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"Así Son":
Salsa Music, Female Narratives,
and Gender (De)Construction
in Puerto Rico

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Así son, así son las mujeres
Así son, así son cuando se quieren
(Such, such are women
Such are women when you love them)
El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico

Quiero que recuerdes para siempre
el momento aquel en que te hice mujer
(I want you to remember always
that moment when I made you woman)
Willie Colón

Abstract Latin American cultural studies have not dealt systematically with the impact of popular music—particularly salsa—on gender roles in the Hispanic Caribbean. This essay analyzes the ways in which women are negatively represented and constructed in popular song lyrics, both in the overall tradition of Caribbean music (the bolero, the merengue, and salsa) and in two specific musical texts by Willie Colón and by El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico. Beyond denouncing female stereotypes in music in the process of reading women's representation in Latin popular music (*listening woman*), this essay also

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proposes a critical praxis, *listening as a woman*, which constitutes an actively deconstructive stance toward patriarchal salsa songs. This problematizing position is exemplified by Ana Lydia Vega and Carmen Lugo Filippi in their short story "Cuatro selecciones por una peseta." Most Latinas engage in listening as women in their individual and social interactions with music. The results of ethnographic interviews with twenty Latinas in the United States suggest that Hispanic women are not passive listeners, but are constantly engaged in *reading* patriarchal song lyrics and even in *rewriting* them, affirming their autonomy in heterosexual relationships. While women have not yet achieved truly liberatory texts against misogyny in popular music, Latinas do contest and deconstruct these gender inscriptions through acts of listening and of writing.

Introduction

For all of us in every culture, but particularly in the Caribbean, music has been a strong influence in our formative years, and both song lyrics and the social practice of dancing have had a tremendous impact on the formation of our sexuality. Whispering romantic boleros while dancing to their slow melodies and moving to the fast rhythms of salsa and merengues constitute an important part of my memories of growing up *puertorriqueña*. Indeed, popular music is an important cultural vehicle for defining gender in the Caribbean. Sexual politics also come into play, as popular music reproduces the struggles between men and women in a contemporary urban world where gender identities and sexual roles are being drastically transformed.

This essay is an exercise at once in *listening woman* and in *listening as a woman*. The former entails reading women's representation in Latin popular music, "both the ways in which women are figured . . . and the ways in which such figuring gives representation its force by repressing female desire" (Caughie 1988: 328). The point of "listening as a woman" is "to challenge masculine appeals to legitimate (textual) meanings and legitimate (sexual) identities" (ibid.: 326). It implies a rereading and a deconstructive stance, or "the undoing of ideas about women and meaning elaborated in male discourse" (ibid.: 327; see also Jacobus 1986: 30). While "listening woman" may suggest a unidirectional mode of categorizing stereotypes and other images of women in masculine discourse, my "listening as a woman" (like Elaine Showalter's *gynocritique*) goes beyond such enumerative practices to question the very processes of representation and reading.

As a critical approach, "listening woman" supersedes the "images of women" methodology of the 1970s, which has come to seem static and unidimensional. While twenty years ago this method became the core approach of one of Anglo-American feminism's most urgent imperatives (that of decoding and denouncing literary figurations of

women by male authors), many analyses were in practice based on the simplistic assumption that texts "reflect" reality, leading to merely psychological or descriptive commentaries on female characters. In their attempts to uncover women's treatment as literary objects, many female critics implicitly reproduced this treatment—a flaw that was also, unfortunately, quite common in the context of Latin American scholarship on women (see, e.g., Jaquette 1973). And it still is. In her recent analysis of female characters in the Puerto Rican narrative of the 1940s and 1950s, Neyssa Palmer (1988: 27) exemplifies the dangers of this approach:

Todas estas vidas son trágicas, responden al mundo brutal e injusto que encuentran a su paso, sin otra alternativa que la resignación, pero no hay en ellas degradación moral alguna. Por el contrario, *el dolor las exalta*. A través del proceder que develan como personajes, percibimos el profundo conocimiento que posee González de la conducta y reacciones que observa la mujer puertorriqueña frente a la adversidad.

(All of these [women's] lives are tragic; they respond to the brutal and unjust world around them; they have no other choice but to resign themselves, although there is no moral degradation. On the contrary, *pain exalts them*. Through their behavior as characters, we perceive González's [the author's] profound knowledge of the behavior and reactions of Puerto Rican women in the midst of adversity.)

The italicized statements (my emphases) illustrate the ways in which this hermeneutic praxis elides the text as a literary construct and insists on a direct correspondence between fiction and reality, exercising what Toril Moi has termed "excessive referentialism" (Moi 1990 [1985]: 45). Indeed, what Palmer does not take into account is that female representation—and by and large any representation—results from the textualization of a constellation of such factors as gender, race, class, and ideology. She does not problematize the process of defining a fixed gender identity for women as well as for men; in fact, she participates in fixing women's identity, notably, by naturalizing women's emotions and even ascribing patriarchal values to those emotions ("pain exalts them").

Despite some isolated attempts to raise the issue of women's representation in Caribbean popular music and in salsa specifically (see, e.g., Fernández Mirallés 1979; Malavet Vega 1987), salsa lyrics have remained virtually uncontested by female musicians, singers, consumers, and critics. However, two contemporary Puerto Rican women, fiction writers Ana Lydia Vega and Carmen Lugo Filippi (1983: 127–37) have dismantled salsa constructions of women in a short story entitled "Cuatro selecciones por una peseta" (Four songs for a quarter). Here, two female authors, themselves avid readers/listeners of salsa, cre-

ate four male characters who, while listening to Latin popular music, utter their own diatribes against women. The underlying irony in the narrative voice, and the parodic inscription of musical and phallogocentric discourses, enables this text to raise questions about patriarchal models of selfhood and about social constructions of the feminine. Thus, as authors and narrators, Vega and Filippi deploy a feminist politics of listening to salsa; they enact "listening woman" and "listening as a woman," undoing and rewriting patriarchal salsa lyrics from a gynocentric perspective.

Before analyzing this short story, however, it is essential to examine salsa music in terms of popular culture and the hermeneutic challenges it poses for gender studies. Salsa music is a syncretic art form that originated in the Latino barrios of New York City. A conjunction of Afro-Cuban music (*el son*) and rhythms, of Puerto Rican *bombas* and *plenas*, and of African American jazz instrumentation and structures, salsa music has become the quintessential musical marker of *latinidad* in the United States and in Latin America. Not to be confused with Latin jazz or tropical music—mambo or cha-cha—salsa is a musical form developed mainly by a Latino proletariat *farándula* (composers, singers, and instrumentalists) (Rondón 1980). As such, it documents and articulates the needs, desires, and perspectives of the Latino working class, of the black sector, and of life in the urban barrios of America (from New York to Colombia and Peru). Like other forms of commodified popular culture, salsa music is highly contradictory. While it reaffirms a Pan-Latino cultural resistance within the United States, and in that sense can be deemed politically progressive, it simultaneously participates in the patriarchal system of both Latino and North American culture.

Salsa is produced within a male-dominated music industry. While I agree with Félix Padilla (1990: 87) that salsa "results from the interplay between hegemonic determinations on the part of owners of the Latin music recording industry and cultural creative responses by individual musicians," its position as a commercial product of a capitalist superstructure and a male-dominated industry has led to women's exclusion from its arenas of production and composition. While some female interpreters have been key figures in the development and popularity of salsa (e.g., Celia Cruz), and recently in that of the merengue (e.g., Sonia López; Milly y los Vecinos; Mayra y Celín y su grupo Flor de Caña; Chantelle; and Las Chicas del Can), these women mostly perform texts written by men, thus reinforcing the music's monopolization by patriarchal perspectives and the male as writing subject.

Nevertheless, salsa's performance by female interpreters entails a listening practice significantly different from that of songs sung by males. When women sing sexist lyrics, the object of the sexism is re-

versed. It is empowering for many women to see female performers on stage, or to listen to female voices on the radio, as articulations of a female subjectivity.

Yet why is it that women's recent incorporation into the music industry has not resulted in the divestiture of patriarchal lyrics? While the Cuban singer Celia Cruz has recorded a number of songs in defense of women, such as "Las divorciadas" (The divorced women, 1985 [see Discography]), her repertoire in general has not had any impact on Latin women's issues. Indeed, many songs interpreted by women perpetuate traditional gender roles. Milly y los Vecinos's "Ese hombre" (That Man, 1991) and Sonia López y su Combo's "Castígallo" (Punish Him, n.d. [see Discog.]) establish gender in dualistic, oppositional terms—male versus female—that clearly denote the traditional "battle between the sexes." While Anglo-American feminism may dismiss these songs as examples of gender oppression, in my opinion they must be understood within the cultural, social, and historical contexts of (hetero)sexual relations in Puerto Rican society. These songs are valuable insofar as they eloquently articulate the struggles of Puerto Rican women and Latinas to empower themselves by contesting the dictates of a strong patriarchal system.

The song "Mentira" (Lies, 1991 [see Discog.]), by Mayra y Celínés, initially seems to condemn the male subject as a liar and traitor, but its refrain—"estúpida soy" (I am stupid)—reiterates the woman's naiveté in trusting him. Instead of truly inverting the stereotype of the treacherous woman, the song reinscribes the construct of woman's lack of knowledge and power, of her supposed "stupidity." That the composer of "Mentira," Carlo de la Cima, is male partly explains why this song (if not these singers) does not articulate the needs and desires of "real" women.

Another gender-related contradiction in salsa music is its addressing such contemporary issues as homosexuality and AIDS while ignoring the situation of women. Two very progressive salsa composers, Willie Colón and Rubén Blades, for example, are independent producers as well as singers and composers whose recordings have addressed homosexuality and AIDS (e.g., Willie Colón's hit "El gran varón" [The great male, 1989 [see Discog.]]), yet have not paid much attention to women's issues. Rubén Blades's "Ligia Elena" (1983 [see Discog.]), a popular hit in its time, narrates the story of a white, upper-class young woman who elopes with a black trumpet player, to the dismay of her family. This song was an initial step in the right direction, yet over a decade later it still remains an isolated case. Blades's 1991 album, *Caminando* (Walking), suggests that even the limited interest in women's issues shown by this Panamanian composer then is now on the wane. While most of the cuts here signal a return to his most politically progressive

and denunciatory modes, including a sensitive defense of repressed homosexuality ("El" [He]), only one song focuses on women, "Ella se esconde" (She Hides), which constructs Woman as traitor and as "bandolera" (female bandit), thus uncritically perpetuating the tradition of misogyny in Latin popular music (see Discog.).

The predominance of male composers, singers, and producers is causally related to the phallogocentric tradition of salsa lyrics, yet it does not constitute an explanation, in and of itself, for that tradition. The sociocultural explanation—that is, "machismo" is inherent to Latin American culture; therefore, popular music reflects that machismo—is likewise insufficient. The "New Song" movement is also a cultural product of Latin America, yet its radical ideology, its counterdiscursive stance, and its identification with oppressed groups have allowed for lyrics that take a stronger position on behalf of women's rights (those songs that continue to subtly belittle women notwithstanding). Thus a complex matrix of cultural, economic, and ideological factors comes into play when we examine the patriarchal positioning of salsa music.

Andreas Huyssen (1986: 62) has claimed that the "gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior," a social, political, and aesthetic project that originated in the late nineteenth century, became obsolete with the decline of modernism and with the increasingly "visible and public presence of women artists in high art, as well as the emergence of new kinds of women performers and producers in mass culture." This has not been the case, however, with salsa or with Caribbean popular music. While such musical forms as salsa and the merengue obviously appeal to both male and female audiences as dance music, Puerto Rico's urban musical culture presumes and targets an ideally male-dominated audience. The schism between the *roqueros* (white, upper- and middle-class young males who prefer U.S. and British rock and roll) and the *cocolos* (young black and working-class males who listen to salsa) divides the male youth culture. Indeed, the role of entertainment as "escape" that is often ascribed to various expressions of popular culture, and the ensuing trivialization to which the themes and lyrics of popular songs are subjected, facilitates salsa's patriarchal production and its fast consumption. Due to this expectation of "escape," men and women listen to Latin popular music "easily" or superficially as background music and while dancing or driving. We enjoy its rhythms and its vocal interpretations, but the lyrics are often dispensable to us as receptors, that is, one song can easily replace another. The "disgust for the facile" expressed toward popular music in scholarship and by the educational system, on the other hand, is analogous to societal attitudes toward the social construct of the "easy woman" (Fiske 1989: 121–22; Bourdieu 1984: 486–88). With

women and popular song lyrics as signifiers thus trivialized and reduced to univalent objects of consumerism, salsa songs are doubly precluded from assuming a major role as oppositional cultural and social voices. Condescending attitudes toward popular music and the concomitant superficial readings of it are signs of the persistent internalization of the modernist "great divide" between high art and mass culture (Huyssen 1986). Moreover, these readings actualize class prejudices. By identifying all salsa songs with "easy listening" music, scholars undervalue the cultural and economic realities of the working class from which they arise.

As for the music's gender-based reception, why have salsa lyrics remained virtually untransformed by feminist-driven social changes? Where is the feminist reception? Why do women, including feminists like Vega, Filippi, and myself, enjoy salsa as much as men do, despite its patriarchal and misogynist discourse? To answer these questions, it is not enough to examine (and decode) the "ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our [musical] inheritance," to quote Annette Kolodny's (1985: 162) "Dancing through the Minefield." In order to really address the sexual politics of salsa, the ways in which the "discourses which comprise it [reproduce] a struggle equivalent to that experienced socially by its readers" (Fiske 1989: 168), we must consider the dialogic texture of female responses (whether in songs, narratives, or conversations) and women's social practices of listening and dancing to salsa—its reception by female and feminist audiences. In other words, a profound gender analysis of salsa must go beyond denouncing the absence of the female subject and the consequently masculine monologue of the typical salsa song. As Shelagh Young has pointed out in her probing analysis of Madonna and feminism:

We still need to look more closely at the internal contradictions and tensions that affect feminism's relation to popular culture. If feminism is to remain a radical or subversive political force women cannot afford to simply emulate either the old Left's dismissive disdain for mass culture or the new Left's apparently indiscriminate endorsement of anything that appears to be popular. (Young 1989: 177-78)

To this we might add the urgency of documenting the voices of working-class Puerto Rican women and their attitudes toward salsa, a music that many of them grew up listening to in the urban ghettos of San Juan and New York. The views of educated upper- and middle-class puertorriqueñas should be considered as well. That these attitudes and listening practices have gone undocumented is not a reflection of the presumed passivity with which women listen to patriarchal lyrics, but rather of the elitist disdain with which working-class and

female realities are viewed. Theoretically, the postmodern approach suggested by Young (*ibid.*: 182) would allow for the recognition of multiple female subjectivities and would thus be better able to explain the gaps between feminist receptions of/against salsa (informed by Anglo norms) and those of the many Latinas who accept and enjoy this music.

One possible venue for the problematizing of reception is that proposed by John Fiske (1989) in *Understanding Popular Culture*. Fiske's thesis is that popular culture "is to be found in its practices, not in its texts or their readers" (*ibid.*: 45). Contesting the Frankfurt school's vision of the mass media as a unilateral vehicle for the ideological forces of domination, and of the masses as passive receptors, Fiske approaches popular culture as praxis and as a semiotic exchange between producers and consumers. Indeed, Fiske defines readers/viewers/listeners not as consumers, but as "cultural producers" (*ibid.*: 151), insofar as they activate the "circulation of meanings" by which popular culture is effected. His concept of "productive pleasures" is particularly relevant for the problematics of women and salsa.

For Fiske, *productive pleasure* is that "pleasure which results from [a] mix of productivity, relevance, and functionality, which is to say that the meanings I make from a text are pleasurable when I feel that they are my meanings and that they relate to my everyday life in a practical, direct way" (*ibid.*: 57). Thus, the receptors of popular culture are empowered by assuming this active (i.e., productive) role in the process of signification. This also implies that popular texts are polysemic, thus permitting different and even contradictory meanings to be produced from one text by many different readers/listeners.

While Fiske calls attention to the power of the proletariat in creating other relevant meanings from popular texts, his definition of "relevance" proves rather disconcerting when he adds that "however we might wish to change the social meanings and textual representations of say, women or nonwhite races, such changes can only be slow and evolutionary, not radical and revolutionary, if the texts are to remain popular" (*ibid.*: 133). Fiske's interest in explaining the progressive nature of popular culture as lacking revolutionary potential leads him to assume that the proletariat is ultimately patriarchal. This assumption implies, moreover, that the culture's listeners/readers/viewers comprise a monolithic group that identifies with the systems of power. For popular culture to be "popular," "it can never be radically free from the power structure of the society within which it is popular" (*ibid.*: 134). My contention is that Fiske fails to recognize the potential of the media, and of the music it disseminates, to reach vast audiences and to suggest new modes of consciousness—which is precisely what

the "Nueva Canción," Rubén Blades, Willie Colón, and others have partially achieved.

These reservations notwithstanding, Fiske's concept of "productive pleasure" can help us approach the question of female reception. As a female reader and listener of salsa, I find many of its lyrics relevant to my own social and personal situation as a Latina. The discursive repertoire, the persuasive strategies, and the rhetoric of love exhibited in salsa songs are, in many cases, analogous to those used by Latin males in personal and romantic relationships. What I am suggesting is that perhaps the "relevance" of salsa music for women resides not in the lyrics themselves, but in the ways in which repeatedly hearing them may allow female listeners to reread and reconstruct their own sexual identities and relationships with males against the misogynistic grain. This liberatory listening, however, may be a function of time, age, and perhaps generation: while an older woman reflecting on her past may be able to engage in this type of rereading, for a young woman, listening to salsa lyrics engages her as a reader of male sexual codes and makes her an active participant in a specific musico-cultural "interpretive community" (see Radway 1991: 468–70). As such, she will apply what she learns about decoding male signifiers and sexual puns in the fictive space of music to the decoding of male (sexual/romantic) language in real life. In this respect, my own role as a cultural and feminist critic is to foster a politics of listening to salsa by which women, young and old alike, can acquire an awareness of the discourse of love, desire, and pleasure as a socially constructed product of a patriarchal society. Through this politics of listening, and the ensuing critical dialogue that it can facilitate among male composers, feminist critics, and female performers and listeners, a reflexive meta-language may flourish, enabling us to deconstruct these codes within our own lives.

Let me pause at this point to review some of the comments and observations gathered from my interviews of Latinas. I interviewed twenty women—ten Latina students at the University of Michigan and ten working-class Latinas from Detroit and southeastern Michigan. The interview format consisted of asking a series of questions about two salsa songs after playing them for each interviewee (questions to which I will return later): Willie Colón's "Cuando fuiste mujer" (When you became woman, 1989 [see Discog.]) and El Gran Combo's "Así son" (Such are [women], 1979 [see Discog.]). It was obvious that the young Latina students, who were from upper- and middle-class backgrounds, overtly rejected salsa on the grounds of its sexism, yet they ascribed that sexism to the "vulgarity," machismo, and lack of education of

working-class men (i.e., salsa composers and singers). They also drew a distinction between the values of these working-class men and the positions and attitudes of the men in their own families and of their own educational level. Ironically, for many of these Latinas, salsa—as a marker of national and ethnic identity—had become more culturally significant during their stay in the United States. In other words, they valued the cultural role of salsa music in their own experiences of displacement and ethnification as recent “immigrants.”

The working-class Latinas whom I interviewed, on the other hand, uniformly accepted salsa as their own music and demonstrated an impressive knowledge of its history. They overtly acknowledged its importance as a cultural marker in their own migration and separation from their country of origin. However, they also exhibited a stronger praxis of “liberatory listening” than their middle-class counterparts. Most young, working-class Latinas responded positively to these two patriarchal songs because they “selected” those aspects of the love-song lyrics that reaffirmed their own sense of independence from men. At the same time, the songs allowed them the latitude to discuss the negative aspects of male behavior, the men’s double standard for male and female behavior, and other issues that they all related to their own personal lives. In other words, these Latinas deconstructed—and inverted—the sexual roles and masculine constructions of the feminine that were articulated in these salsa texts. This was a clear example of Fiske’s “productive pleasure,” whereby a female listener created her own meanings from a popular text and, furthermore, produced a reading that opposed the ideology of the song.

This is precisely what Vega and Filippi achieve in their short story “Cuatro selecciones por una peseta.” By deploying salsa intertexts in their story, Vega and Filippi position themselves as writing subjects who are simultaneously female listeners/readers of salsa. Through such writing strategies as irony and parody, they author and *authorize* a feminist deconstruction (in the sense of a dismantling or undoing) of the lyrics that have permeated the lives and loves of their four male characters—and those of all of us *cocolos* and *cocolas* who listen to salsa.

Salsa Music: Constructing Gender

Despite the contending ideologemes that salsa contains—patriarchal values, love songs, Christian themes, eroticism, politically progressive texts, nostalgic allusions to emigration, urban life, reaffirmations of race and ethnicity, AIDS, and so on—this syncretic music has consistently articulated patriarchal, misogynistic attitudes toward women. Many salsa songs express gender-based violence, as in “Bandolera” (1978 [see Discog.]), where Héctor Lavoe sings to a woman: “Te voy a

dar una pela / pa' que aprendas a querer / pum pum pum . . ." (I am going to hit you / so you may learn to love . . .), or in "Yo la mato" (1974 [see Discog.]), where Daniel Santos sings: "Yo la mato o pide perdón" (Either I kill her or she asks forgiveness). In the latter song, male violence against women is "naturalized" through such statements as "mira qué cosas tiene la vida" (that's the way life is). While the phrase "Yo la mato" is a literalization of a Spanish colloquialism, its naturalizing effect exonerates the male subject from any responsibility for his expressions of violence. It may be surprising to some readers that "Yo la mato" is a *guaracha* by Don Pedro Flores, the famous Puerto Rican composer of such Latin American lyrical favorites as "Amor," "Linda," and "Bajo un palmar."

The configurations of feminine identity in salsa are composed of negatively charged images and figures drawn from a topical repertoire rooted in Hispanic and European traditions. The "bandolera" that constantly reappears in salsa songs, for instance, is a figure that can be traced back to medieval European culture. This "bandolera" myth overlaps with various other textualizations of what could be called the *economics of love*: (1) the gendered relationship (from the male perspective) between love and money, in which the woman is accused by the man of stealing his property (e.g., as in the line from Lavoe's "Bandolera," "me buscaste en los bolsillos" [you searched my pockets]), even his heart (as in Pedro Conga's "Ladrona de amor" [Burglar of love, n.d. [see Discog.]]); (2) the belief that women are never to be trusted, for their real selves are hidden behind their smiles (as in Rubén Blades's "Ella se esconde" [She Hides]). This construct of the deceiving woman, an expression of the archetypal association of woman with mystery, is also elaborated in metaphors of witches and witchcraft (listen to El Gran Combo's "Brujería" [Witchcraft, 1979 [see Discog.]] and suggests that women cannot be accurately "read": our bodies and our gestures are false signifiers that will inevitably be misread by the male interpreter; (3) women's commodification as merchandise or property to be acquired (through marriage) or purchased (through prostitution).

Other common stereotypes include the dualistic construct of the promiscuous, sexually superendowed black woman or mulatta, on the one hand, and the pure, sexually unattainable virgin/mother figure, on the other. These configurations are not exclusive to salsa, for they abound in the literature of Hispanic countries as well as in the folklore and literature of other Western countries (see Herrera-Sobek 1990). As Sander Gilman has pointed out, the building of stereotypes "perpetuate[s] a needed sense of difference between the 'Self' and the 'object,' which becomes the 'Other.' Because there is no real line between self and the Other, an imaginary line must be drawn; and so

that the illusion of an absolute difference between self and Other is never troubled, this line is as dynamic in its ability to alter itself as is the self" (Gilman 1985: 17-18). This basic need, argues Gilman, leads to the construction of what Stephen Pepper has called "root metaphors"—"a set of categories which result from our attempt to understand other areas in terms of one commonsense fact" (ibid.: 22). By establishing analogical values between real life experiences and the world of myths, stereotypes establish associations that may entail either "negative images" or "positive idealizations" (ibid.: 25). It is at these two poles, indeed, that women are positioned and represented within the Hispanic culture.

There is, however, another mode of textualizing women that differs from these stereotypes and configurations. Gender constructions can be found at three levels: first, in misogynous and violence-laden utterances; second, in stereotypes and images, as we have already noted; and third, in the power of the male writing subject to concretely articulate the "nature" of womanliness or of the feminine, that is, the male composer/author's socially and linguistically vested power to "create" the female. How do men, then, "construct" Woman as song/text?

A discourse analysis of Willie Colón's "Cuando fuiste mujer" illustrates this third and most subtle form of gender construction. To be a "listening woman" with respect to this song is not enough; it requires "listening as a woman" to be decoded. Its lyrical melody and harmonies, informed by the bolero, and its "romantic" lyrics establish the song as "marked writing," what Hélène Cixous (1981: 249) has defined as phallogocentrism "hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction" (or lyricism, in this case), which is precisely why I have chosen this text as an object of deconstruction. Not only does this song exemplify gender construction in its lyrics, but it does so in its musicality as well: the slow tempo and lyrical tone "plugged" its melody into my head until I found myself humming the song over and over again, utterly and dangerously "seduced" by it.

Cuando fuiste mujer

Conmigo aprendiste a querer y a saber de la vida
 Y a fuerzas de tantas caricias tu cuerpo formé.
 Tu rostro de pálida seda cambió sus matices
 Se tiñó de rubor cuando fuiste mujer, fuiste mujer.
 Sentía tu cuerpo temblar sin la noche estar fría
 Sentía tu cuerpo vibrar en la noche que ardía.
 Sintiendo el gemir de tu amor que me dio su tibieza
 Hice mío tu amor cuando fuiste mujer, fuiste mujer.
 Quiero que tú sigas siendo niña
 aunque en tu alma seas toda mujer
 quiero que tu alma y la mía
 se unan por amor formando un nuevo ser.

Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides
de tus sentimientos, de tu forma de ser
Quiero que recuerdes para siempre
el momento aquel en que te hice mujer
y fuiste mujer y eres mujer.

Coro: Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides

Solo: No te olvides del amor que compartimos debajo de la luna
cuando dije entre mí como esa mami no hay una

Coro: Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides

Solo: Que conmigo aprendiste las cosas de la vida esa noche te
juro nunca se me olvida

Coro: Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides

Solo: Quiero que tú sigas siendo niña aunque en tu alma seas
toda una mujer

Coro: Quiero . . .

Solo: Que tu alma y la mía se unan por amor formando un solo
ser

Coro: Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides

Solo: Mi recuerdo te desvela, soy el ansia que te llega nunca
podrás olvidar lo que te enseñé

Coro: Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides

Solo: Pregunta por ahí quién es el que te ama siempre he sido yo,
en la vida hay amores que no pueden olvidarse, como
nuestro amor

Coro: Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides

Solo: En una noche encendida tú me entregaste tu cuerpo yo te
di todo mi ser . . .

Coro: Quiero que tú nunca más te olvides

Solo: Cómo temblamos de alegría, jamás yo me olvidaré.

When You Became Woman

With me you learned to love and to know about life

And I molded your body with the power of my caresses.

Your pale silk face changed its hues

It blushed when you became a woman, became a woman.

I felt your body trembling when the night was not cold

I felt your body vibrating in the ardent night.

Feeling your moaning love that offered me warmth

I made your love mine when you became a woman, became a
woman.

I want you to remain a little girl

even though in your soul you are all woman

I want your soul and mine

to fuse in love and form a new being.

I don't want you to ever forget

your feelings, your way of being

I want you to always remember

that moment when I made you into a woman

and you were woman and you are woman.

- Chorus: I don't want you to ever forget
 Solo: Don't forget the love we shared in the moonlight when I told myself there's no other woman like you
 Chorus: I don't want you to ever forget
 Solo: That I taught you about life that night I swear I'll never forget
 Chorus: I don't want you to ever forget
 Solo: I want you to remain being a girl, even though you are a woman in your soul
 Chorus: I don't want you to ever forget . . .
 Solo: I want your soul and mine to fuse in love and to form a new being
 Chorus: I don't want you to ever forget
 Solo: You cannot sleep [for] thinking of me, I am the anxiety that you feel, you could never forget what I taught you
 Chorus: I don't want you to ever forget
 Solo: Ask others who could love you, I have always loved you, in life there are certain unforgettable loves, just like our love
 Chorus: I don't want you to ever forget
 Solo: In this ardent night you surrendered your body, I gave you my whole being
 Chorus: I don't want you ever to forget
 Solo: How we both tremble with joy, I will never forget.

The male singing subject addresses "tú" (you), the implied woman and lover, from the position of master. She acquires her knowledge of love and of life, and indeed, her life itself, only through him. The syntactic position of "conmigo" (with me) as the first word of the song establishes the foundational position of the male subject as her first and primary teacher: "Conmigo aprendiste a querer y a saber de la vida" (With me you learned to love and to know about life). She is like the blank page upon which his pen(is) inscribes his desire. She is text, he is author. The reference in the third and fourth lines to her blushing face, full of desire, underlines this interpretation of woman as absence. Her desire fills a gap due to lack of knowledge and experience. Sexual intercourse with the master is the bridge between her emptiness and her presence, however imperfect this presence may still be for her (i.e., however tinged with shame: "rubor"). The male singer further articulates his desire for possession and appropriation when he confesses that "Hice mío tu amor" (I made your love mine), thus reinforcing the masculine "Yo" as the agent that possesses.

In the recurring theme of remembrance and the memory of her first sexual experience ("Quiero que recuerdes para siempre" [I want you to always remember]), he ascribes eternity to the transitory nature of the encounter. Through the romantic construction of "no me ol-

vides" (don't forget me), the male subject appropriates for himself not only her love and her selfhood, which are also defined by him ("de tus sentimientos, de tu forma de ser" [your feelings, your way of being]), but their effects on her, his traces that will endure throughout her whole life.

Sexual intercourse and phallic penetration are equated with his formation of her: both symbolize her initiation into womanhood and into being. A causal logic underlies the polysyndeton: "el momento aquel en que te hice mujer / y fuiste mujer y eres mujer" (that moment when I made you into a woman / and you were woman and you are woman). This gender contouring, reminiscent of the myth of Adam's rib, is earlier revealed in the second line when he suggests that her body was shaped by his "caresses." Yet the contradictions of his love surface in the opening phrase of that line: "Y a fuerzas de tantas caricias tu cuerpo formé" (And I molded your body with the power of my caresses). Although clearly meant to be read figuratively, these "fuerzas" relate to "caricias," with *caricias forzadas* (forced caresses) reinscribing the male's power over the female body, his authority to shape it and thus to mold *her*. The power relations suggested in these lines reflect the underlying violence and the suppression of female desire on which the sexual politics of salsa are based.

Woman's desire in this song is far from being hers. It is a sexuality imposed from the outside, from the man's sense of power over her body, her identity, and her life. While female desire is alluded to once, through the male's voice, it is never self-defined, but marked precisely by the absence of any female voice. Masculine desire, by contrast, is overdetermined in the anaphoric structure of the verses, notably, the "Quiero" that continually reiterates itself behind the mask of "eternal love." The dialectics of oblivion and remembrance also allow male power to be reiterated. The structure of the refrain (*estribillo*) reflexively articulates the song itself as a memory of the male singer/composer's agency and of his powerful role in the woman's female development precisely.

Yet the master's desire entails a central contradiction. While he expects eternal remembrance as her master and the author of her womanhood, he does not truly desire her to be a woman. He will eventually be made redundant as her master if and when she achieves maturity as a woman. Thus, the male singer/subject qualifies female potential: it is only her "soul" that develops into womanhood, not her body. He desires her to remain childlike, although he aspires to a spiritual union between souls. The metonymic strategy of body/child soul/woman is repeated at the end of the song during the *montuno* section, in which the singer improvises upon the previous verses. Because of the improvisatory freedom of this section, the *montuno* may be read

metaphorically as the sexual unconscious of the male singing subject. In Colón's montuno, he sings, "Tú me entregaste tu cuerpo / Yo te di todo mi ser" (You surrendered your body / I gave you my whole self), illustrating the phallic reduction of the woman to the female body ("tu cuerpo") in a sexual metonymy that objectifies women as Woman and that is counterposed by the male subject to his own selfhood as totality or wholeness ("todo mi ser"). The last line of the song, "jamás yo me olvidaré" (I will never forget), turns the male subject into an agent of memory. However, the mutuality between the man and the woman suggested by this last utterance has already been undermined and rendered untenable throughout the song by the previous assertions and reiterations of his will.

"Quince años" (Fifteen Years), a song composed by P. Armas and released by El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico in 1988 (see Discog.), also exemplifies the construction of Woman as sign and object of male patriarchal desire. While the pre-text of the song is an older man's tribute to a young girl on her fifteenth birthday, her *quinceañera*, its text subtly constructs the young girl through the male gaze.

Quince años

En el campo del amor
cuando nace alguna flor hermosa
siempre hay un ruiseñor
que la mira con pasión deseosa . . . (repite)
La fantasía de tus años comenzó
En una flor hay muchos rasgos inocentes
Dios te bendiga bella hoy, mañana y siempre
Que el sol que encuentres
cuide siempre tu esplendor
Quince años para contar las estrellas
Quince años para empezar a vivir
y habrá muchos caminos esperando
para darte acceso al mundo
que te toca dividir.
Quince años que se amoldan a tu talle
Quince años que cumples para sentirte mujer
Recibe de mi parte quince besos
abrazados al cariño
que hoy en ti deposité.
Linda flor, si es que las flores
se merecen siempre flores
de los más bellos colores
para formar su vergel.
Coro: Es una flor en sus quince primaveras
Solo: Apenas sus pétalos comienzan a abrir
Ella significa pureza
Coro: Es una flor . . .

Solo: Sabe Dios lo que le espera en la vida
 Seguro que cosas malas, cosas buenas
 Coro: Es una flor . . .
 Solo: Es una flor que nace sin espina
 que cuando florece se ve muy divina
 Coro: Es una flor . . .
 Solo: Que Dios tenga guardadas para ti
 cositas bonitas que te hagan feliz
 Coro: Es una flor . . .
 Solo: Y quién diría que aquella niña
 una flor hermosa
 pronto será una mujer?

Fifteen Years

When a beautiful flower is born
 in the fields of love
 there is always a nightingale
 that gazes at her with desire and passion . . . (repeat)
 The fantasy of your age just began
 A flower has many innocent traits
 May God bless you today, tomorrow, and always
 May the sun you encounter
 always take care of your splendor
 Fifteen years to count the stars
 Fifteen years to begin to live
 and there will be many paths awaiting
 to lead you into the world
 that you must divide.
 Fifteen years that have curved your waist
 Fifteen years that make you feel like a woman
 Receive from me fifteen kisses
 embraced with the affection
 that I bestow on you today.
 Beautiful flower, if flowers
 always deserve flowers
 of the most beautiful colors
 to complete their garden.
 Chorus: She is a flower in her fifteenth spring
 Solo: Her petals are barely opening up
 She signifies purity
 Chorus: She is a flower . . .
 Solo: Only God knows what awaits her in life
 Surely good things, bad things
 Chorus: She is a flower . . .
 Solo: She is a flower born without thorns
 and when she blooms she looks divine
 Chorus: She is a flower . . .
 Solo: May God have beautiful things stored for you
 that will bring you joy

Chorus: She is a flower . . .
 Solo: Who would believe that this girl
 a beautiful flower
 will soon be a woman?

As in Willie Colón's "Cuando fuiste mujer," the male subject of "Quince años" addresses the theme of the female's transition from girl to woman. "Quince años," however, employs the rhetoric of religion and the patriarchal image of the "flower," a commonplace of debutante balls and quinceañera celebrations throughout Latin America. The phrase "Ella significa pureza" (She signifies purity) clearly alludes to the patriarchal value of virginity, or sexual "purity," that the young girl is supposed to embody. She is the signifier, purity the signified. Once again, the male writing subject reads women as Woman, a univalent text.

Singing in harmony with this patriarchal, fatherly voice is the voice of male desire. While the former celebrates the girl's youth and innocence and would protect her from unhappiness and suffering, the latter vocalizes the male gaze and articulates his desire. This desire is conveyed by (1) the cumulative effect of references to the envisioned girl and to the visualization of her body: "es una flor que se ve muy divina" (she is a flower that looks divine), according to the male voyeur, the "ruiseñor / que la mira con pasión deseosa" (nightingale / that gazes at her with desire and passion); (2) the explicit reference to the female form: "quince años que se amoldan a tu talle" (fifteen years that have curved your waist); and (3) the sexual implications of the flower imagery: "apenas sus pétalos comienzan a abrir" (her petals are barely opening up).

Through the processes of "listening woman" and of "listening as a woman" with which I approached these two songs, I have begun to decode the various ways in which the male singer/subject in salsa music constructs Woman as object and sign. Representations of the feminine in salsa are inscribed not only through conventional themes and stereotypical figures, but also through a more subtle discourse of male desire that underlies lyrics celebrating womanhood.

As interdisciplinary efforts, my readings of these two salsa songs remain "literary"; refusing completeness or comprehensivity, they do not address the musical elements of the songs or the heterogeneous reception practices of their listeners. My readings are informed by my own listening experiences of these particular songs and of salsa in general; you, the reader, have to rely on my verbal translation of that experience. My readings are individual; a more comprehensive study would include a number of responses to these musical texts. Despite these material and methodological limitations, I hope that my analysis begins to foreground constructions of the feminine in salsa

and to contextualize popular music within a system of cultural semiotics and signifying practices that helps to explain its social relevance and popularity among women and men. While salsa songs reinforce the power of males to construct Woman according to their gaze and desire, perhaps the same songs also allow female listeners to reread male languages of sexuality and desire, whether present or past, in order to revise their understanding of their own sexual experiences as social constructs rather than "natural" behavior. In other words, perhaps women can use salsa to challenge and denaturalize the gender mores of their own generational times. This would constitute a sort of collective "productive pleasure" that could consequently foster a feminist politics of listening to salsa.

Women's Narratives and Gender Deconstruction

In popular songs, meanings are constructed not only through the lyrics, but in the conjunction of the lyrics with the music. In some ways, music takes us back to the past; it fosters a nostalgia of sorts for our youth or adolescence—in particular for those years when we were in fact becoming women and men, when we were both listening and dancing to popular music—and for the associations that those lyrics and rhythms have with our own lives, and with the experience of constructing our own sexuality.

It is no coincidence that many Latin American literary texts include popular music intertexts that raise issues of sexuality and sexual identity alongside cultural and gender politics: Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* and *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* (Sánchez 1976, 1988); Angeles Mastretta's (1985) *Arráncame la vida*; Rosario Ferré's (1979) "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" and "Amalia"; Ana Lydia Vega's (1983) "Letra para salsa y tres soñeos por encargo"; and Magali García Ramis's *Felices días tío Sergio* and "Cuando canten 'Maestra Vida'" (García Ramis 1986, 1983).

Umberto Valverde's (1981) *Reina Rumba* (Rhumba Queen) is an interesting text in this regard. The intertextual presence of the *rumba* and the textual reconstruction of Celia Cruz as a character consistently signal the protagonist's recurring nostalgia or yearning for his youth, for the period when he was becoming a man. Most of the experiences—personal and historical—recounted in the narrative are semantically intertwined with Celia Cruz—as figure and presence—and with her songs. Profoundly phallogentric in its enunciation, *Reina Rumba* articulates the nostalgia for youth while growing old, the need for permanence amidst sweeping urbanization in Colombia, and the need for sexual pleasure to assuage loneliness. This complex articulation is achieved through musical discourse and through the sexual objectification of Celia Cruz and of her music. Similarly, Edgardo Rodri-

guez Juliá's (1989) *crónica playera* (beach chronicle) "El veranazo en que mangaron a Junior," like El Gran Combo's song and Valverde's novel, textualizes the male gaze and male desire, in this case through the vehicle of a summertime salsa beach festival in Punta Salinas, Puerto Rico. What such deployments of musical intertexts in literature illustrate are the underlying connections between sexuality and listening to popular music, relations explored by our authors yet for the most part unexamined by literary and cultural critics or by musicologists.

In "Cuatro selecciones por una peseta," Ana Lydia Vega and Carmen Lugo Filippi (1983) undermine the "productive pleasures" experienced by male listeners of Latin popular music through irony, parody, and a subversion of male codes. The story's epigraph is the well-known refrain of a salsa song by El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico: "Así son, así son las mujeres" (Such, such are women ["Así son," 1979 [see Discog.]]). This refrain encapsulates the male perspective that permeates the song and on which the short story is structured.

The male-centered discourse of "Así son" originates from the conjunction of two musical traditions: the bolero and salsa. Boleros—lyrical, sentimental, nostalgic songs—usually express the sufferings of a male victim of unrequited love or abandonment, with the absence of the loved one causing him pain. The male singer of a bolero assumes the persona of a man getting drunk in a bar or club in order to forget the past and this relationship, "para olvidar" (Malavet Vega 1987: 393–409). Thus, the woman's absence functions as the pre-text for many boleros and for such salsa songs as "Así son."

Tintineo de copas, chocar de besos,
 humo de cigarrillos en el salón,
 El Gran Combo que toca sus melodías
 y gente que se embriaga con whisky o ron.
 Yo que me desvelo por tu cariño,
 Tú que me desprecias, ay, sin compasión.
 Andas como una loca por las cantinas
 Brindando a todo el mundo tu corazón.
 (Clinking cups and the sounds of kisses,
 cigarette smoke within the room,
 El Gran Combo is playing its songs
 and people [are] getting drunk on whisky or rum.
 I who am sleepless for your love,
 You reject me, mercilessly.
 You go around the bars like a madwoman
 Offering your love to all.)

The references to drinking, music, and sexuality occur within the male locus of a bar or nightclub, a space in which the male singer/subject can cathartically enunciate his accusations against "his" woman, who

has now left him and is acting "loca" (crazy), offering her love to others. Thus, the man's first reference to the woman he loves is a negative one: she is a traitor to his love, while he is her victim. An analogous situation is created by Vega and Filippi in the short story, whose ironic subtitle identifies the bolero as one of its subtexts: "Bolero a dos voces para machos en pena, una sentida interpretación del dúo Scaldada-Cuervo" (Bolero in two voices for suffering males, a sincere interpretation by the duo Scaldada-Cuervo). While this statement takes its rhetoric from the bolero tradition, it also subverts that rhetoric by using it to contest that tradition. The "two voices" allude to the collective authorship of Vega and Filippi, as well as to the implicit opposition of male and female voices. There are two female writing subjects who speak, and who speak doubly. While the story is at one level about four males, Eddie, Angelito, Monchín, and Puruco, who meet at a bar to express their anger at the women who have either abandoned or betrayed them, the "sentida interpretación" (sincere interpretation) of the subtitle suggests a hidden perspective, a double-talk by which the reader is alerted to alternative meanings and subversive interpretive strategies. "Sentida" would be literally translated as "felt" and only derivatively as "sincere," "honest," or "sentimental." However, it is clearly related to *estar sentido* (to be hurt or angry), a phrase which at first glance would seem to apply exclusively to the male protagonists. Yet, in the context of a piece of writing by two women subjects, this phrase suggests an angry or spiteful motivation for the writing itself. We could thus read the story's epigraph as an expression of vindictiveness toward men or at least as an attempt by these authors to see and define men from a woman-centered perspective.

The "four selections" correspond to the diatribes uttered by the four protagonists against "their" women as well as to the songs they select on the jukebox. A closer analysis reveals, however, that the men's utterances and the songs' lyrics continually contaminate each other. The men do not always speak in their own words, but sometimes in those of lyrics, such as the lyrics of the famous Latin American bolero "Usted," by José Zorrilla and Gabriel Ruiz: "Usted es la culpable de todas mis angustias, de todos mis quebrantos" (You are to blame for all of my suffering, for all my pain [Vega and Filippi 1983: 134]), in addition to lyrics from salsa, tangos, and *rancheras*. All of these musical genres articulate a patriarchal ideology in which women acquire value as women only when they love a man or allow themselves to be loved by a man. As El Gran Combo sings in "Así son": "Qué buenas son las mujeres, qué buenas son cuando quieren" (Women are so good, so good when they want to/when they love you) and in its corollary: "Qué buenas son cuando se quieren" (Women are so good when you love them). The words men use to construct women are the semantic

and ideological link between the popular songs inscribed in the short story and the *quejas* (complaints) of the story's four male protagonists. Eddie wanted his wife to be a nurse/slave to his mother; when she left the house for an hour, he beat her up. Because Monchín allowed his wife to go out to work, he supposedly "lost" her to unions and politics. Puruco expected his wife to cook him dinner every night and to wait on him and his friends since he was sensitive enough not to go out to bars, but to have his friends over instead. As for Angelito, well, he never married at all.

The four diatribes of these men are textualized forms of "productive pleasure." Their respective *quejas* are interspersed with snatches of lyrics from salsa, boleros, tangos, and rancheras: "Qué buenas son las mujeres, qué buena [*sic*] son cuando quieren" (ibid.: 132); "Túuuuuu, sólo túuuuuu . . ." (ibid.); "Usted es la culpable de todas mis angustias" (ibid.: 134). References to tangos and rancheras per se complete the repertoire of patriarchal lyrics: "No hay como un tango pa olvidar" (There is nothing like a tango to help me forget [ibid.: 133]); and "Los acordes de una ranchera matahembra sobrepoblaron el aire" (The chords of a female-killer ranchera overpopulated the air [ibid.: 135]). These song lyrics and musical references offer the four working-class, Puerto Rican males a mode of catharsis and a patriarchal paradigm for reconstructing and giving meaning to their own experiences. The men actually produce meanings from the songs, but only from those lyrics that are relevant to their position as men who have been abandoned by their wives or lovers. In "Cuatro selecciones por una peseta," the four characters represent an interpretive community constituted by working-class Puerto Rican males who listen to certain popular songs that reaffirm and naturalize their socially mandated masculine behavior.

Viewed in this light, Latin popular music serves as a code, or as a language, for those who lack one. Eddie, Angelito, Monchín, and Puruco consistently depend on the codes of popular music to define themselves and to construct women. As mass-media products, these lyrics (in this case, disseminated by the *vellonera* [jukebox]) provide the men with a language for catharsis, for expressing and relieving their emotions. As "emotional type listeners" (Adorno 1941: 42), they react to sentimental music by attaining a "temporary . . . awareness that [they] have missed fulfillment." This music "permits its listeners the confession of their unhappiness," yet their catharsis is illusory. The music is not truly liberating since it actually "reconciles them, by means of this release, to their social dependence" (ibid.). Ironically, the emotional type of listener believes that he or she is escaping an unhappy reality by means of this music, as in the story's last line: "No hay como un tango pa olvidar" (There is nothing like a tango to help

me forget [Vega and Filippi 1983: 137]). However, these listeners are participating in a pattern of social dependence by indiscriminately accepting this musical discourse as personally relevant. While they may pose as authors of their own discourse against women, these four men are merely the receptors of these ideological cues. (Their position may, in fact, be read as analogous to the colonial situation of Puerto Rico.)

"Cuatro selecciones por una peseta" dismantles the constructions of women in Latin popular music, particularly in salsa. Here, the representation of the feminine that is based on absence (as in Willie Colón's "Cuando fuiste mujer") becomes superimposed on a representation of the Puerto Rican male as one who lacks a language of his own and the necessary cultural and gender codes to deal with his repressed emotions: "Cuando calló Jaramillo el silencio era un bache de lágrimas machamente contenidas" (When Jaramillo stopped talking, silence was a puddle of tears restrained in a macho way [ibid.: 129]). The double discourse of the title further suggests that the "selecciones" to be listened to, or consumed, are not only the musical ones, but also the four men's diatribes. The cumulative effect of the ironic, tongue-in-cheek tone of the female narrative voice and the parodic distortions of male discourse at the level of the signifier indicate that this text is not about women, but about men. By the end of the story, the reader has gathered that Eddie, Puruco, Monchín, and Angelito (1) have been unfaithful to their wives and/or are still dependent on their mothers (ibid.: 130); (2) are not politically savvy (ibid.: 134); and (3) are quite naive about each other as friends (ibid.: 136). "Así son, así son los hombres cuando no los quieren" (Such, such are men when they are not loved) summarizes what the story is all about: women de(con)structing men.

While much work remains to be done regarding the reception of salsa by both male and female interpretive communities, this interdisciplinary attempt to deconstruct salsa's patriarchal lyrics via the music's textual relationships to other Puerto Rican narratives, especially a female-authored one, may serve as a useful beginning. This essay, read only as printed matter, as words, necessarily excludes the music of the songs. The voices of salsa cannot be fully heard or understood without the music. I urge the reader to become a *cocola/o*, an active listener of salsa, and, in the process, to cultivate the habits of *listening woman* and of *listening as a woman*.

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