“A sharp observer and scholarly commentator, Aldama gives sex and gender a new twist. He gathers expert analysts who put sex and gender into contemporary but unfamiliar contexts of popular culture. They take us into national (Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Japanese Peru, Puerto Rico, Argentina, Cuba), pre-national (Amerindian), and hemispheric transnational spaces (the U.S.—Mexico border, Budapest—Brazil, Japan—Peru, Cuba—U.S.) of cultural production. An absolutely essential resource for all those interested in the dynamic and varied ways that sex and gender inform the shaping of pop culture in the Americas”

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“In Latin America, as elsewhere, popular culture can enforce systems and structures of oppression as well as provide a space for resistance to them. The redoubtable, versatile Aldama is the perfect impresario for these studies into how various forms of pop throughout the Hispanophonie Western hemisphere shape and are shaped by gender and sexuality”

Steven G. Kellman, author of The Translingual Imagination, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA
THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS OF WHITE MASCULINITY

Tito Bonito and the burlesque butt

Kristie Soares

Named one of 2016’s “Most Fascinating People” (LA Weekly 2016) and 2017's “Most Comedic Performer” (Burlesque Hall of Fame 2017), Tito Bonito is a 5’10”, light-skinned, dark haired Cuban from Miami. He is reminiscent of Desi Arnaz, a likeness that Tito plays up when hosting burlesque shows, often in tuxedos and hats like those Arnaz himself used to wear. Tito’s charm and old-fashioned aesthetic make him a perfect choice to gently initiate a crowd of burlesque virgins into the art form on the Monday I see him perform in the Boogaloo Bombshells show at a downtown L.A. sports bar. Tito welcomes the crowd—which is largely queer, of color, and/or female—while making clear the exotic and political potential that burlesque has always encapsulated. Although he identifies personally as gay, and makes no secret of it on stage, he tells me after that show that audiences always wonder about his true sexuality. He finds this funny, particularly since throughout the course of this particular night he will give a man a lap dance and spank another, and given that it is not unusual for him to deep throat a microphone between acts. Something about his presentation of self makes his sexuality unintelligible to people, however, likely because his gender presentation is so fluid. On this evening he will start in a suit, but by the end of this night we will see him in a thong, nipple tassles, and—the signature of his act—“asles,” tassles glued to the butt cheeks. Tito’s intersectional identity as a queer Latino is represented in his costume by the “asles.” Because of their prominent placement on his queer Cuban butt, the “asles” gesture toward the gender performativity and xenophobia that structure the history of burlesque into which Tito inserts himself.

The kind of gender and sexual play that Tito engages in is characteristic of burlesque. The form entered into the U.S. landscape in the late 19th century, and was quickly adopted and shaped by American vaudeville. Scholars such as Mara Dauphin have written that there is significant evidence for “including bodies not sexed as female in the historical archive of femininity,” particularly within the vaudeville world “in which femininity was always imitated and rarely tied to biology or nature” (269, 259). Although most burlesque performers have been historically female, and the vast majority of neo-burlesque performers today are also gendered female, there is a long tradition of biologically male bodies performing femininity in vaudeville to which Tito belongs.

There is also a significant tradition of non-white and immigrant bodies performing within burlesque and vaudeville, although their inclusion has been more troublesome. Historically, the non-white and immigrant integration into burlesque has centered around the “cooch dance”—originally a version of belly dancing, and eventually expanded to include any kind of “exotic” or non-Western dance. The cooch dance was distilling to American audiences upon its debut at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, but xenophobic discourses quickly surrounded the world of cooch dancing. The infamous “Night at Minsky’s” that marked the beginning of large-scale raids of burlesque clubs in New York, which would eventually lead to the downfall of burlesque in the mid-20th century, was supposedly triggered because one of the cooch dancers went too far—exposing her breasts to the, not incidentally, largely immigrant audience.

Tito’s on-stage persona, which in his words ranges from “ratchet, gay club” Cubanidad to “Desi Arnaz 1950s,” exposes mostly non-Cuban L.A. audiences to Cuban culture. The history of gender play and ethnic othering in burlesque, however, locates his performances within a historical narrative that aims at gender as performative, while simultaneously warning that the kind of gender and sexual play that Tito engages in is characteristic of burlesque. The kind of gender and sexual play that Tito engages in is characteristic of burlesque.

The Cuban Missile Crisis of White Masculinity

Tito began performing burlesque in 2010 after being introduced to it by friends while in theatre school in Chicago. He explains to me that he had always identified as a “pervert”—first having the slur thrown at him as a young man growing up in a Cuban household in Miami, and later embracing his queerness and sexual desire as an adult burlesque performer. Burlesque, he says, allowed him to make a career of what he had always been inclined to do—take his pants off and dance. His mother, who is supportive of his career, christened him “Tito Bonito” and the “Cuban Missile Crisis” soon after he began burlesque, and he has made a career of performing as the provocative Cuban persona “Tito” ever since.

Tito’s insistence on being called “The Cuban Missile Crisis of Burlesque” gestures toward the fact that his “missle” is attempting to replace the military missiles that have characterized Cuban exile masculinity since the 1960s. His “missle” causes a crisis in the sexuality of some individual audience members, and in the collective appeal to hetero-masculinity held by the Cuban exile community. Tito’s relationship to the categories of Cubanidad, “Americanness,” “masculinity,” and “femininity” are the result of not only his personal upbringing, but also the larger context of Cuban-American relations in the 20th and 21st centuries. The second half of the 20th and the early 21st centuries have been characterized by a masculinist standoff between anti-Castro Cuban Republicans and Fidel Castro. For Cuban-American queers, particularly those coming of age in Miami, the relationship to both masculinity and femininity is complicated by the hegemonic control that both pro-Castro and anti-Castro forces seem to have over gender expression.

Tito’s branding as the “Cuban Missile Crisis of Burlesque” references a specific moment of crisis—the infamous nuclear showdown that followed the failed Bay of Pigs invasion—as well as the more general gender crisis faced by Cuban-American queers wishing to separate themselves from the normative gender and sexuality mandated by both their Cuban and American heritages. The question, then, is not so much whether one is pro- or anti-Castro, but rather how one can use gender expression to critique both Castro’s dictatorial masculinity and the right wing Cuban exile masculinity that opposes it.

Epistemology of the butt

Tito’s on-stage persona, which in his words ranges from “ratchet, gay club” Cubanidad to “Desi Arnaz 1950s,” exposes mostly non-Cuban L.A. audiences to Cuban culture. The history of gender play and ethnic othering in burlesque, however, locates his performances within a historical narrative that aims at gender as performative, while simultaneously warning that the kind of gender and sexual play that Tito engages in is characteristic of burlesque.

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The "missile" that both enacts this political critique and stirs up queer desire in Tito's acts is not necessarily, as one might think, his penis. The crisis in the audience actually comes about when Tito turns around. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner writes of Puerto Rican butts in the diaspora:

In the diaspora, the sexual epistemology of the butt gets even more complicated. Gay men may carry the bottom's fetishism to bed as a nostalgia for Condado fuck: nationalistic lesbians use their culonmetros to distinguish the borinquenas from other types, close-to-call ethnicities: and many Puerto Rican women, who have and admire their Chacón bodies for their power over men and circumstances, rear as they are subjected to the everyday indignities of being told that they are fat, should get on a diet, or should sign up for the gym. Migrant life, with its characteristic economic and emotional instability, ultimately becomes a struggle to avoid ending up with el culo al aire (our butts exposed).

Negrón-Muntaner argues for an "epistemology of the butt," which understands the Puerto Rican butt (here expanded by me to include the Cuban American butt) as a defining feature of the Puerto Rican body, which is understood to be the cradle of American burlesque. Following the presentation of the first cooch dance by a dancer named Little B at the World's Fair, in fact, as a part of a celebration of Puerto Rican culture: "100—150 burlesque theatres in this country doing their part employing Puerto Rican women, three Russian brothers that owned the most prominent chain of burlesque houses in mid-20th-century New York—tried to defend against the crackdown on burlesque by distancing themselves from ethnic otherness. When the Minsky brothers would have to testify in congress in 1937, they appealed to the national cultura of xenophobia in order to defend their show. Herbert Minsky was quoted as saying that there were: "100—150 burlesque theatres in this country doing their part employing vaudeville performers. We pledge ourselves not to employ foreign strip-tease artists in our cradle of American burlesque" (quoted in Zemeckis 2013).

The inclination to set burlesque apart from ethnic otherness may indirectly have something to do with the "culo al aire," as Negrón-Muntaner reminds us: "A big culo does not only upset hegemonic (white) notions of beauty and good taste, it is a sign for the dark, incomprehensible excess of "Latino" and other African diaspora cultures. Excess of food (unrestrained), excess of shifting (dirty), and excess of sex (heathen) are its three vital signs" (1997: 189). Returning to Tito Bonito, the artist's use of the clearly ethnicized body, and particularly the butt, to do the work of commenting on both the U.S. fear of sexuality and of immigration, represents both a continuity and a departure from burlesque tradition. He relies upon burlesque's historical use of humor and irony to comment on gender and sexuality, even while he departs from tradition by relying on the ethnicized markers of his body—the butt—to force the audience to engage with him not as a spectacle, but as an interlocutor putting the too muchness of the ethnic other literally in their faces.

This is most evident in Tito's signature act, "Cuba Libre," which begins with an audio mash-up of "Hail to the Chief," Desi Arnaz's "Babalú," and an excerpt of President Kennedy's Cuban Missile Crisis speech. Tito emerges furiously from the dark, playing a tiny bongo and holding a small American flag. He wears a white guayabera, khaki pants, and flip flops—identifiable at typical Cuban male gear. Around his waist is a blue inflatable raft that clearly reads as a children's pool toy. With an exaggerated masculinity communicated by his chest thumping and stern facial expressions, Tito begins to sing along as Desi Arnaz. The sternness of his face as he sings juxtaposes the playfulness of this tiny bongo, flag, and pool raft. Suddenly, in a theatrical arm sweep, Tito throws the American flag to the floor. He feigns a single tear dripping down his face, and—almost instantly—begins to take off his clothes...

This first portion of Tito's act is characterized by business as usual in Cuban exile politics—i.e. Cuban alpha male retains the maddening and tragic story of exile, aided by a literal raft around his waist and the most recognizable Cuban-American audio of the 1950s and 60s booming behind him. The shedding of the American flag marks a turning point, however—a moment that unleashes the queerness of Tito's character. If Tito is angry holding the American flag, then non-flag holding Tito is not just happy, he is gay.

Moments after the flag hits the ground Tito's face softens as his character appears to dis.
begins to furiously hit the bongo, eventually lowering it to his crotch so that this action looks like masturbation. At the moment of ejaculation, Tito’s juvenile persona stops her feverish drumming and flops over onto his side, only to be energized again by the opening to Celia Cruz’s “La Vida es un Carnaval.” The trajectory here is one of masculinization in reverse—Tito’s character goes from alpha male, to adolescent boy discovering his sexuality, to, finally, Celia Cruz.

Dance scholar Sherrill Dodds makes a “claim for the capacity of faces in motion to act as a site of meaning-production” (Dodds 2014: 52). For Dodds, the face is as important a tool as the body to convey meaning in dance performances. Indeed, Tito’s message becomes clear when we understand the throwing of the flag against his expressions. For Tito’s character, the American flag functions as a form of repression—keeping him from both smiling and experiencing sexual desire. It is only when he sheds the flag that Tito’s face displays pleasure, the zenith of which is accompanied by an explosion of music by queer icon Celia Cruz.

Tito is also displaying here what Reina Klein refers to as “bodily humor” in neo-burlesque, “which encompasses various embodied performances through exaggerated gestures, costumes, a focus on pleasure and playfulness, coupled with striptease and the other attributes of traditional burlesque” (2014: 247). Although he is still wearing his clothes, minus the flip flops, Tito satirizes Cuban maleness through his exaggerated portrayal of both his austerity—indicated by his thumping hit against his chest—and his sexual curiosity—indicated by the frenzied masturbation choreography.

In this third and final part of the performance, Tito rises up from the ground to the sounds of Celia Cruz’s music. As he stands, he makes eye contact with the audience as he licks his lips in pleasure. If the adolescent Tito was marked by surprise at his sexuality, this final Tito is marked by visceral delight. Tito engages here in what Sherrill Dodds refers to as the “choreography of facial commentary”—that is, the facial expressions that the burlesque performer choreographs into their act to signal to the audience their opinions or underlying intentions (2013: 80). In this case the underlying commentary is pleasure, which Tito communicates with a knowing smile and raise of his eyebrows. With this pleasure comes the entrance of the butt. He slowly and deliberately removes his clothing while swirling his hips, eventually gyrating them enough to seemingly compel a woman in a black dress, before waiting off stage, to dance with him. The two dance 32 counts of salsa together, but although Tito is performing the traditionally less flashy role of the leader, the brightness of his blue pool raft, his white undershirt, and the movement of his bottom half make him the obvious focus of the pairing. The woman eventually sneaks off of the stage, while Tito proceeds to rip his undershirt off in a fit of sexual ecstasy. He sensually strips off his blue pool raft, now metaphorically free of the masculinist struggle it represented in the first part of the performance.

The rafts Tito dances around the stage tulpes, drawing the focus now to his crotch and butt as he prepares for his final declaration: dropping his pants to reveal his Cuban-flag covered butt. As he turns around to bow, the audience discovers that this whole time Tito has been wearing a black thong with a Cuban flag tucked into the back. The truth of his identity has been there inside his pants all along; he is indeed a Cuban man, but his sexuality and gender performance are queered by where he keeps his Cubanness—on his butt. He lifts the flag so that the audience can applaud his bare butt cheeks, which he gyrates enticingly before bending down to pick up just two props for his stage exit—his bright blue raft and the tiny American flag which he waves with a comic enthusiasm as he backs off of the stage, indicating the fragility of both U.S.-based and Cuban masculinities.

Terrie Waddell characterizes burlesque as “a lived experience, energized by the pleasure involved in its development and sustenance, performer-audience camaraderie, and the need for burlesque to be preserved as an art form that pokes fun at gender stereotypes” (2013: 99). Waddell links the last characteristic of poking fun at gender stereotypes to burlesque’s trickster quality, which seeks to destabilize an audience’s assumptions without clearly telling them what assumptions they should replace them with. This is the case in Tito’s performance of “Cuba Libre.” We know the answer is on the “culo,” but what is the “culo” trying to tell us? Tito describes his Cuba Libre act on his website as “a political commentary on the Cuban immigration into the United States during the 1960s.” It does seem to make some sort of commentary on Cuban immigration—from the voiceover recordings of President Kennedy’s Cuban Missile Crisis speech to the excerpts of Desi Arnaz’s “Babalú”—and yet the exact political messaging is not clear. While a right-wing Cuban exile reading might construe the act as a critique of Castro’s communism, Tito’s satirical portrayal of Cuban masculinity in the first third of the act suggests that he does not intend to uphold a stereotypical notion of Cuban machismo or heteronormativity. Rather, the subtext to this act on Tito’s webpage gives us a hint. It reads, simply, “La Mentirita” (the little lie). Again, a right-wing exile reading might suggest that the “lie” is contained in the name of the act, namely the suggestion that Cuba is “libre” [free]. I would suggest a counter-reading, which is that the mentirita the subtext references is literally revealed at the end of this act, when Tito turns around, drops his pants, and exposes his Cuban-flag covered butt. Tito’s butt is a symbol of the mentirita that is the concept of a stable Cuban exile masculinity, which was itself unraveled by the simulated masturbation that gave way to the queerness of his salsa dancing and his thong. Tito’s act makes clear that if Cuban exile masculinity of the variety of Desi Arnaz and Brigade 2506 (the paramilitary group that the CIA backed and then failed to back to attack the Cuban Missile Crisis) has ever existed, then it is long dead now. Replaced instead by adolescents jacking off and coming into consciousness—quite literally—queer Celia Cruz impersonators.

There is also another mentirita, however, which Tito hints at through his treatment of the American flag. Tito has been exposed with his culo al aire, in the literal sense of having his butt exposed, but he has not been exposed with his culo al aire in the colloquial sense of the phrase. That is, he has not been caught with his pants down in front of a U.S.-based audience made up almost entirely of non-Cubans. Yes, Tito critiques Cuban masculinity, but he also critiques American perceptions of Cuban men when he throws the flag to the ground at a key moment in the act. If non-Cuban audience members believe they understand Tito as he critiques American perceptions of Cuban men when he throws the flag to the ground at a key moment in the act, they are forced into a rude awakening when he comes into consciousness midway through. Where the first version of Tito was vulgar in his movements and facial expressions, the second and third Titos demonstrate what Maria Elena Buszek might call an “awarishness” that posits him as subject rather than object. Buszek uses the term to refer to the self-conscious wink or nod that 19th-century burlesque performers used to let audience members know that the performers knew exactly what they were doing. This awarishness “called into question the legitimacy of defining female sexuality according to a binary structure, but also marked as desirable the spectrum of unstable and taboo identities as imaged between these poles” (Buszek 1999: 142). In the case of Tito, he is calling into question both heteronormativity and pre-determined notions of the immigrant as un-nuanced savage. Far from the cooch dancers that American audiences ogled and exoticized, Tito forces this U.S.-based audience to confront whether their ideas of exotic otherness as indicated by Desi Arnaz’s babalú and the conga drum. In doing so, Tito places himself on the “monster/beauty” continuum, inhabiting monstrosity and beauty at the same time (Sally 2009: 7). He is the “monster” immigrant of which many are so afraid, and the queer “beauty” that no one in the audience can take their eyes off of.
The labor of the butt

When I arrive to see Tito perform at the sports bar, I am immediately harassed by a drunk straight white man at the door. He wants to buy me a drink, gets mad when I won't let him, tries to buy my wife a drink, and then gets a little too close. This is the environment in which Tito must work. Although the room will gradually fill with queers, people of color, and cisgender white women as show time approaches, the environment does not, on its surface, look like a safe place for a queer Latino man to take his pants off onstage. Because most neo-burlesque is performed in bars and cabarets without a formal stage, performers generally move around the crowd, often in very close physical proximity to people that may be drunk, inclined to touch performers, or both. There is a strict rule in burlesque against audience members touching performers, but this rule must be explained and enforced by someone.

Because Tito hosts as well as performs, the task of establishing the norms of conduct often falls to him. In an interview he tells me that as a young boy he was never taught the concept of consent: “I was taught you could just touch whatever you want.” Today, as a self-proclaimed “faggot feminist,” he makes consent one of the cornerstones of his hosting by articulating when an audience member does or does not have consent to touch him. As a cisgender man, Tito acknowledges that he knows he “won’t always be welcome” in all spaces in a predominantly white audience. One evening when I attend his show, I note a young Latino man that appears to be in his 20s and is clearly intoxicated. He speaks out of turn, flirting with the crowd, often in very close physical proximity to people that may be drunk, inclined to touch performers, or both. Tito loudly, mostly in Spanish and occasionally in accented English. 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The relationship is complicated also by the imperialist power that the U.S. has exerted over Cuba historically. For instance, the 1901 Platt Amendment that made Cuba a "sovereign" state allowed the U.S. to lease Guantanamo Bay and to intervene in Cuban foreign affairs.

4 For more on Sarah Baartman, an African woman whose buttocks was exhibited in 19th-century European freak shows, see Strother (1999).

5 One night in particular is often cited in histories detailing the decline of burlesque—the night they raided Minsky's in 1925 (Pullen 2002). This event may actually have never occurred, as Kirsten Pullen argues in her investigation of public record, but its rhetorical importance remains as a crucial moment in the story of the persecution of burlesque.

6 Of note here is also burlesque's historic ties to minstrelsy, with American burlesque performers sometimes adopting blackface as part of parody (Mahar 1999: 342) and female minstrel companies pairing minstrelsy with burlesque (see Moody 1944).

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