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[Review of: R.E. Carrasquillo (2014) The People's Poet: Life and Myth of Ismael Rivera, an Afro-Caribbean Icon]

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DOI

[10.18352/erlacs.9986](https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.9986)

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe

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Citation for published version (APA):

Martens, E. (2015). [Review of: R.E. Carrasquillo (2014) The People's Poet: Life and Myth of Ismael Rivera, an Afro-Caribbean Icon]. *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, 98, 134-135. <https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.9986>

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cial movements and gender and sexual politics in Latin America, and its emphasis on lesbian identities and organizing is particularly welcome, since it is still a little explored area in those fields of study.

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– *The People’s Poet: Life and Myth of Ismael Rivera, an Afro-Caribbean Icon*, by Rosa Elena Carrasquillo. Caribbean Studies Press, 2014.

In recent years the genre of the biography has become increasingly accepted as a probe to explore broader historical contexts, particularly those relating to colonial histories in need of revisionist scrutiny. This is what Rosa Elena Carrasquillo has done in *The People’s Poet*, a biography on the life of Puerto Rican Latin singer Ismael Rivera.

In the book’s introduction, Carrasquillo explains that she aims to combine ‘the linear conception of time of a meta-narrative of a “post”-colonial subject with the revisionist, and even futuristic, need to create heroes of Caribbean popular culture’ (p. 3). She argues that ‘Puerto Ricans, like other black men and women of the transatlantic world, “need” heroes in order to humanize our past, present, and reimagine an empowered future’ (p. 3) – and rightfully so. While the colonial project rested on the dehumanization of black people, it has become the main task of the postcolonial project to affirm their humanity. An important way to achieve this is through ‘imagining, documenting, rationalizing and proclaiming’ (p. 3) the exploits of black individuals who dared to resist colonial practices and discourses.

According to Carrasquillo, Rivera ‘illustrates a type of hero of post-colonial times’ (p. 4) as he exercised great influence in Puerto Rico’s cultural domain, the domain where fierce battles over meaning and power were fought out, as political action on the island was limited due to the US governance system. Within this domain, Carrasquillo considers music as ‘one of the most salient aspects of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism’ (p. 6) and Rivera as ‘a model of cultural nationalism and Pan-Africanism’ (p. 8). The biography begins from these departure points.

Following the introduction, *The People’s Poet* consists of five chapters in which Rivera’s life story is unfolded. Chapter Two, ‘Musical Cradle 1931-1954’, describes his childhood in the poor slums of Santurce and shows how his dream of becoming a musician took off. Chapter Three, ‘The Golden Years: 1954-1962’, details Rivera’s heyday from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s and explores the popularity of his ‘new sound’ (p. 45) among all racial groups in Puerto Rico and the wider Latin world at a time when racial separation was the norm. Chapter Four, ‘Imprisoned 1962-1966’, discusses Rivera’s heroin addiction and his downfall when he got arrested for possession of the drug and sentenced to prison. Chapter Five, ‘Salsa Heights 1966-1979’, docu-

ments Rivera's return to society, which was followed by new highs and lows, including his success in the New York salsa scene and his second drug addiction. Finally, Chapter Six, 'Desolation 1980-1987', provides an account of Rivera's final years, in which he 'fell into an abyss of depression' (p. 177) and died of a heart attack at 56 years of age, just when he had gained renewed hope for another comeback.

Altogether, *The People's Poet* presents a detailed, nuanced and vivid portrait of the life of one of Puerto Rico's greatest musicians. It is obvious that the author had unprecedented access to Rivera's archives and family, notably his sister, who is the director of the Fundación Ismael Rivera, formed to preserve his singing legacy. In particular the discussion of the police report of Rivera's arrest, which has taken on mythical proportions, sheds new light on the incident that marked the end of his golden years. Moreover, Carrasquillo's attempt to understand Rivera's life in the light of Puerto Rico's cultural landscape and its wider socio-political contexts makes *The People's Poet* a valuable resource.

However, here the limits of the book come in sight as well. First of all, the connections made between Rivera's life and Puerto Rico's history feel at times artificial. Too often the experiences of the musician are stated to 'reflect', 'mirror' or 'match' the socio-political events taking place in society, without identifying direct links or impacts. This also calls into question Rivera's heroic status. My main unease with the book is due to the impression that he does not live up to his reputation as post-colonial black hero. Not only does he come across as irresponsible (mainly his repeated sexism, infidelity and drug abuse make him quite unsympathetic), but also, and more importantly, it remains unclear what contribution he has made to post-colonial change in Puerto Rico and wider Hispanic America.

While his songs and performances have undeniably inspired cultural nationalism and black pride in the Afro-Latin world, throughout his life Rivera largely seems to have avoided political action within the cultural domain. In fact, at times the author herself revokes Rivera's status as a hero by exposing hidden facts and deconstructing popular myths surrounding his life. This is both insightful and thought-provoking, but it would have been useful to deal with this more explicitly throughout the book, and to add a critical dimension to the theoretical celebration of black heroes. However, in spite of this, the retrospective and revisionist aspects of this well-written work make it a welcome addition to the academic genre of the biography – and of course a must read for all fans of Latin music.

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