

SO! Reads: Licia Fiol-Matta's The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

In her recent biography of Roland Barthes, Tiphaine Samoyault describes the quality of his speech through what Barthes had called the “grain of the voice,” a quality that “bears witness to a past able to act in the present, a continued memory, a recollecting forwards” (13). The voice, and perhaps most importantly, its potentialities, has [...]

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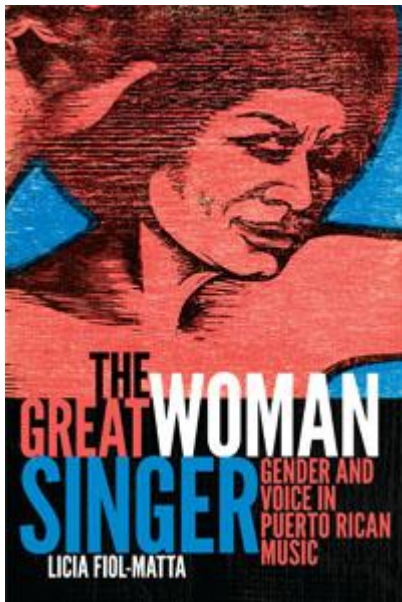
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In her recent biography of Roland Barthes, Tiphaine Samoyault describes the quality of his speech through what Barthes had called the “grain of the voice,” a quality that “bears witness to a past able to act in the present, a continued memory, a recollecting forwards” (13). The voice, and perhaps most importantly, its potentialities, has been theorized in the realms of critical theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and more recently sound studies, as a property that although commonly enacted remains mysterious, beyond the realm of simple intelligibility. Licia Fiol-Matta’s *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music* (Duke University Press: 2016). brilliantly engages many of these theoretical genealogies yet takes an analysis of the voice in surprising new directions. Her focus, as the title indicates, is the career of four “great” Puerto Rican women singers whose careers encompassed a great part of the Twentieth Century. In addition to the theoretical trajectories Fiol-Matta engages, the book is also a welcome addition to the growing field of Latina/o sound studies. Indeed, Latina/o studies’ intersection with sound studies has produced a range of provocative and essential new work that that aim to re-situate how we understand the sonic in Latina/o America.

Once a field dominated by musicologists and historians, sound studies has opened for interdisciplinary scholars new avenues to study the ways in which music and sound intersect with the formation of transnational Latinidad. In particular, many of these studies tend to be anti-canonical, reframing established histories of Latina/o American sounds through expanded forms of listening offered by sound studies. Similarly, listening in new ways to the historical record has allowed scholars in these fields to investigate lesser studied sites or to reframe well established archives. In recent years, we have seen a wealth of exciting (sound) studies that turn our attention and our ears to apprehend how the sonic creates, and often exceeds, forms of knowledge central to these fields. Books such as Deborah R. Vargas’ *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of la Onda* [check the SO! Reads [review by Wanda Alarcón](#)], Alexandra T. Vazquez’s *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music*, Ana Maria Ochoa-Gauthier’s *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*, and Dolores Inés Casilla’s *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish Language Radio and Public Advocacy* [check the SO! Reads [review by Monica De la Torre](#)] to name a few, have re-centered Latina/o and Latin American studies along the lines of the sonic. Departing from (although indebted to) earlier studies of Latina/o American musical forms, this body of work invites us, borrowing Vazquez’s term, to listen in detail not only to the official record, but to the sonic keys and codes hidden beyond official canons of the continental soundscape. In these projects, as in Fiol-Matta’s work, sound is engaged not only in relation to those who produce it but also those of us who must engage in an expansive project of listening.



The “great” woman singer of the title carries multiple valences for the author. It refers of course to the greatness of these singers but also to the ideological strictures that have dictated the very way these singers were received, written about, and interpreted in a larger public sphere that in the book encompasses the continental landscape. Fiol-Matta argues that to conceive of a singer as both great and a woman creates a central divide that forces our listening of female singers into roles dictated by the nation, record companies, fans, and others. In order to challenge this ideological strait-jacked *The Great Woman Singer* proposes that these great female singers deployed what she calls the “thinking voice,” a form and theory of vocality that turns to a range of theories, primarily psychoanalysis and philosophy, to read the very cultural history of Puerto Rican music during the greater part of the last century.

Fiol-Matta listens in detail to the careers of four singers, Myrta Silva, Ruth Fernández, Ernestina Reyes, and Lucecita Benitez, who throughout their prolific careers were forced to balance their preternaturally gifted voices and defiant public personas against a sexist and homophobic industry and culture that sought to discipline them. In some ways, the histories and careers of each of these singers might seem at first glance to cast them as probable tragic protagonists in a Douglas Sirk melodrama, female figures who are pitted against but ultimately succumb to larger societal forces. A gifted storyteller, Fiol-Matta does provide the reader vivid portrayals of the many challenges that each of these singers faced, yet she pairs these biographical sketches with keen theoretical insight to illuminate how their thinking voice stood against their time. Thus, what emerges throughout *The Great Woman Singer* is not only a loving portrait of these women, but also a theoretical model that grasps how their extraordinary voices, as well as their performative command of the stage, were able to exist in relation to the weight of the state, culture, and history. Among the book’s most exciting strengths is the encounter between the historico-biographical and a series of deeply theoretical arguments that build throughout. Fiol-Matta deftly combines (to name a few) archival research, cultural history, psychoanalytic theory, queer and feminist theories, close reading, and interviews the author conducted in the course of writing the book.



Ernestina Reyes aka La Calandria, Screen capture by SO!

Although her stated goal is to develop a theory of the thinking voice, Fiol-Matta does so by mining the complex interactions between music's deployment in the service of state projects, audiences both local and transnational, record companies, the cultural and social history of particular sounds, and the personal and professional lives of the singers themselves. At times such a comprehensive approach feels overwhelming, digressing often from a chapter's main points to small details of a singer's oeuvre for example, but this move results necessary to fully illustrate the enormously complex terrains these singers had to navigate. Indeed, the contextual elements of the book provide neophytes to the Puerto Rican and Caribbean sonic landscape the tools to grasp how the voice emerges often against the demands of institutional and cultural forces. However, the driving force of these chapters is an invitation to listen along, so as I read through Fiol-Matta's chapters I listened along to these voices, enveloping my reading and my listening.

The Great Woman Singer begins with an emblematic moment in the history of Puerto Rican music that helped establish the island's sonic relation to the rest of Latin America: Lucecita Benítez's winning performance of "Génesis" at the First Festival of Latin Song in the World. Previous to this moment Puerto Rico, and Lucecita, had occupied a marginal space in the Latina/o American imaginary, but in her performance of composer Guillermo Veneers Lloveras' song, Benítez reset the script for both.



https://youtu.be/QK6_IJUH6s

As Fiol-Matta writes, “no scripts were available to subordinate her and tame her eruption. She was not feminine. She did not sing softly or croon about heterosexual love. She claimed the masculine prerogatives of expressing social and political ideas outside of marriage and motherhood, eschewing the roles that her managers sought to implant in her earliest persona” (3). These opening moments will serve as a refrain through different voices, keys, timbres, and moments throughout the book. *The Great Woman Singer*, however, is not only a feminist retelling of history, or as Fiol-Matta writes, “It is not a survey of women in music or a tracing of resistance by women to the strictures of music making. My interest in the female pop music star is about querying instances where singularity erupts despite heterosexism and misogyny, through the vehicle of voice” (4). To listen to women seriously, she indicates, is to move away from facile narratives of gender and onto an investigation of what their voice *did* against the weight of history itself. Like the grain of the voice that began this review, the vocal performances that the book delves into appear to scramble the temporal markers that would contain it.

A central concept in the book is the notion that the voice itself must be understood as a form of thought. As Fiol-Matta writes, to examine the thinking voice of the great woman singer in its historical specificity is a way of thinking gender itself, “a critical theorization of voice and gender, with an anchor in psychoanalytic thought without being exclusively psychoanalytic.” (8). Her approach to the voice functions as the methodology that guides the reader, proposing forms of listening that often escape normative listening practices. Central to the book’s argument is the relationship between music and the state. Indeed, Fiol-Matta refers to the state’s investment in music as a form of “mandated enjoyment” but as she writes, “I unpack enjoyment’s dependency on the performing, female body and detail when, how, and why various forms of control short-circuit, despite their certainty of managing women” (10).



Myrta Silva, Screen Capture by SO!

The first chapter examines the career of Myrta Silva, who enjoyed a long and fruitful career partly because of her mastery of a number of genres, the guaracha and the bolero primary among them. Fiol-Matta puts forward a notion of “cynical ethics” that we can find in Silva’s voice, “a virtuosity that José Esteban Muñoz has linked to queer artistry: the brilliant, conceptual staging of negativity and failure” (19). The height of Silva’s prominence came during the 1940s, her most prolific and successful period. She was an extraordinary figure who interjected herself into traditionally masculine realms, “her positioning was simply unheard of” (21). In the 1950s Silva returned to Puerto Rico from New York, becoming a major figure across media. Fiol-Matta lingers in particular on the excesses of Silva’s body, who in the arc of her career went from a youthful singer to a “sexual bombshell,” eventually to be known as “nuestra gordita,” a figure who had lost the sexual appeal of her youth but who remained iconic in spite of these sexist castings of her body. The chapter listens to Silva’s signature song “Nada.”



<https://youtu.be/dcE0HHjsiCo>

The song's lyrics are self-referential; Silva refers to herself as "nada," a way of expressing that she does "not want to be looked at/I don't want to be told what to do, to be touched, spoken to, or be invited to sing/Nothing, I will no longer be called Myrta." When listening to the song, Silva's virtuosity becomes immediately apparent as the furious velocity of her voice charges the lyrics in equal amounts with sensuality and negation. As an ostensibly queer artist, this performance of "Nada" signals Silva's refusal to be coopted by the desires of her male onlookers. As Fiol-Matta makes clear, this positioning is essential to understand the very career of Silva's body as she morphed from the sensuous "Myrta" to the nearly desexualized "Chencha" later in her career. But her voice "[breached] the distance between signifier and signified and between her persona and person" (33).

The following chapter focuses on Ruth Fernández, one of Puerto Rico's most prominent black singers. She "entered the star orbit of the music establishment as an exception: the first female lead of any orchestra in Puerto Rico, and also the first black star body in Puerto Rican culture" (67). Blackness, in this chapter, becomes entangled with the question of being itself, with Fernández's voice a rejoinder that comes into existence against a racist and sexist cultural landscape. Throughout the chapter we hear how Fernández was from her childhood relegated to the sidelines because of her blackness, sometimes quietly, often through the loud marker of "ugliness." But as with the rest of her case studies, Fiol-Matta shows that Fernández's trajectory defies any simple narrative that would see her career as a personal triumph against this racism.

<https://youtu.be/TJ9H0waRZhk>

Her vocal performance leaps beyond the racist narratives assigned to her blackness although she always had to negotiate them. As the author states, "while Fernández was a pop music singer, she possessed a voice of great volume and color, was naturally virtuosic, and, although not trained, reflected a preference for classically inflected singing that she probably learned or was steered into in school" (68). This education, however, was in itself the result of colonial programs that sought to "civilize" Puerto Rican bodies, but "in this colonial context, her voice opened a gap in

the available symbolics of music" (68). The virtuosic register of Fernández's voice pushed against the racial logics imposed upon Puerto Ricans of African descent, even when descriptions of it understood her blackness as the provenance of her mighty instrument. The chapter is especially attentive to how Fernández's aural and visual presentation collided and colluded to create a racial sensorium. What emerges in the chapter is a set of difficult negotiations that tether between the official reception of blackness embodied by Fernández's career and the ways in which the voice, through its signifiers, evades and expands upon those official programs of racial legibility. To approach the black sensorium of Fernández's career, Fiol-Matta intimates, we must listen past the stories of triumph, hearing as well the wounds that her voice could never quite heal.

The book turns next to Ernestina Reyes, "La Calandria," Puerto Rico's foremost interpreter of the *jíbaro* genre, or music from the countryside. Her fame was unparalleled, "over the course of two decades, she recorded an uncommonly large number of tracks for a woman, a feat made all the more remarkable because she routinely received sole or main billing, collaborated with the very best vocalists of the country music genre, and was as a matter of course backed by master country music *cuatro* players, certifying her revered standing" (121). But Reyes's career serves as a gateway to investigate Puerto Rico's difficult relationship to the figure of the *jíbaro*, a symbol of the nation's countryside, a figure equally admired and derided.

<https://youtu.be/PYAZ0nEyqew>

As Fiol-Matta explains, "the Puerto Rican genres of plane, bomba, and *jíbaro* music became explicitly aligned with the national-popular visions that rewrote music history as a racialized narrative of predominantly Hispanophile origins [that] exalted the peasant figure and relegated Afro-Puerto Ricans to a heritage role" (125). Fiol-Matta posits these distinctions as *zoe* or "bare life." But, "compared to the Afro-Puerto Rican subject, the symbolic country dweller lived on, however spectrally, while the descendant of slaves faded away as a relic of the past" (125). Calandria was difficult to classify within the racial spectrum of the *jíbaro* genre, she is consistently described as "dark-skinned" against the figure's supposed whiteness as she "astutely navigated this extimacy and understood the contradictory affordances of the nothing" (133). Fiol-Matta sees Calandria's career as an encounter with the "nonplace" in her performance of a figure, the female *jíbaro*, that did not readily exist in the cultural imaginary. She "learned to convey the 'rustic' via well-traveled techniques of rasp and nasality; she also recurred to the shrill tone, which sounded uneducated to the middle classes, a fact that she must have been well aware of" (135). Indeed, Calandria managed a successful career because of the ways in which she disguised her virtuosity through improvisation, playing both in order to create her figure as a singer. Fiol-Matta is attentive to the genre's own ambivalent place in the Puerto Rican sonic imaginary, teetering between the folksy and the popular, providing readers with a rich history of the demands of iconicity.



The final chapter returns to Lucecita Benítez and most fully develops the concept of the thinking voice. Listening to Benítez's powerful performance of "Génesis," the performance that begins the book and serves as its concluding guide, feels overpowering even with decades standing between its moment and the present. It embodies the thinking voice, "an event that can be apprehended through but is not restricted to music performance. It exceeds notation, musicianship, and fandom, although it partakes of them all. No artist owns the thinking voice; it cannot be marshaled at will or silenced when inconvenient. Its aim is not to dazzle or enthrall, although it may do so" (173). Benítez alongside the other singers in the preceding chapters, doesn't so much *possess* this voice as much as she wields it, an encounter between prodigious talent and deep technicality. In the case of Lucecita, perhaps the greatest champion of the Puerto Rican sonic imaginary, the expansiveness of the thinking voice took her from her beginnings as a teen superstar to embrace the seismic political calls toward liberation in the 1960s and 70s, and even sustained her as she became a popular balladeer in the dusk of her career. Fiol-Matta explains, "her deep register was truly wondrous and unique in the constellation of all Latin American and Spanish-speaking singers, not just women" (177). Lucecita did not emerge unscathed, however. As her recordings and performances took on an increasingly defiant tone, aligning herself with the Cuban revolution and Black liberation, she was blacklisted, her career momentarily suspended. As an older figure, her final career incarnation was as a diva never declared such in part because of her butchness. She never turned her back on her political leanings, but adapted to the necessities to continue her career. The chapter's conclusion is particularly evocative as Fiol-Matta discloses her own disillusionment at this final phase, attending concerts "waiting for the real Lucecita to come back" (224).

But it is this final desire, unfulfilled, that perhaps provides the impetus for a book invested often in reconciliation. Throughout their careers, all four singers performed songs in which they were the explicit protagonists, calling out (and to) their publics, who often chose to ignore these calls in spite of their fascination with the singers. It's a position familiar to those of us who have declared ourselves fans only to feel like we have been let down by the object of our fascination. And yet what Fiol-Matta proposes with the thinking voice is not simply a mode of reparative reading that restores her (and our own) fandom, but a serious analytic that blurs the distinction between the listening to and the thinking with. Fiol-Matta knows that this is an especially

important move when it comes to female singers, whose careers and personas are used to obscure the difficulty they demand from the listener. *The Great Woman Singer* then provides us with a guide to listen anew and in new ways.

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Featured Image: Screen Capture of Ruth Fernández by SO!

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