

Afecto Caribeño / Caribbean Affect in Desi Arnaz's "Babalú Aye"

santaperversa

Blog post published March 21, 2016 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/pxkm5-x7t95>

Abstract

Recently, the new biopic and telenovela *Celia, La Serie* on the life of Celia Cruz reminded me of how her iconic call "Azucar!" (translated as sugar) engaged audiences to feel the *sabrosura* of her music.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Caribbean Studies, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Cultural Studies, Race

Recommended citation

santaperversa. (2016, March 21). Afecto Caribeño / Caribbean Affect in Desi Arnaz's "Babalú Aye". *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/pxkm5-x7t95>

Copyright

Copyright © santaperversa 2016. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Recently, the new biopic and telenovela [Celia, La Serie](#) on the life of Celia Cruz reminded me of how her iconic call "Azucar!" (translated as sugar) engaged audiences to feel the *sabrosura* of her music. The soap-opera included documentary footage of the larger iconic events in Celia's career that could not be recreated, scenes that captured how Cruz and the audience connected. The scenes that best captured this are when Celia performs with Fania at Yankee Stadium in 1973 and in [Zaire in 1974](#). When she felt the audiences' joy in her performance she'd share that expressive sentiment of the sweetness in the moment, taking audiences to a deeper ecstatic place.

I also felt and witnessed this myself when I saw Cruz perform at the Hollywood Bowl decades ago. It's akin to what I sensed when also hearing Damaso Pérez Prado's guttural "Maaam-bo" in his "Mambo No 5." While watching *Celia, La Serie*, I asked my mom if she had ever watched Desi Arnaz on *I Love Lucy*. Her response included a dislike for Arnaz, while I remembered enjoying his performance of "Babalú Aye." Our exchange raised the question: can Arnaz's performance, like Cruz's expressive phrasing or Pérez Prado's musical cue, unify a Latinx and African diaspora through sound and affect?



I posit that Arnaz's televised performances of "Babalú Aye" like Celia's "Azucar" or Prado's "Mambo" exemplify what Alejandra T. Vazquez calls in [Listening in Detail](#) "vocal armament and ornament" (132), a sound that cultivates an *afecto caribeño* among Spanish-speaking diasporic migrants and their descents. My use of *afecto* here is a key sonic detail, playing upon the Spanish meaning to show tenderness and emotion. I also appreciate affect theory as it provides a framework by which to explore the emotionality and connection to experiences that have not been named. For example, in "[Feeling, Emotion, Affect](#)," Eric Shouse writes about affect as "the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience. The body has a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language." I attempt here to cultivate a language that address how Arnaz's physical and sonic articulation sets an entry to examine contributions by members of the Latinx Caribbean diaspora and its reach to those of us hearing and seeing them in a US context.

Growing up bilingual and bicultural in Los Angeles, I saw how my mom retained a bit of her homeland by watching a variety show called *Siempre en Domingo*. Many of the artists who performed were also heard on the local Spanish language station K-Love. The ritual gathering on Sunday nights as we watched the show metaphorically united my mom with her family. I believe that viewing and hearing her Mexico made the distance away from her family soften. For me, listening to the songs I heard on *Siempre en Domingo* then replayed on the radio helped codify something more than Mexican; it was pan-Latino. These moments of engaging with television shows mediate my experience of sound and affect, which I've named *afecto caribeño* (translated to "caribbean affect").



My fondness of Desi Arnaz stems from a familiarity of Spanglish when I saw my first episodes of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) on Saturdays on KTLA. Its stars, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, played a married couple, and the comedy of errors would inevitably involve "Lucy Ricardo" trying to scheme something. In real life, Ball and Arnaz were a Hollywood power couple who produced their show, establishing a practice of syndication rights paid to the actors. Arnaz played "Ricky Ricardo," the owner of the Tropicana nightclub where he was also the bandleader. When scenes featured him at the club he would always play the congas, thus creating a continuum of his earlier career as a musician to now television star.

Hearing Desi Arnaz speaking *inglés* with a Cuban accent was familiar to my ears. I knew that sound of English blended with *español* because it was what I heard from my parents and their acquaintances. In the show, misunderstandings happened because one could not decipher what "Ricky" meant or said. The mistranslations led to some comedic moments and the establishment of a long-running comedic television trope at the expense of Latino characters and actors, as explored by Dolores Inés Casillas and Sebastien Ferrada in "[Listening to Modern Family's Accent](#)." However, in [Life on the Hyphen](#), Gustavo Pérez-Firmat describes Arnaz's *nilingüe*—someone who speak neither Spanish nor English—and argues his *nilingüe*-ism was personified through "Ricky Ricardo" as "Spanish utterances shot through anglicisms so that the monolingual viewer can understand what he was saying" (43). But, Arnaz did not reach only "English-only" ears. To my *pocha* ears Arnaz spoke a familiar—and not incorrect—spoken *Spanish*. As a young viewer, I had no reference for his mistakes. Sonically "Ricky's" familiarity came through when he complained about "Lucy" in Spanish. Hearing the *español* I spoke at home on "I Love Lucy" is how I connected to the

hyphenated *Americano* via tv. Nowhere was this more pronounced than with Ricardo's frequent performances of "Babalú".



Diosa Costello and Desi Arnaz in Too Many Girls (1939)

Before his film career, Arnaz was known as the mambo king. Due to his lackluster rise as a "Latin Lover" in Hollywood, Arnaz returned to work as a musician and began singing his signature "Babalú" around 1943. The song is attributed to Margarita Lecuona and published in 1939. "Babalú" conflates the popular 1940s-50s big band sound with a Cuban folksong (or *son*) sung to the Orishas (deities or gods). Babalú is an Orisha deity who oversees health and is revered because of his power over life and death, and is also known as San Lázaro within the pantheon of Catholic saints. By the time Arnaz made the song popular in the United States, the song had also been associated with Miguelito Valdés, who was known as "Mr. Babalú." Other musical contemporaries like Damaso Pérez Prado were also making a name for themselves by developing a new sound that Latinized dance music in the U.S. According to Ed Morales in *Living in Spanglish*, it is in the 1950s that Prado creates his signature sound in Mexico City by "mixing North American swing and bebop" known as mambo (152). However, it is Arnaz's performance that I reference because of its reach to a multi-generational audience through syndication of the "I Love Lucy" show.



Each time Arnaz performs "Babalú" it serves as an offering to the Orisha to heal the longing for a homeland he left long ago, as experienced by many musicians like Cruz who live in exile. With each performance on the "I Love Lucy Show," Arnaz reconnects to his *cultura*. Performing this on national television it's not about the Anglo viewer who only sees Arnaz as the "Rhumba Rhythm King" (sic) (Pérez-Firmat, 52) made famous in movies; rather it is about Arnaz creating a space of agency through a prayer and healing ritual in song, thus an expression of *Afecto Caribeño* connecting the Latinx diaspora to something beyond national borders and generations.

For example, in Season 2 [episode 21](#) "Lucy Takes a Job at the Bank," Arnaz (as Ricky Ricardo) brings out his son Ricky Jr. to play the congas alongside him. Ricky as proud father shares his joy in this moment. The camera pans out to Lucille Ball and her co-star Vivian Vance sitting at the table. Arnaz instructs his son to "say thanks" and he replies in Spanish "gracias." This exchange is profound because it accentuates the bilingualism and bicultural exchanges that happen in the home space now introduced to many via television. Arnaz continues, "Even though Little Ricky was born in America, there's lots of Cuban in his heart." The Cuban in his heart plays out in sonic beats through a father-and-son performance on the congas and the calling upon "Babalú Aye." Both Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz are happy parents, not just stage parents, who revel in this moment. As Ricky Jr. plays, his mother bangs on the table too and Arnaz looks up to the sky as if in gratitude for this moment to the Orisha Babalú.



<https://youtu.be/uZKVJHrlmKA>

Upon reflection, I am aware of how television informed my childhood search for something that reflected how I spoke and heard the world. In these linguistic-sonic moments I reconnected to my mother's homeland and sought to make sense of my pocha identity when I heard English spoken with a Spanish accent. In *Relocations*, Karen Tongson names these moments of connection that occur through a technological network as "*remote intimacies*" that can "account both technically and affectively, for the symbiosis that can happen between disparate subjects. . . I like to think that these imaginary correspondences sometimes have to happen across greater distances, both conceptually and topographically with other ethnicities, accents, nations (130)" The conceptual and topographical correspondence informs *afecto caribeño* as a means to enable critical connections to a Latinx diaspora centered *en el Caribe* highlighting the mestizaje of African and Spanish heritage, thus expanding upon Paul Gilroy's notion of the "black Atlantic" on how the Atlantic slave trade also impacted culturally *el Caribe*. Upon singing "Babalú Aye" Arnaz's performance not only is a disruption to Anglo American viewers, but also "disrupts the myth of Cuban whiteness" (Vasquez, *Listening in Detail*, 150).



I am drawn to sonic experiences that can help unpack Latinidad and the multicultural roots that are informed by other migrations of Africans, Asians, and Spaniards to the Américas. I am a descendant of these *mestizajes*, as Gloria Anzaldúa writes in her canonical text *Borderlands / La Frontera*. A concept like *afecto caribeño* addresses the social and emotional exchanges that emanate from the complexity of these migrations and how they reveal themselves in momentary connections. When Arnaz performs as “Ricky,” he breaks that character upon playing the congas. Here he does not act as the nightclub owner; the reverberation of the conga mediates an embodiment of his true self exemplifying *un afecto caribeño*.

reina alejandra prado saldivar is an art historian, curator, and adjunct lecturer in the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program and Liberal Studies Department at CSULA and in the Critical Studies Program at CALArts. As a cultural activist, she focused her earlier research on Chicano cultural production and the visual arts. Prado is also a poet and performance artist known for her interactive durational work *Take a Piece of my Heart* as the character Santa Perversa (www.santaperversa.com) and is currently working on her first solo performance entitled *Whipped!*

Featured Image: Desi Arnaz performing with Diosa Costello, 1948.



REWIND!...If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[The Sweet Sounds of Havana: Space, Listening, and the Making of Sonic Citizenship](#) – Vincent Andrisani

[SO! Amplifies: Shizu Saldamando's OUROBOROS](#)–J.L. Stoever

[SO! Reads: Dolores Inés Casillas's ¡Sounds of Belonging!](#) – Monica de la Torre