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Rumba and the Vocal Performance of Cuban Femininity:

A Call for New Forms of Interdisciplinary Research

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Robin Moore

Sonia Seeman

Rumba and the Vocal Performance of Cuban Femininity:

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by

Katherine Snow Chapman, B.M

Report

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Author

Katherine Snow Chapman

Abstract

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Katherine Snow Chapman, M. Music
The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Robin Moore

This project brings together distinct areas of scholarship — rumba, the voice, and gender — that have never influenced one another strongly, and suggests similar comparisons and modes of analysis within other Afro-diasporic genres. My paper discusses existing literature on rumba, gender performativity, the voice, and timbre. It then uses these literatures in analysis of a performance by Celeste Mendoza and argues that rumba provides an exemplary site for the study of Cuban gender roles. My primary purpose is to suggest new avenues of research and to provide a sketch of what such analysis might look like, rather than undertaking a detailed case study. Discussion of Celeste Mendoza thus represents a starting point for research that I hope will be done in the future.

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Introduction

This project brings together distinct areas of scholarship — rumba, the voice, and gender — that have never influenced one another strongly, and suggests similar comparisons and modes of analysis within other Afro-diasporic genres. Throughout this paper I focus primarily on Cuban women performing after the revolution of 1959; however, I reference previous artists and musical recordings in order to contextualize the primary focus of my discussion, Celeste Mendoza (1930-1998).

My paper discusses existing literature on rumba, gender performativity, the voice, and timbre. It then uses these literatures in analysis of a performance by Celeste Mendoza and argues that rumba provides an exemplary site for the study of Cuban gender roles. My primary purpose is to suggest new avenues of research and to provide a sketch of what such analysis might look like, rather than undertaking a detailed case study. Discussion of Celeste Mendoza thus represents a starting point for research that I hope will be done in the future.

Before I delve into my analysis, I would like to discuss two terms used in the paper. First, I use *rumbero/a* to refer to the lead singer of a rumba group. Although “rumbera” is often used as a term for a dancer or anyone involved in rumba performance (or even more generally to describe a “party girl”), my usage is specific. Second, when I use the term “rumba” I broadly reference the music and dance style including many of its commercial manifestations. Although I do not include the most patently Westernized versions (often called rhumba and more accurately described as a form of Cuban *son*) in

my discussion, I do discuss hybrid variants that became popular in in the mid-twentieth century.

What is Rumba?

Since its inception, rumba has come to be known as many things; however, traditional rumba can be described as a secular, celebratory music that involves percussionists, singers, and dancers. It is a hybrid form of music that combines both Spanish- and African-derived elements. Examples of include the use of both Spanish and African languages in texts, the prominence of drum ensembles and performance techniques derived from African antecedents, African-derived improvisational styles and dance choreography, Western/Spanish scales and harmonies, and Spanish poetic forms such as the *copla* or *décima*.

Many antecedent forms of rumba are mentioned in existing literature,¹ yet the three styles of rumba most commonly recognized include the *guaguancó*, *yambú*, and *columbia*. The first two are couples dances, while the latter is a virtuosic solo male dance. The columbia originated in the Cuban countryside as a pastime for slaves who cut sugarcane on plantations. The guaguancó was undoubtedly influenced by slave traditions as well, though the emergence of its modern form is associated with marginal areas of urban Havana. Guaguancó is relatively a fast-paced dance whose choreography is inspired in acts of sexual conquest. The *vacuanao* (literally, “vaccination”) in the guaguancó is a move in which the man thrusts his pelvis (or alternately his arm, leg, or head) at his female partner. She in turn must avoid the thrust while continuing to dance.

¹ See for instance Daniels, Yvonne Payne. “Rumba then and now: quindembo.” In *Ballroom, boogie, shimmy sham, shake: a social and popular dance reader*, ed. Julie Malnig. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Pp. 146-164.

The yambú is similar to the guaguancó in musical terms, but does not incorporate the vacunao, instead foregrounding mimetic movement that alludes to comical stories discussed in the lyrics. It is slower in tempo and is performed less often today.

Usually rumba music ensembles consist of percussionists and vocalists; in the latter half of the piece (the *montuno*), the pace of the music typically increases and the lead singer alternates improvised phrases with a chorus in call-response fashion, using primarily Spanish as well as some African derived terms or phrases. The percussion section most often “includes one or two low-pitched conga-type drums, a high-pitched conga drum, and a pair of wooden sticks (*palitos*) beaten against the wooden body of one of the drums,” or on a woodblock or piece of bamboo.² The normal structure of a rumba consists of a *diana* or improvised vocal introduction that establishes the key center, a verse section featuring poetic forms such as the copla or décima (the verse is known as the *canto* or *tema*), and then the final montuno. Prior to the 1970s one would typically find rumbas performed in informal gatherings such as in a “bar, tenement house patio, [or on a] street corner...”³ However, over the years the rumba has influenced many social spheres and styles of performance including Latin jazz, salsa, and other genres. The rumba has thus evolved into many more forms and has taken on many different meanings as it has entered the touristic and commercial spheres and fused more aggressively with commercial influences in the process.

² Crook, 93.

³ Ibid.

Early twentieth-century Cuba is associated artistically with the *afrocubanismo*⁴ movement. In the late 1920s and 1930s, many white, formally trained composers, artists, and writers became fixated on traditional African-derived song and dance genres such as the rumba in a search for nationalist inspiration. As a result, they depicted rumba not only in visual art, literature, and popular song, but also in Western symphonic compositions. This process rhetorically transformed rumba from a style associated with marginal blacks to a “whitened” form more accessible to the middle and upper classes.

In the mid-twentieth century, international music companies and sheet music publishers adopted the term *rumba/rhumba* to refer to any kind of music that had Cuban or Latin American elements. A “rumba craze” developed internationally because of the fascination with the music’s perceived “exotic” rhythmic and choreographic elements, even though what was being consumed was hardly reminiscent of traditional rumba at all. However, following the emergence of other genres such as the mambo and salsa, the Cuban government slowly started to repurpose traditional rumba and to support it as an important form of traditional heritage. As of the 1970s and 80s, the Ministry of Culture began scheduling traditional rumba events in order to celebrate the culture of the “masses.”

Because of the whitening and universalization that has occurred with rumba internationally, and the populist appropriation of traditional rumba by the Cuban government, some argue that it has become symbolic of the hybridity and egalitarianism

⁴ Moore, Robin. *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*. University of Pittsburg Press, 1997, 31.

associated with *cubanidad* (the essence of being Cuban); however, it is still often looked down upon among certain sectors of Cuban society because of its lingering associations with lower-class black culture, poverty, and slavery.⁵

⁵ Daniels, Yvonne Payne. "Changing values in Cuban rumba, a lower class black dance appropriated by the Cuban Revolution." *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1991): 1.

Existing Scholarship

Rumba is an important genre because it has contributed to many Afro-diasporic music genres and is embedded in both popular and traditional contexts that touch many lives: young, elderly, Cuban, American, white, black, and Latino(a), among others. This essay contributes to the study of rumba, Afro-diasporic vocalization, and Cuban culture, focusing on the voice as an instrument and marker for social identity. It draws from vocal literature as well as other readings on performance studies, embodiment, Western musicology, and Latin American studies.

The analysis of Celeste Mendoza's performance below is informed by my own experience as a vocalist in genres such as opera, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock, country, and various genres in the Hispanic Caribbean tradition like rumba, salsa, merengue, and *son*. I have learned that each genre requires the adoption of unique vocal techniques. For example, one would not sing rock music in an operatic style unless attempting to make a strong artistic statement or appear avant-garde. In addition, many elements of embodied sound production must change in order to modify vocal technique. Attention must be paid to where the sound should resonate in the chest and/or head, how fast or slow the vocal chords should vibrate, and how the inside of the mouth should be shaped to produce the timbre that is desired. Although seemingly minute adjustments, these elements make the difference between singing like Shania Twain⁶ and like Natalie Dessay.⁷

⁶ A country singer popular in the 1990s.

⁷ A French coloratura opera singer.

VOCALITY RESEARCH

Vocality research in ethnomusicology typically focuses on Western vocal music, performance practice, and the spoken voice. The few existing studies of non-Western vocal practices, such as *Singing the Classical Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* by Amanda Weidman and *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* by Nicholas Harkness, have identified culturally specific characteristics in performance associated with particular societies. These ethnographies use Indian classical repertoire and Western classical performance in Korea, respectively, as a means of observing cultural difference through the medium of music. Weidman treats the voice as both an anthropological and a historical object and uses the concept of “politics of voice”⁸ to emphasize the importance of the voice in classical Indian music and Indian society more broadly. Weidman also stresses that musical sound and practice are productive in society rather than merely “reflective” of social structures.

In *Songs of Seoul*, Harkness describes the voice as a “phonosonic nexus.”⁹ He uses a semiotic approach, suggesting that the voice “accounts for the relationship of sound to body, speech to song, and everyday vocalization practices to higher-order social voicings of perspective and personhood.”¹⁰ In contrast to Weidman, Harkness asserts

⁸ She defines the politics of voice as “a set of vocal practices as well as a set of ideologies about the voice and its significance (voice as deeply felt marker of identity, class, caste, gender, social positions, and nationality); [and] practices of voice as a mode of discipline through which subjects are produced (p13–14).

⁹ Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*, 3.

¹⁰ Harkness, 7.

that the voice is manipulated to align with society's expectations.¹¹ Though I agree with Weidman's belief that the voice has agency in culture, Harkness's study is more important to my interests because he includes detail about the voice as an object and the cultural work it performs in middle- and upper-class Christian Korean society. Vocal qualities in Korea act as a marker for Korean social identity. By suppressing some and accentuating other vocal qualities, Koreans define themselves as either prosperous, clean, progressive Christians or as suffering, dirty, traditional heathens.¹² Harkness demonstrates this stark contrast between the two groups through his comparison of Western classical singing and traditional *pansori* singing.¹³

I emulate this model of detailed vocal description as I draw conclusions about the power and agency of the female voice in Cuban rumba. I focus primarily on gender rather than on class, race, and colonialism, and I hope that my study will inspire new analysis along similar lines. I suggest that undertaking gendered studies of the rumba as vocal practice can provide insights into the aesthetics of the black Cuban population, and the changing social roles of women. Much like the two studies mentioned above, rumba artists have used their voice as a means of gaining recognition by dominant society, and to embody the imagined ideal of visitors to Cuba.

¹¹ Harkness, 15.

¹² Harkness, 6-7.

¹³ *Pansori* singing is a traditional form of musical Korean story telling. However, to become a master it is said that one must sing so loudly that the vocal chords bleed.

RUMBA RESEARCH

Rumba has been analyzed by Cuban researchers and by scholars abroad; however, Cuban researchers took greatest interest in the genre right after the Cuban Revolution, beginning in the 1960s. This was primarily because of Cuban government's greater support of rumba at the time in attempt to valorize a traditionally lower-class genre and to emphasize egalitarian socialist ideals. Examples of Cuban scholars who wrote about rumba in the mid 20th century include Fernando Ortiz who focused on incorporating and elevating traditional Afro-Cuban and indigenous musical forms, and Rogelio Martínez Furé who attempted to actively preserve Cuban folkloric music. Although neither of these individuals focused exclusively on rumba, their attention to the folkloric and to Afro-Cuban musics more broadly made rumba relevant to their research. However, Cubans seemingly grew weary of writing on rumba as of the 1970s or 80s and moved on. There has not been much Cuban literature produced on the topic since then, aside from a few encyclopedia entries.¹⁴

Since the 1980s, scholarship on rumba internationally has shifted from discussing rumba subgenres in general terms or analyzing elements of its musical structure to viewing performance through overarching theoretical frameworks. An example of an early musical analysis is "A Musical Analysis of the Cuban Rumba" by Larry Crook (Crook 1982). In this article, Crook breaks down the three traditional forms of rumba,

¹⁴ Giro, Radamés. "Rumba." *Diccionario Enciclopédico de la música cubana*. La Habana, Cuba : Letras Cubanas, (2009): 98-101; Fernandez, Olga. "La Rumba: Origen, Evolucion y Permanencia." *Repertorio Americano* (Heredia), nueva epoca, No. 12 (jul-dic. 2001): 79-83.

describes African influences that may have contributed to their development, and the specific scales/pitches typically used by vocalists. He notates the recurrent drumming patterns used, as well as transcribing extended drum solos. Although this analysis is helpful in understanding what the rumba is on a structural level, it doesn't really put the music into context.

Foreign scholars studying the music more recently include Rebecca Bodenheimer, Robin Moore, and Yvonne Daniels. While not all avoiding analysis of music or dance, they focus primarily on issues of blackness, nationality, and commercialization, all through slightly different lenses. Moore's "Commercial Rumba" is an excellent source with which to examine the trajectory that rumba has taken over the last two centuries. As stated earlier, rumba emerged out of Afro-Cuban slave culture but it gained much popularity through *teatro vernáculo*¹⁵ performances and the *afrocubanismo* movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Later, rumba began to influence popular song and jazz repertoire, and the hybrid compositions circulated internationally. Europe and the U.S loved the "exotic" rhythms and the racy dancing that went along with it. This led to a mislabeling of everything with a Latin beat as rumba in mid-twentieth century. Cubans at home eventually reacted to tourists' interest in rumba performance and began to replicate the sounds circulating abroad.

Bodenheimer's article, "Rumba: A 'National Symbol' or a 'Black Thing,'" discusses the trajectory of rumba within Cuba since 1959, focusing on how it was re-

¹⁵ *Teatro vernáculo* consisted of comedy, music, and dance performances that, similarly to minstrelsy, poked fun at the black communities as well as others.

assimilated after the Cuban revolution. She argues that although many authors now consider rumba to be a “national symbol,” that assumption is not entirely accurate. Through the folklore troupes that perform both for government-organized and other touristic events, rumba has become a rather virtuosic phenomenon. Individuals apprentice with master performers and practice rigorously to hone their art. Clearly, recent performance practice has changed radically. What of the traditional participatory party music? Upon interviewing a large number of dark and light-skinned Cubans, Bodenheimer further revealed that most light-skinned Cubans still did not attend rumba events, and that rumba was still very much a “black thing.” Bodenheimer’s book *Geographies of Cubanidad* evaluates Cuban cultural forms through a framework of space and place. Although this book isn’t entirely focused, on rumba, it adds a new theoretical framework to an understanding of it, and especially in terms of the ways traditional Afro-Cuban arts have developed in Havana as opposed to Matanzas and other parts of the island.

Yvonne Daniels has written several interesting articles and books about rumba over the years. Some of her works include: the article “Rumba: Then and Now” and her book *Dance and Social Change*. The latter focuses on the rumba as a complex performance event. Daniels recounts her experience in Cuba traveling to observe the differences in rumba events between large urban cities and smaller, primarily, dark-skinned (to borrow Bodenheimer’s terminology) communities in Matanzas. According to Daniels, performances in Havana were primarily staged or prearranged, whereas in Matanzas they often seemed more spontaneous and casual. There, everyone was drinking

rum, dancing, and singing—even a fight broke out! In contrast, Havana’s performances involved carefully crafted experiences intended primarily for tourists. From this perspective, a focus on the entire event helps explain the broader social meanings and transformations of rumba in recent years.

Topics for Future Exploration

Upon reading existing rumba literature, it is clear that more work needs to be done on the intersection of rumba and gender and rumba and the role of the vocalist(s). Although rumba is generally considered a male-dominated art form (aside from female participation in the dance and the chorus), these gender roles have begun to change in the last few decades. It is less uncommon now to see a female rumbera leading a group, or even female drummers accompanying her. What does this say about broader gender dynamics in Cuba, or about rumba as a national symbol? Are these women performing simply for the tourist industry to make money? Are they performing for their own enjoyment in all kinds of settings? Are they hired by the government to promote rumba, as discussed earlier?

Although rumba drumming and dancing have been given a lot of attention in existing publications, the voice has largely been ignored. Authors discuss common phrases or words used by vocalists (like “*Óyelo...*”), yet there is little discussion about how the rumbero/a makes decisions about improvisation, how the throat constructs the typical timbre, what the aesthetics of singing in the style are in general terms, how rumberos know how long to carry on the call-and-response section, what the exchanges with drummers are like when cueing the next section, what typical melodic phrases consist of, and what rumberos consider virtuosic singing. The list of questions is endless. In-depth fieldwork must be undertaken to thoroughly understand gender intricacies unique to the rumba; this would undoubtedly include finding a rumbero/a to study with,

attending dozens of performances, and interviewing multiple performers in order to explore some of these issues.

The remainder of this paper first discusses the role of women in Cuba since the revolution of 1959, and then explores issues in literature related to gender performativity, the physical voice, and timbre. Finally, it briefly analyzes a video and audio clip from the video *Nosotros la Música* (*We Are the Music*) directed by Rogelio Paris in 1964 that includes a performance of rumba by Celeste Mendoza and Carlos Embale, among others. In this analysis I begin to unpack the ways in which the physical voice and vocal performance portray unique qualities about Celeste Mendoza's Cuban femininity. I examine elements such as timbre, vocal range, vocal production, and physical appearance, and ultimately conclude that although she embodies many stereotypically feminine characteristics, Mendoza has command of the entire performance, assuming a central and ultimately masculine role. Mendoza's voice and performance reflect the new agency she assumes in this context. I conclude the essay with reflections on additional questions raised by the analysis of Mendoza's performance, and on the utility and significance of future work along these lines.

The Feminine Voice in Cuba

In this section I discuss performances by rumberas in the twentieth century and the way femininity is displayed through the voice. I argue that the greater prominence of female rumba performance today is rooted in a heightened female presence outside the home in Cuba, and that female involvement in music assisted in bolstering female empowerment through the rest of the twentieth century.

Modern Cuba's adamantly socialist orientation today provides an interesting backdrop against which to study female empowerment and feminism. This is because socialism assumes a strictly egalitarian system in which everyone is expected to work in order to sustain the economy and the country as a whole. In addition, "sex discrimination is forbidden by law and men are urged to change their sexist attitudes."¹⁶ Following the Cuban Revolution 1959, women's roles changed drastically. The government encouraged women to leave the home and enter the workforce; however, they were still expected to take care of the home in their spare time and "gender differences remained salient."¹⁷ This expectation to "do it all," so to speak, proved almost impossible to sustain and eventually led to further gender negotiation, according to Johnnetta Cole and Gail Reed.

Under the leadership of the Federation of Cuban Women, large numbers of Cuban men and women began to consciously entertain the position that housework and child-care should be shared between partners of a household, especially when they both work outside of that household. But this attitude made little headway until the policies of the Family Code were instituted... it was Cuban women,

¹⁶ Froines, Ann. "Women's Studies in Cuba." *NWSA Journal* 5, no. 2 (1993): 233.

¹⁷ Froines, 233.

speaking through their local women's federations, who affected the consciousness of [the Cuban] leaders by loudly and clearly speaking of their double shift.¹⁸

However, even though women were working outside the home and making strides in influencing public policies such as the availability of childcare centers and provisions for paid maternity leave, they were scarcely seen in positions of power and were still viewed as the primary homemakers.¹⁹ According to Anna Cristina Pertierra, a strict division existed between the "*casa* and *calle*" for women and men throughout the twentieth century (and even in the twenty-first century), despite the efforts of socialist leaders.²⁰ In other words, women were expected to take care of the home (the *casa*) and men to complete tasks outside of the home or that required more physical strength (e.g., in the *calle*, the street). One could still certainly argue that Cuban female empowerment began in the 1960s with the Federation of Cuban Women's push for female-friendly public policy; however, this accomplishment was but an initial milestone of the journey Cuban women had been engaged with for some time as they challenged traditional gender roles.

In the realm of music, women were never the most prominently involved. According to Alicia Valdés, in 1919 women only made up about 8% of musicians in Cuba. In 1943 women's involvement increased to about 32%, and in 1953 the percentage had fallen again to about 25% of musicians.²¹ Although not equitably represented in

¹⁸ Cole, Johnnetta B., and Gail A. Reed. "Women In Cuba: Old Problems And New Ideas." *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 15, no. 3/4 (1986): 324.

¹⁹ Froines, 233.

²⁰ Pertierra, Anna Cristina. "En Casa: Women and Households in Post-Soviet Cuba." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 747.

²¹ Valdés, Alicia. *Con música, textos y presencia de Mujer*. Ediciones UNION. Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 2005: 14-17.

commercial music making, women still found their voice through song and dance. Much as Kat MacIntyre suggests in her master's thesis: "*Negro y Macho: The Son Narrative and Orquesta Anacaona*," I base the assertion of women's contributions to music making partially on the formation of all-female dance bands such as Anacaona in the 1930s. Anacaona debuted in February of 1932 at the Teatro Payret de la Habana.²² The band of seven sisters wanted to play dance music in public. They initially began performing because of university closings that left the members unable to make a living in other ways outside of the home. At this time, Cubans looked down upon women for taking part in the workforce; playing music in the community, especially genres not typically played by women, represented one way of pushing back against social norms. Although the original Anacaona band members went into retirement around the time of the Cuban Revolution, the inspiration that the original group of women provided persisted into the 1980s; younger women formed a new group with the same name that still performs today.²³

Anacaona could be understood as using music to redefine their femininity in Cuban society. Not only did they push back against their role in the community, but also in their role as musicians and singers. They performed their own kind of femininity — a new kind — that became more prominent through the remainder of the twentieth century in Cuba.

²² Ibid. 81.

²³ Castro, Alicia. *Queens of Havana: The Amazing Adventures of Anacaona, Cuba's Legendary All-Girl Dance Band*. 1st ed. New York: Grove Press, 2007.

In the sections that follow, I discuss the idea of performing femininity through the body and voice, and then analyze an example of a rumba performed by Celeste Mendoza to demonstrate how Cuban femininity can be understood through the musical performance.

Gender Performativity

Gender performativity theory is central to this study because it allows me to tie the performance of rumba to gender performance through an examination of the voice. Judith Butler, a post-structural feminist, coined the phrase “gender performativity.” According to her, gender is a performed act socially constructed through repetitive action. She quotes Simone de Beauvoir as she asserts that “one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman.”²⁴ Using phenomenological theory, she even questions the naturalness of biological sex.

...if gender is the cultural significance that the seed body assumes, and if that significance is codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender.

Butler derails the core ideals of feminism with which she is strongly associated when she insists that:

...one ought to consider the futility of a political program which seeks radically to transform the social situation of women without first determining whether the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation.²⁵

Although there is much criticism surrounding Butler’s theories, her overarching premise, that gender is constructed and performed, is widely accepted. However, despite emphasizing performance and acting in her writings, Butler largely excludes discussion of music, and the voice in particular. Nevertheless, scholars such as Suzanne Cusick and

²⁴ Butler, 519.

²⁵ Ibid 523.

Judith Halberstam began applying Butler's performance theory to music in the late 1990s. Cusick makes the connection between the voice and gender performativity in her essay, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," published in 1999. In this article, Cusick asserts that both gender and sex result from actions and performances because we learn to perform them as part of our initiation into society.²⁶ She suggests that

"...voices stand for the imperatives of sex because, unlike the behaviors we might agree are performances of gender (clothes, gestures, ways of walking), voices originate inside the body's borders and not on the body's surfaces. We assume that physical behaviors originating within the body's borders are determined by their site of origin, by the body itself. Thus, they cannot be "performances," in that they seem not to be choices."²⁷

She argues that voices are culturally constructed because vocal production includes "performances of a relationship negotiated between the individual vocalizer and the vocalizer's culture."²⁸ Halberstam demonstrates that masculine and feminine qualities are not simple binaries by introducing the idea of "female masculinity" (and in opposition, male femininity). This is relevant to my case study of Celeste Mendoza because of the parallels between Mendoza, a black woman with a low voice who sings stereotypically black genre of music, and Big Mama Thornton.

After introducing the concept of "female masculinity" in her 1998 book, *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam discusses vocal qualities more in depth in *Oh Boy! Masculinities*

²⁶ Cusick, Suzanne G. "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex." In *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, edited by Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley. Zurich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999, 26-27.

²⁷ Cusick, 29.

²⁸ Ibid.

and Pop Music from 2007, and particularly in “Chapter 9: Queer Voices and Musical Genders.” She uses Big Mama Thornton and Sylvester as case studies to explore related issues of “gender variance.”²⁹ She adopts Roach’s notion of “subcultural reinvention” to trace female blues performer to the drag kings of today.³⁰ In discussing Big Mama Thornton, Halberstam explains that it is suspected Thornton was a homosexual because she never bore children, was never “romantically associated with a man,” and wore “more masculine kinds of clothes.”³¹ After explaining Thornton’s interactions with Elvis and his performance of the song “Hound Dog,” Halberstam asserts that “this absorption of black cultural production into white performance *is* the blues; and the histories that locate Thornton merely as a singer who sang “Hound Dog” first as opposed to an artist who pioneered the form, the vocal style, and the sexy masculinity that came to be essentially associated with Elvis’s iconicity, reverse the relation between female and male masculinity, black and white cultural production, queer and hetero cultures and the blues and rock and roll.”³² The fact that “Hound Dog” was written by two Jewish Americans from New York City further problematizes the way in which the song is interpreted racially. It appears that one minority may have taken advantage of another in order to make the song more popular through the voice of another.

In regards to the relationship between drag kings and the blues, Halberstam states, “if we restore the history of Willie Mae Thornton’s influence on Elvis, we can reread

²⁹ Halberstam. *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Pop Music*. London: Routledge, 2007, 183.

³⁰ Halberstam, 184.

³¹ Ibid 186.

³² Ibid 189.

drag king performances of Elvis, particularly black drag king performances as a way of imagining the lost circuits of influence within which Elvis and other white male rock heroes are merely echoes of the forgotten black butch musicians who preceded them and who were hounded from history by them.”³³

Halberstam asserts that Sylvester, in contrast to Thornton (who performs a sort of masculinity as a woman), sings his femininity as a man. The disco queen, according to Halberstam, often overlapped with the idea of drag queen when performed by a man, which is what Sylvester’s persona encompassed.³⁴ Halberstam then discusses the timbre of Sylvester’s voice, one of the primary reasons he is characterized as queer. Halberstam (via Jake Austen) describes his falsetto as “unnatural,” “strange,” and “thin”—associated with a distorted feminine rather than a healthy masculine falsetto.³⁵ In addition, she uses the example: “You are my Friend,” Sylvester’s cover of a Patti LeBelle song. This is not only a song originally sung by a woman, but one Sylvester dedicates to his backup singers. Halberstam asserts that the combination of his timbre/singing style, the origin of the song, and his camaraderie (“queer friendship”) with a group of females solidifies this femininity.³⁶

³³ Ibid 190.

³⁴ Ibid 190.

³⁵ Ibid 192.

³⁶ Ibid 193.

The Physical Voice

The voice is a physical entity, an index for meaning, and a direct sign of experience that part of everyday life through communication, expression, artistic manifestation, and representative identity.³⁷ It is a complex mechanism that utilizes the entire body when producing sound. The voice as a physical presence is important to this paper because it allows me to examine how the act of producing sound can portray gender. The methods utilized by the singer not only impact the way the music sounds, but also the way the singer has encoded themselves into that sound.

The process of phonation begins with a breath. The diaphragm must contract and move downward as the singer or speaker inhales to make room for air in the chest. Then, as the breath is released, the diaphragm loosens and rises so that the air is forced upward through the larynx in the throat, which is comprised of many tiny muscles and membranes such as the vocal folds. Upon reaching the larynx, the air vibrates the vocal folds that produce the initial sound. This sound is then amplified and distributed to the outside air through the resonators in the pharynx, nasal cavities, and mouth.³⁸ When executed in the style of Western classical performance, the muscles in the throat should be relaxed and the larynx left open and hollow. The outgoing air buzzes in spaces in the cheeks and nasal cavities, often called the mask, in order to resonate. However, in many

³⁷ Amanda Weidman, "Anthropology and Voice." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2014. 43:40.

³⁸ Meribeth Bunch Dayme, *The Performer's Voice: Realizing Your Vocal Potential* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2005), 53.

other traditions a more constricted or nasal sound is desired, requiring that the muscles in the throat and the body cavities act in different ways. The sense of constriction, control, and vocal acrobatics in vocal production can be interpreted many ways. Much like Halberstam and Cusick address, the act of adjusting airflow, changing the shape of the mouth, or constricting the muscles in the throat can completely change, not only how the voice is sounded, but also the way the listener understands or interprets the vocal sound.

Aside from being a mechanism that produces sound, the voice is crucial in portraying identity. Certain vocal sounds and timbres are culturally linked with various forms of identity because of the way that they are practiced and performed in certain environments.³⁹ In the following section I discuss timbre and how it interacts with such portrayals of identity. Timbre is central to my discussion of Celeste Mendoza's voice. Though I cannot physically see her vocal chords, I can use timbre to make inferences about what is happening in the throat and resonators.

³⁹ Nina Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race: Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre," *Trans: Revista Transcultural de Música* 13 (2009): 6-7.

Timbre

Although timbre is difficult to observe objectively and is a primarily “sonic phenomenon” that cannot yet be accurately evaluated with technology, it is paramount in making inferences based on one’s voice.⁴⁰ Timbre is equivalent to human perceptions of the sound itself, whereas pitch, duration, and dynamics are defined as measurable elements that describe particular moments of the sound.⁴¹ According to Cornelia Fales, it doesn’t just “carry the most information about a source and its location (Butler 1973); of all parameters of music, it carries the most information about the environment through which the sound has traveled.”⁴² It is a “synthesis of several factors” surrounding the sound itself.⁴³ In many European traditions, the timbre of a piece is often used to label a musical work or group of pieces.⁴⁴ For example:

A feature common to the later classes of French popular song was the adaptation of new words by the librettist or songwriter to well-known vocal or instrumental melodies; the ‘timbre’ was the melody’s label, or identification tag. It was a brief form of words, sometimes taken from the refrain or first couplet of the original poem, sometimes of more obscure origin (e.g. ‘La Pandoure’); for dance or other instrumental tunes the timbre gave the dance type together with the composer or work of origin (e.g. ‘Musette de M. Blaise’).⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Eidsheim, 8.

⁴¹ Cornelia Fales, “The paradox of timbre,” *Ethnomusicology* 46/1 (2002): 58.

⁴² Fales, 57.

⁴³ Murray Campbell, “Timbre (i).” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/27973>.

⁴⁴ John A. Emerson. “Timbre (ii).” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed May 5, 2015.

⁴⁵ Emerson.

Few accurate descriptors of timbre exist, in part because of the complex combinations of formants that co-occur in acoustic spaces. One must rely on “metaphor” or “analogy to other senses” to explain perceived timbre, and analogies or metaphor are often disputed or shrugged off as subjective description.⁴⁶ Common timbral descriptors include: reedy, brassy, clear, focused/unfocussed, breathy, rounded, piercing, strident, harsh, warm, mellow, resonant, dark/bright, heavy/light, and flat.

Fales notes that timbre works discretely in making associations both consciously and unconsciously. Obviously, those who are specifically examining timbre in music or speech are aware of what it is and often what it is depicting. Fales, however, argues that all listeners, whether trained or untrained, are equipped with “auditory cognition skills” that allow them to pick up on aspects other than the sound characteristics themselves, such as the nature of the “sound source” and its location.

Nina Eidsheim, in parallel with Judith Butler, explains this phenomenon succinctly when she states:

By considering timbre instead as the sound that results from the *vocal body—the vocal apparatus as it is fashioned through repetition of particular sounds, rather than the inner structure of an essential phenotype*—we may come to the realization that timbre is actively *shaped*, rather than passively projected. In essence, each part of the body that participates in the creation of vocal sounds (vocal tract, torso, tongue, mouth cavities and so on) has been actively fashioned. I term both this active sculpting of the vocal apparatus, and the shaping that takes place on the fly, *the performativity of timbre*—the sonic event is merely a confirmation that an inner choreography has taken place.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Fales, 57.

⁴⁷ Eidsheim, 8.

In the same article, Eidsheim explains the unique problems that a software company encountered while attempting to construct a program designed to replicate a female soul singer's voice. Although the company employed a black woman who was an experienced soul singer to record the phonemes for this project, the constructions made out of these phonemes were distorted because of the singer's Caribbean origin.⁴⁸ Without the soul-singing context, the singer reverted to her native vowel formations. Eidsheim describes the fallacy behind the program designers' idea that anticipated a soul sound from any black singer would be the same as "standardization."⁴⁹ The perceived link between timbre and identity is ever-present even if it is not necessarily accurate. Although I find Eidsheim's example of the female soul singer problematic in the sense that the singer was chosen primarily because of her soul-performing background, not just her race, I do agree with the author's assertion that identity and timbre are deeply linked through social practice and I believe her analytical approach can be effectively applied to the way gender is portrayed through the voice.

Clearly, identifying the qualities of timbre can be difficult. Once revealed, however, the analysis of timbral elements can be incorporated into a more comprehensive understanding of gendered performance. Below, I will attempt to identify timbral markers and gendered vocal gestures in the voice of Celeste Mendoza.

⁴⁸ Ibid 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Celeste Mendoza

Celeste Mendoza was an Afrocuban female artist born in Santiago de Cuba, but who moved to Havana as a young girl to pursue a career in dance.⁵⁰ She is known as the “‘rumba queen’ [or “*Reina del guaguancó*,”] of 1950s Cuba,” but was also a “well-known dancer and actress in and around Havana.”⁵¹ Mendoza began her career dancing in cabarets in primarily black neighborhoods such as Marianao.⁵² Although at this time most clubs were performing the more international variants of rumba, she stayed fairly true to the traditional style.⁵³ According to Delia Poey, “[e]ven as Mendoza’s career shifted from being a dancer to a vocalist and star performer, her start as a professional dancer, specifically one well-versed in grassroots Afrocuban dance traditions, would continue to influence the way she used her body onstage.”⁵⁴

Aside from staying relatively true to working-class Afro-Cuban dance traditions, Mendoza also adopted an intriguing gender persona. Although she dressed in a very feminine way, her voice (discussed below) and her physical movement on stage bordered on the masculine. Below are some images from album covers that feature Mendoza at various stages of her career.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ "Mendoza, Celeste." *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/article/epm/71161>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Poey, Delia. *Cuban women and salsa: to the beat of their own drum*. Palgrave Macmillan. United States, 2014: 26.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 27.

⁵⁵ The dates for these CDs are recent because most of them are either re-releases or tributes to Celeste after her death. The original record dates could not be found, but the photos in the first two album jackets appear to have been taken in the 1950s. The final four date from the post-revolutionary period.



Illustration 1: Celeste Mendoza. *La soberana* (2006).



Illustration 2: Celeste Mendoza. *La Guapachosa* (1994).



Illustration 3: Celeste Mendoza. *Celeste Mendoza Con Sierra Maestra* (1998).



Illustration 4: Celeste Mendoza. *La Reina del Guaguancó* (2000).

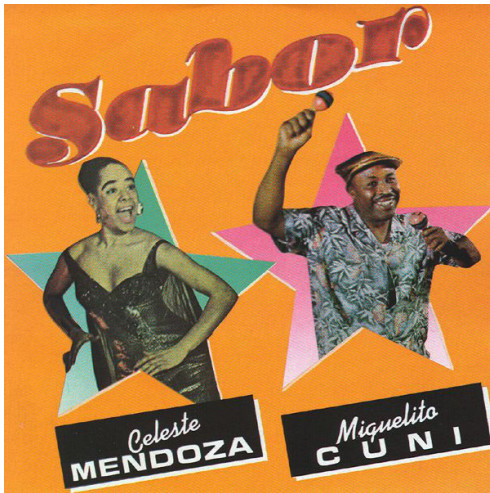


Illustration 5: Celeste Mendoza and Miguelito Cuni. *Sabor* (1992).



Illustration 6: Celeste Mendoza. *Perlas Cubanas: Canción de Mi Habana* (2014).

Because she was a female solo artist, Mendoza often used the audience as her dance partner. According to Posey:

“While guaguancó is traditionally a couple’s dance, Mendoza performed it as a soloist. The sexual conquest choreographically enacted in the traditional form shifts as Mendoza invites her audience to become her figurative dance partner... in doing so she embodies both female and male dancer as she is both the male aggressor and the female drawing and evading the ritualized conquest.”⁵⁶

This description problematizes how strictly feminine Mendoza truly was, despite her attire and her heterosexual marriage. Mendoza’s gender performance recalls Butler and Halberstam’s idea of gender fluidity.

Mendoza’s stage shows slowly lost relevance between the 1960s and 1980s due to shifts in ideology in the post-revolutionary leadership that considered dance music frivolous. Additionally, Mendoza acquired an alcohol problem and was imprisoned for

⁵⁶ Ibid 28-29.

stabbing her husband.⁵⁷ This violent act also supports the idea that Mendoza was not as strictly feminine as her appearance portrayed, and further complicates her performance of gender in everyday life.

⁵⁷ Ibid 31.

“La última rumba” (The Final Rumba) from Nosotros la musica⁵⁸

VISUAL

The example I have chosen to examine is a clip from *Nosotros la musica* that was filmed in 1964 and directed by Rogelio París. The performance of “La última rumba” takes place in a *solar*, a large tenement building in a marginalized neighborhood,” in order to evoke the traditional environment in which rumba was performed. Below is a brief visual description by Posey:

The camera pans the buildings that face an open patio, lingering on the inhabitants as they go about their quotidian activities as the music starts, consisting entirely of percussion instrumentation. The rumbero Carlos Embale begins singing, joined by a coro [chorus]. The balconies fill with spectators drawn out by the music and the camera falls on Celeste Mendoza. She begins with the Diana of “*La última rumba*” (The last rumba). Her stance and gestures, more closely aligned with the male role in *guaguancó*, are boastful and defiant—raised, open arms and upper body leaning back, challenging and inviting the audience. She is dressed in a contemporary style—tight pencil skirt and full blouse—as opposed to the stereotypical *rumbera* costume or the glittery clothes of a diva performing on a nightclub stage. She moves about using steps and movements from traditional rumba, alternatively isolating parts of her body and taking quick, marked turns as is typical of the female role of *guaguancó* as the dancer evades the male’s movements. She draws out a male partner from the crowd and together they perform the traditional *guaguancó* choreography.⁵⁹

AURAL

Carlos Embale begins the clip with a higher, nasal, male voice. I suggest his voice is a “high” because it is in the same range as Mendoza’s when she enters the song. In the Western musical tradition, I would consider Embale a tenor because he tends to stay in

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFI8NEJXDtc> ; the clip takes place about 48 minutes into the original film.

⁵⁹ Ibid 29.

the octave between middle C and C5.⁶⁰ Next the chorus comes in singing “la la la la la” in a mostly pointed sound with a few rounder voices sticking out. The chorus sings in major triadic harmony and acts supportive accompaniment for Embale.

After a few call-response patterns, Mendoza appears in the frame and begins to sing and dance. Since her range is similar to that of Embale’s and stays primarily between middle C and C5, I would consider Mendoza an alto in the Western tradition. The first thing she sings are vocables (“A na na nia na na”) with a heavy nasal emphasis carrying from the “n” sound. However, once Mendoza begins singing the verses, her sound becomes round and full. Through this rich timbre, one can observe the resonance occurring in the mask of her face. The vocal chords sound relaxed and open in comparison to those of Embale. She even adds a small amount of vibrato at the end of phrases in a Westernized fashion. However, she has a slight rasp in her voice, which I believe can be attributed to age rather than her intended vocal style. At this point Mendoza would have been about 35, and with drinking and (probably) smoking habits, this would not be uncommon.

ANALYSIS

Much as I argued in my discussion of Anacaona, Celeste Mendoza defines a new kind of femininity in Cuba in the mid-twentieth century. Mendoza dresses in a feminine way and dances flirtatiously, which categorizes her as female. However, Mendoza

⁶⁰ Although applying Western European terms to an artist and tradition that does not fit within the Western tradition is problematic, it is helpful to me to have a relational starting point to classify these voices.

portrays masculinity both vocally and in dance performance. Vocally, Mendoza produces a rich, all encompassing, resonant sound that overpowers Embale and causes his voice to sound more feminine than hers. Her performance commands the listener's attention. The music seemingly stops upon her entry and the camera focuses on her rather than the crowd or Embale.

Mendoza's new version of femininity is evident in Posey's description: "...in shifting her movements to include both the female and male roles in the choreography of guaguancó, she demonstrated the fluidity of gender performance even in this highly gendered dance."⁶¹ However, even when Mendoza dances with a man from the crowd briefly (instead of dancing by herself), it appears that she is commanding the space and seemingly leading him rather than following conventional gender roles. Therefore, Mendoza asserts herself as the center of attention, not just in a sexual way as women have often been portrayed in past, but as a leader. This was truly groundbreaking in Cuba, especially since this video was broadcast on television. It seems that Mendoza grew from some of her pictures shown above in revealing and form-fitting ball gowns to a kingpin dressed in a pencil skirt and blouse: a leader who commands the room and leads the music and dance.

⁶¹ Ibid 29.

Conclusion

This brief consideration of Mendoza's performance raises at least as many questions as it answers. How did music venues and established media help promote (or hinder) the careers of women performers? How did Cuban women participate in music as instrumentalists as opposed to vocalists? How did women negotiate gender roles through performance outside of Havana in smaller, more traditional cities? How might gender have been embodied and performed in subsequent decades? Are there any studies outside of European classical music that study the physicality of the voice in depth (with pictures of vocal folds, etc.) to which this case study can be compared?

I suggest above that women have played with their public gender roles in order to gain access to certain areas of Cuban society. Sometimes that has meant accentuating feminine characteristics; at other times, masculinity must be portrayed in order to assert power and control. Although this idea of gender play is nothing new in research, and the study of gender play through the voice has been undertaken before, the application of gender play through the voice is new to the study of female Cuban performers. One can see that Cuban women have to act within a complex structure of the unstated rules associated with a socialist society as well as within a culture of machismo, but through this structure they have pushed boundaries over time to produce change for themselves.

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Vita

Katherine Chapman received a Bachelor's of Music in vocal performance at the University of Texas, and is completing her Master's of Music in Ethnomusicology. During her time at UT, Katherine has participated in music groups such as the University of Texas Concert Chorale, the Longhorn Singers, the Franco American Vocal Academy, the Early Music Ensemble, the Butler School of Music Opera Ensemble, the African American Vocal Ensemble, and the Hispanic Caribbean Ensemble. She has also completed two certifications: one in Business Foundations from the McCombs School of Business and the other in Arts and Cultural Management and Entrepreneurship from the LBJ School of Public Affairs. Katherine's other research interests include higher education reform in music schools, gender studies, opera, and popular music.

Permanent email address: katie@katiesnow.com

This report was typed by Katherine Snow Chapman.