

Aurally Other: Rita Moreno and the Articulation of “Latina-ness”

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Abstract

Dear Listeners, This year, my first book—*Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (Rutgers UP: 2011)—was born. The writing process required nearly a decade of thought and development, a gestation period that reminded me how to listen as well as see.

Keywords

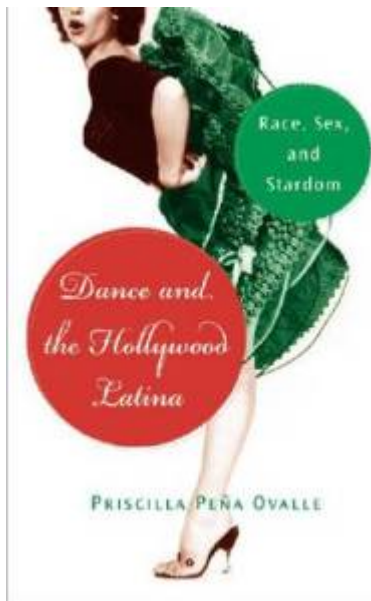
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Dear Listeners,

This year, my first book—*Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (Rutgers UP: 2011)—was born. The writing process required nearly a decade of thought and development, a gestation period that reminded me how to listen as well as see.

As a sound recordist in film school, I became acutely aware of the hierarchization of the visual over the aural: it was a challenge to claim space for sound when the director wanted to yell “Action” as soon as camera was ready. Me (covered in grime, Nagra deck over one shoulder and boom pole in hand): “What’s the frame line? Is my mic—or the shadow of my boom pole—in the shot? And, maybe I can get a level-check before we shoot—so the audio levels are as pretty as your exposure? Maybe?”

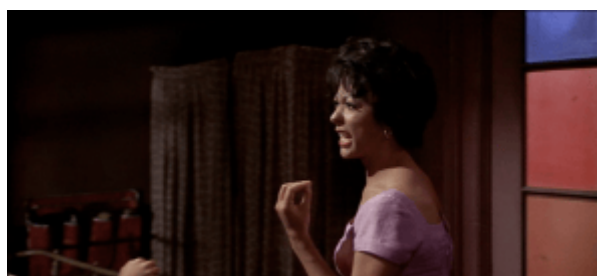
Yet, most of those instincts and that tenacity dissipated during graduate school. As I honed the language of film and television analysis, I, too, began to privilege the visual over the aural. Over time—and with the help of colleagues like [Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman](#)—*Dance and the Hollywood Latina* reminded me how to listen.

And so, I present a moment from the book that reinforced the scholarly importance of watching with my ears. In the following excerpt, I analyze Rita Moreno’s aural Otherness in *West Side Story*. The scene, like many others of Moreno’s career, illustrates the tension between the “look” and the “sound” of the Hollywood Latina. While my book is primarily organized around the ways that racialized sexuality is encoded in the dance of the Latina body in Hollywood film, the chapter “Rita Moreno, the Critically Acclaimed ‘All-Round Ethnic’” helps clarify how the Hollywood Latina has been read as both “easy on the eyes, but hard on the ears,” a phrase used to describe Moreno during her appearance on *The Muppet Show* in 1976.

The excerpt explores a pivotal scene in the film, where Anita (Moreno) confronts Maria (Natalie Wood), whom she discovers has just slept with Tony—the murderer of Bernardo (George Chakiris), Anita’s boyfriend and Maria’s brother:

<https://youtu.be/4oxfOncYiag>

[T]he nondance musical number “A Boy Like That” illuminates how the Hollywood Latina has also been aurally imagined and reproduced. [The song] expresses Anita’s anger and sense of betrayal, and eventually builds into a powerful duet (“I Have a Love”) between the women. As a backdrop, the setting and bodies of the scene are visually coded as Latino/a: the apartment matches the purples, blues, and reds associated with the Sharks in the film, while the two Latinas in the frame—one real and one diegetic—are colored Puerto Rican through the use of brown makeup. These stylized signifiers set the tone for Moreno’s aural representation in the scene. As the only Puerto Rican in the film cast, Rita Moreno gave a performance that became a touchstone of aural authenticity for non-Puerto Rican actors such as George Chakiris (Bernardo). In one interview, Chakiris notes that he and the Shark actors used Moreno as their sonic “guide” (Gross 2001). [Interestingly, the *West Side Story* shooting script available in the Bob Wise Collection at the University of Southern California Cinematic Arts Library includes written dialect for the Jets but not the Sharks, suggesting that the sonic expectations of the Latino/a characters were self-evident].



Both Natalie Wood and Rita Moreno lip-synch to prerecorded tracks, but unlike Wood, Moreno performs her other songs herself; “A Boy Like That” is Moreno’s only song that does not feature her real singing voice. While the dubbed vocal performance compensates for Moreno’s higher vocal range, it undercuts the ferocity of her physical performance. As Moreno’s facial expressions and posturing exhibit an angry and forceful delivery, singer Betty Wand’s vocal interpretation of the lyrics overly amplifies the supposed sound of a Latina body in lieu of the emotional urgency of the song. Moreno’s assertive body language is thus mismatched with the generic quality of Wand’s artificial accent, a kind of aural brown-face that flattens the scene’s intensity.

In a 2001 interview, Moreno expressed her disapproval of the vocals in “A Boy Like That,” claiming that Wand’s lack of acting skills resulted in a restricted interpretation that did not match the physical intensity of the scene. She explains: “[Wand] just couldn’t get it the way I wanted it...to sound. It should have almost been a growl...you know, barely sung. And she ended up sounding...almost like a cliché Mexican” (Gross 2001). Despite Moreno’s coaching, Wand could only articulate the song’s Latina-ness, a sonic interpretation that solely relied on a stereotypical accent to tell its story. This racialized vocal performance is incompatible with the emotional depth Moreno produces onscreen because it was only—always, and already—aurally Other. [This shift is most noticeable at the moment in “A Boy Like That” when Rita Moreno’s dialogue as Anita suddenly shifts to the lyrics of the song].

Rita Moreno’s career enabled me to hear the Hollywood Latina, an experience that enhanced my analysis of Dolores Del Rio, Carmen Miranda, Rita Hayworth (Rita Cansino), and Jennifer Lopez—the other women I study in *Dance and the Hollywood Latina*. I am thankful for Moreno’s (creative/political/critical) voice and hope that she continues to help me listen anew.

And thank you, dear listeners, for your time and attention. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
priscilla.

PS: [Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom](#)

