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Devil Bunny in Bondage: Challenging Essentialist Identities

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DEVIL BUNNY

IN BONDAGE

Challenges Essentialist Identities

The sound of electronic beats and a video projection of a swirl of shifting colors and shapes set the tone as a woman dressed all in white—from her suit to her boots—walked onto the stage and began to read a manifesto.

Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa, also known as the Devil Bunny in *Bondage*, is a San Francisco–based performance and video artist, activist, curator, and percussionist. She hails originally from Miami and received her B.A. from Brown University, where she created her own major entitled “Hybridity and Performance.” Since then, she has worked with various nonprofit arts organizations as well as HIV-prevention service agencies and has collaborated with artists including Pearl Ubungen, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Elia Arce, and Afia Walking Tree.

Her timely manifesto, entitled “Hot Lesbians in Action!,” responded to the simplistic and implicitly racist statements made in the wake of the passage of Proposition 8, the 2008 amendment banning gay marriage in the state of California. Many pointed fingers at the black community for voting for Obama and for Proposition 8 at the same time, saying that blacks were betraying the history of the civil rights movement by treating gays as second-class citizens. “This is how we can divide our community!” Devil Bunny cried ironically. She went on to describe the ways in which many people feel the

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need to privilege one of their identities—be it race, gender, class, or sexuality—over others. Yet, she suggested, some people “multitask,” asserting multiple identities at once without ranking them. As a multiracial queer artist, Devil Bunny is one of those people. She refuses to allow her identity to be categorized and defined and thereby made safe for consumption by others. (In particular, she pointed to the fact that lesbianism is frequently co-opted by mainstream media and porn as something “hot” that straight men like, thereby denying lesbianism’s radical rejection of patriarchal social norms.) She also argued that rather than making the issue about what member of what races voted for Prop 8, we

should focus on the fact that many people of all races and backgrounds in this instance voted for discrimination. Tying the division between gays and blacks as a result of Prop 8 to the colonialist strategy of dividing and conquering the colonized in order to maintain colonial power, Devil Bunny insisted that “No one is free while others are oppressed.”

Then the white-clad figure disappeared from stage and, as part of a piece called “The Dimension of IS,” Devil Bunny reappeared onscreen as an on-the-scene reporter announcing the fact that the group Dykes on Bikes had been denied a trademark by the U.S. Office of Trademarks and Patents on the grounds that the word “dyke” is

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“vulgar” (from an office that did allow NASA to name a weapon a “God rod”). Suddenly, the video shifted to another location, identified as “Military Industrial Complex, Earth,” where three futuristic military industrialists led by the “Global CEO” describe a plan to attack alien civilizations with “God rods” so as to attain alien weapons known as “infinity spheres” and thereby protect their power and to make more money. Meanwhile, the alien “Elders,” dressed in elaborate costumes, shake their heads at these greedy earthlings and muse about the ways in which

humans have put other humans on display for entertainment and profit—images of Filipinos displayed at the 1904 World’s Fair appear briefly onscreen—and suggest that perhaps they should capture humans and put them on display. Eventually, the Elders confiscate the “God rods” and give the humans a “shot of pacification,” generating a montage of documentary footage of happy people at gay pride festivals and a confirmation that the Dykes on Bikes have been granted their trademark protection.

The next piece, entitled “Big Pink,”

involved an interaction between Devil Bunny wearing a hot pink wig onstage and a hot pink gorilla—Big Pink—on the video screen. This piece introduced by a song containing the refrain “there’s a monkey on your back.” Devil Bunny and Big Pink discussed the pressure on lesbians to procreate, the “death of feminism,” and substance abuse among gays. Throughout the video, Big Pink continually urged Devil Bunny to get drunk, pop pills, go to a “dyke bar,” and celebrate “depoliticized art.” Finally, a boxing glove emerged in the video from offscreen and punched the gorilla out in a symbolic rejection of the monkey on Devil Bunny’s back.

Another short video followed, documenting a performance piece called “Bliss” in which Otálvaro-Hormillosa inhabits the persona of “Cosmic Mestiza,” her head shaved and painted blue, dancing in what looked like football shoulder pads inside a glass box while spectators watched her smile and dance.

After these three video pieces, Otálvaro-Hormillosa appeared onstage in casual clothes to give an artist’s talk. She explained that Devil Bunny in Bondage is a performance persona she created in order to deconstruct

stereotypes of women, people of color, and queers. She says the word “devil” refers to the common image of woman as a devilish, seductive vixen; the word “bunny” suggests the societal expectation for women to behave like Playboy Bunnies and to procreate; and “bondage” refers to both oppression as a form of enslavement and to the stereotypes of queers as sexual deviants. She says she tries to undermine multiple stereotypes at once.

Her arts organization, (a)eromestiza, which promotes the art of women and people of mixed races, also attempts to undermine any essentialist notion of identity. The term “mestiza” refers to racial, cultural, and religious mixing in Latin America and to people who hold multiple identities. The name “(a)eromestiza” is meant to evoke both the idea of fluidity (aero) of identity and the erotic (eros). She says that as a queer person of color, she insists on questioning the assumptions made by people of all gender, sexual, racial, social, and political persuasions. Clips from another performance piece called “Inverted Minstrel” showed her inhabiting characters of other races and genders in order to destabilize stereotypes.

When asked during the Q&A session about the most challenging part of making her art, Otálvaro-Hormillosa answered “funding” but noted that nearly all artists struggle with this particular problem. It is also a challenge, she said, for her to see how well her solo pieces are working since she is the only one in the piece. She seeks out the responses of others so that she can gain perspective. Asked about how audiences have responded to her work, she said that she gets a range of responses from anger to affirmation. Although she has received some hate mail and threats, she suggested that any artist who “pushes the envelope” will get a lot of different reactions, some not necessarily positive. Asked how she balances the aesthetic with the didactic/political aspects of her work, she replied that she switches modes from piece to piece, emphasizing the politics more and sometimes less.

While Otálvaro-Hormillosa’s works were sometimes difficult to fully engage with—particularly those that were videotaped performances that occurred elsewhere—it is clear that she is using video and performance to put identities in question and to find common ground between different groups of people.

In opposition to those who would divide our community into mutually exclusive demographic categories, she sees all identities as overlapping with the potential to coexist and thereby unite all people across their differences.

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Photo credits: from left to right, “Cosmic Mestiza,” by Nacho Gonzalez; “Mestizo Best,” by Nacho Gonzalez; and “Big Pink,” by Heather Cox.