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Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895.(Book review)

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Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895. By Jill Lane. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. xi + 274 pp. \$50.00 cloth.

Blackface Cuba is an examination of nineteenth-century Cuban society and theatre. Cuba at the time experienced an uneasy relationship with racial interaction: racial unity was perceived as a source of national pride, but racial divisions led to tension. Blacks and whites competed for the right to determine Cuban national identity, with blackface performance expressing multiple and contradictory desires for independence, emancipation, and the status quo. The history of Cuban blackface appeared through the theatrical style known as "teatro bufo" and was, according to Jill Lane, "a critical history of the relation between racial impersonation, popular culture, and the development of an anticolonial public sphere" (2). Stereotypes of blacks appeared in numerous plays and comic skits throughout the period, becoming part of Cuba's growing nationalism. Dramatists incorporated African, Spanish, and local styles in closet [dramas](#), plays, and bufo, leading to a hybrid of antecedents and innovations. Despite a confluence of influences, the "publicity, reviews, and the plays themselves typically characterized [the performances] not as racialized (not black, not mulata) but national (Cuban): the danzon and the negrito were first and foremost imagined as Cuban" (3).

Each chapter examines the nationalism of nineteenth-century Cuba as illustrated in performance, demonstrating how performance helped define Cuba's cultural identity. Chapter 1 analyzes the "costumbrismo," a literary and performative style utilizing idiomatic vernacular, elaborate [pageants](#), and local life. The principal contributors were poet and playwright Bartolome Jose Crespo y Borbon, who (using several aliases) popularized the bozel character (the African-born slave), and Francisco Covarrubias, who "debuted as the first blackface stage character in 1812: the negrito" (29). The costumbrismo scripts followed the prescriptive designs familiar to European commedia dell'arte: swiftly recognizable types ensnared in zany shenanigans. A steady stream of these popular plays depicted [music](#), food, costumes, and indigenous characters. What

complicated matters was the [use](#) of blackface, which, as Lane carefully points out, had a unique and complex cultural significance.

Chapter 2 explores the visiting Spanish touring troupes that "transformed their source materials" and established "a recognizable Cuban aesthetic that gained new relevance in the contest of anticolonial resistance" (61). The 1860s marked the first of several wars for Cuban independence. These rebellions influenced the teatro bufo; plays and sketches began providing roots to revolutionary ideology. The core of the cultural conflict was centered in blackface performance, where the potential meaning of blackface could "function as a sign of racial division, marking and reinforcing the difference between white and black; at the same time, it could function as a sign of racial contact, where black met white for some new 'mestizo' entity" (66-67). This complex interaction brought on by blackface stimulated the appearance of skits and dramas that depicted, albeit covertly, anticolonial attempts at pitting locals against invaders. Dramatists invented ways of using the blackface mask to create satirical tropes, "enabling the emergence of a 'Cuban' humor, style, and rhythm" (80). But this development, Lane maintains, was in constant flux as Cubans attempted to formulate a national style against the backdrop of racism, class conflict, and colonial power.

Chapter 3 takes as its point of departure Jurgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere," defined as a gathering of bourgeois intellectuals and critics whose purpose was to ferment aesthetics, taste, and social dialogue. However, for Lane, the Cuban public sphere evolved not from an elite literary (and literate) society but from the raw tools of performance; and not from bourgeois social congeries but from a working-class milieu. This was evidenced by the return of the blackface performance in the teatro bufo from 1879 to 1895, with its "sharply contrasting emergence of black social performances, known as veladas, sponsored by black mutual aid societies" (108). Under the influence of popular dance mainly in Havana, the representation of race came to dominate choreography. But this representation, Lane stresses, was rendered through "a dizzying array of doubled and redoubled racial impersonations" (114). Late-nineteenth-century Cuba also experienced the rise of the "mulata" character as a cultural symbol. These events were soon followed by independence movements, intellectualism, and new civil rights legislation, all of which informed the costumbrista and teatro bufo.

Danzon is the subject of chapter 4, where Lane considers gender in performance. The influence of African and European [dance](#), and the sexual suggestiveness of dance itself, becomes a nexus of contestation and complexity. Lane applies various scholarly devices to the material, among them Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling." The book continues in chapter 5 to complicate Cuban identity and nationalism through its examination of literary movements that followed the ending of slavery in 1886. The chapter illustrates the role of the mulata as a metaphor for the prominence of Cuban culture that was island-based, racially complex, and politically fraught. Issues are brought into focus in the conclusion, where Lane examines what she calls "cartographic [fantasy](#)" (225), the notion of an interrelationship of ideology embedded in Cuba's popular theatre and its evocation of Africa--the idea of exoticism and racially circumscribed space.

Blackface Cuba is a meticulously researched and impressive work. Lane is a careful and appreciative expositor, guiding the reader through theatrical history seldom explored in English. The [translations](#) are superb, conveying the scholarly intent of formal articles and the comic vernacular of colloquial dialogue. The narrative occasionally succumbs to predictable and unconvincing poststructural pseudo-Marxism, and the text sometimes belabors shopworn academic terms such as "discursive" and "discursively" which together appear thirty times, sometimes twice in the same sentence and thrice on the same page. Still, such awkwardness is forgivable in view of the work's many virtues and elegant writing. It deserves accompanying photographs, and the press's likely parsimony should be faulted for failing to incorporate illustrations. There are several instances where photos would have complemented the work's descriptions of playbills, posters, and the performers' body language. The author will, it is hoped, attain this kind of support in the future. Much of the book follows in the tradition of performance studies, which suggests that performance itself is "not a site for unproblematic, reciprocal racial mixing and exchange, as some would have it, but the contrary: a site of profound social contestation and negotiation" (147). This work convincingly illuminates the importance of performance in understanding Cuba's history, aesthetics, and civil rights.

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