

Spic(y) Appropriations:

The Gustatory Aesthetics of Xandra Ibarra (aka La Chica Boom)

Iván A. Ramos

Abstract: *This essay examines what I call the gustatory aesthetics of Chicana performance and visual artist Xandra Ibarra (aka La Chica Boom). I focus specifically on the appropriation of the Tapatío brand hot sauce across a series of works. I argue that Ibarra's practice lays out a politics of Latina/o anti-assimilation by playing with racist tropes. The essay first carves a genealogy of gustatory aesthetics focusing on the work of the Chicana/o art collective ASCO and performance artist Nao Bustamante's 1992 performance Indigurrito. I argue that this aesthetic performs acts of refusal by turning to ingestion as a central element of their work. I then examine in detail how Ibarra's use of the bottle draws from the complex history of Mexican food, and in particular how its spiciness is imagined. By sexualizing the hot sauce bottle through the strap-on, Ibarra creates a visceral project that breaks the boundaries of racialized politics.*

Keywords: *Chicana, queer, feminist, performance, contemporary art*

Introduction

Upon entering the recent solo exhibit of Xandra Ibarra (b. El Paso, Texas 1979), aka La Chica Boom, at San Francisco's Galería de la Raza in the Mission district, attendees were greeted by a large display of 167 Tapatío hot

sauce bottles mounted upon shelves on the far wall of the small gallery [Fig. 1]. Seeing the bottles at a distance, one expected to find the hot sauce's traditional logo, which has been described as:

a charro – a Mexican cowboy – wearing a yellow riding jacket; a red handkerchief tied around his neck; a helmet of brown hair; a thick, though not obnoxiously bushy, mustache; and a sombrero with arabesque stitching snaking around the brim...The Tapatío man is smiling, proud, exuding *mexicanidad*.¹

Upon closer inspection, however, the bottles were not emblazoned with this traditional emblem, but instead with Ibarra's face, grinning in contradistinction to the proud *charro*, her hair flowing and green, while retaining the logo's other sartorial characteristics [Fig. 2]. Her smile serves two purposes, on the one hand, an almost racialized and distinct Mexican smile, on the other, the expression of someone who has knowingly and mischievously tricked our expectations. The writing on the bottle is also

¹ Gustavo Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*, Scribner, New York, 2012, p. 223.

transformed, the gender designation adjusted to spell *Tapatía*, the “salsa picante” banner replaced with La Chica Boom’s name, and instead of the descriptor “Hot Sauce” the words “Spic Jouissance”.



Fig. 1 Xandra Ibarra’s ‘Ecdysis: The Molting of a Cucarachica’ exhibition (gallery view), 2015, Galería de la Raza, San Francisco. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

This essay takes the *Tapatía* bottle as a starting point to discuss Ibarra’s gustatory aesthetics. I show the ways in which Ibarra’s myriad of uses of the bottle articulate a visceral anti-assimilationist politics that appropriates and critiques the racist imagery that has defined Latina/o subjects in the United States. I place this work within a longer trajectory of queer Chicana/o art that utilizes the digestive tract to reshape the potentiality of Latina/o cultural politics in the United States and beyond. In particular, I analyze how spiciness functions as a central metaphor that serves to illuminate not only the fear around immigration but also as part of an adjacent, if under analyzed, history in

which Mexican *food* has managed to lead the entry of the Mexican *body* into the United States. It is this disjuncture between foreignness and popularity that indicates an oppositional gesture against the justifications for integration and assimilation into the state.

As I write this essay, the Mexican immigrant has once again been thrust into the center of North American national politics. The almost absurd candidacy of billionaire entrepreneur Donald Trump has hinged upon the nativist fear of Mexicans taking over the cultural and political life of the United States. After his recent invocation of Mexicans as “thieves” and “rapists” the swift response toward Trump has highlighted a politics of Latina/o respectability. Yet Ibarra’s work draws from a tradition of Chicana/o aesthetics that rejects the notions of assimilation and integration so often required of Latina/o people.

I divide the essay into two sections. The first places Ibarra’s work in the context and genealogy of Chicana/o art, most prominently the 1970s collective ASCO, and the work of queer feminist artist Nao Bustamante. I show how what I call gustatory aesthetics – work that calls upon ingestion, disgust, and other visceral reactions brought about by consumption and food – have

served queer artists to oppose the call toward assimilation. The second part of the essay develops these insights around Ibarra's myriad of uses of the hot sauce and the complex and playful resignification that she brings both to hot sauce and the dildo. I delve into the history of the Tapatío sauce itself to reveal that in spite of the multifarious forms of the anti-immigration narrative, Mexican subjects have entered the global discourse of transnational migration via ingestion.

Part of what interests me in La Chica Boom's work is how she continuously surprises her audiences by exploring and toying with prevalent ideas around labor and consumption. The queer twist in Ibarra's use of the Tapatío bottle is the shift from the oral to the phallic and, ultimately, the vaginal. Indeed, in her wielding of the bottle, Ibarra most prominently marries it to her strap-on. In an essay for the 1995 anthology *Lesbian Erotics*, Colleen Lamos asks, "how can the dildo – the butt of homophobic humor and fodder for heterosexual pornography – be recast from a fake penis to a parody of the penis's phallic pretensions?"² Ibarra answers by racializing the dildo through the hot sauce, reminding us of her own erotic position. If

² Colleen Lamos, "Taking on the Phallus", in Karla Jay (ed.), *Lesbian Erotics*, NYU Press, New York, 1995, p. 102.

the immigrant subject continuously appears through the labor of food, Ibarra maneuvers this labor to upend this trajectory and instead carries it as a crystal, spicy lesbian phallus that can be handled to queerly penetrate politics. I discuss here her employment of the Tapatío strap-on across her performance and visual output and its aesthetics of sex and humor. After all, the power of her performances is often achieved through irreverence, play and humor to the point of discomfort.



Fig. 2 *Spic Jouissance Bottle*, 2014, glass, inedible sauce, paper. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Xandra Ibarra began her performance career in the neoburlesque scene with the moniker of La Chica Boom in 2002. She quickly gained notoriety for her performances, which mixed and repurposed traditional Mexican iconography alongside racist tropes within the erotic and sensual vocabulary of burlesque. Ibarra denominates these performances “spictacles” or, in her own words, “camp spectacles of Mexican/Mexican-American myths and narratives that render the colonial gaze/relationship laughable; short bursts of mexi-sexy minstrelsy that interrogate modes of sub/objectification.”³ For example, in *Virgensota Jota*, Ibarra, dons garb reminiscent of La Virgen de Guadalupe, giving immaculate birth to a Hitachi-wand, which she then proceeds to masturbate with on stage. In another performance, *Dominatrix del Barrio*, La Chica Boom stages a wrestling match with a piñata. She comes onto the stage wearing a luchador mask, and the battle with the piñata, in the shape of a donkey, turns into a burlesque donkey show, as La Chica Boom begins to finger, and, eventually, fist the donkey. Queer theorist Juana María Rodríguez has explained that Ibarra’s performances of racial abjection,

³ Xandra Ibarra [webpage], *Spictacles*, retrieved 1 September 2015, <<http://www.lachicaboom.com/#/spictacles/>>.

“attempt to make queer meaning out of the scenes that etch their way into our psychic imaginaries that slither into our most shameful fantasies.”⁴ Writing about another of La Chica Boom’s spictacles, *I’m Your Puppet*, in which Ibarra’s on-stage persona is sexually humiliated by a butch lesbian border agent using the erotic vocabulary of burlesque, Rodríguez argues that:

Ibarra triggers [our] attachments to the racialized erotics of dissymmetrical power relations in her audiences, as she simultaneously exposes these sanctioned gestures of the state as the nonconsensual sexualized sadism of border security.⁵

As Ibarra has transitioned from her earlier work on the queer burlesque stage into the realm of visual art and the gallery, she has remained steadfast in her poaching of abject and racist imageries often utilized to denigrate Mexican subjects. For example, in one of her most recent projects, encompassed by a full-length solo performance alongside photography and installation work, Ibarra has taken on the guise of the cucaracha, or cockroach. Ibarra's embodiment of this creature thus plays with the discourse of dirtiness and takeover so often applied to Mexican immigrants.

⁴ Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, NYU Press, New York, 2014, p. 152.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 153.

La Chica Boom most prominently borrows from the racialized trope of the oversexualized “spicy” Latina that has remained a central representation in worldwide media. She draws her own persona from this visual history, and although this depiction has gained most of its popularity in the realms of cinema, television and stage, the history of the spicy Latina owes much of its original meaning to a historical relationship to food. The invention of chili in the Southwestern United States in the late 19th Century was heralded by naming the women who would toil over the spicy pots as “chili queens”. Although their labor became heavily legislated in the streets of San Antonio, Texas, leading to their eventual disappearance by the 1930s over fears of unhygienic food preparation, their image would live on in popular culture.⁶ With the Tapatío sauce Ibarra gives literal meaning to the idea of the spicy Latina, bottling perhaps her very essence. But as I discuss throughout this essay, the idea of the spicy Latina is precisely what La Chica Boom humorously subverts and ultimately transforms in her creations. If Latinas are understood as oversexualized, spicy, and, thus, dangerous and unhygienic, Ibarra utilizes these conceptions to literally fuck back with them. The desire for the hot Latina that La Chica Boom embodies is

⁶ G. Arellano, p. 34-35.

returned, but instead she will top the viewer, in her own terms. I offer this brief summary of some of Ibarra’s trajectory as a performer and artist to call attention to the utilization of racialized and abject tropes in her work. These images, which are often rejected by mainstream Chicana/o politics as damaging, uncouth, and troubling, have rich history within racialized art in the United States and beyond. However, in using abjection as a strategy of resistance, Ibarra manages to upend the structures of power that aim to discipline the transnational Latina/o subject into a politics of respectability.

Gustatory Aesthetics

Before exploring the intricacies of Ibarra’s manipulation of the Tapatío bottle, I wish to place her within a trajectory of queer Chicana/o work that underlines disgust and sexualized abjection within its parameters. Most immediately, Ibarra could be said to belong to the genealogy of queer feminist performance Laura G. Gutiérrez discusses in *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the World Stage*. She writes that feminist artists in this tradition,

are keenly aware of sexuality’s pervasive presence in culture and thus deploy it as a trope of sorts, at times masking it as entertainment. But, in direct contradiction to mass-media representations of sexuality, they create counterdiscourses

that make evident societal hypocrisies in relationship to sexuality, particularly female and queer.⁷

For Gutiérrez, the playful and sexualized work of the artists she examines, including Mexican cabaret performers Jesusa Rodríguez and Astrid Hadad, and Chicana artists Nao Bustamante and Ximena Cuevas, directly confronts the histories of oppression that female bodies have suffered on both sides of the border. She explains that:

one of the ways in which queer political cabaret undoes this complicated position that the queer and racialized body occupies in culture is by excessively and humorously proposing alternate ways of seeing ourselves.⁸

Ibarra can comfortably take place in this tradition of feminist art. For now, I focus on the appearance of digestive aesthetics and the visceral responses that they elicit.

Perhaps the most recognizable appeal toward this kind of visceral reaction has been the 1970s Chicana/o artist collective ASCO. Originally constituted in 1972, the collective was made up originally of Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez. Centered primarily on Los Angeles, ASCO would eventually expand to include collaborations with several other artists

around the area. ASCO took their name from the Spanish word for “disgust”, which as Gronk states in an interview, was a response to the primary reaction the group seemed to draw from its audiences. As C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez explain in their essay “Asco and the Politics of Revulsion”, the collective “found their shared purpose in depicting and reflecting the revulsion they felt about the effect of cataclysmic geopolitical events on their experience of local realities.”⁹ Thus the nausea in their name reflected a double purpose, a sense of revulsion caused by the politics of the time that then became mirrored in the response expressed by their audiences in 1970s Los Angeles. Adding to this, the political context under which ASCO created their own work was enmeshed across different networks and forms of protestation. Chavoya and Gonzalez explain that in their early work, ASCO was responding to the immediacy of the Vietnam War, which saw record numbers of Chicanos enlisted into the U.S. Military, only to return for their burials. Their first public performance, *Stations of the Cross* (1971), consisted of Herrón hoisting a fifteen-foot cross alongside Gamboa and Gronk across Los Angeles’ Whittier Boulevard. Herrón was

⁷ Laura G. Gutiérrez, *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendedoras y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2010, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁹ C. Ondine Chavoya & Rita Gonzalez, “Asco and the Politics of Revulsion”, in C. Ondine Chavoya & Rita Gonzalez (eds.), *ASCO: Elite of the Obscure*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, 2011, p. 40.

dressed in full Christ-like garb, his face painted as a calavera figure in the tradition of the Mexican “Día de los Muertos”. The group deposited the cross at the doorstep of the Marine Corps recruiting center after observing five minutes of silence.

The second major context in which ASCO created their work, and which serves as the rationale behind their name, was the larger Chicano movement of the time. The political upheaval experienced the world over during the 1960s and 1970s had given rise in Los Angeles and beyond to an emerging Mexican-American civil rights movement that, as literary theorist Richard T. Rodríguez has pointed out, built its nationalist rhetoric upon the heteropatriarchal discourse of the family.¹⁰ This in turn led to a cultural imaginary that highlighted ancestry, tradition, and Mexican identity as powerful signifiers of Chicano identity. While the Chicano visual vocabulary of the time, which preferred masculinist genealogical forms in the shape of the warrior/father, is much too large to catalog in this essay, suffice it to say that ASCO’s irreverent use of these symbols opposed these patriarchal iconographies. Rodríguez singles out the group’s 1984 video *Baby Kake*, which culminates in the liberation

¹⁰ Richard T. Rodríguez, *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011, pp. 2-7.

of the mother after her overgrown adult-sized baby has choked on his food.¹¹ ASCO adopted other Chicano nationalist icons in their work, such as Patssi Valdez’s own use of the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe in the group’s 1972 *Walking Mural* action. Their name remains associated with a strand of queer Chicana/o aesthetics that contradicts the assimilative narrative imposed upon Mexican-American subjects.

But perhaps the closest relative of Ibarra’s Tapatía strap-on is Nao Bustamante’s 1992 performance *Indigurrito*. In this piece, Bustamante famously donned a strap-on that held a large burrito in place of a dildo. She invited members of the audience – specifically white men – to come on stage with her, get on their knees, and take a bite of the burrito from Bustamante’s crotch as an act of absolution from white guilt. The audience was instructed to chant “a-man” after each bite, whereby the men would become symbolically cleansed. The performance itself doubles as a critical act, not only by making white men get on their knees before Bustamante’s faux indigenously clad persona, but also, as she mentions at the beginning of the piece, as a critique of a system that in 1992 saw institutions fund artists of color who were doing work that

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 83-85.

explicitly evoked 500 years of oppression brought about by the conquest of the New World. The performance not only comments on the expectations placed upon artists of color to complete easily recognizable political tasks but then actually performs this by rejecting the kind of seriousness expected of such labor via a queer feminist action, what queer Latina theorist Christina León calls “femme camp”. The burrito becomes a metonym for “modern indigenous people”. Although of course, Bustamante means this playfully, as her physical expression as she looks down mournfully at the burrito accentuates both the fake mournfulness without action that emerges in these articulations of Indigeneity and the fact that the burrito is a U.S. based creation, not a Mexican or Indigenous one. At one point Bustamante intones after one of the men takes a bite: “he says it’s hot, but just to let you know, I ordered it without chili, just to be considerate of the white folk.” This humorous jab is precisely what Ibarra picks up in her practice. She leaves out the burrito and instead goes entirely for the chili, which I will expand upon in the following section. But lest this performance be taken simply as an aggressive gesture to castigate white men, I find that both Bustamante and Ibarra thread within the possibility of the reparative. Their aim isn’t *just* to shame white audiences, but

rather dissect racial encounters as both fraught and potentially productive. León has recently argued that this performance,

offers us here a way in which calling out becomes an erotic form of calling in, of asking a brother queer, through femme camp, to take account of being a man while opening himself up orally to a brown, femme top who tenderly fills his mouth so that the sounds of white guilt don’t take the stage.¹²

As we will see, Ibarra takes this dictum and places it not upon white male queerness, but white feminism. Both Bustamante and Ibarra render the penetrative encounter humorously, not as an accusatory gesture, but rather as one filled with redemptive possibilities for the subjects involved.

Bustamante and Ibarra’s particular use of the makeshift dildo and accompanying strap-on are worth lingering on. As Colleen Lamos explicates in her aforementioned essay, the dildo has held an ambiguous place in the history of lesbian sex. At one time decried as an imitative phallus that betrayed lesbianism by reproducing heterosexual sex, Lamos asserts that perhaps:

the dildo appropriates the symbolic power with which the penis has traditionally been endowed and transfers it onto a non anatomical, commercially manufacture

¹² Christina León, “Eat It: Queer and Brown Affect in Nao Bustamante’s Indigurrito”, National Women’s Studies Association Conference, “*Feminist Transgressions*”, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 13– 16 November 2014.

part. Moreover, the overt artificiality of the dildo reflexively denaturalizes the penis-as-phallus, revealing the penis as only one among many possible phallic symbols.¹³

Bustamante and Ibarra destabilize this relationship further by turning to the alimentary. The dildo itself becomes denaturalized and made organic by inverting (although in the case of Ibarra, not completely) its imagined point of entry. Both artists imagine the Latina phallus through its racialized gustatory labor. But as Lamos notes, it is the harness that brings about the most anxiety around the dildo's usage since, "if the hand-held dildo or vibrator is a substitute for a 'real man', the woman with the strap-on dildo is herself replacing the man; she becomes the man."¹⁴ Bustamante is well aware of this, yet displaces this anxiety by having the audience chant "a-man" after each bite. Both artists welcome this interpretation not by projecting themselves as male or even masculine substitutes, but by becoming "the man" in the shape of femme tops who dictate our own interactions and desires with their edible extensions.

I present these examples, although far from exhausting, in order to illuminate how ingestion, and its failure, has been an

important if overlooked strategy in queer Chicana/o performance. I also aim to locate a few of the genealogical strands under which Ibarra operates, an important move in writing about the oeuvre of contemporary racialized artists whose work is so often relegated to identitarian claims that exist outside or besides aesthetic innovation. Although other Chicana/o artists have also utilized eating and the social worlds that food creates, ASCO, Bustamante, and Ibarra can be located in a line that rejects the norms of food and cultural belonging. In the following section I explore the specific processes through which La Chica Boom seizes the culture of eating as once central to the creation of the subject, focusing specifically in the innovations that the Tapatía bottle engenders.

Toward a Spicy Feminist Phallus

Recent critical interdisciplinary work in the humanities and social sciences has singled out many of the procedures through which food and eating are woven into the fabric of the social and the very formation of racial categories of labor and management. As Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur remind us in the introduction to their volume *Eating Asian America*, the association between food and

¹³ C. Lamos, p. 104.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 109.

race, or “the tendency to equate racial features with gastronomic expressions is so persistent that a person’s race is commonsensically equated with what he or she ingests.”¹⁵ Regarding food and Asian American communities, they point out that:

social, political, economic, and historical forces, as well as power inequalities, including discriminatory immigration and land laws, have circumscribed Asians materially and symbolically in the alimentary realm, forcing them into indentured agricultural work and lifetimes spent in restaurants and other food service and processing industries.¹⁶

Persons of Mexican origin in the United States have had a similar trajectory from farm to table since, not only has Mexican food had a long, popular – if fraught – trajectory, but also as Mexican farm workers have been central in the maintenance of agricultural industries through backbreaking labor. Xandra Ibarra’s critical use of hot sauce and her reappropriation of the imageries of consumption allow us to read this work beyond the social realities of Chicana/os and their relationship to food production, but also in the encounter between Mexicanity and ingestion.

¹⁵ Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV & Anita Mannur, “An Alimentary Introduction”, in Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV & Anita Mannur (eds.), *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, NYU Press, New York, 2013, pp. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Although acts of consumption have been central in several strands of critical theory, most notably – perhaps – Freud’s stages of development, they rarely attend to how consumption, orality, anality, viscosity, and numerous other pathways that link these acts are centrally conjoined to subjectivation, explicitly pronounced for raced and gendered subjects. Kyla Wazana Tompkins’ *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* begins to chart how some of the techniques of what she calls “critical eating studies” may foster a complex account to

move beyond the concern with skin and boundary that has dominated body studies, and thus away from an investment in surfaces that I want to argue is the intellectually limited inheritance of the epidermal ontology of race.¹⁷

Tompkins’ contribution is especially important to understand the work I discuss in this essay. *La Chica Boom*’s appeal toward ingestion, oral and vaginal, requires a critical vocabulary that expands our current understanding of the political subject of Latina/o studies. Tompkins writes:

By reading *orificially*, critical eating studies theorizes a flexible and circular relation between the self and the social world in order to imagine a dialogic in which we – reader and text, self and other, animal and human – recognize our bodies as

¹⁷ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, NYU Press, New York, 2012, p. 3.

vulnerable to each other in ways that are terrible – that is, full of terror – and, at other times, politically productive.¹⁸

Tompkins' insights help me place an analytical frame upon the sexualized elements of Ibarra's work. Tompkins' argument that

eating intervenes as a determining moment in what...are paradoxical and historically specific attempts to regulate embodiment, which I define as living in and through the social experience of the matter we call flesh¹⁹

seems peculiarly pertinent to locate an alternative history around the management of the figure of the Mexican subject in the United States and beyond. Especially in the area of the Southwest that encompasses territories that formerly belonged to Mexico, the administration of bodies across law, politics, labor, and culture has often intersected with the trajectory of Mexican food in the larger culture, stretching well into places where *mexicanidad* seems it is most foreign. Among the many metonymical objects that have stood for Mexican food throughout its history, spiciness recurs most often as the impasse to its circulation and proliferation. It is precisely from this space that Ibarra makes her strongest intervention.

The earliest use of the Tapatío bottle in

Ibarra's work was in one of her spectacles, *Tortillera*, which became one of her signature numbers [Fig. 3]. According to the artist's website:

Ibarra takes on her own racial bondage to hot sauce, tacos, and demographic panic in "Tortillera." She dances a 60's border corrido as a minstrel Mexican housewife, makes tacos with her panties, and jacks off/spreads her seed onto tacos with her Tapatio strap-on.²⁰

The term *tortillera* has double meaning, as women who complete the domestic labor of making tortillas, but also as a derogatory term in Mexican slang for lesbians. Shown as a video for her exhibit in 2015, the performance consists of Ibarra in "traditional" colorful Mexican *tortillera* garb. Although she singles out the Mexican housewife, this is also the attire that high-end or "authentic" Mexican restaurants require of women who stand in panoptical view of their costumers, assuring the tortilla's faux home-made authenticity. As the performance progresses, Ibarra sheds more and more items of clothing, in the tradition of burlesque, until she dons nothing but her pasties and a Tapatío bottle attached to a strap-on, which she then uses to cum on the tortilla before consuming it. La Chica Boom's affect in the performance is of defiant

¹⁸ K. Wazana Tompkins, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

²⁰ Xandra Ibarra [webpage], *Tortillera*, retrieved 1 September 2015, <<http://www.lachicaboom.com/#/tortillera/>>.

dissatisfaction. She contorts her face, ferociously bearing her teeth, setting the domesticity of tortilla making against the physical performance of anger. The performance sexualizes the labor of tortilla-making, not only by invoking the lesbian, but also by making the audience aware that Latina labor is always already erotic in its abject physicality. Although this is a solo performance, Ibarra still implicates the erotic economy of creation and consumption. The final ingestion, of the tortilla with the hot sauce that stands for her Chicana lesbian ejaculation perversely mimics the action of eating her own racialized cum in the tortilla.

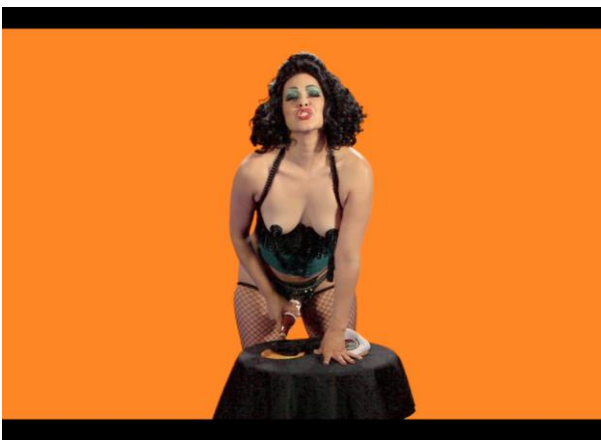


Fig. 3 *Spictacle II: Tortillera*, 2015, 4:11, looping video. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

The use of Tapatío, instead of other brands of hot sauce is significant. The sauce was first manufactured in Mount Vernon, California in 1971, when José-Luis Saavedra decided to mass-produce his own recipe, which he first produced in his native Mexico City. In *Taco*

USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America, Gustavo Arellano describes the sauce's massive popularity as the result of its instantly recognizable flavor, "assertive, thick but smooth, immediately peppery, chiles reduced to their fiery essence."²¹ Although now a staple in many a kitchen in the United States and Mexico, the sauce's authenticity owes more to the attempt to bottle a flavor from home in another country, a pathway that many a Mexican dish has followed. Although a failed business venture in its initial years, Saavedra continued in his quest to distribute the sauce across supermarkets in Southern California, changing its original name to Tapatío after a legal dispute with José Cuervo tequila. But as Arellano explains:

Calling his new hot sauce Tapatío was a genius ploy that ensured Saavedra almost instant success upon starting anew in 1975. Buying a bottle didn't merely satisfy taste for customers, but also a longing for cultural validation.²²

The sauce's larger cultural vindication amongst American foods reached its apotheosis in 2010, when the company established a deal with Kraft foods to expand its distribution, just a few years after salsa had been declared in 2007 the most popular condiment in the United States, surpassing ketchup and mayonnaise.

²¹ G. Arellano, p. 223.

²² Ibid, p. 225.

Of the many twists and turns in the history of Mexican food in the global market, and explicitly in the United States, spiciness has been heralded as the primary indicator of its foreignness, reappearing as metaphor and *raison d'être* across restaurants, cookbooks, and the market. For example, a 1982 *Time* magazine article, the first in its history dedicated to Mexican food's ascendancy in the United States begins with the sentence, "Mexican-food chains are hotter than chili peppers."²³ Certainly, as Jeffrey M. Pilcher points out in *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food*:

The combined promise and warning about the heat of Mexican food conveyed a sense of exoticism. Meanwhile, tins of tortillas, sauce, and the like were the most convenient, if not the most satisfying, way of provisioning Mexican food on a global scale, given the lack of widespread knowledge about cooking and eating it.²⁴

In other words, hot sauce and a tortilla can make anything into a taco, and thus, Mexican food. But perhaps spiciness and its discontents can serve as a point of departure to understand the ludic sexual thrill of Ibarra's harnessing of the sauce. In their introduction to a recent issue of *GLQ*, "On the Visceral", Sharon P. Holland, Marcia

²³ John Greenwald, Sheila Gribben, & Janice C. Simpson, "The Enchilada Millionaires", *Time*, November 29, 1982.

²⁴ Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, p. 166.

Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins link the colonial and the queer archive through practices of ingestion and its many metaphors which in turn result in the intersection of the gut and, in reference to the essays in their special issue, "pussy, mouths, anuses, intestines, throats, open sores, dead bodies, inhuman genitals, cannibals."²⁵ These crossings seem especially relevant when one reads them alongside the various attempts since the annexation of Mexican territory to the United States in the 19th Century to legislate the perceived excesses of the brown body. If the sensual physicality of the immigrant brings up fears of a takeover by a swarm of reproducing bodies, in effect, Mexican food and its ascendancy points toward the relationship between fear and ingestion – both located at the gut – incorporated into the very bodies of those who would react with fear and castigatory dismissal. We could maybe even extend this reading to the very trajectories of food in the United States and the immigrant farm labor required to produce most of the fruits and vegetables that feed most of the nation; none of it untouched by Mexican hands.

Ibarra's first visual use of the Tapatío strap-

²⁵ Sharon P. Holland, Marcia Ochoa, & Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "On the Visceral", *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2014, p. 399.

on, a photograph from 2010, features a close-up of the bottle inserted in the harness, pointing downward, perhaps flaccid, if a bottle like that could ever be [Fig. 4]. This original incarnation of the object gives detail to the mix of the humorous and the melancholic in Ibarra's oeuvre. The objects were Ibarra's early attempt to bring together the racialized and the pornographic, extending her queer Latinidad beyond the stage and into an exuberant play with objects. By placing the original bottle phallically upon the nondescript leather strap-on, this earlier work began a turn that Ibarra has practiced in her shift from burlesque to visual art. In this photograph, the Tapatío man's half-smile and the red blood of the substance function through their seeming incongruity with the sexual object. At the same time, this earlier piece served as an early attempt to bring together the critical apparatus that she has since developed. Ibarra would go on to manipulate and create her own set of custom-made leather strap-ons, reminiscent of gun holsters, emblazoned, respectively, with the words "La Chica Boom", "Cucarachica", and "XXX". At this point Ibarra also transformed the image of the *charro* to a facsimile of herself. One of the works that gives detail to the smile reproduced in that image is *Cucaracha Stretched Smile* (2015), which features a

close-up of her mouth, smiling, the cotton canvas stretched by rope. The forced grin in this extreme close-up becomes almost disconcerting, highlighting the S/M elements in the pieces. It also functions as a mediator between Ibarra's most recent persona, as a *cucaracha* in the process of molting into her next incarnation. This summation of objects narrates and conjoins the visceral elements present in them. It stretches literally from the smile and concentration on the mouth to the makeshift materiality of the faux phallus. It offers not a body without organs, but a jocular body that synthesizes and returns the contradictions of the Mexican body and her food, her mouth, her vagina, her spicy cock.



Fig. 4 *Tapatío Strap-On*, 2010, photograph.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Ibarra's use of the bottle responds to this very question of authenticity by taking the bottle and distorting its origin further. In the most provocative use of the strap-on so far, *Untitled Fucking* (2013), a collaborative 15-minute video with performance and video

artist Amber Hawk Swanson, Ibarra finally shows us the object used on another body. It begins with a medium shot of Ibarra's torso, clad in pasties with the Tapatío bottle attached to the strap-on. Hawk Swanson, off-camera, puts two condoms on the bottle, followed by some lubricant. Ibarra then puts on a pair of black surgical gloves as Hawk Swanson, her face finally in frame, makes her way to the bed, where she lies on her knees. They are both clad in all black lingerie, Hawk Swanson in full femme regalia, wearing black stockings and high heels; her presence reminiscent of a 1950s pinup, a la Betty Page. She makes the most eye contact with the lens, as Ibarra, her *cucaracha* pasties now fully visible, assumes a dominant position behind her, never cracking a smile, wearing dark makeup. The uninterrupted shot is now framed around Hawk Swanson's doggy style position, an unused (perhaps backup) Tapatío bottle alongside them on the bed. Ibarra places the lubricant on her hands as Hawk Swanson looks directly into the camera. Ibarra's lower half disappears from frame behind Hawk Swanson's body, as the latter begins intoning "feminism, that's deep. I think I need a minute to think about that. So, I don't know." As Ibarra begins to clearly penetrate her with the bottle, Hawk Swanson repeats the words over and over. The sentence constantly shifts in her voice, which

goes from nervous calmness to orgasmic moans, becoming overwhelmed by Ibarra's topping skills. The empty air picked up by the microphone against Hawk Swanson's multilayered breathing supplies the soundtrack to the piece. Ibarra occasionally looks at the camera, but always carries an erotic seriousness as she performs her duties. At about the 4 minute mark, Hawk Swanson breaks the rhythm to ask "do you like my line?" to which Ibarra responds, "I love your line, it's a good line, I think you should keep saying it" in a dominant yet caring tone. After Hawk Swanson repeats it, Ibarra says "I think you should slow down" dictating the speed of the encounter. As the video progresses and the sexual action gains intensity, so does Hawk Swanson's moaning. Her face orgasmically contorts as she begins to – at times – lose sight of the lines in favor of letting herself go into the intensity of pleasure. Ibarra sometimes smiles alongside her, returning to composure as Hawk Swanson lies flatly on the bed while Ibarra pulls her hair. At about the 12-minute mark, Ibarra finally pulls out the bottle, takes off the condom and cap and as she continues to be on top of Hawk Swanson begins to simulate ejaculation by pouring the contents of the bottle straight onto Hawk Swanson's backside. The final seconds of the video, as Hawk Swanson has been brought to climax by

Ibarra, show the latter kissing the former's buttocks before slapping her ass, a satisfied look on both their faces as the image quickly fades.

Originally part of Hawk Swanson's video series titled the *This Is Feminism?* project, the piece was displayed behind a small white wooden box with a peephole at Galería de la Raza. This presentation required viewers to peer through a slit while wearing headphones, stressing the potential salaciousness of the action. The box was placed next to the 167 bottles emblazoned with La Chica Boom's reappropriated smile. Above the box were displayed the three custom-made strap-ons. The objects in the video were set prominently for the viewer to encounter their usage. It created both a material archive but also an almost perverse reminder of the bottle's potential, as if promising viewers that they could too receive their own messy fuck. In a short piece for *GLQ*, Juana María Rodríguez reads the piece alongside the ever-present problem of race for any kind of feminist politics. After all, the piece never lets us forget how heavily racialized the interaction is. Rodríguez writes: "the eroticization of race, rather than functioning as what a liberal-minded queerness is intended to erase, becomes an opportunity to visually capture what white

feminism becomes unable to speak."²⁶ The piece reminds us, according to Rodríguez, that sex is the space that disturbs politics, as the unruly desires that trouble the boundary of the political should instead be a sign that this, after all,

is messy stuff, intended to cling to our bodies, rub off on those around us, scrape against the grain of the status quo. Feminism should be mouth-burning stuff, full of smoldering flavors that are not easily forgotten. To not speak about the racial contours of sexual politics, to imbibe our perverse pleasures and secret fantasies on the down-low, is to allow a politics of respectability to define what might constitute a feminist agenda.²⁷

I wish to offer an additional reading that goes along the gustatory politics that I have tried to develop throughout this essay. Most significantly lies the inversion of the bottle, and the hot sauce, from the oral to the vaginal. The video collapses the two, as the penetration explodes in Hawk Swanson's orgasmic utterances. Feminism itself remains unresolved. But, if as Tompkins points out, the goal of critical eating studies is to think the body's function as an organic loop, in which our interiorities cannot be so easily separated, *Untitled Fucking* makes this literal in this sexual encounter. The video achieves this by turning sex into a ludic act that

²⁶ Juana María Rodríguez, "Viscous Pleasures and Unruly Feminisms", *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2014, p. 11.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 12.

culminates in La Chica Boom's hot sauce cum on Hawk Swanson's back. For the audience there is almost a sense of relief, our titillated anxieties of what would happen were the bottle to break at last allayed. For those of us familiar with the taste and texture of the sauce, this faux cum-shot is exceptionally visceral. Upon each viewing, I can sense the smell, the texture, the taste. The sheer excess of it, the whole bottle in fact, creates a crimson mess that seeps into the very sensorial memory of our own encounters with a bottle of Tapatío.

This mess, however, can be read as the ultimate unleashing of Ibarra's project. Her cum-shot releases the substance that in this context offers a reframing of racialized queer politics. Spiciness is in equal parts alluring and dangerous, and perhaps out of all culinary experiences expands in and beyond the mouth, often exposing the very boundaries between inside and outside. After all, sweetness may be cloying, bitterness distasteful, saltiness annoying; but spiciness expands, takes over one's body, brings tears to one's eyes. Unless properly cleansed, a hand that has touched a hot chili or a seed that has smuggled its way beyond the plate will transmit the burning sensation to the skin. Unlike any other flavor, spiciness demands stamina and commitment to the

gustatory as an almost sadomasochistic experience, one that *Untitled Fucking* unites most explicitly to the act of lesbian sex. We are invited into a political aesthetic that dissolves the self in favor of sensorial overload. This is a Latina/o politics that begins from – but extends beyond – lesbian feminism, and instead points toward a form of intervention beyond respectability that revels in turning the racist imaginary on its head by deploying its alimentary desires.

But, before we forget, what the bottle effectively contains is La Chica Boom's "spic jouissance" in the form of the red spicy substance, the psychic interiority of the joys of racial subjection as a substance with a kick. While the complicated usage and various trajectories that the term *jouissance* has experienced – particularly in French psychoanalytic and critical theory – are far too large for this text to explore, Ibarra borrows the concept for her own colloquial use, as unbridled joy that is rendered infinitely complex by the pleasures it elicits and produces. But suffice it to say that if the term itself remains slippery in its theoretical apparitions, Ibarra complicates it even further by granting it a fluid appearance that lives through the messy political subjecthood of her (and our) own queer Latinidad.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown how Xandra Ibarra, aka La Chica Boom, utilizes the Tapatío bottle to articulate a gustatory politics and aesthetics of Chicana/o queerness. She has undertaken a project that continuously surprises and surpasses our ability to grasp the various meanings of the Tapatío strap-on. She does so by summoning an erotic lexicon usually associated with racism and abjection. In the tradition of great feminist art, she invokes the vagina as the site of pleasure, but La Chica Boom will be the one to top using our own racialized imaginings. Her aim is never to simply instill guilt upon us, but rather to call attention to the multitude of forms that unbelonging can take. Ibarra refuses the aesthetic genealogies of Chicana art that privilege the role of the mother as the caretaker of the family. La Chica Boom is nobody's mother, and she only enters the kitchen dissatisfied, returning Tapatío bottle in hand, with the grin of someone who knows the kinds of pleasures that await us.

Throughout these works, the literal association of spiciness with sex, the shift in its distribution from mouth to vagina (and in its many associative forms, also the anus) lends the series its specific weight. As Arellano points out as a refrain throughout

Taco USA:

Mexican food [arrives] to wow customers, to save them from a bland life, as it did for their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. Again. Like last time – and the time before that.²⁸

Although Arellano repeats these words to booster the cultural significance of Mexican food, we can find indication that this food is often received as an adventure, the parameters of which are often set by its spiciness. Ibarra's deployment of the Tapatío bottle is an erotic threat, perhaps a promise. Without losing sight of its drollness, or precisely because of it, the Tapatío cock is Ibarra's stand against assimilation, an invitation to turn the world Mexican and queer, one spicy fuck at a time.

© Iván A. Ramos is a UC President's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Riverside. He received his PhD in Performance Studies with a Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality from UC Berkeley. His first project examines how Mexican and U.S. Latina/o artists and publics utilized sound to articulate negation in the wake of NAFTA. Ramos' broader research investigates the links and slippages between transnational Latina/o aesthetics in relationship to the everydayness of violence and biopolitical forms of management. His writing appears in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory, Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, and *Ayotzinapa: An Anthology* (forthcoming).

²⁸ G. Arellano, p. 174.