La Chica Boom’s Failed, Decolonial Spictacles

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Oakland-based performance and media artist Xandra Ibarra, who grew up in El Paso, Texas, performed as La Chica Boom as part of a decade-long burlesque project. Three of her performances as her alter ego are included here: Dominatriz del Barrio, Tortillera, and Virgensota Jota. Each performance is unabashedly bold, hilarious, thought-provoking, serious, and disturbing—Ibarra fists piñatas, plays with a Hitachi Wand vibrator in the guise of La Virgen de Guadalupe and splatters hot sauce via a strap-on onto tacos, made from corn tortillas and her lacy underwear. Ibarra’s “spictacles”—her intentionally provocative term for these performances—are part burlesque and part extreme exaggeration of Mexican and Mexican-American stereotypes. Ibarra defines spictacles on her website as follows: “A performance of Mexican/Mexican-American myths and narratives that render the colonial gaze/relationship laughable; a masterful exhibition of spichood that interrogates modes of sub/objectification.” Indeed, Ibarra’s spictacles veer on the side of dark humor and are close to the bone, but her performative strategy is not Brechtian; they do not so much distance the audience, they rather bring the audience closer to her.¹
Her decolonial performative critiques of hegemonic constructions of Mexicanidad are presented as inexorably linked, intertwined or “intersectional” with a broad range of other identity categories. The title of one her performances, Tortillera, for example, not only refers to a woman making tortillas but also is a slang word for a lesbian. In Dominatrix del Barrio, Ibarra wears gloves, pasties, sequins and a sheer outfit expected of a burlesque performer, yet her mask conjures the world of Mexican lucha libre. Finally, she plays with gender, sexuality, as well as faith-based norms in Virgensota Jota when she embodies the virgin Madonna—as-whore. In her theory of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw points to the importance of considering constructions of gender, race/ethnicity, and class as constitutive of one another. (Crenshaw 1994, 94) Ibarra’s work expands this list to include faith, sexuality as well as nationality and citizenship.

My conversations and correspondence with the artist have made clear, however, that she is also keenly aware that her spectacles might actually reinscribe rather than challenge the stereotypes they attempt to dismantle. For instance, after one of her performances, one audience member came up to her and said: “I can’t believe you are Mexican…but then again your J-Lo ass gives it away.” As Ibarra wrote to me in an email, “my ass seems to function as an identifying racial/sexual marker for colonial onlookers.” That is, some of the material—specifically the photo-documentation of Fuck My Life (FML), her short experimental film of the same title, her short film Corrida (in exodus), and her essay “It Gets Worse,” connected to her eponymously titled performance—assembled as part of this multimedio challenge the implied optimism embedded in the intersectional approach I have thus far invoked.

Through the lens of concepts and theories such as intersectionality as well as sociality and endurance, Ibarra’s work points to complex ways of theorizing what might be provisionally described as the “failure” of the decolonial. Returning to intersectionality, Jasbir Puar argues that it “holds fast as a successful model of political transformation” but that it needs to be supplemented as a tool for political intervention. For Puar, this has meant a focus on assemblage but she does not jettison intersectionality as a concept completely. For instance, she notes that it is “a much more porous paradigm” than is generally acknowledged and her conceptualization of “the becoming of intersectionality” in which there is an emphasis on

motion rather than points of meeting, is particularly provocative. That is, I would argue that Ibarra’s work performs the colliding of the various signifiers she mobilizes, but this collision could bring about or become a productive unraveling of the rigidity of the borders of these signifiers or it could also become a reinforcement of them for a viewer (Puar, 2011). Put another way, Ibarra’s performative pastiche of visual signifiers connected to Mexicanidad along a range of different identity axes could lead to colonization—re-iterating the power dynamics which serve to continue to stage Mexicanidad as the “other”—as much as decolonization. In this way, this multimedia engenders a space of critical Mexi-minstrelsy—another one of Ibarra’s evocative terms—at once utopian and dystopian, both a success and failure.

She explores the notion of “failure” as well as the social most earnestly in her solo theatrical production Fuck My Life (FML) (see photo-documentation), the set for which was both a burlesque stage and a “toilet alter” to burlesque and Hollywood Mexican actress Lupe Velez, who died purportedly with her head in the toilet. Ibarra invokes Velez in order to foreshadow the comically tragic destiny of La Chica Boom. She inventively draws on some of the racist reactions she experienced over the course of her burlesque project and turns them into montages and voiceovers for FML; speakers were strategically situated in the audience to implicate the audience in re-producing a racist ethos. Audience members were even encouraged to throw corn tortillas at La Chica Boom throughout the play; in so doing, they become unwittingly participants of the play and effectively contribute to the death of Ibarra’s alter ego.

FML suggests that we read her performances as relational, always already connected to an audience—even ones which undermine (or are asked to) her work. Partially drawing on another of Ibarra’s work and discussing failure in the context of her theory of “queer sociality,” Juana María Rodríguez writes that “at its core [queer sociality is] an attempt at recognition [...] a utopian space [...] And because recognition always risks failure, queer sociality also remains stubbornly attached to deploying failure as an opportunity for new critical interventions.” Rodríguez further notes that queer sociality “both performs a critique of existing social relations of difference and enacts a commitment to the creative critical work of imagining collective possibilities.” Ibarra’s Tortillera, Dominatriz del Barrio, and Virgensota Jota certainly do the latter by articulating

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racialized female subjects with perverse sexual scenarios as pleasurable. FML, though, neither leads to an “opportunity for new critical interventions” nor engages in the “creative critical work of imagining collective possibilities.” The fact that Ibarra’s FML itself failed is evidence of this fact: comments from some audience members continued to be derisive and commingled with recorded ones; there was no simple recuperation of failure. Indeed, it is important to note that Ibarra writes that FML is not the sort of productive failure that Jack Halberstam theorizes in his The Queer Art of Failure. As if to underscore this point, Ibarra dressed as a cockroach, and in stark contrast to the burlesque performances referenced above, is eerily silent on stage in FML.

Her performance implicitly evokes Richard Dyer’s metaphorical differentiation of pastiche from parody as a mode of critique: pastiche is much closer to its source material and thereby “risk[s] contamination by it.”(Dyer 2006; 157, 167) Indeed, the cockroach is both a seemingly universal maligned symbol of disgust and disease. In other words, Ibarra has re-cast herself as the embodiment of a contagion rather than empowerment. This is also the partial message of Ibarra’s performance It Gets Worse (see essay) at Performance Studies international (PSi) in 2013. The title is instructive: it is a riff on journalist Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” (IGB) campaign in response to a spate of highly publicized gay youth suicides in the US in 2010. Tavia Nyong’o usefully connects IGB to the colonial imaginary when he suggests that Savage’s campaign echoes the ‘pull yourself up from the bootstraps’ immigrant dictum. That is, in much the same way that the fallacious notion that any immigrant who is not successful is simply not working hard ignores complex, often deeply embedded structures of institutional racism and xenophobia, Savage’s campaign ignores how constructions of gender, race, and class impact sexuality and thereby vitiate or make suspect the implicit universalizing claim that it gets better. (Puar, 2010) Ibarra’s essay and performance title It Gets Worse (IGW), then, signal an increasing sense of the failure of her intersectional and decolonial performative critiques—the possibility of them becoming (per Puar’s aforementioned conceptualization of intersectionality) colonizing rather than decolonizing gestures.

She dressed as a cockroach in IGW as in FML, but she read the essay on a treadmill. The cucaracha is not only synonymous with revulsion, but also known for its stamina. As Ibarra writes in
IGW, FML “calls upon the practice of endurance amidst the consequences of failure.” Endurance, then, is key to the sort of decolonial work she is doing as is tenacity and strength, which Ibarra displays in abundance. Ibarra’s burlesque project took place over ten years—the tireless, re-iteration of her work over time I would suggest is itself evidence of the ceaseless nature of decolonial work—both academic and artistic. The bracketing of time of Ibarra’s performances I would argue is more of a convention to package work for art world consumption than a signal of some sort of clean break towards what might be precariously termed post-decolonial work. Indeed, decolonial work is a Sisyphean task, which will never be complete per Ibarra’s performance at PSI and thereby can never be “post.” Yet, while the task may remain incomplete, the smorgasbord of material presented as part of this multimedia suggest sometimes one can get very close to achieving the re-working of visual signifiers which intersect with Mexicanidad. The latter, of course, is ephemeral, in the way failure is short-lived, too.

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Notes

1 Richard Dyer in his groundbreaking book Pastiche (2006) writes that this is what distinguishes pastiche from parody as a mode of critique. The former is felt and the latter is not—it is merely ironic and disembodied (closer to the sort of depthlessness which Frederic Jameson has written typifies postmodernism more generally). See pp. 40–8 for Dyer’s discussion of parody as distinct from pastiche.

2 See Puar, 2011.

3 My use of language such as “collision” is purposeful. It connects to Crenshaw’s cogent description of cars meeting at an intersection, which Puar notes is suggestive of intersectionality
being an “event.” She further writes: “As Crenshaw indicates in this description [the analogy of cars], identification is a process; identity is an encounter, an event, an accident, in fact. Identities are multi-causal, multi-directional, liminal; traces aren’t always self-evident. In this ‘becoming of intersectionality,’ there is emphasis on motion rather than gridlock; on how the halting of motion produces the demand to locate.” Emphasis mine.

Ibarra performed as La Chica Boom in a variety of different contexts—gay bars, theaters, museums, nightclubs, and even academic conferences—which ultimately impact reception. I do not explore it in this essay, but it should be kept in mind.

See her 2011 article “Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies,”—discussion of Ibarra’s work begins on p. 343.

As Puar perspicaciously notes, Savage’s campaign does productively open up a space for “public mourning,” but it tends to promote the rights gained by a selected group of mostly white, upper class, gay males as being what constitutes “better.”

Works Cited


Rodríguez, Juana María. 2011. “Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies,” in *GLQ* 17: 331–348