

Que te Vaya Bonito: Breath and *Sentimiento* according to Chavela Vargas

In order to listen to Chavela Vargas' voice, I heed suspicious advice, take pen and paper, and scandalously notate what I cannot presume to calibrate: word for word, I notice Vargas' breath, held and released painfully, coming and going, a display that does not hide the fatigue of singing's work, a display of heartbreak produced by a vocal artisan. It becomes clear that the song is about what the voice cannot presume to hide but is often hidden: its labor. This is an invitation to consider how Vargas labors to produce *sentimiento*, not from interiority, but from the cavities of her vocal apparatus.

Her public positioning as a lesbian marks her performances, and has made her an icon for the community across the world. How does a lesbian woman produce with her vocal chords and technique a sound with nationalistic affinity? The song I address to answer this question is "*Que te Vaya Bonito*" [Have a good journey], a classic about love's abandonment authored by the late preeminent singer/songwriter José Alfredo Jiménez from a male heterosexual position, a position that Vargas artfully "drags" to borrow Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano's concept in her analysis of Vargas' cultural production.

If the words of this song bid farewell to the beloved, wishing her a "beautiful" outcome in life, Vargas performs an insistence for her/him to *stay*, an insistence to hear her emotional struggle. The struggle of the voice to force such well-meaning words out is evident. This gives insight into not only the body of the singer, but also the body of the listener, for performing with *sentimiento* is the satisfying contagion of a familiar heartbreak, not only aurally, but corporeally as well.

A single guitar accompanies Vargas. This minimalism is significantly distinct from the mariachi accompaniment. Nevertheless, the guitar executes a steady melody

foregrounding a vocal disobedience that displaces the authority of consistency. The voice wanders powerfully into a distinct musical path departing from the discipline the playing fingers enact.

First is her soft spoken “*Ojala que te vaya bonito* [I hope it goes well for you]”. Immediately after, the pause is brief, but marks the beginning of the end: with *bonito*, her voice on the precipice of discharging suffering and spite. *Bonito* is emitted with regret by who seems to be one of the many emotional stagings by Vargas, which I hear as her *sentida*, upset and melancholy, voice. The *sentida*, can return to the whisper or morph into utter *desgarro*. Imagining her voice marking concentric circles in the space around her, like an aural halos, I hear these two personas of *sentida* and *desgarrada* throughout the song.

Sentida, from the verb “to feel”, literally means felt (gendered depending on the ending *a* or *o*). As a designation of an emotional state, it describes a hurt individual, a person let down by a loved one. This state of pain is a heartbreak characterized by unexpressed bitterness, by implied resentment. Vargas exudes the *sentida* both figuratively and literally: *sentida* as hurt, performing feeling in such a way as to convince us of her quiet offense, as well as *sentida* as felt. Hers is a *voz sentida*, a felt voice. Feeling and pain merge not only linguistically, but sonically in the transmission of *sentimiento*. To produce *sentimiento*'s sounds, Vargas flexes the diaphragm and does not let go, never crying but living in the painful verge of controlling contempt. *Sentida*, she displays the body's dilemma between the hysteria of sobbing and the intelligibility of words, between resignation and retribution.

The *voz desgarrada* is the voice that is literally ripped away from the body, from an apparent *root*. The hoarse voice does not conceal its (physical) damage and (affective) turmoil. It reveals the mechanics of the singing apparatus and the ultimate efforts at being heard by a lover. Vocal *desgarro* is what Yarbro-Bejarano again alludes to as “these unexpected surges create an effect of excess that disrupts the conventional level of the lyrics, opening the music to other readings, and other pleasures” (41).

Both the *voz sentida* and the *voz desgarrada* activate the apparatus of crying in Vargas’ body. The unstable utterance of bo-hhh-ni-hhh-tttt-oohhhh, each “h” a short, quick breath as she resists crying and struggles to remain textually intelligible, although this disrupted voice, as musician Laurie Stras might call it, “conveys meaning before it conveys language” (173). To achieve the effect of inhibited crying that at times she allows to break through, Vargas must alternate between closing her vocal folds and letting out air, implying constant regulation of the diaphragm.

Words are not enounced without a troubled passage through Vargas’ throat. Hers is not a fluid interpretation, but one constantly interrupted by her pauses, her taking in of air to let it out unevenly in pitch and in tone, the sonic iconoclasm Yarbro-Bejarano refers to. This breath remains a presence throughout the song; Vargas noisily takes in what she needs to continue to emphasize *desgarro*, produced while loudly resisting the vocal apparatus: *Ojala!*

Vargas’ words seem to choke and entangle into what is a common expression in Spanish : *un nudo en la garganta*, the knot in the throat, when one cannot speak because words will not come out, but the desperate, or quiet, breath of tears. This kind of tension is key if performing with *sentimiento*, as Nájera-Ramírez notes, “Singers who merely sob

through an entire song lose the emotional tension that a skilled ranchera performer manages and prompts such criticism as “*Es muy llorona*. She’s just a whiner” (188). A whiner Vargas is not. *Sentida* and *desgarrada*, Vargas invents her own brand of *sentimiento*, a timbre and a method undoubtedly recognizable. Listening to Vargas’ voice, I am challenged to reveal, and undo, her *nudo en la garganta*, the knot in her throat, to depart critically in order to listen carefully. This undoing of the throat reveals some of the role of her voice in validating a community otherwise alienated by the heterosexual codes in popular music, like those Yarbro-Bejarano makes note in her essay, a lesbian public of *sentimiento* becomes a taunting possibility, of *sentidas*, women feeling for and each other.

Vargas’s voice emerges from a point that expands and returns to what sounds like a spoken confession: close to our ear, the microphone fulfills the desire of proximity, including the crisp sound upon the opening and closing of the mouth. As Carlos Monsiváis, cultural critic often engaging with the sounds of Latin/a/o American popular culture, stated in Chavela Vargas’ farewell concert in 2006, “Chavela added a radical solitude to the *ranchera* repertoire, where the music and lyrics reach the level of early morning confessions”¹. These are confessions possible after a few drinks, which the lyrics she chose to sing, already massively popular, often invoke.

Sentida and *desgarrada*, Vargas indeed creates a space of confession that does not seek redemption in the religious sense. This is her part of her “critique” if I may: if *sentimiento* reigns within a patriarchal fantasy of love and patriotism, Vargas secularizes it while appropriating its confessional space. When we listen to Vargas, her voice is performing the intimate whisper, the voice close to the ear of another, disclosing desire.

1 www.diariocordoba.com/noticias/noticia.asp?pkid=274389, accessed 11/015/08

The microphone allows us to listen in closely, as if we were right there, next to her, allowing a technology of intimacy to emerge out of her interaction with the amplifying device. Vargas' confession becomes the sin itself, the voice that escapes the words themselves, the voice that allows its work to be heard. Her body, hidden beneath heavy ponchos, seems to reside in the carnality of her sound.

Conclusion

Listening to the voice and breath of Vargas reveals the power structures that exist as and within *sentimiento*, the affirmation of a public that notes in the vocal production of the other their own disgrace or good fortune. Understanding its historical trajectory as a highly contested ground for representation, not as a single representative of a national "Mexican" feeling. This is not to say Vargas rescues a voice of the past; instead, she forces one to listen and indulge in her pain, which resonates through her body messily, a cry to awaken the timbre corporeal, musicologist Nina Eidsheim's concept of the voice we hear, to that *sentimiento*, that is only possible to perceive through the voice's body, and cannot be attributed to merely "passionate" or "pastoral" lyrics.

Sentimiento is everyone's, a public domain of feeling in its socio-cultural sphere. Moreover, it is also no one's; no one can claim to capture it as it should be done. It can be felt in one singer, but not reduced to him or her. Vargas' voice produces *sentimiento* through the absence of voice, the presence of breath, the recreation of a confessional space to indulge in lesbian desire, by putting the carnality of emotion and of the voice to the fore.

If *sentimiento* is punctuated with cries of “God’s truth!” to validate the feeling of the singer, of their heartbroken vocal personas, then we can hear the voice of Vargas, breath and truth contributing to her rendition of artificial, but felt, *sentimiento*. It may be God’s truth, but in its corporeal transmission and distribution, it is Chavela Vargas’s truth. Her labor of fervency conveys the truth of a community of *sentidas*, and *sentidos* as well. *Sentidas*, in the sense of women erotically feeling each other, transforms itself from the suffering of the heterosexual imaginary (*sentida/o*) to the pleasure of being felt and feeling. The codes that are presumed inherent and natural in *sentimiento* remain seductive yet sequestered by Vargas and her transgression disguised as *desgarrada* and *sentida*.

Works Cited

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. "Voice as a Technology of Selfhood: Towards an Analysis of Racialized Timbre and Vocal Performance." Dissertation. University of California, San Diego 2008.

Print.

Najera-Ramirez, Olga. "Unruly Passions: Poetics, Performance and Gender in the Ranchera Song." *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Arredondo, Gabriela F., Aida Hurtado, Norma Khlan, Olga Najera-Ramirez and Patricia Zavella. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. 184-210. Print.

Stras, Laurie. "'The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect'." *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*. Ed. Straus, Joseph and Neil Lerner. New York: Routledge, 2006. 173-84. Print.

Vargas, Chavela. *Chavela Vargas- Sus 40 Grandes Canciones*. Rama Lama Music, 2002.

Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne. "Crossing the Border with Chabela Vargas: A Chicana Femme's Tribute." *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*. Ed. Balderston, Daniel and Donna Guy. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 33-43. Print.