

Susana Baca and the Feminine Voice of Nueva Canción

by Erin Miller Bartosch

California State University, Long Beach

eamiller14@gmail.com

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Susana Baca has committed her life and career to the preservation and promotion of Afro-Peruvian music. Though her work is often branded as “world music,” her songs, which intertwine African, Indigenous, and Spanish elements, and literary form and folklore, can be considered politically charged, when placed within the context of the socio-political issues of Peru today, much like the music of the Nueva Canción artists who preceded her. This paper is an investigation of the female voice in modern Nueva Canción through an examination of the influential artist Susana Baca. A study of three of Baca’s songs- *El Mayoral*, *Las Caras Lindas*, and *Maria landó*- will be conducted to specifically highlight the issues of racism, colorism, and the status and struggle of women in Peru. This analysis will demonstrate how Baca has carried the tradition of Nueva Canción by using her music to bring awareness to the struggles of Afro-Peruvians. Information for this analysis was chiefly drawn from translated interviews with Baca, her published essays and articles and her song texts. A brief survey of Baca’s preservation efforts and political involvement will further demonstrate the significance of Baca’s career and music.

Nueva Canción is a Latin American music genre that evolved into a protest movement in 1950s Chile with the works of Violeta Parra, who single-handedly collected hundreds of indigenous Andean songs. Parra used her findings as inspiration for her own compositions with the principle of honoring the music of a marginalized people while being a voice for change regarding contemporaneous issues.

Because of these overlying goals of Nueva Canción, female artists, in particular, are in a unique position of authenticity when it comes to speaking for the most marginalized of their societies, who are most often women, and especially indigenous women, or women of color. Susana Baca has continued this into the 21st century by representing Afro-Peruvian and women’s issues in her music, and bringing awareness and recognition of Afro-Peruvian culture internationally, as well as within Peru.

The Nueva Canción label, when applied to Baca, can be seen as problematic, and this analysis will require a reframing of the term as more than a genre that occurred at a specific and exclusive time and space. If it can be viewed on the macro level as any music of Latin America that is motivated by a set of principles and musical criterium, we can see it as music that is still being created by present-day artists. The characteristics of Baca’s works are encompassed within this broader framework, including her use of poetry or evocative lyrics, simple vocal production, and the use of indigenous instruments and song forms within contemporary compositions. Similarly, the ideals and traditions as established by Violeta Parra are upheld in the chosen poetic texts of Baca’s songs. In terms of these textual themes, an investigation of Baca’s music and career reflect a direct correlation to the Nueva Canción movement.

Susana Baca was born in 1944 in Lima, and raised in the coastal village of Chorrillos. As a student at the National University in the 1960s, Baca explored her love of poetry and literature, and became engrossed in the work of the Vanguardist poets.¹ She also began experimenting with ways to combine the poetry of Peru with Afro-Peruvian music and rhythm.² “For me the written and spoken word is very important. They communicate strong ideas, feelings, and thoughts. I sing using poetry because it helps me leave a mark in the souls of those listening...”³ Her singing came to the attention of legendary Peruvian composer and singer Chabuca Granda at a music and poetry festival. Granda, who mentored Baca’s early musical career, helped her overcome two significant obstacles: being a female artist, and performing Afro-Peruvian music in Peru. “Women in Peru weren’t supposed to sing on stage...it was seen as lowly, like prostitution. And Afro-Peruvian music was considered the music of drunks, of illiterates... a remnant of the racism that endures to this day.”⁴

In addition to struggling against these societal norms, Baca’s career has also been plagued by the debate over her authenticity as an Afro-Peruvian artist. The dispute within Peru on defining the characteristics of “authentic” Afro-Peruvian music is complicated by a confused Afro-Peruvian music history. In her book, *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific*, Heidi Feldman explains how people of what she called the “Black Pacific” lie on the periphery of the Black Atlantic, as described by Paul Gilroy, which itself lies on the periphery of Africa.⁵ Thus, Afro-descendants of the Black Pacific have appropriated cultural characteristics from the Black Atlantic, and not directly from Africa. According to Gilroy, the people of the Black Atlantic, including the Caribbean and eastern Latin American states, maintain both a strong connection to Africa, while also absorbing music traditions from the indigenous people, and Anglo-Europeans. The result is a syncretic music culture, known as *Mestizo*, with interwoven traits from all three backgrounds.

Further complicating matters, what is typically considered authentic Afro-Peruvian music today was actually established during a cultural revival in Peru in the 1950s. Musicologist José Durand Flórez, and musicians Don Porfirio Vasquez, Nicodemes Santa Cruz, and Victoria Santa Cruz appropriated Afro-diasporic musical traditions from Black Atlantic cultures in an attempt to create an imagined Afro-Peruvian music and dance culture. Their television programs and educational concerts with dance troupes *The Poncho Fierro Company* and *Peru Negro* provided the first introduction to Afro-Peruvian music in Peru. The music that was broadcast during this time, despite being created by these revivalists, came to represent authentic Afro-Peruvian traditions for the Peruvian public.

An important question to address is why Afro-Peruvian music needed to be “discovered” and revived within Peru itself. The answer lies within the context of race relations between the three primary race and cultural groups- Anglo-Europeans, Indigenous, and Afro-descendants- and the external and internal racism that is still widely prevalent in Peru. According to Baca, “There is incredible racism against Indians and blacks in Peru, although the country has never wanted to accept that fact.”⁶ According to Baca, racism stems from the fact that African influence is denied in Peruvian history, and there is little to no access to this information in Peru. She further explains, “We were denied a place in our country’s history and I believe that for new generations it is important for them to know what the Afro-Peruvians contributed to our culture in Peru. It

is important to know the truth, not only for the descendants of Afro-Peruvians, but also for the entire public.”⁷

While she was clearly influenced and inspired by the revivalist movement, Susana Baca has placed herself decidedly outside of the authenticity sphere by refusing to conform to the perceived stereotypes of an Afro-Peruvian artist. Because of this, Baca faced rejection from the music industry of Peru and her music was denied a space in Peru’s soundscape. Her use of poetry, modern instruments like the electric bass, and modern arrangements in lieu of so-called traditional Afro-Peruvian music had the effect of making her unmarketable in Peru. Her breaks from the revivalist traditions have caused some to accuse Baca of “whitening” Afro-Peruvian folklore so she can be more marketable internationally. While she embraces her heritage, and her place in the collective history of the African diaspora, Baca does not align herself with the traditionalists, saying “There are traditional people who use Afro-Peruvian music in the traditional form. I believe that I am the least traditional. My roots are there. I can’t extract myself from them...but I don’t want to become...a museum display!”⁸ Due to the lack of support, Baca and her husband-turned manager, Richard Pareira produced albums independently by recording live concerts beginning in the 1980s. This move, made out of necessity, placed Baca beyond the constraints of the Peruvian music market, enabling her to maintain full agency in her music and career- a luxury not often enjoyed by female recording artists of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Regardless of her initial struggles to succeed in Peru, Baca became internationally successful. This success is often attributed to creator of New York based world-music label Luaka Bop and former front-man of Talking Heads, David Byrne, and his patronage of Baca. According to Byrne, he heard a 1986 recording of Baca’s now famous song *Maria Landó* and, after meeting with Baca, included it in his world music album *Afro-Peruvian Classics: The Soul of Black Peru* in 1995.⁹ By 1996 she had become *the* Afro-Peruvian artist for world music listeners, recording, touring internationally, and winning multiple Latin Grammy awards. It is interesting to note that only after achieving this international success did Baca begin to see increased recognition in her own country.¹⁰

All of these issues are preset in Baca’s musical output, and are particularly evident in her poetic and musical choices, which illustrate which socio-political concerns are most important to Baca. My study begins with a work that acknowledges the harsh reality of Afro-Diasporic history. *El Mayoral* (The Slave Driver), from her album *Eco de Sombras*, was released by Luaka Bop in 2000.¹¹ The song was based on the *musica criolla* song and dance form, the *Festejo*, which is characterized by a brisk compound-duple rhythm, festive lyrical themes, and lively choreography.¹² The *Festejo* is thought to have originated in the 19th century, but was made a prominent element of Afro-Peruvian music used by the revivalists. The lyrics often reference the emancipation of African slaves, and the independence of Peru from Spain. It is interesting, then, to consider this characteristic when analyzing the lyrics of *El Mayoral*.¹³ The first two stanzas poetically describe the conditions of slavery, and how slaves were treated by their oppressors. For example, in the first stanza, “It’s the slave driver, with his threats.” Also, “At four in the morning when the sun’s ready to shine, the slave driver with his scolding doesn’t let us rest.” The lyric “pain in my chest when dawn approaches,” could either be interpreted as heartache, or other such emotional pain felt by the oppressed. It could also be the physical pain of one worked to exhaustion, or beaten. The final stanza is perhaps the most

interesting, as it opens new possibilities of interpretation: “Take out your machete, Cipriano. Sharpen your shovel, José.” This could be a literal call to the slaves to ready their tools for work. The machete was the most common tool used in the Caribbean sugar cane fields, and the shovel is a symbol of manual labor. However, I propose that a less literal interpretation could be made here. The machete has also been used in several instances of uprising as a weapon, and to “sharpen your shovel” also turns the tool into a weapon. This stanza is perhaps less a call to work, and more a call to arms; a call to rise up against their European oppressors and fight for their freedom. This reading is supported by the musical choices made by Baca and her band. While she is usually regarded for her smooth, ethereal vocal quality, here, Baca’s voice is more present, aggressive, and insistent. Baca’s assertive musical interpretation belies an inner frustration and anger of the slave condition, which extends long after emancipation, manifesting in segregation and discrimination.

Baca also addresses in her music the phenomenon of internalized racism that occurs when a group of people have been oppressed and discriminated against. “colorism,” for example -a term coined in 1982 by Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker- is one facet of racism that is prevalent among the Afro-diaspora. Colorism, also referred to as “pigmentocracy,” describes a social hierarchy dictated by the gradient of skin tone from darkness to lightness and is upheld by all members of society within that gradient. In the case of African diaspora of the Americas, higher value is placed on lighter skin tones, while “blackness” is regarded as unattractive and of lesser value. Baca explains this condition: “. . .young blacks are not proud of being black. . .Blacks are always stigmatized. The result of that stigmatization is that young black people do whatever they can not to feel black.”¹⁴ On a physiological level, colorism deeply affects those of African descent. Susana Baca describes commonly held beliefs within Afro-Peruvian culture: “Blacks also segregate themselves; by class, or the lighter from the darker. I’ve heard my aunts say, “Marry someone lighter, even an Indian, so that your children will have hair they can comb.”¹⁵ What this establishes throughout the generations of Afro-Peruvians is a reinforcement that they are lesser-than, and unworthy of bettering their circumstances. Baca finds that she is inspired to perform, in part, in order to provide a model for Afro-Peruvian children who have been socialized to be ashamed of their race.

In reaction to this appropriated self-hatred, Baca has created several songs with a “Black Pride” theme. One such selection is *Las Caras Lindas* (The Beautiful Faces), which is featured on her self-titled album, released in 1997.¹⁶ It is arranged in the style of a traditional *landó*, which is said to have developed from an Angolan dance form called the *londu*, and was brought to the Americas via the slave trade, notably in Brazil. Utilizing a mix of Spanish and African rhythms, the *landó* customarily has a slower tempo, features call and response vocals, and has a “stop-and-start” quality in the rhythmic accompaniment of the *Cajón*, a box drum central to Afro-Peruvian music.¹⁷

The lyrics of *Las Caras Lindas* serve as a celebration of blackness in the 21st century, as well as a protest against the negative connotation of blackness.¹⁸ The poetry speaks of a collective presence, and all that it encompasses. It celebrates “The beautiful faces of my black people.” They are made of “weeping, pain, and suffering; truth and love. . .molasses that cries, that loves, who has rhythm and melody.” This also embodies Baca’s belief that blackness is a culture, not a skin tone. “Its presence in terms of color has disappeared; there’s a very small black population. . . but as a culture it is present

everywhere.”¹⁹ The message of the song culminates in the sixth stanza with the declaration, “That’s why I live proud of our coloration.” In this one phrase, Baca celebrates the marginalized “other” as well as situating herself within that group by using the pronouns “I” and “our.” Baca’s self-inclusion throughout is reinforced in phrases such as “The beautiful faces of *my* black people,” and “*we* are the molasses that laughs.” By Baca claiming pride in her blackness, she calls others of African descent to do the same. Though the overall tone is positive, it does bring attention to the unresolved issues of racism in Peru, and is a thinly veiled protest for change in regards to colorism and discrimination within Peruvian culture.

Finally, a third theme found in Susana Baca’s music is the status and struggle of the working class woman in Peru. Statistics from Amnesty International and personal accounts show that women of color, being the victims of racial, gender, and social discrimination, are the most marginalized group in Peru.²⁰ Both indigenous and Afro-Peruvian women make up half the population, and yet do not have equal access to resources or power, and historically have suffered disproportionately from Peru’s widespread poverty and unemployment.²¹

Susana Baca knows firsthand the difficulties of being a black woman in Peru: “I always wanted to say what was on my mind and what I believed. In my time this was not acceptable behavior for a woman to have, and being a poor black woman it came across even worse.”²² The difficult existence of the female working poor is described in Susana Baca’s most well-known song *Maria Landó*.²³ Cesar Calvo composed the song’s poetic text and the melody was based on a fragment by Baca’s mentor, Chabuca Granda. The arrangement by Roberto Argurdas was based on the traditional South American *landó*, and features the conventional instrumentation of guitar, cajón, and voice.²⁴ The first section of the song’s heart-wrenching lyrics describes the rising and setting of the sun, a passage of time that cannot be enjoyed by the heroine, Maria Landó. This woman, who represents all black, working women in poverty, does not have time to even “lift her eyes,” but only works constantly for the benefit of others. Baca eloquently explains the significance of this song: “There are so many Maria Landós. Maria Landó is the woman who goes to the market to sell things...She is the working-woman, who works and works and earns four coins. She survives. This is the story of Maria Landó.”²⁵ In addition to this global context, Baca also describes her personal connection to this poetry. “For me, this is my story. My mother has worked all her life to have a place to live. So I have lived the flesh and blood of this story...”²⁶ In the year 2000, Baca’s commitment to lending a voice to this marginalized group was reinforced when she dedicated a performance of *Maria Landó* to the working women of the city at a concert in Lima. Additionally, she describes how early in her career, when she performed in small cafes and restaurants, the women workers requested *Maria Landó*, and spoke to Baca of how its lyrics resonated with them.

In addition to her recording career, Susana Baca has dedicated her life to collecting, preserving, and fostering Afro-Peruvian music and history. In direct contrast to the revivalists, who looked to outside Afro-diaspora cultures for inspiration, Baca and her husband turned to researching culture and music of black coastal Peru. “I discover that I am black, and what it means to be black. We are different. In some way we are different...there is a culture, there is a presence...this is how my interest began.”²⁷ In this spirit, and almost as an echo of Violeta Para’s own ethnomusicological journey through the Chilean Andes, Baca visited the homes and communities of Black coastal

Peru. She recorded music in every town they visited, and made an album inspired by the collected material. "...We wanted to make a record that would have modernity, good sound...and at the same time that would enable Blacks of different populations, by listening to it, to become interested in the subject of negritude in Peru."²⁸ The result was a 1992 CD and informational booklet titled *Del fuego y del agua*.

To house and utilize the materials collected during their travels, Baca and her husband founded the *Instituto Negrocontinuo* in 1992. The goal of this project was to foster more research and awareness of black music and popular Peruvian culture, provide a performance and rehearsal space for young musicians, and build a public research library. "We've dedicated ourselves exclusively to an investigation of the contribution of blacks to Peruvian music;"²⁹ A contribution that has struggled to receive recognition and respect in Peru. For this reason, Baca's efforts in preservation, education and awareness are incredibly significant.

Baca continued to break race and gender barriers by entering Peruvian politics in July of 2011, when she accepted the position of Peru's Minister of Culture for the government of President Ollanta Humala. She made it her mission to use the promotion of the arts to validate the contributions of marginalized peoples and end the discrimination that has long made second-class citizens of black and Indigenous Peruvians.³⁰ Baca was also elected to be the President of the Inter-American Committee on Culture of the Organization of American States for the 2011-2013 term.

Conclusion

While she believes that an artist's first priority should be their art, Susana Baca has dedicated her life to bringing awareness, and providing a voice for the most marginalized groups in Peru. As an artist, her music represents a living, breathing embodiment of Afro-Peruvian culture today, with an honoring of the past combined with artistic freedom. Her preservation efforts have resulted in a significant collection of otherwise undocumented music traditions from Afro-Peruvians of the coastal regions, and her Institute has provided a space for others to conduct their own research, take courses, and utilize rehearsal spaces for their own creative projects. An analysis of her songs, *El Mayoral*, *Las Caras Lindas*, and *Maria Landó*, demonstrates how her music and the poetry she so carefully chooses addresses the issues of racism and discrimination, colorism within the black community, and issues regarding the condition of the working women of Peru. Baca stands against stereotypes and expectations that are put on her as a female Afro-Peruvian, and pursues a career of experimental musical creativity. Her music and career both serve to represent and provide a voice for the marginalized Afro-descendants of Peru, positioning her as the embodiment of the female voice of Nueva Canción in the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ Heidi Carolyn Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press), 225

² Ibid.

³ Phil Reser, "Interview with Susana Baca: Preserving Afro-Peruvian Music & History for the World," *Latin American Rhythm Magazine Online*, <http://laritmo.com/mag/index.php3?id=1808> (accessed June 10, 2013).

⁴ Larry Blumenfeld, "Born in Peru, Rooted in Africa," *Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2010.

⁵ For more information, see: Gilroy, Paul, "The black Atlantic : modernity and double consciousness," (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶ Jaime Manrique, Susana Baca and Eva Golinger, "Susana Baca," *Bomb*, no. 70, The Americas 2000 (Winter, 2000): 30-35.

⁷ Phil Reser, "Interview with Susana Baca."

⁸ Feldman, 224.

⁹ In the liner notes, Byrne states that this CD reveals the "secret" of Afro-Peruvian music. By introducing this "secret" to US and European audiences, he emulated 1960s revivalists José Durand and Nicodemes Santa Cruz as white curator of Black Peruvian music.

¹⁰ Baca released three solo albums on Luaka Bop between 1997 and 2002, and toured the US and Europe extensively. In 2002, Baca won a Latin Grammy Award for best folk album for *Lamento Negro*, and was nominated for a Grammy for "Best World Music Album." She won her second Latin Grammy in 2011 for her song "*Latinoamerica*," which was a collaborative project with the Puerto Rican rap group, Calle trece.

¹¹ *Eco de Sombras*, performed by Susana Baca, vocals with acc., Luaka Bop, 72438-48912-2-0, 2000.

¹² Javier F. León, "Mass Culture, Commodification, and the Consolidation of the Afro-Peruvian "Festejo," *Black Music Research Journal* 26, no. 2 (Fall, 2006): 213-247.

¹³ Lyrics by Wilfredo Franco Laguna.

¹⁴ Jaime Manrique, Susana Baca and Eva Golinger, "Susana Baca," *Bomb*, no. 70, The Americas 2000 (Winter, 2000): 35.

¹⁵ Manrique, 33.

¹⁶ *Susana Baca*, performed by Susana Baca, vocals with acc., Luaka Bop, B0000DB51S, 1997.

¹⁷ The *landó* genre became very popular in Peru during the revival period and is a dominant aspect of *musicá criolla*.

¹⁸ Text by Tite Curet Alonso for Ismael Rivera in the 1970s. Alonso was a Puerto Rican composer of over 2,000 salsa songs; Caras Lindas is considered a classic in Puerto Rico; Baca wanted it to be a Peruvian tribute to Rivera.

¹⁹ Manrique, 32.

²⁰ Amnesty International, *Fatal Flaws: Barriers to Maternal Health in Peru* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2009). According to the report, 33.7% of women populating rural areas are illiterate, against 10.9% of men of the same demographic. This illiteracy, which is in part due to language barriers of Andean indigenous groups and a lack of equal education in rural areas for blacks and indigenous, keeps women out of well-paying employment, as well as occupying a space in the political sphere. There are also reports from CLADEM (Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights,) that expose the issues of violence against women in Peru, as well as gender discrimination based in unequal access to healthcare and maternal care. Rape, for example is a prevalent problem in Peru, with 61% of rural and 49% of urban women having been victim to domestic violence in their lifetime.

²¹ Peru Support Group, "Peru Support Group: Peru Women: Introduction," <http://www.perusupportgroup.org.uk/peru-women.html> (accessed June 5, 2013).

²² Phil Reser, "Interview with Susana Baca: Preserving Afro-Peruvian Music & History for the World," *Latin American Rhythm Magazine Online*, <http://laritmo.com/mag/index.php3?id=1808> (accessed June 10, 2013).

²³ *Lamento Negro*, performed by Susana Baca, vocal with acc., Tumi Records, B00005NTT1, 2001.

²⁴ It also has the *landó's* characteristic metric ambiguity and shifting accents, but does not include the Cuban percussion instruments, such as the congo, bongo, or cowbell prevalent in the 1960s revivalist *landós*.

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- ²⁵ Feldman, 237: Interview with the author. Lima: March 28.
- ²⁶ Feldman, 236-37: Interview with the author. Lima: March 28.
- ²⁷ Feldman, 237: Interview with the author. Lima: March 28.
- ²⁸ Feldman, 228.
- ²⁹ Manrique, 33.
- ³⁰ Frank Bajak, "Peru's First Black Minister Susana Baca: Barefoot Singer," *Huffington Post*, September 15, 2011.