Barbette would have returned a plate, scolded the waitress when the coffee arrived too early and when she put down some spoons rather noisily. “Since these years in Paris I’ve never been able to readjust to crudity,” Barbette admitted. “[A]part from my family everything about Austin offends me.”<sup>111</sup>

Due to a combination of unemployment and depression as a result of his failing health, Barbette resorted to sleeping pills and died in 1973 at the age of 68.<sup>112</sup> Though the *Austin Statesman* did not carry his obituary, indicating his seemingly unknown accomplishments as aerial performer and choreographer in the United States at the time of his death,<sup>113</sup> he has never ceased to inspire filmmakers, writers and performers. While Barbette was Cocteau’s muse in *Le Numéro Barbette* (1926), he also played a small role in Cocteau’s film *Le Sang d’un Poète* (1930) in which he is seen, beautifully dressed as a woman by Coco Chanel, watching a play from a theater balcony.<sup>114</sup> Barbette would also serve as inspiration for the character of Death in

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<sup>109</sup> Hammarstrom, 32.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 31, 33.

<sup>111</sup> Steegmuller, Interview with Barbette, 66, 69.

<sup>112</sup> Hammarstrom, *Behind the Big Top*, 37; Michael Moore, *Drag! Male and Femal Impersonators on Stage, Screen and Television* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Compagny, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 122.

<sup>113</sup> Burns, “Vander Barbette: Round Rock’s Gift to Paris.”

<sup>114</sup> *New York Times*, “Vander Barbette Is Dead at 68; Trapeze Artist in the Twenties,” August 10, 1973.

Cocteau's play *Orphée* (1950).<sup>115</sup> More recently, in 1979, Albert Goldbarth used Barbettes as inspiration throughout his poetic work *Different Fleshes*,<sup>116</sup> and in 1993, in his work *Light Shall Lift Them*, performance artists John Kelly revived Barbettes's story for contemporary audiences in an artistic combination of theater performance and cinema.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> See Kazuyuki Matsuda, "La Mort Sous la Forme d'Une Jeune Femme Chez Cocteau - Sur la Genèse du Personnage de la Princesse du Film Orphée," 219-26. <http://www.let.osaka-u.ac.jp/france/gallia/texte/40/40matsuda.pdf> [accessed March 13, 2013].

<sup>116</sup> Albert Goldbarth, *Different Fleshes. A Novel/poem* (Geneva, N.Y., 1979).

<sup>117</sup> Jeffreys, "Barbettes: That Daring Young [Wo]Man on the Flying Trapeze," 207. *Le Sang d'un Poète*: see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAqxEq4yIb4> [accessed June 30, 2013]; *L'Orphée*: see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VT4og-xpAas> [accessed June 30, 2013]; excerpts from *Light Shall Lift Them*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAnNhju6MGw> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLZdCtPIpHY> [accessed June 30, 2013].

## Chapter V: Bessie Coleman: “The Only Race Aviatrix in the World”<sup>1</sup>

Working black women could not always access pen and paper as did the white male explorers and adventures whose exploits have become foundational histories. Nor have they been granted the kind of historical publicity garnered by black male artists and activists. But a number of narratives do exist that tell of black women’s voyages. Most of these remain understudied, or at least not considered for what they say about movement and mobility.

Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 10.

### Introduction

Aviation history received renewed interest with the centennial celebration of the first successful powered flight in 1903 by the American brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright. The United States Centennial of Flight Commission, established in 1999 by aviation institutions across the country, had among its appointed tasks to “assist in conducting educational, civic and commemorative activities relating to the centennial of powered flight,” and to “encourage the publication of popular and scholarly works on the history of aviation or the centennial of powered flight.”<sup>2</sup> This celebration of the inaugural flight not only resulted in a number of flight exhibitions, air meets, and aviation educational projects and publications, it also triggered increased interest in the remarkable accomplishments of some less well-known aviation pioneers, including several female aviators whose accomplishments have long gone unrecognized.

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<sup>1</sup> These are the words of the black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*. See *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie Coleman Makes Initial Aerial Flight,” October 21, 1922. On several other occasions, the *Chicago Defender* refers to Bessie Coleman as “the only Race aviatrix” or “the only aviatrix of the Race.” See for example *Chicago Defender*, “World’s Greatest Event,” August 26, 1922; *Chicago Defender*, “Rain Halts the Initial Flight of Miss Bessie,” September 2, 1922.

<sup>2</sup> United States Centennial of Flight Commission, “Final Report for the Centennial of Flight Commemoration,” April 2004. [http://www.centennialofflight.gov/about/natl\\_plan.htm](http://www.centennialofflight.gov/about/natl_plan.htm) [accessed February 13, 2011]; Centennial of Flight Commemoration Act, Public Law 105-389, November 13, 1998, 4.

On March 10, 2010, for example, hundreds of Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were honoured with a Congressional Gold Medal for their service during World War II.<sup>3</sup> These pilots tested and transported various types of airplanes before their use by male pilots during battle. Unlike their male counterparts in the military, the WASP women were mostly volunteers who paid for their own flight training. The missions they flew were dangerous and required the same level of skill as needed by male pilots flying combat missions, yet it was only in 1978 that Congress acknowledged the WASPs' significance by recognizing them as veterans and granting them limited military benefits.<sup>4</sup> The stories of several WASP members have been documented in "Fly Girls" (1999), produced by the American Experience and aimed at presenting "the largely unknown story" of the WASPs who "recall the planes they flew, the challenges they met, and the pride they felt in playing a role in the American war effort."<sup>5</sup>

There has also been renewed interest in the exploits of aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart (1897-1937), widely known as the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean in 1932, and generally less known as a strong advocate of women's rights in aviation. Plans to create a statue of Earhart in the United States Capitol's statuary hall are illustrative of her standing in the public mind.<sup>6</sup> And when remnants of a bone were found recently on a remote island in the South Pacific, hopes were raised that the truth might finally be revealed through DNA tests about

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<sup>3</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Decades Later, Women Pilots from World War II Get Their Due," March 10, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Sharp Landdeck, "Experiment in the Cockpit. The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II," in *The Airplane in American Culture*, ed. Dominick A. Pisano (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 195. See also Katherine S. Gray, "Flying in Formation: Creating a Place for Women in Aviation Through the Ninety-Nines, the Women Airforce Service Pilots, and the Whirly Girls," Master's Thesis (Miami University Oxford, Ohio, 2007). The women of the British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) were also recently commemorated by the British government. See for instance the *Telegraph*, "Air Transport Auxiliary Women to Be Honoured," February 21, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flygirls/filmmore/index.html> [accessed February 23, 2011].

<sup>6</sup> See for instance *Washington Post*, "Amelia Earhart Flies Into Statuary Hall," August 27, 2010.

Earhart's mysterious disappearance in 1937 during her attempt to fly around the world.<sup>7</sup> The movie *Amelia*, released in October 2009, attempted to provide new insights into Earhart's life and her accomplishments as a pilot, although her aviation aspirations were somewhat overshadowed by the script's focus upon her romantic relationship with her publicity manager and later husband, George Palmer Putnam.

Despite this increased level of interest in female aviation pioneers, many of the remarkable exploits of hundreds of women who were pilots during the 1920s and 1930s remain unacknowledged.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the movie *Amelia* may well have given an incorrect impression that aside from Earhart, there were no other female pilots worth celebrating in the 1920s or before. To be sure, Earhart's legacy was a strong symbol for women's emancipation during the turbulent interwar years, but it should not be forgotten that she was, in many ways, a woman of privilege. Unlike most female pilots of the time, Earhart's parents were fully supportive of her aviation career and even helped her purchase her first airplane.<sup>9</sup> As one of a handful of female aviators in the early 1920s, she was selected to be the first female passenger to be flown across the Atlantic Ocean in 1928. This flight, combined with her physical resemblance to Charles Lindbergh, the much-celebrated aviation hero who flew solo across the Atlantic in 1927, was the beginning of "Lady Lindy's" successful aviation career. Strongly promoted by George Palmer Putnam,

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance *Texarkana Gazette*, "Researchers May Have Solved Mystery of Earhart Disappearance," December 18, 2010; *New York Times*, "DNA Tests May Resolve Enduring Earhart Mystery," December 18, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> In 1933, for example, there were no less than 608 licensed pilots in the United States. See *The 99er*, "To Date Data on Women Pilots," December 2, 1933.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Amelia Hadley Freyberg, *Bessie Coleman The Brownskin Lady Bird* (New York & London 1994), 112. See also p. 111, 113. See also Susan Ware, *Still Missing. Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: Norton, 1993), 36.

Earhart was able to fund her aviation adventures as well as write several books and articles describing her life and experiences as a white, female adventurer and aviator.<sup>10</sup>

Who, then, were those other exceptionally skilled female aviation pioneers who remain largely underrepresented in writings on aviation history? Although plans are underway to produce a movie in honour of Harriet Quimby (1875-1912), America's first female pilot and the first woman to fly across the English Channel,<sup>11</sup> several female aviation pioneers' remarkable exploits remain in the dark. Little has been written, for example, about Louise Thaden (1905-1979), who not only won the first (and extremely hazardous) eight-day women's cross-country flying race from Santa Monica, California to Cleveland, Ohio in 1929, but also beat her male counterparts in the prestigious Bendix Race in 1936.<sup>12</sup> Much remains to be said about Helen Richy (1909-1947), the first woman to obtain a position as a professional passenger-transport pilot in 1934,<sup>13</sup> but who chose to resign when she was not allowed to fly during bad weather or when she was menstruating.<sup>14</sup>

Less well known, especially among white audiences, is Earhart's nearest contemporary, African American Bessie Coleman (1892-1926). Coleman was an ardent advocate of civil rights for African Americans. She saw aviation as a means for African Americans to enter mainstream

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<sup>10</sup> See Doris. L. Rich, *Amelia Earhart: A Biography* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989); Ann Herrmann, "On Amelia Earhart: The Aviatrix as American Dandy," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39 (2000): 77-107.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.onlineprnews.com/news/80279-1290206862-americas-first-female-aviators-story-finally-told-in-biographs-harriet-quimby-movie.html> [accessed February 23, 2011].

<sup>12</sup> Joe Christy, *Racing Planes and Pilots*, Aircraft Competition, Past and Present! (Blue Ridge Summit, Pennsylvania: 1982), 123; Claudia Oakes, *United States Women in Aviation 1930-1939* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1985), 29-30. Louise Thaden devoted an entire chapter to her 1936 Bendix Race victory in her autobiography *High, Wide and Frightened*, 109-122. See Louise M. Thaden, *High Wide and Frightened* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> E. Collier, "Helen Richey is Uncle Sam's First Woman Air-Mail Pilot," *Washington Post*, January, 1935; Oakes, *United States Women in Aviation 1930-1939*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Miss Richey Explains Quitting Pilot's Job," November 7, 1935; George Palmer Putnam, *Soaring Wings. A Biography of Amelia Earhart* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), 159-160. See also Melodie Andrews, "Daredevils and Ladybirds: Gender and the Aviation Industry before World War II," *Essays in Economic and Business History* 13(1995): 277-88.

society and to counteract the stereotypes that had inhibited their progress in succeeding in the professional sphere. Coleman built a remarkable career as a pilot, and her early death in 1926, like Earhart's, was both tragic and surrounded by controversy. Given that her name does not "grace the pages of aviation record books" and "is conspicuously absent from aviation histories,"<sup>15</sup> in this chapter I commemorate Bessie Coleman's important role as an aviation advocate and so contribute to the developing history of female aviators in North America. In addition, I illustrate how Coleman negotiated race, gender and class struggles through her aerial activities.

Providing insight into Coleman's life and personality is challenging, however, given that her aviation career, while covered by the black newspaper press (*Chicago Defender*, the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*), remained mostly unaddressed by the same white newspapers that extensively reported on the stunts, records and races of Earhart and other white women pilots. Though the black newspaper reports on Coleman's career were not necessarily more limited or less accurate than white reports, the fact that white newspapers seldom reported about Coleman's aerial activities is indicative of her marginal status in the field of aviation at the time and consequently, in aviation history more generally. In addition, Coleman did not write about her life or contributed stories of her exploits to magazines as did Earhart and Louise Thaden, for example. It is not surprising then that Coleman's biographers have acknowledged that tracing her past remains a complex task.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike biographers Doris L. Rich (1993), Elizabeth A. Hadley Freydberg (1994) and Jacques Béal's (2008) attempts to provide a full reconstruction of Coleman's life, my interest lies

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<sup>15</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman. The Brownskin Lady Bird*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> The only account of Coleman's story by a close family member is that of her sister Elois Coleman Patterson in her short memoirs entitled *Memoirs of the Late Bessie Coleman Aviatrix. Pioneer of the Negro People in Aviation* (1969). This document was obtained through the Bessie Coleman Foundation (BCF) in Washington, D.C.

in exploring Coleman's importance as a stunt flyer, an aviation entrepreneur and an activist, and in providing greater insight into the complex socio-political climate in which she, as a black, working-class woman, navigated her aviation career.<sup>17</sup> I pay attention to the ways in which she performed gender and race in her attempt to gain a foothold in the white, male dominated aviation industry. This chapter is also a response to Pisano's recent call for historians to take aviation history out of isolation and to increasingly connect it to a broader cultural context.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, I aim to bring to light the remarkable accomplishments of Bessie Coleman while paying close attention to the race and gender struggles she had to cope with in pursuit of her desire to fly. Moreover, I illustrate that aerial activities by black performers were often received with much anxiety by white individuals because of fears that black Americans would advance in technological fields such as aviation.

### **The Winged Gospel's Female Missionaries**

Before the Wright brothers captured the imagination of aviation enthusiasts with their first successful powered flight in 1903, there had been a long history of experiments and exhibitions with lighter-than-air machines as a popular form of entertainment. Since the end of the 18th century, hot-air balloons had attracted large audiences, especially when stunts were

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<sup>17</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that in this paper I, as a white, European, female author, do not intend to speak *for* Bessie Coleman; rather, I intend to speak *with* her. In their paper on perceptions of black female athletes Vertinsky and Captain (1998) write that "[t]heories and analyses of white feminist scholars often make little sense in terms of everyday racial experiences of women of color." See Patricia Vertinsky and Gwendolyn Captain, "More Myth than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black Female's Athletic Ability," *Journal of Sport History* 25(3) (1998), 534. Indeed, white scholars have too often viewed black peoples' experiences through their white and usually Western perspectives, often resulting in a reinforcement of stereotypes. Therefore, and as these authors suggest, as a white scholar theorizing about black individuals' experiences, I aim to engage in dialogue, not monologue by seeking out similarities and differences in experiences of both black and white women who were pilots in the 1920s and '30s. Vertinsky and Captain, "More Myth than History," 536.

<sup>18</sup> Dominick A. Pisano (ed), "New Directions in the History of Aviation," in *The Airplane in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 10.

performed on trapezes hanging underneath the airships or when daredevils performed parachute jumps by leaping out of the balloon. Ballooning, as Pisano points out, was synonymous with circus performances, which were becoming increasingly popular at the time. This new form of mass entertainment was not without risk and severe injury, and even death, was common. The more spectacular ballooning became, the more it was associated with recklessness and death, and eventually came to be regarded as impure and immoral. As a result, the Aero Club of America was established in 1905 with the aim of shifting aviation's status as entertainment for the masses to a sport appropriate for the wealthy upper class. The club primarily consisted of members of the prestigious Automobile Club of America and other affluent aviation enthusiasts.<sup>19</sup> That same year, the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* (FAI) was created in France to oversee aviation activities and to keep track of aviation records in the United States and in several European countries. This institutionalization and quantification of aviation in 1905 would lay the groundwork for a flourishing aviation industry during the interwar period.<sup>20</sup>

Although ballooning had been criticized for being an activity too vulgar to entertain crowds, the spectacular success of stunt flyers (in their even more hazardous heavier-than-air planes) drew large audiences during the 1910s. After a short interruption during World War I, a revival of stunt flying was facilitated by the availability of cheap surplus military aircraft that were no longer needed for the war effort. The most common airplane, the Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" biplane, was sold for only \$300 to \$500.<sup>21</sup> Many ex-military pilots who were without jobs after the war took advantage of these cheap planes in order to make a living. They traveled around the

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<sup>19</sup> Dominick A. Pisano, "The Greatest Show Not on Earth," in *The Airplane in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 41-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Sue Bix, "Bessie Coleman Race and Gender Realities Behind Aviation Dreams," in *Realizing the Dream of Flight*, ed. Virginia P. Dawson and Mark D. Bowles (Washington: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA History Division, 2005), 2.

country and introduced large audiences to aviation technology by taking passengers for short rides and by performing dangerous aerial stunts. These “barnstormers,”<sup>22</sup> as they were called, often teamed up and started “flying circuses.” Not a male-only event, in many of these circuses, women would execute difficult and daring stunts, while men piloted the planes. These women included agile acrobats, wing-walkers, and parachute jumpers who dazzled crowds with their stunts high upon an airplane’s wings or while swinging on a bar beneath the craft.<sup>23</sup>

Barnstorming and stunt flying were practically the sole means of access to a career in aviation during the first years after World War I, especially for women who wanted to become part of the budding aviation industry.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the prewar era, when aviation was mainly the privilege of a select few who could afford to buy an airplane and pay for flying lessons, barnstorming in the 1920s made it possible for upwardly mobile women, as well as men, to become involved in the aviation circuit, to make a living out of it and, in some cases, to buy their own planes.<sup>25</sup> “The attraction of women to aviation was a strong one,” Corn points out, “for no

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<sup>22</sup> Freydberg explains: “Barnstorming was a term initially associated with theatre, and it referred to actors who traveled from city to city and town to town. Because in most cases there was nowhere for them to board, or lodge temporarily while on the performing circuit, they found the nearest barn to sleep in for the night, and by day they moved on to the next town to perform. By the early 1920s aeronautical barnstorming had become synonymous with adventurous people, primarily unemployed former World War I fighter pilots, who flew surplus army aircraft for entertainment. These pilots would “buzz” a town in their aircraft – fly low to get the townspeople’s attention and then fly off towards the nearest open field. There they would exhibit stunts of parachute jumping, wing walking, low dives and dangerously daring maneuvers in the air. The performance usually culminated in taking an eager passenger up for a brief ride in the plane for a fee of \$1 to \$5, depending on the reputation and the skill of the pilot. At day’s end, the pilots would locate a barn in which to board themselves and the plane for the night.” See Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Whitman Blair, *The Roaring Twenties. The First Cross-Country Air Race for Women* (Washington: National Geographic, 2006), 23.

<sup>24</sup> See Kathleen Brooks-Pazmany, *United States Women in Aviation 1919-1929* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1983), 5-7.

<sup>25</sup> Phoebe Fairgrave, for instance, joined ex-military pilot Glenn Messer’s flying circus. She wing walked and performed parachute jumps to be able to pay for her flying lessons. When she had earned enough money, she opened the ‘Phoebe Fairgrave Flying Circus.’ She married pilot Vernon Omlie in 1922 and together they stayed in the barnstorming business until they were able to establish their more lucrative Mid-South Airlines company in Memphis, Tennessee. Brooks-Pazmany, *United States Women in Aviation 1919-1929*, 5-7.

better activity symbolized the freedom and power which was lacking in their daily lives.”<sup>26</sup> This sentiment certainly permeated Earhart’s and other female pilots’ writings about their exploits. In 1928, pilot Margery Brown, for example, informed her readers that flying was more symbolic to women than to men. Whereas flying to men was merely mechanical, she said, for women, “it seems to signify rising above their environment in one way or another,” symbolizing “freedom from the irking limitations that have hedged them about for so many centuries.”<sup>27</sup>

Considerable controversy existed about women’s ‘proper’ role in this new field of endeavour. While women were generally accepted and often celebrated in their roles as stunt flyers and aerial performers, they were looked down upon when they wanted to become pilots themselves in order to gain a foothold in the aviation business. Popularly held views about women’s lesser intelligence and inferior biology caused great difficulty for female pilots, as it was generally accepted that women’s lack of technical knowledge and inability to concentrate for long stretches of time made them incapable of flying. Their inherent nervous nature would inevitably cause them to crash.<sup>28</sup> Women were also considered biologically incapable of flying during their menstrual periods, an argument used to explain airplane crashes, as well as to keep women away from jobs as airline pilots in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph J. Corn, “Making Flying ‘Thinkable’: Women Pilots and the Selling of Aviation 1927-1940,” *American Quarterly* 31 (4) (1979): 558; Joseph J. Corn, *The Winged Gospel. America’s Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press 1983), 75.

<sup>27</sup> Margery Brown, “Women and Flying,” *Popular Aviation*, August 1928, 44. See also Karen Piper, “The Gendered Aerial Perspective,” in *Cartographic Fictions. Maps, Race, and Identity*, 65-94 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2002), 74.

<sup>28</sup> Corn, *The Winged Gospel*, 76. See also Margery Brown, “What Men Flyers Think of Women Pilots”, *Popular Aviation* (March 1929), 62.

<sup>29</sup> Illustrative in this context is George Palmer Putnam’s quote in Earhart’s biography: “The medical officers held to the conviction that this [that women had a time every month when their nerves and reactions were thrown out of balance] was bound to be true, and nothing could be done about it. Individual medical history made no difference. Clinical tests made no difference. It was just a fact, and how could full transport dependability be expected in the face of it? Putnam, *Soaring Wings*, 62.

As the American public became increasingly captivated by the promise of aviation technology, airplane manufacturers realized they could capitalize on this new niche market. One of the main obstacles, however, was the discrepancy between the nation's enthusiasm about aviation and the actual application of the technology. Few were brave enough to take a ride in the unstable-looking and rather flimsy airplane models and most preferred to marvel at stunt flyers' performances from the safety of the ground. The onlookers' fear was not without reason, as airplane crashes, often with deadly effects, were common. It was on the nexus of the dangerous nature of aviation in the 1920s, women's enthusiasm for flying and the generally held beliefs about women's inferior flying capabilities that aircraft manufacturers found a new strategy to promote aviation. Under the motto 'if a woman is capable of flying, it must be safe and easy,' aircraft manufacturers hired female pilots to promote the safety and reliability of their planes.<sup>30</sup> Female aviators thus had to maintain a balance between the opportunities offered by manufacturers and their personal attitudes regarding the gender roles assigned to them in the male-dominated aviation industry.

Regardless of the industry's questionable strategy, many women pilots became aviation promoters and considered it their task to encourage America to become more 'airminded.'<sup>31</sup> 'Airmindedness,' it was believed, was something that had to be incorporated in one's lifestyle, and would enable the nation to adequately prepare for the promising age of aviation. As Corn so brilliantly illustrates in *The Winged Gospel* (1983), aviation in the 1920s and 1930s took on the allure of a new religion, something that would make America a better place. Women, in this

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<sup>30</sup> Pilot Louise Thaden, for example, was an airplane salesperson; Blanche Noyes flew as a company pilot for Standard Oil of Ohio before accepting a piloting position with the United States Department of Commerce; and Amelia Earhart sold airplanes, piloted aircraft on publicity tours for manufacturers and also promoted airlines. See Corn, "Making Flying Thinkable," 556-57.

<sup>31</sup> According to Susan Ware, "Being 'air-minded' entailed 'having enthusiasm for airplanes, believing in their potential to better human life, and supporting aviation development.'" Ware, *Still Missing*, 62.

context were aviation's missionaries. They had to educate the public about the applications and advantages of aviation. To fulfill this mission, they presented flying as an extension of women's alleged nurturing function, as something that would facilitate family life and could be executed on a daily basis like other household responsibilities. In addition, it was believed that aviation should be implemented in every school's curriculum. An illustration of this tendency towards "aerial domesticity,"<sup>32</sup> as Corn labels it, was provided by aviator Barbara Southgate in 1934:

If she can do it, then flying cannot be dangerous as it has a reputation for being. *If she can do it, then it must be safe for my son and daughter to learn to fly.* Thus good work can be done for the future of aviation through educational efforts. Who can better perform this task than our girl pilots? Who can better reach the mothers, the women's colleges, the women's clubs, and the high schools to aid the world in developing this comparatively new industry? ... Our high schools have gone air-minded. Many of them have formed aero-clubs that are actively interested in aeronautics. Some high schools even have girls' flying clubs. Colleges have their clubs. The day is not far distant when the schools will offer courses in aviation and aeronautical engineering even as the universities are doing.<sup>33</sup>

Not only was it suggested that all schools would offer courses in aeronautics, it was also believed that the airplane itself would fulfill a significant role in everyday life. "There is a distinct place in American aviation for the "family ship," the personal plane, piloted by the owner, or his son or his daughter, as the family car is operated today," the *North American Review* stated in 1928.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Earhart predicted that the "family car of today will be the family plane of tomorrow."<sup>35</sup>

Attempts to preach airmindedness and increase the nation's aviation enthusiasm were directed only at a white and rather privileged audience in the United States. There was no such thing as a 'winged gospel' for African Americans who might aspire to play a part in the

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<sup>32</sup> Corn, "Making Flying "Thinkable"," 564.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Southgate, "Not in Competition with Men," *Airwoman* 2 (1) (1934): 4.

<sup>34</sup> C. D. Chamberlin, "Shall We All Fly Soon?," *North American Review* 226 (4) (1928): 410.

<sup>35</sup> Amelia Earhart, "Try Flying Yourself," *Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan*, November 1928, 35.

American aviation industry. Several African American inventors had experimented with designing, building and flying airplanes prior to World War I, but their efforts went unreported by the white aviation industry and remain largely unknown even today.<sup>36</sup> During World War I, Eugene Bullard was the only African American who served as a military pilot.<sup>37</sup> Bullard began his career as a boxer in Liverpool, England and in 1913, was provided the opportunity to fight in Paris where he decided to stay. In 1915, having left the boxing circuit, Bullard joined the French Foreign Legion and won the *Croix de Guerre*, the highest French military honour while serving as an infantry soldier. In 1916, he transferred to the French Flying Service and flew combat missions as a member of the French-American air squadron, the Lafayette Escadrille.<sup>38</sup> Although Bullard was an incredibly skilled fighter pilot and was credited with the destruction of two German aircraft, he was forced to leave the squadron when the United States entered the war in 1917 and the Lafayette Escadrille became part of the United States Army Service. Thus, his career as a fighter pilot was ended, as African Americans were not allowed to fly in the United States military.<sup>39</sup> There would not be another certified African American pilot until 1921.

## **Dreams of Flight**

A racially motivated violent incident on June 1, 1921, commonly referred to as the ‘Tulsa race riot,’ greatly affected and shaped African American’s perceptions of aviation. An unresolved lynching incident sparked a much more violent attack the next morning when six

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Jakeman, “America’s Black Air Pioneers” (Unpublished Dissertation, Maxwell Air Force Base Alabama 1988), 3-5. See also Von Hardesty, *Black Wings. Courageous Stories of African Americans in Aviation and Space History* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008); and Samuel Broadnax, *Blue Skies, Black Wings* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007)

<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline L. Harris, *The Tuskegee Airmen. Black Heroes of World War II* (Parsippany, New Jersey: Dillon Press, 1996), 8, 18-19; Jakeman, “America’s Black Air Pioneers,” 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> Jakeman, “America’s Black Air Pioneers,” 4; Jill D. Snider, “Flying to Freedom: African-American Visions of Aviation, 1910-1927,”(Unpublished Dissertation, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 1995), 35-36.

<sup>39</sup> Harris, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, 8, 18-19.

airplanes, dispatched from the nearby Curtis flying field and piloted by white men, set the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, on fire and killed 75 Tulsans, two-thirds of whom were black. It was the first time in history that airplanes were used to attack a black community, and the incident generated much debate about the dangers for African Americans in the coming aviation age. There was much fear that the airplane, in white men's hands, could result in the extermination of the African American race.<sup>40</sup>

According to Snider, two main philosophies emerged in the riot's aftermath. The Garvey Movement, established by the Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, focused primarily on the airplane as a menace and a tool of the white man for controlling the African American race. Anticipating a great race war, Garvey encouraged African Americans to become involved in aviation and to secure as many airplanes as possible. Adopting an apocalyptic undertone, he was convinced that the Tulsa incident was just the beginning, and that if African Americans did not take action immediately, it would lead to their elimination. The *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Baltimore Afro-American* all entertained a more constructive and positive perspective, promoting aviation as an opportunity for African Americans to take advantage of the budding aviation industry, rather than viewing it as a menace. By learning how to fly, African Americans would not only be able to become part of the 'winged gospel' of mainstream society, but would also dispel stereotypes about their lesser intelligence, incompetence and lack of ambition.<sup>41</sup> It was Bessie Coleman who would become the promoter and, indeed, the personification of this latter view.

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<sup>40</sup> Jill D. Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky" The Airplane in the Tulsa Riot of 1921 and the Development of African American Visions of Aviation, 1921-1926," in *The Airplane in American Culture*, ed. Dominick A. Pisano (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press 2006), 105, 112.

<sup>41</sup> Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky," 115.

Bessie Coleman was born in 1892 in Atlanta, Texas, the twelfth of thirteen children.<sup>42</sup> Like many African Americans who fled from the racist and increasingly violent climate in the segregated South with the hope finding a better life in the more ‘progressive’ North, Coleman went to Chicago in 1915. Like her mother, who had always encouraged her children to pursue their interests despite the poor circumstances in which they lived, Coleman showed determination and business acumen in everything she undertook. Her entrepreneurial skills were remarked upon by the *Chicago Defender* shortly after she began work as a manicurist at a barbershop where she won a contest as the best and fastest manicurist in black Chicago.<sup>43</sup> The *Defender* reported that Coleman was “an example of what a progressive up-to-date young woman should be” and that she “should be an inspiration to other young women who contemplate following the same line of endeavour.”<sup>44</sup> Referring to her successes as a manicurist, Coleman’s name would appear several more times in the *Defender*, although she soon left the barbershop scene for pursuits that were perhaps more exciting and exclusive, such as flying an airplane – not a surprising development, given her desire for entrepreneurial opportunities, her energy, and her zest for life.

Like many other Americans, Bessie Coleman was enthralled by the burgeoning aviation industry. Not only did the stories about aviators in World War I that she heard from her male clientele in the barbershop arouse her interest,<sup>45</sup> but her two older brothers, John and Walter, who had both served in France as soldiers, also told her about their fascination with airplanes and

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<sup>42</sup> Controversy exists around Coleman’s date of birth. Although her sister Elois Patterson writes in her memoirs that Coleman was born in 1893 and while her pilot license indicates 1896, most sources refer to 1892 as Coleman’s correct year of birth.

<sup>43</sup> Doris L. Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 14, 19-20. See also K. Creasman, “Black Birds in the Sky: The Legacies of Bessie Coleman and Dr. Mae Jemison,” *The Journal of Negro History* 82 (1)(1997): 158-68.

<sup>44</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Miss Bessie Coleman Among the First to Clamp on “Flu” Lid,” November 2, 1918.

<sup>45</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 179.

flying. They also mentioned that there were several French women who had learned to fly, not thinking that this would ever be a possibility for their sister.<sup>46</sup> Coleman increasingly developed a desire to fly and while her motives for attaining that goal were somewhat obscure, it would later become clear that Coleman would use her skills as both a pilot and an entrepreneur to actively promote aviation among African Americans.

Coleman had a strong personality and was determined to pursue her goals regardless of other people's advice. She clearly did not follow the usual path dictated for a woman of her age and background. When she married Claude Glenn in 1917, who was fourteen years her senior, she did not inform any of her close family members, and it is not clear whether Coleman and Glenn ever actually lived together. According to her niece Marion, Coleman was an attractive woman who had various relationships with both black and white men.<sup>47</sup> Because she was relatively light-skinned, she was able to "make herself up to look like different nationalities," the wife of one of Coleman's brothers noted.<sup>48</sup> It must also be noted that most of the small number of photographs taken of Coleman still circulating today, do not give away Coleman's racial identity. Not only is her black curly hair covered by her flying cap and goggles, but her skin colour seems purposefully lightened. The blurring of performers' racial identity, often emphasizing identification with the supposedly superior white European race, was certainly not unusual. Jazz dancer Josephine Baker and her photographers, for example, seemed to adopt similar strategies, darkening or lightening her skin colour depending on whether the picture had to convey black exoticism or white European 'sophistication.' It is not certain, however, to which extent Coleman promoted herself as 'white.' Like trapeze artists Miss Lala (1858-?) for

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<sup>46</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 26-27.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 31.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 80.

example, whose skin colour was deliberately lightened by French painter Edgard Dégas,<sup>49</sup> Coleman's photographers may also have played with her skin colour's shades.

Undoubtedly, Coleman's business acumen and her good looks facilitated her aviation career. Willet, in her paper on the history of manicurists, takes it one step further by suggesting that in the 1910s and 1920s, many male patrons saw little difference between a female manicurist and a saloon girl or prostitute, and suggests that Coleman developed relationships with Chicago's most powerful and influential men while working in the barbershop. No doubt, she writes, many men "found her an object of titillation."<sup>50</sup> Although there is no evidence as to how exactly Coleman was able to secure funds, it is clear that she was able to establish various connections with influential businessmen who encouraged her to become involved in aviation and financially supported her plans to fly.

One of these businessmen was Robert Abbott, the wealthy editor of the *Chicago Defender* and an ardent promoter of the advancement of African Americans. He shared a vision with Coleman that African Americans should be encouraged to take an interest in aviation. He also wanted to promote his newspaper, and in Coleman he saw the perfect candidate for boosting the public's interest in the *Defender*. Whether Abbott genuinely believed in Coleman's abilities or whether he simply saw the unusual story of an attractive young woman attempting to fly as an opportunity to increase his revenues is not clear. It was Abbott and, presumably, African American philanthropist Jesse Binga, founder of the Binga State Bank, who provided Coleman with the initial funds necessary to pursue her ambitious plans. According to Freyberg, Binga

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<sup>49</sup> See Marilyn R. Brown, " "Miss Lala's" Teeth: Reflections on Degas and "Race," *The Art Bulletin* 89 (4) (2007): 738-65.

<sup>50</sup> Julie Willet, "Hands Across the Table." A Short History of the Manicurist in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Women's History* 17 (3) (2005): 63.

and Abbott were the benefactors behind the practical business pursuits that were established by many prominent African American during the early 1920s.<sup>51</sup>

### **On a Mission to France**

At the time that Coleman wanted to learn to fly, there were no other African American aviators and almost all flying schools in the United States were operated by white men.<sup>52</sup> None of them accepted black candidates and only a small number of schools accepted women. Moreover, the few schools that did accept women often had little confidence in a female pupil's abilities. "Instructors start in with a prejudice, and the woman student labours under a decided handicap," asserted aviator Louise Thaden.<sup>53</sup> Flying lessons were expensive, so the few women who were able to enroll in aviation classes often had difficulties in finding the necessary resources to buy and maintain an airplane once the instruction period was over. Unlike their male counterparts, who were able to work as mechanics at airports to pay off their flying lessons or to buy an airplane, aspiring female pilots most often were not welcomed in such positions.<sup>54</sup> "No one wants a feminine 'grease monkey' around the hangar to do the odd jobs which may partly pay for a young man's aviation training," Earhart pointed out.<sup>55</sup> Also, while men wanting

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<sup>51</sup> Freyberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 72-74; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 29-30.

<sup>52</sup> A recent article recalls the adventures of African American pilot Emory Malick, who was probably the first African American to gain a pilot license (March 1912) from the Curtiss Aviation School on North Island, San Diego. It is unclear whether he still practiced flying when Bessie Coleman received her license in 1921 in France. This fact is remarkable as Bessie Coleman was unable to obtain a license in the United States. See *Black Pilots of America*, "The Unrecognized First," April 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Louise M. Thaden, "Training Women Pilots," *Western Flying*, February 1931, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Corn, "Making Flying 'Thinkable'," 563.

<sup>55</sup> Amelia Earhart, *The Fun of It, Random Records of My Own Flying And of Women in Aviation* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1977), 145. An exception, however, was Florence Klingensmith. She attended electrical ground school as the only girl among four hundred boys. She worked as a mechanic apprentice and "through dirt and grease" she worked her way to one solo flight out of every six hours of instruction. Clara Studer (ed), "Women Can Fly Too," *The Ninety-Niner* 12 (1933):1-2.

to learn how to fly could enlist in the army or navy and receive both free instruction and a salary, this was not an option for women.<sup>56</sup>

Because learning how to fly was impossible for Coleman in the United States, Abbott encouraged her to try to find a flying school in France, the country that had offered Eugene Bullard his flight training in 1917. Interwar France, and Paris in particular, was attractive to black musicians, singers, dancers, athletes and other types of performers because it was generally perceived to be “a color-blind land of tolerance”<sup>57</sup> that provided both venues and enthusiastic audiences for their performances. Coleman was not the first among her fellow country(wo)men to go to Paris in the hope of finding opportunities in Europe’s supposedly more welcoming and less overtly racist climate. Like Bullard, who went to Paris to box in the European circuit, Texan boxer Jack Johnson tried his luck as a boxer and vaudeville performer in Europe earlier on (1908-1915).<sup>58</sup> Another of Coleman’s contemporaries, Josephine Baker, started her career as a member of the infamous Broadway musical *Shuffle Along* (1921) before opening her own cabaret in France in 1925, revolutionizing the Parisian entertainment scenery with her erotic, almost nude, dance performances.<sup>59</sup> France was not only a popular site for staged entertainment, it was also a hub for barnstormers and other aviation enthusiasts in the 1920s. The country had been the first to host an international air meet in 1909 in Reims, and was well known for its numerous aviation pioneers and the good reputation of its aircraft manufacturers.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Earhart, “Try Flying Yourself,” 158.

<sup>57</sup> Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry L. Gates, Jr., “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (4) (1998): 904.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Arthur Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory: The African American Athlete in Boxing* (New York, N.Y.: Amistad, 1993).

<sup>59</sup> Dalton and Gates, “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin”; See also Elisabeth Ezra, “A Colonial Princess. Josephine Baker’s French Films,” in *The Colonial Unconscious. Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca and London : Cornell University Press, 2000), 97-128.

<sup>60</sup> See Luc Robène, Dominique Bodin and Stéphane Héas, “Pau et l’Invention de l’Aviation ‘Sportive’ (1908-1910). Des Enjeux Technologiques aux Plaisirs Mondains: Naissance d’Un Loisir et Nouveaux Pouvoirs du Corps,” *Revue*

Coleman's career thus took off at the crossroads of aviation's popularity as form of entertainment in both France and the United States, and France's more welcoming attitude towards African Americans.

In November 1920, Coleman sailed for France.<sup>61</sup> She visited several flying schools near Paris, though flight instructors there tried to discourage her from taking up flying because two other women had recently died in a crash during practice.<sup>62</sup> Although many men had lost their lives while flying, the sport was considered too dangerous for women. Coleman was still determined to earn her license and finally found the Caudron School of Aviation that was willing to accept her. René and Gaston Caudron had opened their flying school in 1912 in Le Crotoy,<sup>63</sup> near the bay of the Somme, where long stretches of sandy beach offered an excellent base for take-offs and landings.<sup>64</sup> The school had been closed during the war and reopened in 1919. The brothers wanted to attract students to their flying school, so they kept the tariffs for lessons low and they also welcomed women.<sup>65</sup> Coleman completed the ten-month course requirements and passed her exams at the Caudron School. On June 15, 1921, after passing the strict FAI examination, she earned the first international pilot license (No. 18.310) ever awarded to an African American woman.<sup>66</sup>

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*Internationale des Sciences du Sport et de l'Education Physique* 87 (2010) : 13-31; James M. Laux, "The Rise and Fall of Armand Deperdussin," *French Historical Studies* 8 (1) (1973), 95-104 ; Thomas Ameye, Bieke Gils and Pascal Delheye, "Belgian Pioneers in Rally Racing and Aerial Sports during the Belle Époque," *The International Journal for the History of Sport* 28 (2) (2011) : 205-39.

<sup>61</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 72-74; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 29-30.

<sup>62</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Aviatrix Must Sign Away Life to Learn Trade," October 8, 1921.

<sup>63</sup> Le Crotoy is a village by the North Sea, approximately 250 kilometres North of Paris.

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Béal, *Bessie Coleman L'Ange Noir* (Paris: Editions Michalon 2008), 73-74.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>66</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Chicago Girl is Full-Fledged Aviator Now," October 1, 1921; *Chicago Defender*, "Aviatrix Must Sign Away Life to Learn Trade," October 8, 1921; Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 82.



Image 5: Bessie Coleman’s French pilot license. Courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

Later that year, approximately four months after the atrocities in Greenwood, Tulsa, Coleman went back to Chicago. Much hope now lay with her, as she was the only black pilot in the United States and was already perceived as a successful woman by the black community. The *Shuffle Along* musical company welcomed her with a cup “as a token of their appreciation of her achievement in aviation.”<sup>67</sup> Coleman had become the African American winged gospel’s missionary – almost literally an angel from the sky – who held together the belief that there was a future for African Americans in aviation. Playing up her own courage and the perceived urge for African Americans to enter aviation and catch up with white pilots, Coleman told a *Chicago Defender* reporter:

<sup>67</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “‘Shuffle Along’ Company Gives Fair Flyer Cup,” October 8, 1921.

Well, ... I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the Race needed to be represented among this most important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviating and to encourage flying among men and women of the Race who are so far behind the white men in this special line.<sup>68</sup>

Despite her enthusiasm and the black community's confidence in her abilities, Coleman's plans did not run smoothly. In order to locate an airplane and a flying field for her shows in the United States, she had to rely on the white aviation community. Yet few white newspapers picked up her remarkable story. White aviators and owners of airfields either did not know her or simply chose to ignore her because of their lack of confidence in the flying abilities of a black woman, and thus her aspirations for a flying show did not materialize.<sup>69</sup> On February 22, 1922, Coleman sailed back to France in the hope of finding a solution there.<sup>70</sup> It is not clear how she was able to fund this second trip, but "in circumstances different from her first departure," Rich points out, "Bessie now had not only chic Paris gowns and attractive leather flying apparel but much favorable newspaper exposure, especially from hometown supporter Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender*."<sup>71</sup>

### **Missionary, Entrepreneur, Entertainer**

Upon her arrival back in New York on August 14, 1922, having spent approximately six months abroad, Coleman was not only welcomed by African American reporters, but also by those of the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>72</sup> The news about her success in Europe

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<sup>68</sup> *New York Times*, "Negro Aviatrix Arrives," August 14, 1922.

<sup>69</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 83.

<sup>70</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Bessie Coleman Leaves New York for France," February 25 1922; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 39. It needs to be mentioned that information on Coleman's time abroad is hard to find and that also her biographers - of whom one, Jacques Béal, is French - remain rather unspecific on this particular episode in Coleman's life. The information that is available is largely based on the accounts of the *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>72</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 83-85.

must have reached the United States before her arrival, as it certainly sparked the curiosity of the white newspapers. The *New York Times* announced that the “Negro aviatrix” had arrived and enthusiastically reported on Coleman’s accomplishments abroad:

Termed by leading French and Dutch aviators one of the best flyers they had seen, Miss Bessie Coleman, said to be the only negro aviatrix in the world, returned from Europe yesterday to give a series of exhibitions in this country, particularly among her own people. At Staaken, the flying field outside Berlin, Miss Coleman, without any instruction, flew a 220-horsepower Benz motored L. F. G. plane, winning for herself, according to documents she brought back, the distinction of having piloted the largest plane ever flown by a woman. German newspapers spoke in high terms of her ability. Miss Coleman visited Amsterdam, where she flew planes manufactured by Anthony G. H. Fokker, and at Friedrichshafen she gave a series of flights in a Dornier flying boat.<sup>73</sup>

A similar report in the *Chicago Defender* added that “Queen Bess:”

...had been proclaimed by experts at the art of flying in France, Germany, Holland and Switzerland as the greatest aviatrix in the world, even surpassing the marvellous record made by the famous Ruth Law.... Miss Coleman possesses her own plane, a Fokker C-2, which she brought with her from Holland. Several other machines have been ordered for instruction purposes. She will import European pilots as teachers of the profession. While waiting for her equipment from abroad Miss Coleman will travel throughout the United States and the pan-American countries.<sup>74</sup>

The airplanes Coleman was said to have ordered never arrived, but the favourable acknowledgements of her accomplishments by both black and white newspapers now enabled the organization of her long-planned flying shows. It would not prove an easy task, however, to balance expectations from black audiences, white audiences, managers and other individuals who tried to capitalize on her success while simultaneously finding enough financial support to buy airplanes and organize air shows.

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<sup>73</sup> *New York Times*, “Negro Aviatrix Arrives,” August 14, 1922.

<sup>74</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie to Fly Over Gotham,” August. 26, 1922.

In an attempt to pursue her goals in aviation, Coleman had to play several roles. Not only did she have to fulfill her position as an aviation missionary or crusader as Snider points out, but also as an entrepreneur and an entertainer.<sup>75</sup> These roles frequently conflicted and they made Coleman's motivations often seem controversial. This happened mostly when companies tried to lure Coleman into some kind of lucrative project that would offer her financial support, but was at the same time disrespectful of her personal ambitions and background. The manner in which Coleman negotiated these opportunities that also imposed restrictions on her ambitions is best illustrated in the ways she organized her shows, entertained both black and white audiences and interacted with her managers.

By the end of August 1922, with Abbott as her sponsor and publicity manager, Coleman had established headquarters at the *Chicago Defender*'s offices in New York to book her barnstorming exhibitions.<sup>76</sup> For her first exhibition, on September 3, 1922, at the Curtiss airfield in Garden City, Long Island (New York), the Glenn Curtiss Company, the largest aircraft manufacturer in the United States, lent her one of its airplanes.<sup>77</sup> "Beyond question, this event will be the greatest attraction ever staged in America," the *Chicago Defender* asserted, guaranteeing that the "wonderful little woman, the only aviatrix of the Race, will do heart-thrilling stunts that will be astounding."<sup>78</sup> The newspaper also promised "eight other sensational flights by American aces," as well as "giant passenger planes holding 16 or more passengers in which sightseeing flights by the public will be made."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Snider, "Flying to Freedom," 135, 138.

<sup>76</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Bessie to Fly Over Gotham," August 26, 1922; Hadley Freyberg, *Bessie Coleman*, p. 86; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, p. 48.

<sup>77</sup> For more information on Glenn Curtiss, one of the most influential airplane manufacturers at the time, see C. R. Roseberry, *Glenn Curtiss, Pioneer of Flight* (Syracuse, New York 1999).

<sup>78</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Rain Halts the Initial Flight of Miss Bessie," September 2, 1922.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Revealing her talent as a brilliant entertainer, Coleman did not disappoint her audience. She arranged a show that appealed to both white and black audiences by playing on America's patriotism in general and on the promotion of African Americans in particular. She staged the show in honour of the Fifteenth New York Infantry, the first African American regiment sent to France during World War I, which was comprised primarily of jazz musicians and theatre practitioners. Although the regiment no longer existed, the Fifteenth's regimental band, known for introducing Europe to brass-band jazz, was still operational.<sup>80</sup> After the band played *The Star Spangled Banner*, Coleman, dressed in breeches and a French officer's jacket with a Sam Brown belt, went up twice "to the delight of the hundreds of enthusiasts of both races."<sup>81</sup> Although stunt flying was not allowed on Curtiss field and Coleman could not perform the aerial tricks she had learned in Europe, her show proved a spectacular success. In addition, while the eight promised American aces did not make an appearance,<sup>82</sup> Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, a black aviation enthusiast and parachute jumper from Trinidad, "thrilled the spectators with a parachute drop from a Curtiss plane from over 2,000 feet in the air and landed without injury."<sup>83</sup> This jump would be the beginning of Julian's own aviation career.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Amelia Elisabeth Hadley Freyberg, "Bessie Coleman: Original Fierce Flying Sistah," *Abafazi: The Simmons College Journal of Women of African Descent* 7 (1) (1996): 10; *The Chicago Defender*, "Rain Halts the Initial Flight of Miss Bessie," September 2, 1922. The doughboys here refer to American infantrymen who served during World War I.

<sup>81</sup> Hadley Freyberg, "Bessie Coleman," 10; *Chicago Defender*, "Bessie Gets Away; Does Her Stuff," September 9, 1922, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Bessie Gets Away; Does Her Stuff," September 9, 1922. According to Freyberg, "... Hubert Faunterloy Julian, an officer of Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association of New York, dressed in a bright red outfit, joined her in the cockpit. (p. 10) Julian was a flamboyant, wealthy, adventuresome young man born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, a year after Coleman's birth. He had arrived in Harlem in July 1921, by way of Canada, with the intent of becoming a pilot. Julian had not yet earned the title of "Black Eagle." His aviation career was launched when he parachuted from the wing of Coleman's airplane at approximately 1,500-2,000 feet in the air during this event." (p. 11) See, Freyberg, "Bessie Coleman: Original Fierce Flying Sistah."

<sup>84</sup> Freyberg, "Bessie Coleman," 11.

In September 1922, Coleman returned to Chicago, where she began preparations for her second airshow, which was to be held at the Checkerboard Aerodrome a month later. The *Defender* announced that “an elaborate program of special flights has been arranged for “Queen Bess,” whose daredevil flying amazed continental Europe and was applauded in Paris, Berlin and Munich.”<sup>85</sup> This time, Coleman performed stunts, including figure eights in honour of the African American Eighth Illinois Infantry regiment.<sup>86</sup> While the regiment band entertained the audience with jazz music, Coleman executed several stunts named after famous flying aces. She took off, for example, with a “French Nungesser start,” referring to France’s third-ranking World War I fighter pilot, Charles Nungesser. According to Freyberg, this stunt consisted of staying low to the ground during take-off and dipping the plane close to the audience before ascending into the air.<sup>87</sup> In this same flight, the *Defender* wrote, “the Spansih [sic] Bertha Costa Climb was made and the American Curtis McMullen turn, the Eddie Rickenbacker straighten-up, the Richtofer-German glide and the Ralph C. Diggings landing were featured.”<sup>88</sup> The “Bertha Costa Climb” referred to American (not Spanish) pilot Bertrand B. Costa.<sup>89</sup> American Eddie Rickenbacker, German Manfred von Richthofen and American (Chicagoan) Ralph Diggins were all World War I flying aces, credited with several air combat victories.<sup>90</sup> In addition to Coleman’s stunts, the *Defender* had also announced a “drop of death,” or parachute jump, by Coleman’s sister Georgia.<sup>91</sup> According to Freyberg, Bessie had not instructed her sister about how to perform a parachute

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<sup>85</sup> *Chicago Defender* ““Queen Bess” to Try Air October 15,” October 7, 1922.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie Coleman Makes Initial Aerial Flight,” October 21, 1922; Freyberg, “Bessie Coleman,” 11.

<sup>88</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie Coleman Makes Initial Aerial Flight,” October 21, 1922.

<sup>89</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Freyberg, “Bessie Coleman,” 11.

<sup>91</sup> *Chicago Defender* ““Queen Bess” to Try Air October 15,” October 7, 1922.

jump until the actual moment she was supposed to jump out of the plane, so Georgia refused.<sup>92</sup> According to Rich, however, Bessie had discussed the jump with Georgia the night before and it was then that she refused. Regardless of what actually happened, the fact that Coleman seemed to trust that her sister would be able to perform a parachute jump without prior instruction illustrates her adventure-seeking, daredevil personality. It did not seem to occur to her that not everyone shared her delight in such risky stunts.

Coleman's shows were successful in that she was able to provide entertainment for both black and white audiences. Whereas white audiences may have perceived Coleman as an attraction *per se* – seeing a black woman performing aerial stunts was a spectacular novelty. For the black community, her shows symbolized courage and hope for African American's increased involvement in aviation. To foster courage and to inspire African Americans to take aviation seriously, Coleman presented herself as a strong-minded, fearless woman. The military outfits she wore for her exhibitions not only symbolized her deep respect for both the black and white individuals who had fought in the war, but also emphasized the seriousness with which she undertook the role of aviation's advocate.

Unquestionably, the media played a major part in the construction of Coleman's persona as a brave and intrepid African American woman. Unlike white female pilots, whose femininity was emphasized in the media by calling them "lady fliers," "angels," "sweethearts of the air" or "flying flappers,"<sup>93</sup> references made to Coleman by white newspapers were less playful, often impersonal and usually pointed to her racialized identity.<sup>94</sup> Headlines such as "First Colored

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<sup>92</sup> Freyberg, "Bessie Coleman," 11; Freyberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 88.

<sup>93</sup> Frances Drewry McMullen, "The First Women's Air Derby, An Interview with Amelia Earhart," *The Woman's Journal*, October 1929, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Bix, "Bessie Coleman Race and Gender Realities Behind Aviation Dreams," 11.

Aviatrix,”<sup>95</sup> “Negress an Air Pilot,”<sup>96</sup> “Colored Woman a Licensed Pilot”<sup>97</sup> or “Negro Aviatrix Arrives”<sup>98</sup> were frequently used. As Higginbotham has noted, “Ladies,” as white female aviators were often termed, “were not merely women; they represented a class, a differentiated status within the generic category of “women”. . . . But no black woman, regardless of income, education, refinement, or character enjoyed the status of lady.”<sup>99</sup> Also, as Cahn has pointed out, “womanliness” in the 1920s was rooted in the privileged position of the “lady,” in contrast to the view of black women as “robust, unruly, insensitive in pain or exhaustion, and rough in manners.”<sup>100</sup> At the same time, black newspapers referred to Coleman as “Queen Bess,” “Queen of the Air,”<sup>101</sup> “Bird Woman”<sup>102</sup> and “pioneer air bird of the race,”<sup>103</sup> which perhaps also de-emphasized Coleman’s femininity, but did show respect for her position as a leading figure and an advocate for African Americans in aviation. Higginbotham explains that to be called a “race leader,” “race woman” or in this case “race aviatrix,” by the black community “was not a sign of insult or disapproval. . . .” It was a way for blacks to fashion “race into a cultural identity that resisted white hegemonic discourses.”<sup>104</sup>

A few days after Coleman’s show in Chicago, the *Baltimore Afro-American* announced that she had agreed to star in the film *Shadow and Sunshine*, to be produced by the African

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<sup>95</sup> *Philadelphia Tribune*, “First Colored Aviatrix,” October 1, 1921.

<sup>96</sup> *Washington Post*, “Negress An Air Pilot,” July 4, 1922.

<sup>97</sup> *New Journal and Guide*, “U.S. Rule in Virgin Islands Assailed,” July 15, 1922.

<sup>98</sup> *New York Times*, “Negro Aviatrix Arrives,” August 14, 1922.

<sup>99</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17(2) (1992): 261.

<sup>100</sup> Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-century Women’s Sport* (Don Mills, Ontario: Maxwell Macmillan, Inc, 1994), 28.

<sup>101</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie to Fly Over Gotham,” August 26, 1922; *The Chicago Defender* ““Queen Bess” to Try Air October 15,” October 7, 1922.

<sup>102</sup> *Baltimore Afro-American*, “Bird Woman Falls 300 Feet,” February 9, 1923.

<sup>103</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, “Death-Defying Bird-Woman,” September 15, 1923.

<sup>104</sup> Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” 267.

American-owned Seminole Film Company.<sup>105</sup> “Bessie Coleman, the only colored woman aviatrix, will be the featured artist. Supporting her will be about twelve carefully selected and experienced movie performers,” the newspaper reported in October 1922.<sup>106</sup> Although Coleman had indeed signed the contract, to the great frustration of the Seminole filmmakers, she did not show up for the filming. The production of the film had been delayed, the *Baltimore Afro-American* wrote early December 1922:

...because of the temperament of that young lady [Bessie Coleman], who after coming to New York at the expense of the company, changed her mind and abruptly left New York without notice to the director. Six autos filled with a cast of thirty people, two photographers and the directors waited in vain for two hours on the lady. ... The Seminole is fortunate in that they have obtained the services of Miss Bessie Allison, a pretty little girl with both personality and theatrical experience, to say nothing of an unmistakable culture and a social status that will be an asset to the company.<sup>107</sup>

The reason Coleman did not show up for the filming remains obscure. According to Rich, Coleman was told she would have to dress in ragged clothing, and carry a walking stick and a pack on her back to portray an ignorant girl who just arrived in New York.<sup>108</sup> Coleman clearly decided that such an ‘Uncle Tom’<sup>109</sup> depiction would not further her cause and would not only diminish both her personal efforts and remarkable accomplishments, but would also reinforce stereotypes about African Americans. Although her withdrawal set her back financially and put her reputation at risk, by the end of January 1923, she had taken a job of flying to advertise rubber tires for the Californian Coast Tire and Rubber Company of Oakland.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Baltimore Afro-American*, “Bessie Coleman to Star in a Seminole Super Film,” October 20, 1922.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 57; Béal, *Bessie Coleman L'Ange Noir*, 109-10.

<sup>109</sup> As quoted in Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 57.

<sup>110</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, “Only One in the World,” January 28, 1923.

With the money Coleman made advertising for the tire company (by dropping leaflets out of an airplane, for example), she was able to gather enough funds to buy a Curtiss JN-4 or “Jenny,” one of the most commonly used and cheapest airplanes at the time. During an exhibition in Santa Monica, California, in February 1923, her motor stalled and the plane dove into a crash. Coleman was injured, sustaining a broken leg, fractured ribs, cuts and possibly internal injuries.<sup>111</sup> Fearful that her accident would discourage African Americans from taking up flying and concerned that the general public and her sponsors might lose trust in her abilities, Coleman claimed that the fact she was still living proved that “flying in the air is no more dangerous than riding an automobile on the surface.”<sup>112</sup> Moreover, despite the reality that she had not only lost her plane but also had to recover from severe injuries, Coleman urged the *Chicago Defender* to inform her fans that she would come back.<sup>113</sup> To support her, the *Defender* insinuated that perhaps “some mechanics had tampered with the steering apparatus in an effort to keep her from gaining the recognition due to her.”<sup>114</sup> It is uncertain whether Coleman’s plane was indeed sabotaged. The accident may well have resulted from the poor state of her airplane. As Bunn points out, unlike Earhart, who “flew top notch technologically advanced planes, Coleman was forced by her meager financial means to fly second rate, broken down, and falling-apart aircraft...”<sup>115</sup>

Between the time of Coleman’s accident in 1923 and May 1925, newspaper coverage of her aviation career dwindled significantly. Not only had the accident cost her possible sponsors, but Coleman had gained a reputation for being unreliable. The *Baltimore African American*, for

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<sup>111</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 65, 69.

<sup>112</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie Coleman Says Good Will Come From Hurt,” March 10, 1923.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “No Flight by Bessie Coleman; Rain Interferes,” September 8, 1923.

<sup>115</sup> Edward DeV.Bunn, Jr., *Lifting as She Climbed. Bessie Coleman’s Contributions to the Elevation of Black Women* (Gainesville, Florida: Cambridge Lighthouse Press, 2005), 69.

example, wrote in May 1924 that “Bessie Coleman, the colored girl who has been presenting herself as an aviatrix for the past two seasons...has in that time accumulated a long list of incomplete contracts, and an almost as lengthy list of managers and agents...”<sup>116</sup> Around the same time, an article in the *Chicago Defender* warned managers not to book Coleman because “a large number of complaints against Miss Coleman from reliable showmen and noted citizens” had been made.<sup>117</sup>

It was not until May 1925 that Coleman finally succeeded in arranging a series of lectures and exhibition flights in her home state of Texas.<sup>118</sup> P. DeWalt, owner of one of the most successful black playhouses in the South, Houston’s Lincoln Theater, supported the cause of ‘lifting up’ African Americans through aviation, and agreed to manage Coleman’s shows.<sup>119</sup> Aside from Coleman’s stunts, the Texas shows also featured established white stunt flyer Captain R. W. Mackie, who probably provided Coleman with an airplane, and one of his troop members, parachute jumper Ulysses Stallings.<sup>120</sup> Coleman’s initial shows in Houston proved so successful that she was invited to perform in Austin, San Antonio, Wharton and Waxahachie, Texas. In Waxahachie, the organizers initially arranged separate admission gates for black and white spectators, but Coleman opposed this plan and refused to perform unless the city provided a single entrance. Although her demand was accommodated, the fact that the audience was segregated again as soon as it had entered the venue must have infuriated Coleman.<sup>121</sup> Asked to perform a parachute jump at the annual flower show of the Orlando Chamber of Commerce in

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<sup>116</sup> *Baltimore Afro-American*, “Aviatrix Loses Another Manager,” May 2, 1924.

<sup>117</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie Banned,” May 24, 1924.

<sup>118</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 83, 85.

<sup>119</sup> Snider, “Flying to Freedom,” 203-4.

<sup>120</sup> *Baltimore Afro-American*, “Bessie Coleman flies in Houston,” July 11, 1925; *Baltimore Afro-American*, “Aviatrix Heads Another Meet,” July 18, 1925; *The Chicago Defender*, “Aviatrix Performs for Texas Crowds,” July 25, 1925; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 86; Snider, “Flying to Freedom,” 206.

<sup>121</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 89, 90, 93-95; Snider, “Flying to Freedom,” 209.

Florida for a white-only audience, she refused until the organizers, despite strictly enforced segregation laws in Florida, finally gave in and opened the event to both black and white spectators.<sup>122</sup>



Image 6: Bessie Coleman on the wheel of a Curtiss JN-4 “Jennie” circa 1924. Courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

### **The Sky is the Limit for Queen Bess**

In 1926, the Negro Welfare League in Jacksonville, Florida, asked Coleman to perform at their annual First of May Field Day. Honoured, Coleman accepted this invitation, hoping to be able to raise the necessary funds for the flying school she had dreamed of for some time. In Florida, she had trouble locating an airplane because dealers were reluctant to sell planes to

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<sup>122</sup> Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 104, 105.

African Americans. Instead she contacted her (white) mechanic, William D. Wills, in Dallas, Texas, and asked him to fly a plane to Florida for her performance. The plane, again a Jenny, was not very well maintained, and Wills had to make two forced landings on his way to Jacksonville.<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, that was the plane Coleman could afford and the one she was to use for her show.<sup>124</sup>

The day before the exhibition, Wills test-piloted the plane with Coleman as his passenger. When the plane unexpectedly went into a nosedive, Coleman, who was peering over the edge of the cockpit without her seatbelt attached, was catapulted out of the plane and fell to her death. Wills, still in the plane thanks to his seatbelt, righted the aircraft but then hit the top of a tree and plunged to the ground. It was reported that John T. Betsch, Coleman's Florida publicity manager and a member of the Jacksonville Negro Welfare League, rushed to the plane and, to calm his nerves, struck a match to light a cigarette, thereby igniting the gasoline fumes surrounding the plane. Wills died inside the burning aircraft.<sup>125</sup>

Inevitably, Coleman's death spurred a number of speculations. According to Freydberg, some African Americans believed that Wills or "white people" had sabotaged Coleman's plane. It seemed to make sense, given that Wills had succeeded in regaining control over the plane after Coleman fell out.<sup>126</sup> The *Chicago Defender*, however, silenced most suspicions by reporting that the "expert aviators" who had examined the wreckage believed that a wrench had slid between the control gears and jammed them, causing the accident. According to the experts, the plane

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<sup>123</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Bessie Coleman, Aviatix, Killed," May 8, 1926; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 108-109.

<sup>124</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 94; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 108-9.

<sup>125</sup> *Evening Independent*, "Woman Falls 2,000 Feet in Air Smash," April 30, 1926; *Lewiston Daily*, "Only Negro Woman Aviator is Killed in Practice Flight," May 1, 1926; Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 95; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 110.

<sup>126</sup> Freydberg, *Bessie Coleman*, 95-6; Rich, *Queen Bess Daredevil Aviator*, 117.

was an “old-fashioned army type,” and they concluded that the accident would not have happened in a modern plane with protected gears.<sup>127</sup> Coleman’s death was mourned by many, and both black and white admirers attended her three memorial services. The first was held on May 2, 1926, in Jacksonville, Florida, followed shortly by a service in Orlando, Florida, and a last one in Chicago. Coleman was buried in the Lincoln Cemetery on Blue Island, Illinois, where several famous African Americans such as Robert Abbott (1870-1940), blues musician Big Bill Broonzy (1898-1958) and jazz pianist and singer Lil Harding Armstrong (1898-1971) would later be laid to rest.

Although Coleman’s career was short, her tragic death made her an inspiring symbol – even a martyr, some would argue – of African American pursuits in the field of aviation. In the first decades after her death, the *Chicago Defender*’s readers were frequently reminded of Coleman’s courageous exploits and encouraged to follow her example. Although Coleman had begun to pave the way for the acceptance of African Americans in aviation, those who tried to gain a foothold were still discouraged because of the discrimination they faced from the white aviation industry. “Disaster seems to attend all our efforts in this field,” a reporter in the *Chicago Defender* noted:

...partly because of a lack of interest on our part, and partly because of insufficient preparation on the part of those who are trying. We are barred from schools of aviation; the government shuts the doors in our faces, and lack of funds makes it impossible for us to procure first class equipment for our efforts in aviation.<sup>128</sup>

It soon became clear that Coleman’s accomplishments were exceptional and not something many black Americans at the time would be able to repeat. The rallying notion of

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<sup>127</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie Coleman, Aviatrix, Killed,” May 8, 1926.

<sup>128</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Bessie Coleman,” May 14, 1927.

‘racial uplift’ as promoted by Coleman, “illustrates the problematic aspect of identifying a standpoint that encompasses all black women,” or all black Americans, Higginbotham explained. Also, the notions that black Americans had to catch up with the white and learn how to fly to enter white, ‘mainstream’ society equated normality with conformity to white middle-class standards and values. Racial uplift certainly stood in sharp contrast “with daily practices and aesthetic tastes of many poor, uneducated, and “unassimilated” black men and women dispersed throughout the rural South or newly huddled in urban centres.”<sup>129</sup>

William Powell (1897-1942) was among the first African Americans to earn a pilot license following Coleman’s death. After being turned away from flight schools in Chicago, he earned his permit at Warren College of Aeronautics in Los Angeles in 1928. Powell went on to establish a Bessie Coleman Aero Club and the first aviation school for African Americans.<sup>130</sup> The first African American woman to follow in Coleman’s footsteps was Willa Brown (1906-1992), who earned her pilot license in 1937 and would, in later years, become greatly involved in the advancement of aviation for African Americans.<sup>131</sup> Brown was able to set up a flying school in Chicago, but as flight training remained a segregated activity, the school’s flying field had to be created outside the city limits. In the military, African Americans continued to face discrimination and prejudice; they were barred from flight training in the United States until World War II, when the first black air corps, the Tuskegee Airmen, was established, with Coleman as their inspirational muse.<sup>132</sup> Today, the Bessie Coleman Foundation in Washington,

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<sup>129</sup> Higginbotham, “African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,” 271. The double quotation marks around unassimilated are the author’s.

<sup>130</sup> Bix, “Bessie Coleman Race and Gender Realities Behind Aviation Dreams,” 16.

<sup>131</sup> See Fredyberg, “Willa Brown (1906-1992), Aviator, Activist, Educator,” in *Notable Black American Women*, ed.: Jessie Carney Smith and Shirelle Phelps (Book II, Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Inc., 1996).

<sup>132</sup> Bix, “Bessie Coleman Race and Gender Realities Behind Aviation Dreams,” 16.

D.C., encourages African American women to take up flying and provides a strong base of support for female African American aviators.<sup>133</sup>

## Conclusion

Race, gender and class struggles clearly permeated Bessie Coleman's life and career path in aviation. What Vertinsky and Captain note in the context of black female athletes, that they "are racial *and* gendered *and* classed, with each and/or all of these categories taking on a different importance in certain moments and particular contexts,"<sup>134</sup> is equally true about Coleman's career as a black female aviator. The ways in which Coleman experienced the American 'era of aviation' differed significantly from those of white female aviators both in the ways they promoted themselves and in the manner in which they were promoted by media. Although the aviation industry opened up to increased female membership in the 1920s, most women who were able to join were either affluent or had middle-class backgrounds. None of these advantages applied to Coleman, though she nevertheless gained a pilot license and rivaled her white female counterparts in flying competence.

To gain credibility as a black aviator in a white industry and to simultaneously earn respect from the African American aviation community, Coleman had to navigate between what she considered to be her African American roots and the opportunities the white American and European aviation industry offered her. She made sure she organized her shows to appeal to both black and white audiences, and she only signed contracts with white managers if black people were also allowed to attend the show. Not surprisingly, Coleman frequently encountered

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<sup>133</sup> See The Bessie Coleman Foundation website: <http://www.wearethelegacy.com/> [Accessed April 3, 2010]. Currently the foundation seems to use its facebook instead of its website: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bessie-Coleman-Foundation/113677978696209> [accessed June 30, 2013].

<sup>134</sup> Vertinsky and Captain, "More Myth than History," 535. Italics are original.

difficulties in this navigation exercise and was strongly criticized, even by black newspapers, when she broke contracts with managers or did not follow up on the arrangements that had been made for her. Her unique position as a black woman successful in a white field of endeavour gave her the ability to see ‘both sides’ and to negotiate opportunities accordingly. This very position was, of course, also what made her career difficult and unstable at times.

Coleman’s excellent networking skills, her lighter skin colour, and attractive appearance gave her, at least to some degree, the social mobility most women of her background would not have been able to acquire. Born in poor circumstances, Coleman became a popular heroine and was able to secure the funds necessary to not only sustain her career as aviator, but also to support her desire to join the more affluent classes.<sup>135</sup> Unlike Earhart, who was supported in most of her endeavours by her manager and husband George Palmer Putnam, Coleman was in many ways a ‘self-made woman.’ Supported by the desire of black newspapers – the *Chicago Defender* in particular – to increase their readership and revenues, her timely appearance after the racial violence in Tulsa helped her become a ‘missionary’ and an advocate of black progress in aviation. Moreover, her entrepreneurial skills and her ability to turn her aviation shows into a popular form of entertainment for all audiences made her longed-for career as an aviator possible.

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<sup>135</sup> Illustrative is that in 1925 Coleman purchased a house at the Grand Boulevard in Chicago: “To give it real class,” the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported, “Miss Bessie Coleman, the bird woman, and Jack Johnson, the fighter, also purchased homes there [at the Grand Boulevard].” See *Baltimore Afro-American*, “Grand Boulevard Replaces State St,” February 7, 1925; *New York Amsterdam News*, “Grand Boulevard in Chicago Is a World Famous Stroll,” March 4, 1925.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

Let me return, in concluding, to my view that any society that hopes to be imperishable must carve out for itself a piece of space and a period of time in which it can look honestly at itself. The honesty is not that of the scientist, who exchanges honesty of his ego for the objectivity of his gaze. It is, rather, akin to the supreme honesty of the creative artist who, in his presentations of the stage, in the book, on canvas, in marble, in music, or in towers and houses, reserves to himself the privilege of seeing straight what all cultures build crooked.

Victor Turner, "Liminality and the Performative Genre," 1984, 40.<sup>1</sup>

In this work, I have tried to reflect Turner's message that performance, and aerial performances of modernity in particular, provide useful windows into a society's cultural values and beliefs, especially where conceptions of gender, race, class, and sexuality are concerned. I have then argued that aerial performers like Charmion, Barbette, and Bessie Coleman were instrumental in questioning and reshaping traditional beliefs regarding the gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized body-in-motion between 1880 and 1930. Indeed, while the entertainment offered in circuses, vaudeville theatres, and local fairs was often associated with what Bakhtin would call "unofficial culture," the marginal, or the low,<sup>2</sup> spectacular and provocative performances by aerialists like Charmion, Coleman, and Barbette simultaneously reflected and challenged anxieties about the physical abilities and appearance of the female and the male body.

What made aerial bodies stand out from the large group of performers between 1880 and 1930 was their combination of risk, gender ambiguity/transgression, and spectacular aerial action that seemingly lifted categories of identity, at least temporarily. Indeed, as Tait and Stoddart have noted repeatedly, bodies that flew in the fantastic spaces of theater, circus, and open-air

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Turner, "Liminality and the Performative Genre," in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle/ Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Inc: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1984), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Stallybrass, and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 22-23.

fairs rendered categories of race, gender, and sexuality ambiguous. Many female trapeze flyers were as muscular as their male counterparts and executed the same aerial routines, blurring or shifting the boundaries between traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Specifically, trapeze acrobats like Charmion combined feminine sexuality with male muscularity, stimulating questions about the female body's 'appropriate' physical appearance and capabilities. Similarly, aviators like Coleman wore male flying attire, and their leather flying caps and goggles made it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish their gendered and racial identities. Likewise, the distance between high-flying aerialists and audiences below added to the difficulty in distinguishing gender and race, while adding to the spectacular nature of their performances, which seemed to defy laws of gravity.

The carnivalesque or liminal spaces of entertainment venues offered possibilities to aerialists for stretching the boundaries of what was deemed possible in terms of the physical capabilities of the human body. However, aerialists also met with resistance because their performances and bodies simultaneously evoked admiration, desire, and repulsion from spectators, managers, and show critics. On the one hand, performers like Charmion and Coleman were praised as ambitious and 'perfect' examples of what women their age should strive for; on the other hand, their ambition and proficiency in their fields of endeavour were also viewed as threatening signs of unruliness, transgression, and even the grotesque. Indeed, referring back to Russo, female acrobats and stunt fliers in modernity could be understood as models of female exceptionalism, but also as the "double, dwarfed, distorted (stunted) creatures of the sideshow

which stand in as the representatives of a well-known cultural representation of the female body as monstrous and lacking ...”<sup>3</sup>

Associations with the grotesque were not tied solely to the aerialist’s status of exceptionality, but also to the ways in which the aerial body articulated gender, or the lack thereof. This became particularly apparent in my chapter about Barbette, who complicated gender categories through his combination of female impersonation and aerial action. Moreover, literary critics at his time linked his aerial body with androgyny, supporting the notion that the gender of the aerial body becomes ambiguous while in flight. Man Ray’s images of Barbette in the process of gender transformation, as well as Cocteau’s 1926 essay, certainly emphasized the artist’s gender-ambiguous and grotesque body.

One can see, however, as I point out in my discussion about the grotesque body and agency in Chapter II, how the grotesque can be interpreted in different ways. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque was entirely positive, and suggested possibilities outside of the ‘rigid’ structure of everyday life. The grotesque body with all its “protuberances and offshoots”<sup>4</sup> was a body in the process of *becoming*, a body that fostered possibilities. In other words, the marginal body -like the aerial body- was capable of resisting authoritative discourses in the liminal/carnavalesque spaces in which it operated, unlike the “finished” bourgeois body.<sup>5</sup>

In my case studies I have shown that aerial performers operating in liminal spaces fostered possibilities in terms of human/women’s agency. Charmion’s performances encouraged the agency of women through bodily reform, including building muscles, following a healthy diet, and exercising on a regular basis. She also suggested the rejection of corsets and other

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984 (1968)), 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 28, 29; Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 22.

clothing that would hamper a woman's free movement, especially when engaging in exercise. Barbette, on the other hand, suggested different gender possibilities and showed the illusion of the existence of a gender binary. Coleman's performances also suggested new possibilities: in a climate of strict racial segregation, she was able to request that both black and white performers attended her shows and that they entered through the same admission gate. In addition, she combined elements from both white and black culture in her flying shows, suggesting a bridging of racial barriers and possibly encouraging interaction between black and white spectators.

As we have seen, aerialists' agency was limited and confined by the bounds of a patriarchal entertainment industry and, more broadly, by cultural prescriptions regarding the female and male body. Through the examples of Barbette, Coleman, and Charmion, I have shown various ways in which aerialists negotiated these tensions. Of particular importance in this navigation, especially in the cases of Charmion and Barbette, was the developing 'visual culture' around the turn of the twentieth century. Visual technologies had a strong impact on performers' agency because their cinematographic and photographic representations could take on different meaning outside of the context of their performances. Barbette's provocative portraits taken by Man Ray, for example, contributed to a larger debate about the instability of gender and functioned as a critique of France's crisis of masculinity in the interwar years. Whether or not Barbette's effect on French gender politics at the time was deliberate is not clear. Charmion most likely benefitted from her role in Edison's *Trapeze Disrobing Act*, though the short film only showed her undressing act and not her muscular display. In other words, the film was simply meant to titillate (mostly male) audiences, and not so much to show Charmion's physical abilities, therefore bringing into question how much this specific work contributed to discussions around cultural prescriptions of the female body.

Aerial performers, like those in my study, had to “embrace a condition of complete spectacularization.”<sup>6</sup> For example, not only were trapeze performers’ bodies in tight costumes visible from all angles to their audiences, aerialists images were also visible on (theater) billboards, postcards, magazines, and commercial merchandise. Moreover, their names and acts were described and spectacularized in the amusement sections of newspapers and magazines. The talent of the female performer then, as Brown notes,

was her agile ability to navigate between and manipulate discursive terrains. Engaged in multiple directional strategies of perception ... the ... female *flâneur* occupied a privileged vantage point from which to view the world. As she is gazed upon, she also gazes back, and it is her body that questions.<sup>7</sup>

The view of the female performer as *flâneur* or *flâneuse*, as I have also pointed out in my introduction, echoes the idea of a free, autonomous and independent body. The aerial bodies I have addressed in my work especially evoked a sense of freedom that was unparalleled by most other performing bodies at the time. In the case of trapeze artists for example, Tait notes that “[f]lying out from the trapeze and falling through space demonstrated a spectacle of unrestricted if unattainable physical freedom. Mastery over the aerial trick created a realm of performative freedoms which somersaulted meanings attached to physical bodies into fantasy.”<sup>8</sup>

The seemingly unlimited freedom aerialists embodied certainly reflected modern beliefs in technological progress and the infinite capacities of the (male) body. According to Rabinbach, scientists at the turn of the twentieth century believed that “[t]he human body and the industrial machine were both motors that converged energy into mechanical work. The automata no longer

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<sup>6</sup> Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 17. It needs to be noted that Brown makes this claim for Black women in particular, but I think this could also be said about white performers, especially white female performers around the turn of the twentieth century.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Peta Tait, “Feminine Free Fall: A Fantasy of Freedom,” *Theatre Journal* 48 (1) (1996): 33.

had to be denied a soul – all of nature exhibited the same protean qualities as the machine.”<sup>9</sup> The fascination with ‘the body as machine,’ and the mechanisms of its movements contributed to the development of cinematography, which, as we have seen, helped popularize and spread (moving) images of so-called ‘perfect bodies’ like Charmion and Eugen Sandow. These performers, in their claims about the benefits of physical culture in pursuit of healthy life-styles, encouraged the belief that ‘every body’ could be molded and shaped like theirs as long as a strict regime of dieting and training was followed. This fascination with muscularity, as Budd has noted, was at the same time a reaction against the widespread industrialization or ‘machine age’ in which the human body seemed to have lost its significance and agency.<sup>10</sup>

While muscular women like Charmion and Katie Sandwina were considered ‘New’ or ‘Modern,’ also other types of femininities (as well as masculinities) became popular and were emblematic of shifting perceptions about the gendered as well as racialized body. Indeed, modernity came to mean muscles, but also slenderness. Barquette, along with other popular performers like the tall and slim dancer, Ida Rubinstein, for example,<sup>11</sup> were often associated with a sexually provocative androgyny, seemingly freed from markers of gender. In a similar vein, the 1920s’ female flapper who blended typical feminine and masculine categories by bobbing her hair, smoking cigars and wearing short skirts, broke with conventional norms that stipulated appropriate behaviour for women.

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<sup>9</sup> Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor. Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine. Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), 75.

<sup>11</sup> See Patricia Vertinsky, “Ida Rubinstein: Dancing Decadence and the ‘Art of the Beautiful Pose,’ ” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* (forthcoming).

The “flying flapper,” as Walker labels female aviation pioneers of the 1920s,<sup>12</sup> also represented an adventurous and independent New Woman. Aviators like Bessie Coleman and Amelia Earhart for example, clearly “cross[ed] back and forth over traditional gender boundaries with both [their] actions and [their] dress.”<sup>13</sup> Earhart’s bobbed hair, her slender stature in combination with leather flying cap, goggles, jacket and breeches rendered her female identity ambiguous. When she did not fly, however, she emphasized her femininity by wearing pearls, skirts and dresses. “Neither tomboy nor butch, neither masculinized nor sexualized,” Herrmann notes, Earhart represented yet another type of feminine identity in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup>

Similar arguments can be made for Coleman; she dressed in a rather masculine way during her flying shows, though seemed to have capitalized on her beautiful, feminine appearance when she was not flying. Not only did she cross traditional gender boundaries, but also racial ones by taking up aviation and by networking with white men in this pursuit. Moreover, the airplane, often associated with unlimited progress and simultaneously perceived as a tool for mass destruction, fuelled both optimism and fears among black individuals in the 1920s. Coleman felt she had to encourage Black Americans to take part in the burgeoning field of aviation in order to alleviate fears of oppression and keep up with technological developments. It was believed that the airplane, quite literally, could contribute to racial ‘uplift.’

At the heart of modernity, as I have shown in this study, was the body in motion as well shifting definitions of ‘mobility’ more generally. In many respects, technologies like cinematography, trapeze acrobatics and airplane shows, changed the perceived dimensions of

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Walker, *Powder Puff Derby: Petticoat Pilots and Flying Flappers* (Chichester: Wiley, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Susan Ware, *Still Missing. Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 167.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Herrmann, “On Amelia Earhart” *The Aviatrix as American Dandy*,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39 (1) (2000): 104.

time and space, as well as distance and speed.<sup>15</sup> Aerialists' interactions with these technologies also helped change perceptions of the (physical) possibilities as well as limitations of the human body. On the one hand, aerialists symbolized progress and the infinite physical capacities of the body, while on the other hand, the frequent airplane and trapeze accidents, as well as career-ending injuries were stark reminders of the human body's physical limits. Likewise, while individuals like Charmion, Barbette and Coleman encouraged progressive ideas about gender, race, and sexuality through provocative and daring aerial action, they must be seen within the discourses and power dynamics of the respective frameworks/contexts in which they operated.

While technologies such as trains, ships, automobiles and airplanes quite obviously contributed to many individuals' mobility as travelers, in the case of the aerialists in my study, they also seem to have contributed to social mobility. Aviators like Coleman quite literally flew their way into spaces women had not occupied before and, in many respects, also paved the way for other women to follow similar paths or at least to be inspired. Performers like Charmion encouraged women to engage in physical activity, to venture out from their private homes into the public, and to wear clothes that would facilitate their free movement. Moreover, on an individual level, Charmion, Coleman and Barbette's popularity gave them the necessary financial and social means to join the more affluent classes.

Aerialists like Charmion, Coleman and Barbette certainly symbolized many of the hopes, fears and contradictions inherent to a society that was forced to revisit traditional ideas about gender, race, class, and sexuality. Their aerial performances signified beliefs about the unlimited physical capacities of the human body and societal progress more generally. They represented a

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

certain optimism about the future and a freedom seemingly unhindered by the weight of the body's flesh. Clearly, these bodies were 'modern' bodies; autonomous, entrepreneurial and eccentric, yet part of an increasingly capitalist industry that framed the extent to which they could disrupt categories of gender, race and sexuality.

## **Contributions**

Historians like Peta Tait and Helen Stoddart<sup>16</sup> were among the first to address and analyze the aerial body while taking social inequalities pertaining to gender, class and sexuality into account. In my study, I have attempted to build upon their work in order to articulate my own. It was my goal to go beyond the existing literature by extending the notion of flying and explorations of race, gender, and sexuality to different, though overlapping contexts as well as to use theoretical notions borrowed from Bakhtin, Turner and feminist thinkers to guide my analyses. In my work I have started to dissect the notion of aerialism as it pertained to aviation and trapeze acrobatics between 1880 and 1930, and more specifically, as it related to the careers of Charmion, Barquette and Coleman. Throughout their three case studies I have not only addressed specific aspects of trapeze flying and aviation in modernity, but also some of the diverse social (theater, circus, flying meets, the city) and geographical (North American and European) spaces in which aerial performances took place between 1880 and 1930.

My study can be viewed as contributing to the developing field of women's aerial history in multiple and intersecting ways. First, my analyses of the careers of boundary-breaking

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<sup>16</sup> See Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (UK: Manchester University Press, 2000). See also Angela Dalle Vache, "Wings of Desire: Aviation, Fashion, Circus Stunts. History and Analysis," In *Diva Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Russo, *The Female Grotesque*.

pioneers Charmion, Barbette and Coleman can be considered rather ‘unique’ contributions in that they address three pioneering performers whose acts and careers have not received much attention from (feminist) historians in the past. Moreover, in my case studies I bring together traditional research methods by analysing understudied empirical or ‘primary source’ materials found in (digital) archives, and postmodern, feminist theoretical notions as borrowed and modified from Mikail Bakhtin, Victor Turner, Joan Scott, Judith Butler, Susan Leigh Foster, Peta Tait and others. While I have considered theoretical notions like the carnivalesque, the grotesque, liminality, intersectionality and so on, primarily as tools that guided my work and helped me produce in-depth understandings and analyses of the primary as well as secondary sources at hand, I see my work as providing fertile ground for further theorizations of the notion of aerialism in modernity in similar and different contexts.

My work certainly opens up avenues for thinking about the meanings of flying and the technology of flying, both in modernity as well as today. Connections between flying and risk, for example, could be elaborated on as well as the meanings of aerialism in other cultural contexts, such as art, novels and poetry.<sup>17</sup> In the next section I address some of the possible avenues for future research extending from my study.

## **Future Research**

What makes historical research so rich and interesting is that is never finished and, much like the aerial performances in this study, it is always a ‘becoming.’ This is no different in my

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<sup>17</sup> The changes in perception of speed, distance and mobility brought about by a combination of airplanes and film technology, for example, spurred the coming of age of the male dominated Italian *aeropittura* movement, which literally meant ‘aeropainting.’ In a similar vein the technology of flight also spurred the *aeropoiesia* movement or ‘aeropoetry,’ celebrating change, optimism, chaos and thus modernity itself. See Willard Bohn, “The Poetics of Flight: Futurist Aeropoiesia,” *MLN* 121 (1) (2006): 207-24. The notion of aerialism can, of course, also be opened up to current-day contexts, like that of freestyle skiing or snowboarding for example.

work. Although I have identified and explored a large number of newspaper articles, photographs, and also used secondary sources for context, I have just only begun to uncover details about the careers of Barbette, Coleman, and Charmion. While I have conducted exhaustive searches for each individual, there certainly are numerous gaps remaining for further investigation. Little is known about where exactly both Barbette and Charmion travelled and how they were received in different places. Coleman's story could be made more complete by a thorough investigation of her time in Europe. Not only would it be useful to know how she was received there, but also where exactly she went, which (flying) activities she engaged in, and who she met. Barbette's story could be enriched by a more in-depth exploration of his life after his career as aerial performer. There also may be more to be found on Charmion's work overseas in archives unknown to date. It is my hope that more insight into the activities and experiences of these performers abroad, as well as into their lives after their careers as aerial performers, may shed further light on their personalities, their motives for their engagements in aerial activities, as well as their personal aspirations.

Charmion, Barbette, and Coleman are just three of many male and female aerialists who flooded the stages in North America and Europe between 1880 and 1930. One of the reasons that I was able to recover some of the 'traces' these performers left was because their acts were particularly novel and provocative and may have received more coverage in newspapers and other media than most other performances at the time. I therefore see my study as a foundation and opportunity for further investigations into 'women who flew,' and whose histories (or 'herstories') have not received much attention from (feminist) scholars to date.

There are several avenues I consider worth pursuing. First, expanding the number of case studies, by either including more trapeze artists and aviators, and/or to include other individuals

whose performances had an aerial component, would provide a richer foundation for understanding the place of such aerial performances in social/cultural ideas of this time. First, a study of trapeze artist Lillian Leitzel (1892–1931), who was a headline performer with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus in the 1910s and '20s and whose career ended in a tragic trapeze accident in 1931, may be particularly interesting. Like Charmion, she was rather 'petite,' though incredibly strong. Despite her popularity, physical competence, and marriage to controversial trapeze legend Alfredo Codona (who killed his second wife and committed suicide years after Leitzel's death), few scholars seem to have taken her remarkable career to heart. The considerable number of sources (though descriptive and fragmentary) available on Leitzel, suggests there may be an interesting story to be told, especially with regard to the ways in which she negotiated gender and femininity as a pioneering trapeze flyer.

Another aerialist whose career has been addressed rather fragmentarily in many primary and secondary sources is H  l  ne Dutrieu (1877–1961), Belgium's first female aviator and all-round athlete. Starting her career as a cyclist, participating in both races and bicycle stunts, she later became a motorcycle stunt rider, an automobile racer, and finally, in 1910, a pioneering aviator who beat her male counterparts in several air races. After her athletic career, it is believed she became a journalist and advocate of women in aviation, though very little is known about that particular episode in her life. I am not only interested in Dutrieu because of our shared nationality, but also because sources addressing her career are rather descriptive and have not been able to provide insight into her personality, her motives for participating in several male fields of endeavour, her possible struggles in this field, or her advocacy on behalf of female aviators. In cooperation with my Belgian colleagues at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

(Thomas Ameye and Pascal Delheye), I have already started to uncover her remarkable story,<sup>18</sup> while I have continued to gather information on Dutrieu throughout the course of my doctoral work.

I also hope to be able to conduct more transnational research on female aerialists in order to move away from my current Euro-centric approach. For example, my colleague in the Asian Studies Department at UBC, doctoral student Jiyoung Suh, brought the remarkable story of Korean female aviator Park Kyung-won to my attention.<sup>19</sup> Park Kyung-won (1901–1933), whose tragic life as aviator flying in the 1920s and '30s under the Japanese flag has been captured in the movie *Blue Swallow* (2005), continues to spark debate and outrage in Korea today. Her story, alongside that of Bessie Coleman, may serve as an example of the struggles, racism, and politics faced by women who flew across national boundaries in the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

As indicated above, I hope to use my study as the groundwork for future examinations of women who engaged in aerial activities in the past. More specifically, I would like to explore the history of female ski-jumpers and/or swimmers and divers. The recent women's ski-jumping controversy at the Vancouver 2010 winter Olympics certainly sparked renewed interest in the history of (women's) skiing and ski-jumping, including the life of British Columbia's Isabelle Coursier (1906–1980), who was one of a small number of female ski-jumpers in Canada in her

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<sup>18</sup> See Ameye, Thomas Bieke Gils and Pascal Delheye, "Belgian Pioneers in Rally Racing and Aerial Sports during the Belle Époque," *The International Journal for the History of Sport* 28 (2) (2011): 211-214.

<sup>19</sup> Jiyoung Suh has already found and translated fragments from Korean sources and lines from Park Kyung-won's diary, though we have not (yet) been able to trace her full diary. The heated debates that surrounded Kyung-won's flying under the Japanese flag in the 1920s were refuelled after *Blue Swallow* was launched in 2005. According to Jiyoung Suh, the young actress who played Park Kyung-won's role died shortly after the movie's release, possibly (partially) due to the stress and accusations she encountered for playing the lead role.

<sup>20</sup> An interesting example of cross-national research in aviation is Patti Gully's book *Sisters of Heaven: China's Barnstorming Aviatrixes: Modernity, Feminism, and Popular Imagination in Asia and the West*, in which she addresses the lives and careers of three female Chinese aviation pioneers in the 1930s and the gender struggles they encountered in a male field of endeavour. Patti Gully, *Sisters of Heaven: China's Barnstorming Aviatrixes: Modernity, Feminism, and Popular Imagination in Asia and the West* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2008).

time. Vertinsky, Jette, and Hofmann addressed her career briefly in their work on female ski-jumpers in the Vancouver Olympics, though a more detailed analysis of Coursier's life and career could generate a more profound understanding of the difficulties she and other female ski-jumpers at the time encountered in their desire to 'ski-fly.'<sup>21</sup>

Female divers and swimmers, who were popular entertainers on vaudeville stages in the 1910s and '20s, showing off their bodies in tight bathing costumes and engaging in spectacular diving and/or mermaid acts, could, in many respects, also be viewed as flyers. While the flying metaphor quite obviously applies to divers, for female swimmers, an aerial notion may be gleaned from Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen, who in their heavily cited essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," wrote that "[w]oman is an airborne swimmer, in flight, she does not cling to herself; she is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be, of the other woman she isn't, of him, of you."<sup>22</sup> The idea that swimming is like flying, in that it also reflects a sense of freedom and possibilities for women's agency, may be used productively in studying careers of divers and swimmers, such as, for example, vaudeville performer Annette Kellerman (1886–1975).

While the individuals addressed in this study, and those I hope to address in the future, are individuals of the past, their legacies, both directly and indirectly, affect women's as well as men's agency today and continue to spark much interest. In Barquette's case, for example, a direct connection between past and present can be found in John's Kelly's staging of *Light Shall Lift Them* (ca.1993), in which Kelly dances and shows Barquette's story as a movie on a big screen

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<sup>21</sup> See Patricia Vertinsky, Shannon Jette and Annette Hofman, "'Skierinas' in the Olympics. Gender Justice and Gender Politics at the Local, National and International Level over the Challenge of Women's Ski Jumping," *Olympika XVIII* (2009): 25-56.

<sup>22</sup> Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1 (4) (1976): 898.

behind him.<sup>23</sup> Holden reports in the *New York Times* that *Light Shall Lift Them* is a theatrical homage to Barquette and “tells his story as a series of dreamlike tableaux vivants, which blend music, dance and film as they follow Clyde from childhood to a grand, crusty old age.”<sup>24</sup>

A rather recent renewal of interest in the remarkably courageous, accomplished, and adventure-seeking female aviators of the 1920s and '30s is also apparent. Feminist novelists Helen Humphreys and Kerry Greenwood, for example, tell stories about ‘flying flappers’ who outcompeted their male counterparts in record setting attempts and/or stunt flying. Greenwood’s book *Flying Too High* tells the story of private detective Phryne Fisher, a ‘modern’ woman, thin with bobbed hair, who drives a fast car, wears the latest fashion, has multiple lovers, and excels in stunt flying. Fisher is a stereotypical flapper who outsmarts her male colleagues in solving crimes.<sup>25</sup> Humphrey’s novel *Leaving Earth* (1998) tells the story of two young women, the famous aviator Grace O’Gorman and the inexperienced Willa Briggs, who attempt to break the world flight-endurance record by circling above Toronto for twenty-five days. In their endeavour, they face fatigue, inclement weather, mechanical problems, and so on. Despite these hardships, however, flying provided them a way to temporarily transcend restrictions imposed on them in everyday life.<sup>26</sup> O’ Gorman’s personality is certainly reminiscent of Amelia Earhart’s, whose life and aviation career has recently been documented in the biographical movie *Amelia* (2009).

The popularity of circuses like *Cirque du Soleil*, in which trapeze flyers and other aerialists frequently take center stage, also indicates a continued interest and fascination with

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<sup>23</sup> See for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAnNhju6MGw> [accessed June 28, 2013].

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Holden, “Review/Performance Art; John Kelly as a Parisian Legend,” *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/12/theater/review-performance-art-john-kelly-as-a-parisian-legend.html> [accessed June 28, 2013].

<sup>25</sup> Kerry Greenwood, *Flying Too High. A Phryne Fisher Mystery* (Scottsdale, AZ: Poisoned Penn Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Helen Humphreys, *Leaving Earth* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

aerial bodies. In addition, “after decades of decline,” Duncan Wall explains, “the circus is booming around the world. From Norway to Nepal, new circus companies and schools are springing to life at a rate unprecedented in the modern circus’s nearly 250-year history.” Indeed, in France alone there are currently more than 450 troupes and 600 schools, and about twenty countries, including Belgium, Australia, and Mexico have established professional circus training grounds.<sup>27</sup> The popularity of such routines has also extended beyond the space of the professional circus tent. Circus skills are now often promoted as forms of ‘fun’ recreation and ways to build the body. The Vancouver circus school in Richmond, for example, advertises trapeze, aerial silk, and other acrobatic skills classes for all ages starting from pre-school. There are even specific fitness classes “strategically designed to include circus activities as a fundamental for core stability, overall flexibility, ...”<sup>28</sup>

The current-day popularity of (queer) aerial performances similar to Barbette’s, the histories of female aviation heroines of the 1920s, together with the renewed interest in (professional and recreational) circus performances, is certainly encouraging of research areas extending from this thesis in which aerial performances and aerial bodies are central. The same questions I have asked here, regarding aerialists of the past, may also be asked in the context of today’s seeming resurgence (or continuation) of interest in aerial activities: What may aerial bodies and activities tell us about current-day perceptions of the (fe)male body and the culture in which it figures? How may they inform us about current-day notions of gender, race, and sexuality, and how may this be different or similar to notions regarding such topics in the past?

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<sup>27</sup> Duncan Wall, “Moving Beyond the Big Tent,” *New York Times* March 16, 2013. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/opinion/sunday/moving-beyond-the-big-tent.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/opinion/sunday/moving-beyond-the-big-tent.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)> [accessed May 8, 2013].

<sup>28</sup> Vancouver Circus School, Fitness Programs, <http://www.vancouvercircusschool.ca/classes/fitness-programs.php> [accessed May 8, 2013].

Also, how do female trapeze artists and aviators today negotiate cultural prescriptions regarding the body and its abilities, and how are their experiences different or similar from aerialists of the past?

While I will leave the answers to these questions ‘up in the air,’ at least for now, what is certain is that aerial performances of the past and present have the capacity to encourage reflection about taken-for-granted notions regarding the gendered/racialized/classed/sexualized body and inform us about the (in)stability of such notions. My study has raised more questions than it has answered, indicating much research remains to be undertaken in the rich arena of women’s aerial history. I hope that my study will stimulate reflection upon the pioneering work of women who flew between 1880 and 1930, as well as those who fly today. Moreover, it is my hope that my work provides a thought-provoking window onto the history of aerial performance and will inspire at least some individuals with a renewed sense of bodily agency.<sup>29</sup> After all, “[women] who fly escape the dangers of domination, the tyrannical powers of orthodoxy. Flight is also a positive course, a soaring; it traces the path of desire.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History*. Bloomington (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>30</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “Feminism’s History,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 16 (2) (2004): 26.

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