

BOOK REVIEW

Suspending Voices

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The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music. By Licia Fiol-Matta. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. 291. \$24.65 (paper).

Growing up in Puerto Rico in the 1970s and 80s helped me greatly appreciate Licia Fiol-Matta's book, *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rico Music*. The subjects of this book are the talented Puerto Rican singers Myrta Silva, Ruth Fernández, Ernestina Reyes alias La Calandria, and Lucecita Benítez. Even though they enjoyed great popularity in Puerto Rico, in a decades-old, male-dominated industry, Fiol-Matta is the first scholar who looks closely at their personal lives, careers, and significant contributions to the local experience, and especially to popular culture. The author bases her research primarily upon archives and multimedia. Her rich descriptions and revealing photographs challenge existing stereotypes, some of which I once held, for example, that Myrta was Cuban and vulgar.

From the six chapters (a chapter per artist) readers learn that Myrta and La Calandria, both lighter-skinned, in comparison to other Puerto Rican singers of that era, developed their careers thanks in great part to Puerto Rican migrants, exploited gender differences, playfully improvised (Myrta quite cynically), navigated through the populist arena (Myrta exploring different genres, including "black"), and never became divas like Ruth and Lucecita.

If Ruth was the pedagogic mother of official pro-commonwealth Puerto Rican culture and values, Lucecita was the modern rebellious daughter.

They both countered stereotypes of black women in various ways, including wearing extravagant and masculine clothes, respectively. Invested in the middle class, they operated mostly within the national and the romantic spheres and involved themselves in politics, Ruth as a pro-commonwealth senator and Lucecita as a left-leaner with no formulaic agenda.

Myrta and Ruth were connected to Cuba, became entrepreneurs, got socially involved (they sang to the troops), and sympathized with *espiritismo*, Myrta as part of her performance and Ruth at the personal level. Myrta and Lucecita, both queer, did not always have a warm relationship with the public; Lucecita was censored for her subversive politics and Myrta for her obscenity.

Fiol-Matta binds the singers' various experiences (which transcended Puerto Rico and the United States geographically and sentimentally) with the concept of nothingness. Fiol-Matta says, "I have taken my cue from the four singers I have studied..." and she means this literally. For example, Silva's signature song was "Nada" ("Nothing") (30–31) and Lucecita states in an interview: "I am nothing" (206–207). Fiol-Matta continues: "... not as champions of anything, but rather as place-holders of the nothing" (228). That the singers became the first women in their music/art genre and established a new artistic record seems to contradict our common understanding of nothing and therefore, nothingness. But Fiol-Matta refers to a nothingness that refuses to abide by the prerogatives of generality, cohesiveness, singularity, or exceptionality—one that is self-referential and allegorical, anachronistic and ahead of its time. Guided by their contingent, multifaceted, and embodied voices, Fiol-Matta confirms the singers' unavoidable nothingness as they played the cards they were dealt (14), while implicating unconscious processes and a hierarchy of interlocutors.

The transfusing of a type of theoretical blood into each singer's experience(s) is a significant exercise of critical biography, Fiol-Matta's preferred mode of analysis. This may be challenging to undergraduate students or a general audience who, despite their interest in the topic and willingness to explore new areas, are unfamiliar with the philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and/or literary criticism of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida.

Considering that the study is about four "women," the baseline expectation is for all readers, especially graduate students and specialists, to surmount the dictates of gendered voice. If gender is to be examined and understood, Fiol-Matta emphasizes, it is really "*from* gender more than *in* gender" (8)—in other words, as a form of departure and suspension, as non-given/predictable/linear/static, even when it might seem automatically and/or merely spontaneous, reactionary, subaltern or well-adaptive. Herein lies the possibilities of a thought that is voiced and a voice that is thought.

Fiol-Matta's research successfully fills the void in Puerto Rican studies on gender and on gender and the arts, especially music. She offers a much-needed complex theoretical framework with sufficient and effectively presented data in the study of female artists in Latin America *and* the Caribbean and in Chicana/Latina *and* Afro-Latina studies. She moves beyond the exhausted analytic dichotomies of reason vs. intuition, power vs. resistance, and structure vs. agency, as well as transcends attempts to locate the idyllic middle.

Finally, I see as exemplary and pertinent Fiol-Matta's artful and honest invitation to all possible listeners, including those she could have interviewed but opted not to, to reflect upon our own variation(s) of nothingness which

comes from our birth (228), and which develops *as we go* through the tumultuous, rigid, flexible, and quiet. She also invites us to reflect upon our conceptual voicing with or without microphone or any other amplification (for example, the Internet), and to reflect upon our listening to each other and ourselves under whatever category is imposed upon us, we choose or (re) create, but more radically, as human beings.