

Nothing/Nada

Jack Halberstam

In *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music*, Licia Fiol-Matta continues a project that she began in her first book, a study of Gabriela Mistral. That book, like this one, reads questions of ideology and belonging through the ambiguous case history of a figure whom we can claim from a historical distance but whom we must also necessarily reject. In *A Queer Mother for the Nation* (2002), Fiol-Matta offers a critical biography of Mistral, who was characterized as both radical and conservative in her lifetime; she never came out publicly as a lesbian and, while she was embraced after her death, many Chileans roundly rejected her while she was alive. Her own politics were scrambled and misaligned while her personal life was a mess. Because Mistral was unmistakably masculine, Fiol-Matta suggests that she seems available for queer canonization. But Fiol-Matta warns: “queerness is as susceptible to normalization as any other sexual or gender experience and . . . queerness can abet certain forms of heteronormativity” (2002, xxix).

Fiol-Matta looks at Mistral’s legacy, then, not to pull forward a heroic and martyred figure of repressed lesbianism and dynamic female masculinity, but to seize upon the contradictions of desire, rejection, cruelty, and melancholy as they coalesce in one queer figure. In this way, she refuses the conventional function of the case history—as something that establishes clear relations between the general and the particular. The case histories to which Fiol-Matta is drawn, always, are those that defy the case and rethink history in the process or at least the way histories are relayed through individual lives, bodies, examples, and, in her new book, voices.

Her diva figures Myrta Silva, Ruth Fernández, Ernestina Reyes, and Lucecita Benítez similarly stand in ambivalent and contradictory relation to queer and gendered histories of voice and song; indeed, the last singer on this list, Lucecita Benítez was both dubbed “the National Voice of Puerto Rico” and reviled for her avowedly masculine voice and performance persona. But Fiol-Matta deploys them, as she deployed Mistral, as “case studies” in a transnational, cross-genre study of the voice, listening, vocalization, and gendered and racial performance.

This new book makes a number of important interventions into the gendered history of music and performance and, in the process, offers some new and potentially deeply influential formulations:

1. *Divas transcend performance norms.* The singularity of the diva resides not in the exceptional status of the artist herself but in the singer's ability to break through the sexist and heterosexist strictures that bind women to certain performances and certain versions of femininity and power. Here Fiol-Matta links singularity to the special power of these voices and the persistence and wily ingenuity of the women's manipulation of the scene of performance. There is no claim of simple genius or talent, but instead, Fiol-Matta wants to "isolate the performing voice as an object . . . while advancing the study of voice as thought producer" (8). Here voice is not a natural emanation but a form of study, a practice of thinking, and the sound of theory.

2. *Genres are made to be broken.* The singers Fiol-Matta focuses upon choose boleros where they should be singing guarachas, baladas when they should be singing boleros, and boleros when they should be singing back up. They play instruments, they croon, they wear tuxedos, they lead when they should follow, they command when they should flirt and submit. In contrast to the conventional notion of the diva who represents an inflated sense of femininity or womanliness, and whose big voice is an expression of a kind of female capaciousness, Benítez and Fernández in particular explore the low range of the female voice and in the process they convey its ability to disrupt the listener's sense of gendered appropriateness. Silva, on the other hand, insistently improvised and refused the lyrics she was given. Ernestina Reyes performed within a working-class aesthetic that was considered to lack femininity.

All four women break the ability of genres to manage the relation between body and voice. The gender violations are part of the refusal of genre and they throw into doubt the very concept of the "female voice." The larger implication here is that the part of the work of music history has been to line up neatly gender binaries, genre, and national identity—in Fiol-Matta's book, these vectors of identification come undone.

3. *The thinking voice:* With this concept, Fiol-Matta offers to counteract the tendency to cast female singers as just naturally good, as pure voice absent calculation, manipulation, staging; Fiol-Matta looks through archives of the voice and finds in the female singer a staging of history, a record of loss, a biography of race and gender. The thinking voice, she proposes, must be met by a practice of "musical listening" where we hear the pauses, the breath, the silence, the tune, and the dissonance. The thinking voice, Fiol-Matta counsels, directs our listening in very specific ways, in ways that undo the fictions of greatness, woman, and singer. She writes: "It should become clear by now that I do not believe in the ideology of the great woman singer, the specificity of the female voice, the logic of women's resistance,

or the inherent beauty of feminine music” (228). For Fiol-Matta, instead, these woman singers are not figures for some specific politics or identity but, as she puts it, “placeholders of the nothing” (228). The nothing, no thing, nada, is not castration, not simply silence, not absence only—nothing is something we fail to hear.

4. *Nothing is something*: refusing to perform either simply the melodrama associated with camp or the high drama associated with opera, Fiol-Matta’s singers flirt instead with the negative. Often cast as failures, as asexual or overly sexual, as too masculine, as controlling or completely passive, these women refuse the expectations projected onto them, resist the adoration, and refuse the derision and often sing of a “nothingness” that both defines them and becomes for them a kind of weapon of refusal. As Fiol-Matta writes in her introduction of the women she studies: “In one way or another, all expressed, directly or subliminally, the philosophical protestation, ‘I am nothing.’ All have been subjected to an oblivion that, up to this day, remains as profoundly puzzling as it is disturbing, rendering them as the ‘nothing’ in pop” (15).

Ultimately, like Fiol-Matta’s earlier work, this book makes its intervention at many levels at once. It rewrites the history of genius that has made grand detours around female figures and rendered them as mouthpieces for a male composer. The book also approaches singing as a dismantling of seemingly obvious connections between timbre and gender, register and body, vocalization and character. The great woman singer, in the end, is neither great nor simply a woman, she is not a case, not a representative, not a singular instance of talent; the great woman singer is not the worker, the mother, the mistress, the whore, the angel, the peasant, or the deity—she is a thinking voice training us to listen not to her voice but to the nothingness that trails in its wake.

Fiol-Matta is that most rare scholar—she is an original thinker who pushes against the grain of several fields at once while making a mark that is at once indelible and seemingly inevitable. In this book, Fiol-Matta changes completely the way we read “great female singers” but in the process she questions the value of “greatness,” “femaleness,” and “singing.” Offering a wealth of biographical detail alongside elaborate performance histories and media archaeologies for each of the figures she explores, Fiol-Matta both refuses and expands our concept of the diva and situates it in an uneasy set of relations to nation, gender, and voice.

References

- Fiol-Matta, Licia. 2002. *Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.