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Caribbean Popular Culture: Everyday Lives, Racial Politics and Transnational Movements

Review Essay by Emiel Martens

- *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age*, by Lara Putman. Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2013.
- *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico*, by Petra R. Rivera-Rideau. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.
- *Roy Cape: A Life on the Calypso and Soca Bandstand*, by Joycelyne Guilbault and Roy Cape. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014.
- *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950-1960*, by Yeidy M. Rivero. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.

In recent years, book-length studies on Caribbean popular culture seem to be on a rise. In the not-so-recent past, most of the literature on the topic was, if at all, published in journals and edited volumes. At least until the 1990s, as John Lent observed in the introduction of his edited volume, *Caribbean Popular Culture* (1990), ‘the study of Caribbean popular culture, much like that of the field generally, has been very recent, uneven..., scattered, fragmented, and tentative’ (p. 3). According to Lent, the reasons for this paucity and lack of consistency could be found in ‘the diversity of the backgrounds of those researching the field, in the academic snobbery, and in the definition of popular culture itself’ (p. 3). In other words, the field of (Caribbean) popular culture has long been neglected due to its interdisciplinary scope (with no decided approach or method to study it), its low status (and perceived negative effects), and its many meanings (making it a potentially overused and hollow phrase).

Although there is still some academic unease remaining today, significant strides have been made in the past twenty-five years to constitute the field of popular culture as a legitimate field of inquiry. The study of popular culture

has most certainly gained prominence in academic circles, marked by the establishment of various popular culture associations, conferences and journals, as well as a substantial and growing body of research on the topic. While popular culture, as Lent had already highlighted in the 1990s, had long been ‘limited to the study of [Western] industrialized societies’ (p. 4), more and more scholars, both from the region and beyond, have started to focus their attention on the role of popular culture in the Caribbean.

All studies in Caribbean popular culture, such as the ones covered in this review (and studies in popular culture generally), depart from the acknowledgement that, as the late Jamaican-British scholar Stuart Hall (1981), a pioneer of media and cultural studies, once put it, ‘popular culture matters’ (famously adding that this was in fact the only reason why he gave ‘a damn about it’, p. 239). According to Hall, we have to see popular culture as one of the primary sites where power is negotiated, where political struggles take place, and where hegemony is constructed and contested. To use Hall’s own words, popular culture is an ‘arena of consent and resistance’ (p. 228), a ‘constant battlefield where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost’ (p. 239). This idea of power, this idea of the political, is crucial for an understanding of the study of popular culture.

The position that popular culture matters holds all the more true in the Caribbean, where the folk and working-class culture of the black masses has long been ridiculed and oppressed by the commercial and ‘high’ culture of the white (and brown) elites, first during slavery and later under ongoing patterns of discrimination and exploitation. Within the colonial system, with its hierarchical structures of power, the field of popular culture, defined by the influential British media scholar John Fiske (1989) as the production, distribution and consumption of ‘meanings and pleasures within a social system’ (p. 23), became a highly intense and often explosive battlefield. One only has to think of the often violent oppression of African-based languages and religious and other cultural practices imposed by the colonial authorities, and the strong resistance against this oppression, both overt and covert, by the enslaved black communities. After emancipation and independence, the black populations of the Caribbean started to reclaim the meanings, pleasures and, one could add, identities that were curtailed or taken from them – a process that continues today, and still involves a constant and often divisive ideological struggle over the authority of ideas and ideals.

Nowadays, the study of popular culture often focuses on the analysis of mass media texts – ‘the spoken and printed word, sounds, pictures, objects and artefacts’ (Browne, 2006, p. 21) – and their everyday contexts of production, circulation and reception. The premise hereby is that media are active agents in the ongoing negotiation of meanings, pleasures, and identities. As such, analysing media can provide us with routes to insights into the political currents in society at large. Media never operate in a vacuum, as is often claimed in public discourse; on the contrary, they are always part and parcel of the larger power

structures at a given time and place. In the books under review here, Caribbean popular culture is invariably approached as a critical site of meaning creation, with the specific media under investigation being both barometers and catalysts that ‘mediate’, ‘reflect’, ‘articulate’, ‘(re)produce’, ‘shape’, ‘inform’, ‘influence’, ‘perpetuate’ and/or ‘challenge’ wider discourses and practices of power.

Caribbean popular music studies

In *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age*, the first and most comprehensive book under review here, Lara Putnam investigates ‘the popular cultures of black internationalism’ in the early twentieth century and in particular the interwar era – or ‘Jazz Age’ – of the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that ‘black internationalism was not restricted to political leaders, nor to eloquent authors, nor to the print public sphere’ (p. 4). Instead, Putnam shows that ‘the border-crossing spread of black-identified music and dance in this era (under names like jazz, calypso, mento, rumba, and *son*) reflected a different kind of black internationalism, one that was generated and spread by people of varied ages and stations, young working-class men and women most of all’ (p. 4). In fact, she even suggests that ‘the international consciousness generated by the black performative realm may have mattered more, and mattered to many more’ (p. 195) than the one created by the black print-centred public sphere. In doing so, Putnam confirms the idea that Caribbean popular culture matters, and that ‘low culture and high politics’ interacted, and still interact, ‘to remake the modern world’ (p. 230).

While Putnam’s ‘reconstruction of popular cultures’ (p. 18), done largely on the basis of the interwar press and other historic documents, is already impressive, her work does much more than that. In fact, popular culture forms only one (though fundamental) layer of the history that she is reconstructing in her book. Presenting a multi-layered, multi-sited, and multi-directional ‘history of connections across boundaries’ (p. 11), Putnam demonstrates how (1) the development of British Caribbean migration, (2) the origin of border and other mobility control, and (3) the rise of black internationalism and anti-colonial solidarities (that flourished in black religion, print media, and popular music and dance) were ‘mutually contingent, that is, that none of the three would have happened as it did in the absence of the other two’ (p. 11). In doing so, she argues that both the circulation of people and media gave rise to the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere and to the popular cultures of black internationalism ‘in dance halls and revival meetings, in street talk and political tracts’ across, and crossing, the region and beyond (p. 3). The result is a fascinating (and at times dazzlingly detailed) account on the transnational circuits of ‘ideas, sounds, moves, and people’ (p. 11) in the circum-Caribbean world.

One of the most interesting findings of Putnam’s book, and arguably a characteristic that sets Caribbean popular culture, besides its engagement with racial politics, apart from others, is its high level of transnational mobility and ex-

change. Reflecting Caribbean societies at large, the popular cultures and everyday lives of Caribbeaners are shaped by patterns of movement and migration on a significant, if not unprecedented, scale. Resulting from the colonial past (with forced mass labour migration to the Caribbean) and postcolonial present (with often not-so-voluntary mass labour migration from the Caribbean), Caribbean popular culture has been and still is, as Christine Ho and Keith Nurse note in their introduction of *Globalisation, Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture* (2005), both ‘a product of and response to the twin processes of globalization and diasporization’ (p. vii). This nexus between popular culture, racial politics, and transnational movements is exactly what often comes to the surface and is at stake in recent studies of Caribbean popular culture, such as the next two books in focus: *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* and *Roy Cape: A Life on the Calypso and Soca Bandstand*.

Remixing Reggaetón by Petra Rivera-Rideau and *Roy Cape* by Joycelyne Guilbault and Roy Cape focus on a single musical genre and its musical artists respectively. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that most studies of contemporary Caribbean popular culture have been done on the music that the region is internationally famous for. As Lent mentioned as early as 1990, ‘Caribbean music has caught on in the Caribbean, North America, and Europe’, with Jamaican reggae being ‘the best-known Caribbean music worldwide’ (p. 7). It is not surprising, then, that reggae, as well as its more recent offshoot, dancehall, has been the object of many studies in the past decades, from historical accounts and personal biographies to, increasingly, economic analyses of the international reggae industry and critical assessments of the music’s intersections with the cultural politics of class, gender and race in Jamaican society. Over time, however, other Caribbean musical genres have gradually received more attention from researchers of Caribbean popular culture as well.

Remixing Reggaetón may well be the first monograph solely devoted to the relatively new yet highly popular genre of reggaetón, a Spanish-language hybrid of reggae and rap. While being discussed in parts of books and edited volumes (there is seemingly only one edited volume focusing entirely on the genre, see Rivera, Marshall, & Pacini Hernandez, 2009), and often done in the context of Cuba and the wider Latin America, *Remixing Reggaetón* explores the genre in the context of Puerto Rico, the U.S. territory in the Caribbean that is, as Rivera-Rideau indicates in the book’s introduction, ‘often recognized as the epicentre of reggaetón’ (p. 2). Focusing on the racial politics of the music and its associated manifestations, notably music videos, Rivera-Rideau shows how reggaetón musicians such as Tego Calderón and Ivy Queen challenge ‘dominant discourses of racial democracy in Puerto – that is, the persistence of racism on the island despite official rhetoric that a history of race mixture has produced a racially harmonious society’ (p. 6) – and, instead of privileging ‘whiteness and Spanish cultures as the most influential in the island’s development’ (p. 4), ‘produce new understandings of Puerto Rican identities that centre blackness and African diasporic belonging’ (p. 20).

Again, Caribbean popular culture, and this specific case of reggaetón, is regarded as ‘a cultural practice of diaspora’, addressing both ‘the long histories of migrations throughout the Americas’ from which reggaetón emerged (p. 15), and ‘reggaetón’s articulation of diasporic links across different sites, particularly between Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the African diaspora’ (p. 16). In doing so, Rivera-Rideau starts with the local origin and development of reggaetón in the 1990s and early 2000s (including an insightful discussion of a 2002 state campaign targeting reggaetón music videos), and ends with its arrival and popularity in the United States from the mid-2000s onwards. She also considers reggaetón’s ‘vexed relationship with questions of gender and sexuality’, notably ‘its misogynistic lyrics and representations’ (p. 17).

Zooming in on specific individuals who create, define and shape a musical genre, studies on Caribbean artists can offer valuable insights into a music period, trend or style. In fact, in contrast to the prevalent idea that the experience of an individual would only present a limited perspective of history, it is increasingly recognized that a life story could serve as a useful probe to explore broader historical contexts, particularly those relating to Caribbean histories and postcolonial legacies in need of revisionist scrutiny. A good example of this is Rosa Elena Carrasquillo’s *The People’s Poet*, the biography on the life of Puerto Rican singer Ismael Rivera that I discussed in the ERLACS 98 (2015) April issue. *Roy Cape* by Jocelyne Guilbault and Roy Cape is another good example – and an exceptional one.

First of all, the book does not concentrate on a Caribbean lead singer, but on Roy Cape, a Trinidadian calypso and soca musician and bandleader. Guilbault notes that ‘most biographies in popular Caribbean music focus on the stars’ and that this ‘exclusive focus on Caribbean lead singers has diminished the presence of nearly everyone else involved in the production of music’ (p. 3). Allegedly presenting ‘the first book-length study of a journey of an instrumentalist and bandleader in the English-speaking Caribbean’ (p. 2), *Roy Cape* ‘opens a window on sound and its ephemeral qualities’ (p. 3), ‘offers fresh understandings of circulation histories and cosmopolitan practices’ (p. 3) and, most interestingly, sheds light on the working-class practices behind the theories of precarious and ‘immaterial labour’ in the international music industry (p. 5). What is exceptional is that the person as subject in the biography, Roy Cape, is also at the same time co-writer. Guilbault calls the book ‘a collaborative experiment in storytelling’ that relies on sound recordings, photographs, individual interviews and group discussions, as well as first-person narratives by, and dialogues between, the musician Cape and the music scholar Guilbault (p. 2). The result is an innovative and compelling biography – though also, admittedly, a somewhat fragmented and cluttered one – of an individual ‘musician’s journey’ in ‘the particular context of the postcolonial Caribbean’ (p. 7); and one that becomes a ‘social history’ (p. 17) on ‘how individuals, working relationships, institutions, sonic environments, economic and socio-

political conditions, skills, beliefs, and passions have been part of the making of Roy Cape' (p. 13-14).

Caribbean audiovisual media studies

Beyond the apparent realm of Caribbean popular music, research on Caribbean audiovisual media, especially the region's film and television production, has also slowly increased over the past ten years or so. According to Lent, until the 1990s the literature on film in the Caribbean was largely 'made up of scattered articles, discussing local films in the few producing countries' (p. 11). From the 2000s, however, more studies on Caribbean cinema have appeared in tandem with its development. Nevertheless, as Doris Hamburg points out in the introduction of the special issue on Caribbean cinema in *Imaginations. Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* (2015), book-length 'scholarship in Caribbean film studies has been scarce even within individual linguistic entities in the region, with the notable exception of Cuba' (p. 4), where a vibrant film movement has existed ever since the island's revolution in 1959. In fact, with the exception of *Explorando el cine caribeño* (Notario & Paddington, 2011 [Exploring Caribbean Cinema]) that was published in Spanish in limited editions, there has been no region-wide follow-up in almost 25 years of Mbye Cham's pioneering edited volume *Exiles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (1992).

While a similar scarcity can be observed in the field of Caribbean television studies (if we can call it a field), a growing interest in the role of television, arguably the most popular medium in the region, can be detected within the field of Caribbean popular culture as well. A recent study conducted in the field is *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950-1960* (2015) by Yeidy Rivero, the last book under review here. As the title indicates, Rivera's study examines the history of Cuban television in the 1950s. As such, the work is a welcome addition to the literature. Rivera rightfully points out that, 'although the last decade has seen numerous studies published in the English language that focus on Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language television, most of the research has dealt with contemporary television flows, powerful media conglomerates, and the popularity of *telenovelas* (TV soap operas) around the world' (p. 13). This focus on today's flows of television programming in and beyond the region comes at the expense of the significant developments and achievements of television in Latin America and the Caribbean in the earlier days of the medium.

With her research, Rivera, who previously co-edited *Contemporary Latina/o Media* (Dávila & Rivero, 2014), explicitly aims to recuperate 'a key missing link in the history of Latin American television' and to call attention to 'the importance of temporal, geographic, cultural, and social specificity in the studies of television across the region' (p. 13). Concentrating on Cuba, 'the first Latin American country to establish a television network' (p. 8), she looks at the medium's first ten years, a period in which 'television functioned as a

commercial media outlet’ (before being nationalized by the Cuban government) and ‘became directly and indirectly entangled with Cuba’s politics and society’ (p. 1). Rivera argues that, throughout this period, television was used to showcase Cuba’s modernity – a transnational mixture of Cuban national identity, U.S. capitalist culture, and European high-culture tradition – to its citizens and the world. In other words, Cuban television was, following the book’s title, *broadcasting modernity* in all its manifestations, i.e. ‘the technological, legal, business, production, cultural, geographic, and narrative efforts to employ television as a stage to represent Cuba as a developed nation’ (p. 2). Largely relying on newspaper and magazine archives, Rivera skilfully reconstructs the island’s early television history, one that ‘materialized and responded to the particularities of Cuba’s contemporaneity while also appropriating and reformulating external influences’ (p. 3). In doing so, the author, quoting Marita Sturken and Douglas Thomas (2014), reveals television, and popular culture more generally, as ‘one of the primary sites through which we can chart the desires and concerns of a given social context and the preoccupation of particular moments in history’ (p. 6).

And so we have come full circle, back to the idea that popular culture matters, and that Caribbean popular culture matters. From music to dance, from film to television, and all its everyday uses and meanings in between, Caribbean popular culture is inextricably linked with the racial politics and transnational movements within and beyond the region. As such, it is an important and even crucial field of inquiry within Caribbean Studies. Or, as the back cover of *Caribbean Popular Culture: Power, Politics and Performance* (Hume & Kamugisha, 2016), a new collection on the topic that was released only a few months ago, explains: ‘The terrain of the popular has been a generative site for the study of Caribbean societies.... It is also the most powerful force that socializes contemporary Caribbean citizens into an understanding of their identities, the limits of their citizenship, and the meaning of their worlds’. The four books covered here demonstrate this convincingly – and hopefully many more will follow.

* * *

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