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Jennifer Lambe
Yale University

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Listening to Detail: Performances of Cuban Music

BY ALEXANDRA VAZQUEZ. DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013. 352 PP.
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How might we conceive of Cuban music and, by extension, Cuba, in ways that move us beyond the truisms that litter scholarly and popular representations? In *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (2013), Alexandra Vazquez¹ proposes that we do so by abandoning the idea of totality, focusing instead on the “details” around which she structures her critical practice. Her book moves us through a variety of “sonic” spaces to make a case for an “interaction” with Cuban music, premised on the “aesthetic” rather than the “ethnographic” feeling rather than ideology. (27) In dialogue with a venerable tradition of music criticism in and about Cuba, Vazquez reorients us to its suggestive details, some iconic and others unremarked, in order to stage a lively conversation with the music and the country it has sometimes been marshaled to represent. Though this work sometimes moves her down historical paths, she consistently eschews the paradigm of genealogy for the more energetic project of “listening.”

Fittingly, Vazquez’s analysis is less an extended argument than a series of improvisations. Noting that musical details are by nature fleeting and even “disorienting,” she resists the urge to fix them into a more “cohesive” analysis or storyline. Nevertheless, a few overarching motifs stand out. For one, Vazquez is writing against the tendency to freeze Cuba and its music into a tropical commodity, shipped off to listeners and consumers in colder climes. Throughout, she is particularly concerned with the relationship between Cuba and the United States in the area of culture, challenging scholars and critics of jazz, especially, who continue to exclude Cuba from foundational stories. She is also attuned to the “affinities” between Cuban and Afro-diasporic cultural traditions, and the kinds of transnational encounters that have transpired in the space of music. One might be tempted to group many of her broader concerns under the umbrella of cultural cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, Vazquez opts for more indirect signifiers—“vitalizing potentialities” (55) and “sonic confrontation” (76)—in tracing the Cuban musical “undercommons” (following Fred Moten and Stefano Harney).² To craft her readings, she draws not only on

other contemporary scholars of culture and performance studies, but also a wide variety of interlocutors, canonical and non-canonical, including Bola de Nieve, James Weldon Johnson, and a Cuban-American high school student in the 1990s.

Chapter 1, for example, considers the project of anthology more broadly from the vantage point of Cuban jazz pianist Alfredo Rodríguez’s 1996 album, *Cuba Linda*. The bulk of the chapter, however, dwells in other areas: the history of anthology as a “racial compendia,” “Jazz Studies” and the restrictive nature of “disciplines,” musical performance as anthology, and finally the revue and the album. Vazquez mobilizes the symbol of the anthology to understand what it is about *Cuba Linda* that seems to frustrate the “touristic enterprise” and inspire her to write not only “about it” but also “alongside it.” (76) It is the album’s excess of inspiration, “[moving] through too many musical traditions to mention—marking too many spaces to count,” that, for her, resists the narrowing impulse that would shut off that dynamism in the interest of categorization (by genre and nationality). (76)

Chapter 2 passes through similar analytical territory as it reconstructs the story of Graciela Pérez, a member of Orquesta Anacaona, Cuba’s most storied all-female group, and half-sister to Frank “Machito” Grillo, in whose shadow she has long been forced to reside. The author’s account of a 1998 interview with the Oral History Program of the National Museum of American History makes too much, I think, of Graciela’s various “performances” over the space of the recording. Nevertheless, Vazquez’s closing analysis of Graciela’s “shameless shamelessness” as an undercommons stance (specifically in the transition from a timid performance of “Mi cerebro” in 1945 to her bravado, orgasmic turn in the 1956 recording of “Sí Sí, No No”), and the author’s own fleeting encounters with the artist, take the chapter in more absorbing directions.

Chapter 3 focuses on the famous “grunt” of mambo bandleader Dámaso Pérez Prado. The author, following Gustavo Pérez Firmat, uses the “insistent nonclarity” (133) of the grunt to delineate Pérez Prado’s “in-betweenness”: somehow too highbrow for Cubans, who greeted him

with the dismissive “here comes Beethoven” (137, quoting Pérez Firmat, 196), and too kitschy for U.S. and Latin jazz audiences, who have neglected his influence beyond mambo or ignored him altogether.³ In contrast, Vazquez highlights the improvisational, hybrid, and transnational circuits of mambo and its resonances in multiple cultural sites, including Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and Achy Obejas’ *Memory Mambo* (1996). In many ways, however, this chapter proves the least satisfying of the book; more than in any other place, Pérez Prado’s actual music is rendered almost peripheral to the broader analysis, meriting only a brief account at the end of the chapter which does little to clarify the *musical* setting or function of the grunt.

Chapter 4 shifts the emphasis slightly to Cuban shores, specifically the post-revolutionary musical documentaries *Nosotros, la música* (1966) by Rogelio París, and *Y ... tenemos sabor* (1967) by Sara Gómez. Here, Vazquez’s excavation of details resonates most sharply, particularly in her account of composer Odilio Urfé’s riffing on Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* in the opening scenes of *Nosotros, la música*. Similarly, her analysis of Sara Gómez as an arranger positions the director as a sort of exemplary listener. For Vazquez, Gómez’s decision to close her film by juxtaposing traditional Cuban music with jazz pianist Chucho Valdés moves conversations about *lo cubano* beyond facile divisions between nationalist and imperialist.

It is Vazquez’s final chapter, however, that does this analytical work most effectively. In sketching the “oedipal origins” of the book and her own dissatisfaction with standard portraits of the Cuban-American experience, Vazquez puts children of Cuban, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants in the same analytical frame to make “small moves” toward a sort of transnational empathy. Even more poignant is the author’s account of her first viewing of the recorded 1999 Miami concert of beloved Cuban dance band, Los Van Van. The concert, for her and many others, provides the space for sociability and belonging beyond politics, much as X Alfonso’s 2009 performance at the *Paz Sin Fronteras* concert in Havana “invited [viewers] to take up the invitation, not to cross from a here to a there, but to get down and get down together.” (234)

If this social, collective dimension of Cuban music feels strangely absent elsewhere in the text, its welcome appearance here does much to define, or perhaps un-define, what constitutes Cuban music after all. Improvisation and

hybridity, of course, are born not only of an omnivorous relationship with musical antecedents and inspirations, but also of the living, breathing call and response between performers and the public. This dynamic, affectingly represented by the Victrola and its shifting fates in revolutionary Cuba, shines through most clearly in Vazquez’s final chapter. Equally admirable is her attempt to frame it, here and elsewhere, in such a personal way. Throughout, Vazquez reminds us that listening to music, Cuban and otherwise, should be an open, interactive experience, as well as an engaged critical enterprise. *Listening to Detail* will be of interest to scholars of performance and cultural studies in the Americas, Cuban Studies, and, more broadly, Cuban music enthusiasts.

Jennifer Lambe

Yale University

ENDNOTES

- 1 The author, Alexandra Vazquez, does not use an accented “a” in her surname.
- 2 Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney. “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses.” *Social Text* 79, Vol. 22, (Summer 2004): 101-115.
- 3 Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1994).