

Book Review

- *The great woman singer: Gender and voice in Puerto Rican music*, by Licia Fiol-Matta. Duke University Press, 2017

A study of music can give us valuable new insights on the construction of ideas about race and gender in a society. Licia Fiol-Matta lines out these changing ideas over the course of the twentieth century in Puerto Rico: Myrta Silva was a *guaracha* singer who moved to New York during her childhood; Ruth Fernández was the first female black Puerto Rican singer who also lived in the United States, but returned to Puerto Rico where her career in popular music gave her later an entry into politics as a senator; Ernestina Reyes sang *jibaro* music, a very popular type of country or folk music, also with Puerto Rican migrants in the United States. Lastly the book discusses the life of Lucecita Benítez, a symbol of the new, modern Puerto Rico, throughout the different iconic stages of her career. Fiol-Matta's project is one of rewriting history, recapturing and re-signifying different periods in the lives of women. She complexifies the singular – and sometimes almost invisible – image that has been drawn of the singers in the Puerto Rican national memory. She describes in detail how their lives, careers, repertoires, voices, and bodies have been shaped by public imagery to fit a nationalist, and often racist, discourse. At the same time, she shows how the women were active in shaping their identities themselves by playing with expectations along gender and racial lines. They were able to challenge stereotypes and traverse boundaries of a *machista* and racist society that was part of the national project of Puerto Rico. The country's relation to the United States was especially important in this part of history, where music played a central role in government policies. Programs like Operation Serenity – economic arm – and Operation Bootstrap – cultural arm – , starting in the middle of the twentieth century, were set up to reform Puerto Rico into an industrial economy.

The book shows complexities and contradictions in the lives of the singers. How, on the one hand, they played a role in, and could take charge of, shaping their identities and performances, but on the other hand were forced in certain roles or interpreted along the lines of normative ideas about gender and race. It traces how the singers were caught up in the interplay between agency and structure. Some lives were dominated by racist and gendered understandings,

and others with more freedom. The book unsettles the dominant notions of race, gender, and class in Puerto Rico during a specific time period. By elucidating the portraits of the four strong women Fiol-Matta explains how music can disrupt and reorder. The book draws on extended archival research and the story is built on news articles and interviews. Interestingly, Fiol-Matta also interprets the silences, e.g., Ernestina Reyes, about whom she has not found any reporting, which is illustrative for the way the women in *jibaro* music were treated. As a backdrop of the stories about the careers of the women singers, the colonialist setting of a politically changing country unfolds and Fiol-Matta draws in the connection to the United States as the singers themselves signified this connection in their lives by travelling to and living in the United States. Tracing the lives of these women, she gives the reader a sense of the lives of many more Puerto Ricans the artists performed for.

Next to archival research, Fiol-Matta conducted interviews in order to better understand the women's lives and how they are remembered. However, it is sometimes not clear who she spoke to. Her choice to put the four singers on the foreground puts the people talking about them on the background. This is a valid choice, but embedding the voices of the people by whom the women are remembered would have enriched our understanding on how the singers were understood. A close and personalized insight in the public and their ways of understanding depending on their backgrounds would offer yet another angle to understand the construction of gender and race in music. Furthermore I would be interested to read about the current state of gender and race in Puerto Rican music. Is Operation Serenity still going strong? What is the influence of the increasing globalization of the world where people are more and more connected and where music travels quickly?

Fiol-Matta does not just engage with the singers' music by lyric analysis, but also pays attention to the conceptualization of sound. She counters three concepts to do so: The dominant ear, acousmatic blackness, and the thinking voice. These theorizations of the act of listening leads her to ask a question: "Do we hear with ears or with the psyche?" (p. 229). By asking this she problematizes the title of her book: *The great woman singer*. These new concepts and way of looking at music adds to a growing scholarship on sound, and therefore the book is also of special interest to scholars in sound studies. It also enters into conversation with other recent works like Jennifer Stoeber's *The Sonic Color Line* (2016)¹. Fiol-Matta calls for an unsettling of protocols of listening. Challenging the distribution of the sensible is valuable for students and scholars who want to gain an understanding of the construction of race and gender in music. Her project to point attention towards the aural as an undertheorized part of the perception of race speaks to a broad audience.

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¹ Stoever, J. L. (2016). *The Sonic Color Line. Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press.