

# EMISFÉRICA

## *San Antón for TV: Gender Performances of Puerto Rican Black Folklore<sup>1</sup>*

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Isabelo Zenón Cruz, in his groundbreaking study on racism in Puerto Rican literature, focuses on the systematic marginalization of the black man in representations of Puerto Ricanness (Zenón Cruz 1975). This form of imposed alienation continues to be a reality for the black Puerto Rican woman, as is evidenced in the work of authors such as Marie Ramos, Mariluz Franco, Mayra Santos, Doris Quiñones, Idsa Alegría, Palmira Ríos, among others (Franco Ortiz and Quiñones 1993; Quiñones 1999; Ramos Rosado 1999; Santos Febres 1995; Alegría and Ríos 2005). My intervention draws from these critical analyses and proposes the following: First, that the exclusion of black men and women from concepts of Puerto Ricanness operates not only on the basis of absences and silences, but also on presences which are celebrated as part of the island's national folklore. Second, that the implicit racism in this "folklorization of blackness" has particularly insidious effects on representations of the black woman's body.

As an ethnographic example, I wish to recount what occurred during the filming of a television program in the community of San Antón in Ponce. Here, in December of 1995, film crews from local station Canal 2 recorded a Christmas special featuring the musical group *Plena Libre* and the renowned Puerto Rican singer Danny Rivera. Technicians and performing artists arrived seemingly out of nowhere and began to set up at the entrance to San Antón without any prior announcements or permits. According to the director, they had chosen San Antón since it was considered the birthplace of the *bomba* and *plena* dance genres.

As the filming proceeded, community residents gathered around the performers, and the director invited some of them to participate. The first to join in were children, who were asked to promenade from side to side. The director then asked two local male residents to pose in front of the *Zarabanda Club*, one of the most well-known bars in the community. Others participated by playing the *congas* at the entrance to the brightly colored pub. Silvia, a woman approximately 50 years of age, broke into a dance. Her neighbors told her to get off the stage, but Danny Rivera yelled out: "No, don't take her away. I'm going to dance with her in the finale."

I asked one of the men on the film crew if they had requested permission to film in the community. He responded that the police had been informed, but not the local residents. In this way they would avoid attracting too much of a crowd, "and it would come out better, you know, more natural" – he told me. Antonia, a community resident, criticized these kinds of unannounced visits to San Antón. She complained about the photographers, researchers and reporters who, in their zeal to document the birthplace of

the plena, neglected to provide sufficient time for residents to prepare and even dress appropriately. These curious outsiders, on the other hand, “always arrive turned out in the finest clothes and perfectly made up,” Antonia remarked.

I then thought about Silvia, who was awaiting her moment to dance with Danny Rivera, in her stained shorts and mussed-up hair which, of course, she hadn’t the time to coiff. I suggested to Ana Julia that perhaps she might lend Silvia one of the dresses she kept in the community for dancers in the Bomba and Plena festivals. Ana Julia quickly brought out a billowing skirt and a small, bright orange turban. Thus outfitted, Silvia now looked like one of the typical black mammies appearing on the Tanairí soap opera series, or the Mama Inés of the televised ads for Café Yaucono, or the granny of “¿Y tu abuela dónde está?” (“And your granny, where is she?”). She looked so typecast that she no longer bore any resemblance to herself. When seeing her, a local girl chuckled to her neighbors— “Look, there’s Silvia, just waiting to read your palm.”

The aesthetic and thematic framework for this production coincides with what historian Juan Giusti has referred to as “*cultura negroide*” (literally, “negroid culture”). Giusti uses this term to describe the first phase of public artistic expression of Afro-Boricua culture, which was part of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary style sharing certain characteristics with the Négritude movement of the French West Indies and Afro-Cubanism of the 1920s and 1930s. According to Giusti, the main traits of this form of literary expression in Puerto Rico include heightened sensuality and an intense focus on the senses. These elements are also paralleled by disdain for the rational, which is combined with an attraction toward the primitive and festive (including drunken revelry). This type of expression is also characterized by an idealization of the coastal countryside and the rustic way of life of the black people who lived there (Giusti Cordero, 1996).

These signifiers of “negroid culture”—the representation of the black person as primitive, hypersexualized, non-rational and almost instinctively animalistic—are dynamically channeled through the body of the black woman. It is the woman who is considered the repository *par excellence* of negroid folklore. It is also no coincidence that the most famous poem of this movement—“Majestad Negra” by Luis Palés Matos—celebrates the voluptuous swaying of a black woman as she meanders down the “encendida calle Antillana” (“ember-hot Antillean street”) (Palés Matos 1974 (1925-1933)). In this and other literary expressions of Caribbeanness, the black woman is transformed into the object of a detached gaze which depicts her alleged corporeal exuberance in magical, erotic or prohibited dimensions.

The writer Mayra Santos relates how these signifiers of exuberance informed her own parents’ fears, and their obsession for disciplining her body from the time she was a child, to make sure that she would not become one of “those black women” (Santos Febres, 1995). The body of the black woman is always perceived in terms of excess, Santos states: “Too much flesh, too much space surrounded by her bodily fluids, occupied by her hips, that never-ending enticing bottom forever trembling, escaping the full gaze of the beholder” (Santos Febres, 1995).

Black men are not exempt from this kind of hypersexualized representation, however their stereotypes are constructed along different lines. Puerto Rican anthropologist Ramón López comments that *poesía negra* incorporates

...para repetir una imagen de negros bellacos y machistas, borrachos y despreocupados, felices e infantiles. La poesía negra que sube a tarima hoy día, no presenta la rebelión, la solidaridad en la lucha, la denuncia de la explotación y el discrimin y los demás asuntos de la vida cotidiana. (López, 1986)

repeated images of black men as horny, machista, drunken, carefree, happy and infantile. The *poesía negra* which appears in the bookstalls nowadays fails to present (any themes) of rebellion, solidarity, condemnation of exploitation or discrimination, or any of the other real issues of daily life.

The TV crew arrived in San Antón looking for racially representative types—those who might elicit a black essence, a sense of nostalgia which would be immediately and directly identifiable once they appeared on the screen. Whatever they came across was transformed, bit by bit, into the “negroid.” In this scheme of things, male residents were made over to form a rum-laced backdrop of carefree revelry. Silvia appeared sporting her orange dancer’s (or psychic’s) turban, alluding to a distant past of magical and exotic dimensions.

Few of these images bear any relation to daily life in this community. Men do not frequent the Zarabanda Club at such an early hour in the day. People also do not dance in the main street leading into San Antón, which is generally bustling with the traffic of daily shopping trips, family visits, or the transporting of children to and from school. Furthermore, few middle-aged women would ever don such anachronistic headgear. If she had more time, Silvia would probably have visited a beauty salon to have her hair straightened (Godreau 2002). Nevertheless, once again the “blackness” of San Antón is made to seem authentic and national so that it can be presented as an example of “negroidism,” laden with exoticism, fantasy and difference. Such representations of San Antón and Loíza (Puerto Rico’s other main locus of black culture) implicitly reconstruct the rest of the island as being white and modern, which would jibe with the 2000 census results whereby only 8% of island residents reported themselves as black (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

The production of this Christmas special also reinforced racial difference by using other artistic elements. The sophisticated dance style of the program’s professional dancers, for example, with their thin, lycra-coated bodies, their carefully rehearsed routines and makeup, contrasted with the simple steps and rudimentary attire of the local residents who were caught on film. All of this contributed to the creation of a televised version of San Antón that was rustic, unrefined, and, ultimately, a vestige of the past. The contrast

between primitive and sophisticated certainly allowed Danny Rivera and the Plena Libre performers to shine with a brilliant aura of casual neutrality.

I do not believe that these elements were designed or planned in advance. In fact, the inclusion of elements from San Antón occurred rather haphazardly and spontaneously and was certainly not foreseen by the film crew. Nonetheless, these typologies are so deeply rooted in our scripted concept of blackness that they almost take on a life of their own. The men playing drums outside the bar, the children dressed as *vejigantes*,<sup>2</sup> the impromptu dancer, all facilitate an immediate reading of what viewers understand as “black Puerto Rican culture.” That reading requires no planning or explanation, since the signs informing it are understood as givens, and—perhaps most importantly—are naturally assumed, even by those whose everyday lives challenge such typecasting of blackness.

There are, nevertheless, some dissenting voices. Julio, for example, a young man from the community, related the following as we spoke on his terrace last year:

Cultura puede ser yo recoger la basura y pegarle fuego ahí al frente porque eso siempre se ha hecho aquí. Pero cultura ellos lo simbolizan en baile, caretas y comparsa. Pero cualquier cosa que yo haga es cultura. Si yo saco una hamaca y me acuesto ahí al frente eso es cultura (diciembre, 2002).

Culture may also be me collecting together some trash and setting fire to it, which is something that’s always been done here. But, for them, culture means dancing, masks and costumes. But anything I do is culture. If I take out a hammock and lie down there, out in front, that’s also culture (December 2002).

On that day, however, the “negroid” rather effortlessly eclipsed the quotidian. Ana Julia, for example, distributed the dresses and turbans she had on hand. Finally, I also participated when, in attempting to prevent Silvia from appearing like some drunkard or lunatic, I initiated a process that wound up reproducing the stereotype of a black mammy. And so, almost automatically, an act of representation eventually culminated in the same folkloric model which everyone knows and celebrates.

And, so what is the problem? What is wrong with celebrating folklore in such a way? The problem is that those scripts which are devised for black Puerto Rican men and women are not merely left backstage. Their effects seep insidiously into our daily lives, informing actions on the basis of prejudice, prejudice which reads certain bodies as more sexually accessible than others, more primitive than others, and more prone to alcohol, boisterous partying, and indolence than others. And if these models are the product of artistic creation, art is, nonetheless, not constructed in a vacuum. As long as we continue to celebrate our blackness through models which dehumanize black people—with

nostalgic images of allegedly isolated communities that are steeped in magic and contented with their revelry—then the sexism and racism which we perpetuate today will continue to subordinate these communities to the past, thus relegating blackness to “some other place”: be it San Antón, Loíza, the Dominican Republic, or Haiti.

What I propose is not to eliminate difference, or belittle the affirmation of blackness that may occur through dance, music or spirituality. What I am questioning are the anachronistic, hypersexualized and decontextualized ways of celebrating those differences, not only because they have nothing to do with everyday life, but because they are informed by daily practices of exclusion and humiliation. I therefore propose an alternate approach, one which considers racism as part of daily experience, and black Puerto Rican culture as part of modernity. I propose a focused rereading, one which does not pigeonhole a group of people into a specific time and space, or into a matrix of predetermined sensibilities, but one which better enables us to understand how women and men have managed to cope with sexism and racism in different ways at the local level and in solidarity with other groups of the diaspora.

### Endnotes

1 A less abridged version of this article was published in *Identidades*, Vol. I - No. 1 – August 2003: 88-96. English translation for this article was made possible by David A. Auerbach, Associate Professor of the Graduate Program in Translation, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

2 Traditional costumed caricatures who parade through Ponce during carnival (translator’s note).

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