

Fiol-Matta, Licia. *The Great Woman Singer. Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music*. Duke University Press, 2017. 312 pp.

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As soon as I finished the relentless archival labor that sustains Licia Fiol-Matta's writing in her *The Great Woman Singer. Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music*, I went to my library, and started reading my notes on Jacques Derrida's *Mal de archivo. Una impresión freudiana*. I re-read Derrida's lecture in Spanish, going over its original in French, and reviewed the English translation published with the provocative—and somewhat misleading title—*Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Once the English translation displaces the archival malady, the archival pathology to underscore one of the *disease's* symptoms, the fever, the resonances of Derrida's writing, to a certain extent, stop. Nevertheless, something or someone begins *burning with the archival fever*, the moment you decide to unpack (again) the archival command. I was so impressed and excited with Fiol-Matta's passion towards her archival and musical subject matter that it felt more than appropriate to retrace the *imprint of the impression* in order to listen to Fiol-Matta's voice. Already infected, the archival fever was upon me. I was under a double *im-presión*: Fiol-Matta's and the one released by the voices of the Puerto Rican singers Fiol-Matta listens to in her splendid book. Here, I think, lays part of the reason behind my *burning* impulse towards Derrida's pages after reading Fiol-Matta's *archival impression*:

The *trouble de l'archive* [the Spanish translation by Editorial Trotta says “lo turbio del archivo”] stems from a *mal d'archive*. We are *en mal d'archive* [*Nous sommes en mal d'archive*]: in need of archives. [¿?] Listening to the French idiom, and in it the attribute *en mal de*, to be *en mal d' archive* can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun *mal* might name. It is to burn with passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (Derrida *Archive Fever* 91)

There is something murky, shadowy in the *mal d'archive* when it is the place for an “irrepressible desire to return to the origin,” particularly when we are *in the archive*, when we become subjects *in the mal d'Archive*, something more demanding and challenging than merely to be *in need of archives*. This

subjective condition is aggravated by the uneven and scant materials left behind by the performative archive of the Puerto Rican singers Fiol-Matta's studies: Myrta Silva, Ruth Fernández, Ernestina Reyes, and Lucecita Benítez. In *The Great Woman Singer* we are witnesses to Fiol-Matta's prowess as an archival buff pursuing an impressive diversity of ephemeral and almost disappeared materials in and out of a Caribbean country where, in the absence of resources or institutions that protect those materials, tracking down the mere hint or tale of the availability of such materials, who knows where, constitutes quite a challenge.

When the burning passion is there, between the pages of her book, we begin to read (to imagine) Fiol-Matta's ear, eyes and hands perusing recordings, the old ones, the ones recycled today on different platforms—discarded or privatized collections (advertising photos, newspaper clippings, covers, dresses, interviews, letters, notes, posters, reviews, TV or radio programs, records, cassettes, MP3s, DVDs, movies, and fans' collections). *The Great Woman Singer* is the meticulous assembly of a resonance chamber for the act of listening to these voices, in order to expose the images of time and self, even the potential future inscribed in them. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this Puerto Rican archival condition, *The Great Woman Singer* does not shy away from a historical reenactment of these singer's performances so that we can listen to what Fiol-Matta calls the *thinking voice*. Let's read Fiol-Matta's description of her book: "While the book is, in a certain sense, an archive, bringing into painstaking play both sonorous and nonsonorous items from the past (and as such thinks from an archive), it, above all, is a critical theorization of voice and gender, with an anchor in psychoanalytic thought without being exclusively psychoanalytic" (8). How do we understand this "critical theorization of voice and gender" with an "anchor in psychoanalytic thought"? Is this "anchor[ing]" another word for the work of the metaphor as a disguise for the Archival mandate, the *impression* already imprinted in Fiol-Matta's writing, or is this "anchor" a disciplinary device for the deferred rethinking of thinking itself already summoned by Fiol-Matta with a neighboring quote? In as early as her "Introduction" Fiol-Matta admits she is *riffing* on Martin Heidegger's *What is Called Thinking?* when she devised her notion of the "thinking voice":

Sidestepping dominant notions of voice, particularly notation (as in the highbrow musical pedagogy that recognizes voice solely as a musical instrument) and intuition (the widespread notion that a singer trades not in conceptual thinking, but only in spontaneous execution), I come to isolate the performing voice as an object (thinking voice in performance), while advancing the study of voice as thought producer (presenting the voice as it thinks, riffing on Martin Heidegger's treatise *What is Called Thinking?*) (7-8).

Heidegger's thoughts on the thinking moment do not appear with the same intensity and care as Lacan's work in Fiol Matta's book, with the exception of fleeting mentions of Heidegger's meditations on *aletheia* or his notion of the "gift." In fact, *What is Called Thinking?* is the only book by Heidegger cited in the bibliography of *The Great Woman Singer*. Don't get me wrong, I am not complaining about this "unforgivable" lack in Fiol-Matta's trailblazing book, nor am I demanding from the hilltop of disciplinarity a more thorough consideration of Heidegger's important work. I just want to highlight the paradoxical and unavoidable nature of the archive's infection, and the challenges (or defeats) academic thought faces today when "university's discourse" (one of Lacan's four master discourses) is another avatar for contemporary capital's hegemonic construction of everyday life. Let us remember that Lacan avoids confusing the academic interpretative machinery and/or institutional fireworks with his theorization of "university discourse" as "discourse," as a "social link" or let us say an "anchor," as a practice of language that *dominates* society. As a practice of language that articulates "knowledge," conceptualized as one of the discourses of the Master, and as a master-signifier, "the discourse of the university" transforms (translates) the singularity of any object to "objectivity" or "rigor" with the corresponding subordination and subjugation of the subject.

Fiol-Matta's thought provoking meditation of the "thinking voice" as a way of thinking manifesting itself in an aural subject, and as a way of listening to the sound and senses of thought is inseparable from her other operative term in *The Great Woman Singer*: *nada*, nothingness. The book could be read also as the tracing of this concept (metaphor?). From its inception in the playfully defiant and obscene rendition of foundational composer Rafael Hernández's guaracha, "Nada," in the body of Myrta Silva to the apocalyptic melodrama put forward by the enormous Lucecita Benítez in the First Festival of Latin Song in 1969, the work of the thinking voice in Fiol-Matta's book is to register what the author calls the heterogeneous and multiple "fullness" of nothingness, of the varied resonances, reflections, negotiations and sound propositions with which these artists *affected* their voices and public imaginaries by shrewdly engaging their times, the musical industries, moral interdictions and their audiences. *The Great Woman Singer* examines the heterogeneous multiplicity that seems to fulfill both the lacks of the archive and the *void* that opens between the promised fullness of Identity and gender deferrals or displacements. It is *here* where Fiol-Matta wants us to listen, and to think all of these bodies.

What does it mean to think, now, facing this open-nothingness? And, more precisely, what does it mean to think today about voice, gender, and archives in the context of the absorption of the actual University by the equivalence principle of global capitalism? What does it mean to listen right

here and right now, to this gap, and to the sounds of nothingness within the hallways of the Modern Puerto Rican musical archive? What is the historical pressure of the musical impressions that Fiol-Matta works thru? Is it possible to archive love, to register love's trembling, not the declaration of the words of the lovers, not love informed by some genre or structure, but love's image, the image of the music of the senses taken by passion?

Let me go back to Derrida's "Preamble" to *Mal d'Archive*, where he declares he has a debt with his readers-listeners; an "explication concerning the word *impression*" (25). He writes that "in an instant," three meanings of the word "impression" "had condensed themselves and overprinted each other from the back of [his] memory" (25). As Derrida approaches his second valence of the word "impression," and specifically under the "Freudian impression," he underscores the etymological "double advantage" of the two translations used in several languages for Freud's word *Verdrängung* (repression, the repression of an impression), and its difference with *Unterdrückung* (suppression), and its direct consequences on "the structures of archivization" (28). This unstable and shifting quality of any "impression" is, for Derrida, a way to represent the non-conceptual condition of the *notion* of "archive" in Freud's work. Derrida champions the undecidable, the future and productive potentiality of the archive, of Freud's impression, as a concept for the future:

Unlike what a classical philosopher or scholar would be tempted to do, I do not consider this impression, or the notion of this impression, to be a subconcept, the feebleness of a blurred and subjective preknowledge, destined for I know not what sin of nominalism, but to the contrary, as I will explain later, I consider it to be the possibility and the very future of the concept, to be the very concept of the future, if there is such a thing and if, as I believe, the idea of the archive depends on it. This is one of the theses: there are essential reasons for which a concept in the process of being formed always remains inadequate relative to what it ought to be, divided, disjointed between two forces. And this disjointedness has a necessary relationship with the structure of archivization. (29)

The Great Woman Singer is a complex and spherical study on musical and visual impressions, recordings, registers, tones, timbers, ranges, and voice *impressions* of the image, of the musical image in modern and contemporary Puerto Rico. I hope I do not have to explain that this spherical logic is not synonymous with repetition or redundancy. The inadequacy, the disjointed tension of Fiol-Matta's notion of "the thinking voice" as a multidirectional impression of the archival drive that absorbs and gives order to the singers' quest towards representation and public visibility is, in part, responsible for the spherical double movement of the book. This inadequacy stretched between the university's disciplinarity and what remains unknowable, unheard in the singers' voices is the beginning and the

end of the future of this intellectual tour de force by Fiol-Matta. This is the unregistered disciplinary and decisive strength of this book. Perhaps, as a passage towards a new beginning. *This is the end of this book*, the beginning of an exodus from the conventional ways of doing things with archives. In the best scenario, (pun intended) the arrival of the “thinking voice” as an inscription, as well as its traces from past performances, is the very possibility of bringing an end to academic thought as corporatist or institutional currency.

It seems that when Fiol-Matta arrived at the idea of her book as an academic intellectual, her life of listening, since early childhood in Puerto Rico, was already inscribed and transformed by the voice and images emanating from the performances of Myrta Silva, Ruth Fernández, Ernestina Reyes, and Lucecita Benítez. The writing of this book is perhaps the re-tracing of the affects and effects produced by these performers, and a way to make sensible that which is irreparably lost or destroyed in the archive and even in the present of the text. The spherical logic that traverses *The Great Woman Singer* has to do with the painstakingly erudite effort of Fiol-Matta to circle around the void, around that nothing (*esa nada*) that, at the end of the book, had *in-formed* a *something* by these performances. It could be a finger around the open mouth of the singer or the retracing of the rims and borders of the ground zero of the aural discharge. The contents of the book are a potential itinerary for making *sense* of this nothing, for making something of this nothing: “Introduction. I am nothing; One. Getting Off...the Nation; Two. So What If She’s Black?; Three. Techne and the Lady; Four. The Thinking Voice; Epilogue. Nothing is Something.” Does this table of contents aspire to restore the visibility, the sensibility of the “authentic” performance by the “Great Woman Singer”? Of course not. Fiol-Matta tells us she does not believe in the misogynistic ideology that constructed such a state of exception and exclusion for those performers. But this is the form of the sphere inscribed *by her thinking voice* as an academic intellectual in her book. Does *The Great Woman Singer. Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music* fill in the gaps of the *nada* with the trace, the workings of the gendered thinking voice? I don’t think so, since Fiol-Matta does not aspire to restore the forgotten glory or visibility of those performances, but to “remember” their singular paradoxical coming into being, and, more or less, their “disappearance” from the Caribbean Aural Archive. Fiol-Matta knows, even at the end of her book, that in the Puerto Rican *mal d’Archive* (if such a thing exists), even while listening to the most important *note or melody, something is still missing*:

Myrta Silva’s signature song, “Nada,” became an albatross after the 1950s. Silva was expected to perform the song well after her interest in it had waned. In footage of the early 1970s, Silva forgets the lyrics to “Nada” during a tribute to Rafael Hernández at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. She

finally blurts out, “I forgot the words. What was it, something about getting a divorce? I think I have sung this so many times my brain doesn’t want me to sing it again.” Silva is intentionally deceptive. She had performed forgetting and changing the lyrics to the same song before. In fact, her entire recitative had been filmed in the Banco Popular 1965 tribute to Hernández. Silva was not forgetful; she was stating the musical need to move on. (226)

The emergence of another void in this book devoted to tracing and tracking most of them is quite fascinating. I am referring to the void between Silva’s “I” and “her brain”, that Fiol-Matta quickly exposes and fills as Silva’s staged and recorded forgetfulness. Here is another void, another “nada” that Fiol-Matta seems to corroborate due to her knowledge and the hours spent working within the confines of the archive. Let me finish working around, working within, the understanding of the critic, of the listener as a probe into the emptiness at the heart of intentions or at the origin of identity’s drives towards institutional recognition. This inquiry into nothingness as disguise, reception or performative maneuvering could also open itself to the task of facing the incommensurability, lack of clarity and murkiness of those stances and performances when those voices decided to challenge the institutional interdictions, precisely when the powers that be (or their contemporary custodians) demanded reverence and abidance to their institutional compounds. The consequences of these actions are quite *impressive*.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz, The U of Chicago P, 1998.