



REVIEW | The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music

Licia Fiol-Matta

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017

ISBN: 9780822362937 (PB)

Verónica Dávila

Northwestern University

v.davila@u.northwestern.edu

During the last decade, cultural studies scholars have been transforming the ways in which we analyse popular music. Deviating from scholarship that focuses on lyric analysis, academics have been reaching out for other multidisciplinary tools through which to understand popular music. With an emphasis on analysing popular music as a means to comprehend issues of history, identity, and belonging, scholars of Latinx studies have been borrowing from studies of performance, gender and sexuality, as well as from ethnomusicology. This has produced a shift towards listening as hermeneutics; listening as the space where both scholar and artist produce and derive knowledge. Considering listening as critical act also allows us to understand popular music in a new register and to uncover new sites of knowledge production.

Licia Fiol-Matta's book does precisely this. Preceded by *A Queer Mother for The Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral* (2002), this publication deviates from this earlier work due to the corpus it analyses, but its critical lens remains in conversation with a tradition of literary scholarship. In this book, Fiol-Matta reconstructs the archive and analyses the musical trajectory of four important female Puerto Rican singers from the first half of the twentieth century: Myrta Silva; Ruth Fernández; Ernestina Reyes "La Calandria"; and Lucecita Benítez. Her revision of the Puerto Rican cultural archive recuperates these figures from oblivion and resituates them as part of a larger history of feminist figures that have helped shaped contemporary discourses on nation, race, and gender.

The book is organized into four chapters that each explore a different Puerto Rican singer. Although each woman's career is separate by time frame, musical genre, and position, these timelines overlap and their individual positionalities reveal different facets of a same cultural project. Utilizing psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework, this book makes these four Puerto Rican women sing anew and illustrates how their performances were intertwined with ideas of nationhood and sovereignty during crucial political periods of the island.

These women were both symbols for the state as well as countercultural figures that at times advanced progressive agendas, and questioned gender performances and normative representations of female artists. As early as the 1940s, a figure like Lucecita Benítez, Fiol-Matta shows, transgressed strict aesthetic norms in popular music performance by cross-dressing in national television. In the same vein, Myrta Silva harnessed the potentiality for scandal that her queerness offered in order to point towards Puerto Rican society's hypocrisy and double standards. Similarly, Ruth Fernández, the first black Puerto Rican band leader, becomes a symbol for anti-colonial discourses through her assertion of blackness.

Importantly enough, these four women's work can be found at the intersection of politics and celebrity culture. Specifically, in the case of Lucecita Benítez and Ruth Fernández, who formed part of political parties in the island and were involved, in their own ways, in diverse music-activist related endeavours. Here a particular emphasis on voice allows us to understand the political and historical work these women undertook, and shows how their careers are intertwined with contemporary Puerto Rican history. These artists, then, become Great Women Singers. As artists that worked against limitations imposed on them by the pop music industry, they resisted being portrayed as symbolic through a conscious use of their voices as disruptors. Without falling into the "logic of the exceptional" (3) – that is, the impulse of considering women artists because of their apparent uniqueness in the popular music production at the first half of the twentieth century – this book sheds light on four relevant voices from diverse popular genres in Puerto Rico. Inquiring in a time when women singers were placeholders for male musical and lyrical genius, Fiol-Matta's analysis not only destabilises the notion of women as mediums for composers but finds that geniality precisely in their condition as voice. Voice becomes a locus of intelligibility for these women; the concept of "thinking voice" (29, 66) is developed in the text as a sort of riddle, that the reader – and listener – can uncover through the clues offered by each of the singers analyzed. Ultimately, this "thinking voice" – deployed differently by each performer – reveals the ways in which these women grappled with the social and historical circumstances they inhabited, pointing also to the gaps in the archives of cultural memory.

Fiol-Matta also offers a discussion of the long and exhaustive research process she underwent for this book. Certainly, each chapter reveals a particular instance of the challenges female researchers encounter when facing musical and historical archives that have eclipsed popular female (and queer) performers. This is particularly relevant during her analysis of Ernestina Reyes' career, since it shows how the construction of the mythical Puerto Rican *jíbaro* (countryside peasant) figure has been impinged by a masculinist archive. This connects with her wider work of reconstruction, because it illustrates gendered problematics at the level of research and scholarship. In other words, men hold the key to these women's stories, materials, and memorabilia, amongst others, and that they also seem to control the narrative.

Transforming that narrative, then, requires the scholar to "listen distractedly" (10) to the archive, as Fiol-Matta suggests. This methodology reads like a progression of some of the recent investigations on popular music and Latinx studies. It contrasts, for example, with Alexandra Vazquez's title concept "listening in detail", introduced in her 2013 book of the same name. For Vazquez, listening in detail implies paying attention to the subtleties found in records, the extra-musical, and the ephemeral. It urges the scholar and audience to sit patiently with the minutiae of the Cuban music repertoire to unhinge the historical, racial, and

gendered paths of those traditions. This book, in turn, listens distractedly to all the available objects in the sound archive. Fiol-Matta's analysis necessitates a distracted listener in order to escape the exhausting over-signification of these performers.

This publication can thus be situated within a corpus of contemporary feminist scholarship about Latinx Popular Music, particularly that which is invested in contemplating the study of performance from the axis of listening. In 1998 Frances Aparicio's *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*, sketched the ways in which listening to women performers precisely from the vantage point of a woman scholar as well as a woman public, can be a praxis for better understanding the lyrical and sonorous representation of women in popular music genres like salsa. In her approach, the listening woman becomes a feminist concept that resituates the role of interpretation and analysis of the female producers, listeners, and scholars involved in and with popular music. More recently, Debora Vargas' *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* (2012) deploys the idea of listening to dissonance, as a way of expanding the genealogy of Mexican and Mexican-American music. Dissonance in this case performs a disruption of the archive and the genealogy of Tejana/o music, where female interpreters can be located. Similar to Fiol-Matta's varied materials, Vargas' corpus includes not only the sonic, but also gossip and memorial reconstructions of the performers. This attention to the extra-musical – a strategy followed by Fiol-Matta – provides these varied analyses with an additional richness, but it also points towards the creative academic endeavours that scholars working with female production in diverse popular music traditions need to engage in.

Fiol-Matta's book recovers these methodologies and approaches, and reformulates its own practice of listening, therefore offering an ambitious but relevant model for further investigations on female musicians, gender performance, and archival reconstructions of Latinx popular music. Its interdisciplinary theoretical model provides the field with alternative ways of exploring musical performance beyond the facile methods of lyrical interpretation and considers the multifaceted nature of popular music performance. This approach to archival work also allows space for forgotten voices to emerge out of historical records. Fiol-Matta's encounter with the archive's lacunae and her attempts at capturing even the feeblest traces of voices unmediated by male archivists, collectors, and producers, demonstrate these artists' continuous efforts of negotiating their positions in contemporary Puerto Rican popular culture discourses.

References

- Aparicio, F., 1998. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*. Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press.
- Fiol-Matta, L., 2002. *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Vargas, D. 2012. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Vazquez, A., 2013. *Listening in Detail: Performance of Cuban Music*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.