

Tuning Out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television. YEIDY M. RIVERO. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005. xii + 264 pp. (Paper US\$ 21.95)

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Yeidy M. Rivero points out that in spite of Puerto Rico's political relationship with the United States, the representation of blackness on Puerto Rican television has been defined through a complex range of relationships, dialogues, and the re-articulation of local, Caribbean, and Latin American contexts. In addition to contributing to the historicizing of these relations, her essay includes an analysis of racism and the ethnic frontiers in Puerto Rican television. Understanding the complexities of the representation of blackness in Puerto Rican television goes beyond the deconstruction of discourses of "racial democracy" Puerto Rican style that have developed around myths such as "racism doesn't exist," "everybody is mixed," or "talking about race or racism merely imitates intellectual discourse in the United States." Rivero historicizes the key moments of these representations in the period 1940-1990 and she closes with an epilogue in which she discusses the dilemmas of local Puerto Rican television when confronted by the supremacy of huge corporations such as Univisión-Puerto Rico, based in the United States.

The first chapter, "Caribbean Negritos: Ramón Rivero, Blackface and Black Voice in Puerto Rico," focuses on the artistic trajectory of the famous comedian Ramón del Rivero (Diplo) and his use of "blackface" in Puerto Rican theater and television, making the connection clear between Cuban *teatro bufo* (1860, a genre whose influence can be traced back to the Spanish Golden Age) and the "blackface" of the Puerto Rican author. The influence of what Rivero, following critic César Salgado, calls "Cubarican" socio-cultural expression is central for her argument, since she goes fully into a "transnational" consensus of the representation of race in both countries.

These alliances clearly occurred in popular culture (Diplo saw the mask for the first time on Cuban comedian Leopoldo Fernández), and as Rivero points out, they strengthened with the Vanguard movements and cultural and literary *negrismo* (négritude) as in the poetry of Palés Matos and Nicolás Guillén. During those years, Fernando Ortiz was already the director of the "Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos" (Society of Afro-Cuban Studies) where Tomás Blanco presented his conference "Racial Prejudice in Puerto Rico." The allusion made

to a particular discourse on race and racism that was being articulated in similar modes on both Hispanic Caribbean islands indicates that the radicalism and the complexity of Diplo's black mask goes beyond a mere copy of the scripts and accent from Havana. It is a trans-Caribbean mask that represents – “from the top” and “from the bottom” – a series of discourses and social, cultural, and political issues. In the transition to television the radicalism of the scripts was transformed, making way after the death of Ramón del Rivero to other representations in “blackface,” such as Paquito Cordero's character “Reguerete” (1965, *La taberna India*) and the Negro “Doroteo” by Tino Acosta (1960), that lose the social and political cleverness of Diplo's characters.

Chapter 2, “Bringing the Soul: Afros, Black Empowerment and the Resurgent Popularity of Blackface,” analyzes the 1970s in Puerto Rico and a more politicized discourse on racism in the mass media. Political and social alliances created by Puerto Ricans in the diaspora with African-Americans in cities such as New York and Chicago are central to understanding the socio-cultural and political debates about race. Rivero highlights the founding of the “Young Lords,” the Puerto Rican chapter of the Black Panthers in Chicago, and the visit of Stokely Carmichael to Puerto Rico and his meeting with Juan Mari Brás, the leader of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party.

The first part of this chapter presents several interviews, photos, and images of variety shows, from the beginning of Lucecita Benitez's career as a singer of the “nueva ola” (new wave) until the moment of her political radicalization. Rivero points out that this can be seen at a musical level on her record *Raza pura* (1971) in which the singer interprets songs with a radical political edge, and at a visual level, in the singer's choice to transform her hair to an Afro style and to dress in a masculine manner. These gestures forced her out of local television for a number of years, although it gave her a degree of international fame: Lucecita won the Festival OTI in México in 1969, singing “Génesis” dressed in a blue gabardine suit and donning an Afro.

Rivero points out that discussions of race also touch on issues of gender and sexuality and analyzes Lucecita's polemic Afro in that intersection. Ironically, local programming closely followed musical shows in which African-American “soul” styles were the fashion, and Rivero mentions the Boricua version of *Soul Train* with Carol Myles and Melín Falú, the latter with a U.S.-style Afro. The second part of this chapter concentrates on the victory of Wilnelia Merced in the “Miss Mundo” contest and the reaction of the press. Rivero argues that Merced's victory revealed the ambiguity of racial categories in Puerto Rico. If for some journalists Wilnelia was *trigueña* (brown-skinned), for others her skin color was due to the “strength of the tropical sun” rather than her racial origin.

Chapters 3 and 4, “The CubaRican Space Revisited” and “Mi familia: A Black Puerto Rican Televisual Family,” concentrate on comedies of the 1980s and 1990s. Rivero explores the importance of the presence of Cuban screen-

writers such as Manuel Montero “Membrillo” and Felipe San Pedro for the production of comedies on local television. The world of Latin American soap operas owes a large debt to scripts for Cuban radio soap operas such as *El derecho de nacer* (the right to be born) written by Delia Fiallo, and Puerto Rican comedies also reflect the influence of Cuban scripts and comedies that arrived on the island before 1959. After the Revolution of 1959 and with the emigration of Cubans dedicated to media-related work, producers, directors, and scriptwriters went on to form part of the mass media of Puerto Rico.

If, as José Cobas and Jorge Duany (1997) point out, an anti-Cuban discourse against the new emigrants began in the 1960s (“Cubans are right-wing,” “they always talk about Cuba,” “they think they are better than Puerto Ricans,” etc.), scriptwriters such as Manuel Montero “Membrillo” represented these issues in television comedies, interrogating, deconstructing, and redoing many of these stereotypes. The comedy *Los suegros* (The in-laws) is a clear example of these “ethnic” and “international” borders in Puerto Rican television. Rivero analyzes the scripts of several episodes to trace the interaction between the Puerto Rican and Cuban families, and at the same time, to show how they reacted to Kathy, the character from the United States. The quality of the scripts created a conflict between Montero and various sectors of the Cuban community in Puerto Rico who considered that he was not “anti-Fidel” and did not have a “clear” political commitment to Cuba. One of the contributions of this chapter is the elaboration of this “Cuba-Rican” border in social, political, and cultural arenas. It also makes clear that the Cuban community in Puerto Rico since the 1960s has been as heterogeneous in its political visions as it is today in any part of the world.

Chapter 4 deals with the popular series *Mi familia*, starring Otilio Warrington (Bizcocho) and the late Judith Pizarro, highlighting the *puertorriqueñidad* represented by the characters that created a “de-racialized” image – one of the show’s initial proposals. Rivero analyzes which of these instances are positive and negative vis-à-vis that “de-racialized” image, while underlining its importance and popularity on Puerto Rican television. He points out that the comedy was a workshop for many black Puerto Rican actors, and contrary to other African-American series, it wasn’t necessarily focused on upper- or middle-class black families. After the chain Univisión purchased Channel 11 and turned it into Univisión-Puerto Rico in 2001, many local programs disappeared. *Mi familia* was canceled in 2003.

The book’s “Coda” discusses the social, cultural, and political implications of the control that conglomerates now hold over programming in Puerto Rico and Latin America more generally. If Puerto Rican television has not been a mere “copy” of programs from the United States or Latin America but rather a creative and dialogical expression of local contexts and spaces, what are the repercussions of programming that does not speak about local or national debates and racial, ethnic, and sociopolitical borders? Due to pres-

sure from the large U.S. television chains, numerous Puerto Rican actors now live in Mexico, Miami, or Los Angeles to participate in this market. Making the jump from the local to the U.S. “pan-Latino” is equivalent to the creation of new languages of interpretation that, contrary to spaces such as the *Cubanorriqueño* (of a pan-Caribbean nature), make reference to postnational and globalized contexts. Are positive results possible or is local Puerto Rican television a colonial victim of the “equalizing” and “commodifying” currents of globalization? Rivero does not answer all of these questions, although she does emphasize that the products, actors, and creations of local television need to be defended and that there is a sense of urgency for academics on the island and in the United States to make these debates visible.