

SO! Reads: Deborah R. Vargas's Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda

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Abstract

Deborah R. Vargas's *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* (2012) presents an alternate story of Chicana music through a collection of case studies in Chicana/o music history centering on Chicana/Tejana musicians active between the early decades of the 20th century to the present.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Book Review, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Cultural Studies, Gender

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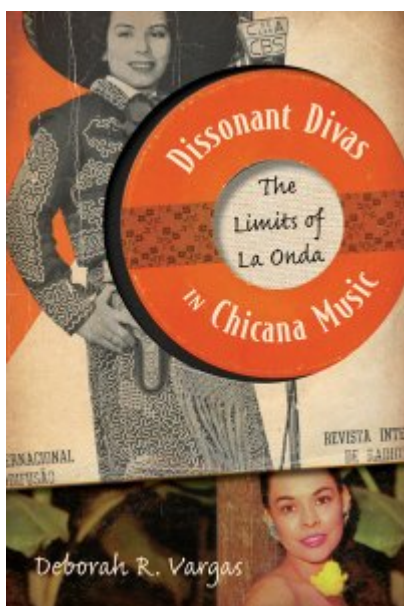
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Deborah R. Vargas's *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* (2012) presents an alternate story of Chicana music through a collection of case studies in Chicana/o music history centering on Chicana/Tejana musicians active between the early decades of the 20th century to the present. Vargas assembles a mix of archival documents, interviews, images, songs, recordings, performances, ephemera, fragments, memories and engages intersectional feminist theory and queer of color critique to trace the music scenes her subjects inhabit.

A feminist oral historian, Chicano/Latino cultural studies scholar, and Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at UC Riverside, Vargas's research overlaps these disciplines and facilitates a conversation between popular music and sound studies that significantly considers gender, sexuality, and racialization in the construction of borderlands imaginaries. With *Dissonant Divas* Vargas makes an intervention both theoretical and methodological that greatly expands the Chicana/o musical archive and as well as the audiences for sound studies research. Furthermore, Vargas's reflective writing voice locates her own Tejana/Chicana story in relation to her project and offers helpful insights into her research process at key moments. [The brief essay titled "Selena, Jenni Rivera, Eva Garza—meditations on an author's soundtrack" published on the Minnesota Press webpages for *Dissonant Divas* is a generous methodology piece that should be read along with this comprehensive, satisfying, highly readable and often riveting text.]



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Vargas defines the term, *la onda*, in a general sense as “an umbrella term for Mexican American/ Chicano/Tejano music (x).” More critically, *la onda* also “operates to represent musics that have been prominent in academic and cultural sites that have produced dominant discourses of sexuality, gender, class, race, geography, and language in the constructions of Chicano music.” “Dissonance” can be understood variously as “chaos, cacophany, disharmony, static” and “out-of-tuneness” that draws attention to “the power of music with regard to Chicana gender and sexuality (xiv).” Vargas’s main critique notes how the “limits of *la onda*” reveals the heteronormative and patriarchal underpinnings that construct dominant narratives of Chicano music historiography. She argues that the force of these narratives have naturalized a way of thinking about Chicano music in terms of the various “fathers” of Chicano rock, *conjunto* music, and of the field of borderland studies itself. The distortions produced by the assimilating cultural nationalist logic of “*la onda*” have not only suppressed Chicana music histories and/or enabled their mishearing, but they also hide the complex ways that race, class, gender, and sexuality converge to produce Chicana subjectivities within and against the Chicano musical canon. In theorizing “dissonance,” Vargas thus productively *sounds* the Chicana histories in *Dissonant Divas* as alternatively gendered and/or queered against the heteromasculine concord of *la onda*.

<https://youtu.be/6cM2nU46guE>

The chapter “**Borders, Bullets, Besos: The Ballad of Chelo Silva**” contains perhaps the most provocative pages, detailing Chelo Silva, a *bolero* singer with a distinct repertoire of songs that are still performed and kept alive by a diverse lineage of performers and audiences, yet whose renown is seemingly inseparable with her former marriage to Américo Paredes. Ubiquitous in borderlands studies, Paredes’s name and legacy are defined largely by his study of the *corrido*, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1970). Vargas strategically positions Silva and Paredes as “embodied representations” of the *bolero* and the *border ballad*, respectively, taking up Sonia Salíðvar-Hull’s proposal to “imagine new corridos” by proposing Silva’s *boleros* as “feminist border ballads.” Vargas parses the constructions, aesthetics, and values carried in each song form, exploring how the border ballad has been the primary counter-site for narrating the injustice of Tejano/Anglo conflict (bullets) while the *bolero*, whose constant subject is love, luxuriates in all its *jouissance* (besos). Vargas reveals that the border ballad “has allowed its authors, singers, and scholars to sound the borderlands imaginary into being,” illuminating how the contest over historical representation is tied to musical representation. Silva’s story cannot be found within this articulation of *la onda* without, in part, redefining the border ballad (54).

Vargas innovates and meticulously crafts an alternative archive better suited to narrating and hearing Silva’s fragmented story, what Vargas felicitously calls her *archisme* of knowledge. Engaging the silences in Silva’s story, the *archisme* sounds her presence in the recorded memories of her fans which include testaments to her unique vocal qualities, her powerful and evocative performances, her improvisations in music and in life, along with a healthy amount of the *chisme* or gossip surrounding Silva. Proposing the *archisme* as a “feminist project for historicizing

nonnormative Chicana/o genders and desires” Vargas extends both Sonia Saldivar-Hull’s directive for Chicana scholars to look in nontraditional places for theory and Lisa Lowe’s theorization of gossip as a destructuring site of knowledge production (Saldivar-Hull, 1998; Lowe, 1996).

As I read through the first three chapters, a question that kept coming up concerned why we should not consider this study on more specific regional terms, or why this book isn’t titled, “Tejana Divas”? Vargas finds the overdetermination of these Chicana/Tejana musicians as “regional” subjects a problem not typically encountered by musicians from a city like Los Angeles, for example, because of its construction as a global metropolis. I cannot dispute Los Angeles’s status as a world center and I wondered how to earnestly engage Vargas on this point. What are the stakes of locating this study of Tejana/Chicana musicians within a broader Chicano/a musical context?

<https://youtu.be/GAnkCel510M>

The final two chapters make the case for remapping Chicana music, advanced in part by the capacious notion of queer “diva-scapes.” In “**Sonido de las Americas: Crossing South-South Borders with Eva Garza,**” Vargas employs what she calls a “*transfrontera* musical compass,” a feminist methodology deftly juxtaposing the notion of a “musical scale” with the concept of “geographic scale.” Eva Garza’s career begins in her San Antonio hometown but she eventually came to embody the “la voz de las Américas” in a hemispheric sense via her participation in early Spanish language radio, recordings, and live performances in nightclubs and films that took her to Mexico City and Havana for significant periods; her genre-crossing repertoire mirrored her travels. Garza began as a singer of the appropriately feminine *bolero*, but through her contact with Cuban musicians, the Afro-Caribbean *guaracha* song—decidedly phallocentric and risqué in its subject matter—also became part of her repertoire. The song she was most known for, “*Sabor de Engaño*” adds a sensual register to her *transfrontera* compass, a lingering *sabor* or taste exceeding regional, national, formal, and gendered limits. This is most evident in the repeated examples of impromptu performances of a song verse or refrain of “*Sabor de Engaño*” by many Cubanos Vargas encountered in her research travels. Vargas employs the *transfrontera* musical compass as a “listening instrument” to trace Garza’s musical trajectory through spatial-temporal moments disrupting rigid and normative notions of community, nation, and Chicano music (147).



*"Selena Live" by Flickr user
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In **"Giving Us That Brown Soul: Selena's Departures and Arrivals,"** Vargas addresses the multiple problems in the mainstream media's designation of "crossover star" to narrate Selena's story as a spectacular rise in fame marked by her violent death in 1995. Vargas seeks to correct the assimilationist narratives of Selena's musical history that, in addition to figuring her as a marginalized Latina on the verge of "legitimate" status, problematically narrates a south-north trajectory "devoid of blackness and queerness." Vargas both critiques how "brown soul" has been musically deployed to stand in for cultural nationalist "brown power" and extends previous work focusing on blackness in Chicano/Latino music that includes R&B and Afro-Caribbean influences but not necessarily the Afro-diasporic. *Cumbia*, an Afro-Columbian dance form popularized in Mexico in the 1940's – 50's is central to Selena's *Tejano* sound as are 70's era disco and 80's freestyle, particularly in the cultivation of her iconic diva look which together resonate a queer of color musical legacy on the sonic and visual planes.

<https://youtu.be/nZ7ULHI8rHs>

Selena's "brown soul" and style moves Tex-Mex *cumbias* in what Vargas calls "queer misdirections" by traveling north-south, for example, while sounding counterhegemonic femininities that continue to reverberate in the many tribute drag performances to Selena in and beyond the borderlands of Tejas. In these ways, Vargas traces the "topography of Selena's transformations and remappings of Chicano music (205). Just as audio technologies have been key in circulating Eva Garza's and Selena's music in multiple directions, so are the memories, repeated performances, and queer embodiments of their music by their diverse audiences. For both of these artists, sound expands Vargas's engagement with spatialization theories so that we may hear these productive dissonances and in these ways begin to imagine alternative borderlands imaginaries.

Upon finishing, a question that remains in considering “diva dissonance” is the implied consonance of Vargas’s theorization of “la onda.” At times, the term becomes too totalizing, and I would argue for the presence of heterogeneity and other musical diversities even within what Vargas denotes as *la onda*. We must both make and leave room to imagine the possibility of many unrecorded, captured, or yet unsounded transgressions for Chicanas whose paths may appear to follow a heteronormative logic. For this reason I found the reiteration of such rich findings against *la onda* asomewhat repetitive distraction from the richer tales Vargas’s archival work tells. What would these histories sound like if they weren’t always positioned against *la onda*—if they were sounded instead more toward each other?

What Deborah R. Vargas richly accomplishes in *Dissonant Divas* responds to Alejandro Madrid’s call for musicologists to establish critical conversations beyond “the conservatory” and to engage larger intellectual dialogues (AMS Vol. 64, No. 3, 2011). Vargas’s intersectional feminist-of-color argument extends the body of feminist Chicana/o cultural studies scholarship and equally extends Chicano music histories that may engage gender to some degree but do not fully interrogate those categorical constructions. Her theorization of the title’s key term “dissonance” as “both a methodological and analytic device” and her construction of a differential archive combine to create “alternative sonic imaginaries of the borderlands (xii).” More broadly, *Dissonant Divas* is an intervention to the problems of conducting research in marginalized communities and the racialized subjects often left out of official archives, institutional records, and studies of sound (Trouillot, 1995; Taylor, 2003). Each chapter reveals and addresses various barriers to conducting research on Chicana musicians whose uneven historical representation lead Vargas to turn to other sites, methodologies, and embodied practices where Chicana voices resound across temporal and spatial lines. In these ways, Vargas’s sustained engagement of race, class, gender, and sexuality with Chicana/o borderlands music is thoroughly new.

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Wanda Alarcón is a doctoral candidate of Comparative Ethnic Studies with a Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality at the University of California, Berkeley where she is writing a dissertation titled: “Sounding Aztlán: Music, Literature, and the Chicana/o Sonic Imaginary”. Her research interests include Chicana/o cultural studies, U.S. ethnic literatures, popular music, sound studies, queer of color theory, and decolonial feminism. At Berkeley she has facilitated the working groups, “Decolonial Feminisms” and “Popular Music in Chicana/o Cultural Studies” at the Center for Race and Gender (CRG). Wanda is originally from Los Angeles and before starting graduate school she created the poetry zine, JOTA (2002 – 2006) and is updating that project by creating an archive for queer Chicana writing in cyberspace. She is a fan of radio genres and podcasts and writes micro radio plays while on the road. She is suspicious of the MP3 format yet enjoys curating party, tribute, and mood themed playlists on Spotify immensely. You can find her on Twitter depending on writing deadlines @esawanda.



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