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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 Bootleg 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 erotic and political potential that burlesque has always encapsulated.¹ 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—"assles," tassles glued to the butt cheeks. Tito's intersectional identity as a queer Latino is represented in his costuming by the "assles." Because of their prominent placement on his queer Cuban butt, the "assles" 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" (260, 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 titillating 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.² The history of gender play and ethnic othering in burlesque, however, locates his performances within a historical narrative that hints at gender as performative, while simultaneously warning that ethnic otherness, though sexy, is potentially too sexy. Tito's work as the "Cuban Missile Crisis of Burlesque" both confirms and disrupts this narrative, as he performs both his gender and his *Cubanidad* through the figure of what Frances Negrón-Muntaner has called "el culo al aire" [literally: ass in the air; colloquially: being caught with one's pants down] (1997: 191). In using his butt as a visual marker of both his sexuality and his ethnicity, Tito pushes audiences to simultaneously "normalize sexuality" while confronting what he calls "the fear of immigration in America" (Personal Interview).

Epistemology of the butt

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 and 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 "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 "missile" is attempting to replace the military missiles that have characterized Cuban exile masculinity since the 1960s. His "missile" 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.³ 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.

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 fucks: nationalistic lesbians use their culometros to distinguish the boricuas from other too-close-to-call ethnicities: and many Puerto Rican women, who have and admire their Chacon bodies for their power over men and circumstances, roar 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).

(1997: 191)

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 way of understanding cultural identity within the community. To be caught with your “culo al aire” means literally to have your butt in the air, but colloquially it means to be caught with one’s pants down. For Negrón-Muntaner, the epistemology of the butt functions so that one identifies ethnically through the butt, while being careful not to expose oneself (or one’s butt) to the point of drawing ridicule from non-Puerto Rican people.

Burlesque is an interesting avenue through which to address the politics of the butt, including its larger implications for gender, sexuality, and ethnicity when that butt is attached to a gay Cuban man. Neo-burlesque, which refers to the resurgence of burlesque since the 1990s, “is an attempt to recover the subversive elements of burlesque in order to wrest the act of stripping from more patriarchal interests through a re-focalization on humour, sexual agency and pleasure” (Klein 2014: 250). In this way burlesque, with its reliance on irony and satire, has historically commented upon the gender and sexual norms of Victorian bourgeois society, early 20th century American upper-class society, and since the 1990s U.S.-based norms of beauty, particularly as they relate to body shape. Its commentary on racial and ethnic norms has historically been less clear, however. Well-known Black performers like Josephine Baker have had a long history in burlesque, even as the form has generally had a complicated relationship with racial and ethnic otherness. The cooch dancer figure in late 19th-century burlesque, for instance, “was representative of an exotic foreign culture, demonstrating her native customs for the enlightenment of burlesque’s ethnographically-minded audiences” (Allen 1991: 264). The cooch dance was included in the World’s Fair, in fact, as a part of a celebration of “the quadricentennial anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the New World and as a showcase for American technological and cultural progress” (Allen 1991: 225). The cooch dancer’s body was understood as spectacle in a tradition that could be traced back to the freak show culture surrounding Sarah Baartman, the so-called “Hottentot Venus.”⁴

Following the presentation of the first cooch dance by a dancer named Little Egypt, the burlesque world began to adopt cooch dance and the Orientalizing clothing, music, and back stories that accompanied it (Schwartz 2005). Most scholars argue that the irony that otherwise characterized burlesque was missing from most cooch dance, making cooch dance exotic and enticing, but not necessarily critical. Viewers of cooch dance believed themselves to be learning something about another culture, which stripped away the ironic component

of other burlesque dance. Many scholars posit cooch dance as a turning point in American burlesque, with its departure away from comedy and toward exotic sexuality actually helping bring about the end of the golden age of burlesque.⁵ There is an underlying critique of cooch dancers and women of color implicit in these narratives, which suggests that their excessive sexuality is both dangerous and un-ironic. This critique is itself ironic, given that by the time of its full-scale adoption into burlesque, cooch dances were no longer primarily performed by women from other cultures, but were rather fanciful interpretations of these dances by American white women (Deagon 2007).⁶ Distancing burlesque from the ethnic other is a rhetorical device often used to scapegoat women of color, rather than acknowledge that the end of the golden age of burlesque was brought about by anti-obsenity laws and the rise of the film industry. For instance, the Minsky Brothers—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 culture 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 shitting (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 furtively from the dark, playing a tiny bongo and holding a small American flag. He wears a white *guayabera*, khaki pants, and flip flops—identifiable as 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 against 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, flip flops first.

This first portion of Tito’s act is characterized by business as usual in Cuban exile politics—i.e. Cuban alpha male retells 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 discover the bongo, here a proxy for his own penis. He looks young and curious now, as he

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 his 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.⁷

Tito is also displaying here what Reisa 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 his fist 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 swiveling 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 raffless Tito dances around the stage topless, 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 of 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 exile 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 subtitle 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 subtitle 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 during the Cuban Missile Crisis) has ever existed, then it is long dead now. Replaced instead by adolescents jacking off and *cuming* into consciousness—quite literally—as 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 inhabits the most stereotypical markers of Cuban masculinity in the first third of 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 heteromascularity 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 this predominantly female art form, and this understanding of his male privilege makes him particularly skilled at controlling male audience members. 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 Tito loudly, mostly in Spanish and occasionally in accented English. Because Tito positions himself as Latino early in his hosting, not just by virtue of his name but also by the use of Spanish words and jokes, he is able to control this audience member using both an insider and an outsider dynamic. As an insider, Tito appears to care for the audience member, good naturedly chiding him at several points throughout the night. This joking often centers on the audience member's Latinidad, with Tito often making reference to the current political situation by referencing Trump and whether the audience member, and presumably Tito himself, will be allowed to stay in the country. The audience member seems in on these jokes, laughing along and often talking back. When he goes too far, however, Tito disciplines him through jokes that are more cutting or, in the case of when he interrupts Tito's act to throw dollar bills in his face, through rolling his eyes and turning away from him for the entirety of the rest of the night. When I ask Tito about this later, he says he tries "to be disrespectful to put him in his place but still nice because at the end of the day he is throwing \$20 bills at us."

This mode of navigating money and audience behavior is common in professions in which affective labor and physical labor are rewarded by tips. In the case of this particular show, performers are paid a fee but can also make more money off of audience tips. Tito's *culo* takes on another dimension here, as it is both a cornerstone of his social commentary and the cornerstone of his economic potential. Burlesque is notorious for paying very little, with performers often noting that one goes into burlesque for the love of it, and into striptease for the money. Sherrill Dodds notes that the "economic stability and intellectual capital" required to perform burlesque consistently "constitutes a position of class privilege" (2013: 84). In the case of Tito Bonito, he readily recognizes that his own ability to survive primarily from his burlesque income is a result of his masculine privilege. He refers to his gender presentation as "faggot butch," and recognizes that his rarity as a male performer makes him more marketable, and that his masculine gender presentation is also a source of social capital among male performers.

Tito uses his classically masculine gender presentation—particularly when he hosts shows in suit and tie—to gain audience trust. In his words: "The men in the audience fall in love with me as a friend [...] and then all of a sudden you're blind-sided." In part because of his seemingly-normative

gender presentation, he is able to make his ethnic identity very clear from the start, sometimes opening a show in Spanish by shouting "Sábado Gigante! Don Francisco aquí"—a reference to the long-running Spanish-language variety show hosted by the Chilean Don Francisco ("Cuban Missile Series"). Likewise, Tito does not shy away from making jokes that reference political situations that are relevant to the Cuban exile community, for instance joking that "my government name if you wanna look me up on Facebook is Elian González Ruiz de Bustamante Acosta Hurtado de los Santos"—a reference to Elian González, the young boy who was the subject of an international custody battle between Cuba and the United States in 2000 ("Mini Missile-Sizzling"). He will also occasionally perform as Fidevil, a queer version of Fidel Castro performed with a beard, military cap, thong, and red devil horns—here a reference not only to anti-Castro sentiment among Miami Cuban exiles, but also to the masculinist image that Castro sought to portray.

During a show that I attended, he is the last performer of the night. Because he is the only male performer in the Bootleg Bombshells show, it is possible that new audience members may not be aware that he will eventually perform. He transitions from hosting to performing casually, handing his microphone to a fellow performer, and then fixing eyes sexily with an audience member. Tito dances to slow R&B music, removing his suit jacket and sequined red suspenders. Like the acts by female dancers before him, he works the crowd, eventually removing his shirt to show his bare chest covered by just two red nipple tassles. Where most of the female dancers rely on the removal of their tops as an act closer, referred to colloquially as the "big reveal," Tito tends to remove his shirt in the middle of his act. Nipple tassles highlight his nipples as erogenous zones that we, the audience, are not allowed to see. The key moment comes when Tito removes his pants to reveal a silver thong, his buttocks also sporting two black "assles" that he twirls seductively as he writhes on the floor. On all fours, Tito positions himself over a pile of money and begins to toss it over his shoulder at his own butt, reminding the audience that when the "culo" is "al aire," the right thing to do is throw money.

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In a photoshoot taken on a train car by photographer Kriss Abigail, which appears on Tito's website, we see Tito dressed from the waist up in a black collar shirt with a striped black and white tie. Tito holds on to the railings between two train cars, peering out between them as though he were a harried businessman on the way to work. Below the waist Tito wears black brief underwear, however, and black dress socks held up by a sock garter. Tito twists one leg over the other, as though he is a Rockette about to perform her signature kick. The juxtaposition between Tito's top half and his bottom half in this photo tells of the interplay between two frameworks. On the top half, a heteronormative framework—a young man going to work. On the bottom half, the epistemology of the butt, and in this case the Cuban butt. If the businessman is the emblem of all that is normative in U.S.-based masculinity (Cuban-American or otherwise), then Tito's version of the Cuban-American working man is an indication of how gender, sexuality, and ethnicity can be queered in the world of burlesque. By forcing audiences to confront their fears of sex and immigration through the figure of the "culo al aire," Tito inserts himself into a historical narrative of burlesque that performs not just gender and sexuality, but also *Cubanidad*, in a way that is both sexy and political.

Notes

- 1 Tito's audience composition is indicative of the typical audience in neo-burlesque, which is largely queer and female (Ferreday 2008).
- 2 For a further theorization of the concept of "ratchet," a slur generally referring to a combination of raunchiness and low-class aesthetics, see Hernández's "Carnal Teachings" (2014).

- 3 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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