

INTRODUCTION

Translating Televisual “Blackness”

It was a time when we were islanders, and the sea, on every side the sea, was our only frontier. We lived surrounded by water and submerged in family tradition. And we have always been good, my brother and I. We ran in the solitude of our house, playing with American toy soldiers, Spanish decks of cards, and with dreams of leaving forever. We were growing up in the brightness of Puerto Rican mornings and in the shadow of the trees that shaded houses full of shadows in the stupor of identical and tranquil afternoons of Santurce in the fifties.

Magali García Ramis, *Happy Days Uncle Sergio*

And in this warehouse that Pedro borrowed and that has an interior, I mean, an inside part, his best friends are waiting for him, I mean, Lindbergh, Moncho Tarralla, Glostora, Chan el Cabro and Jalisco. . . . Jalisco is the artist who came from abroad, so we can sell the *telenovela* abroad. . . . You know how it is!

El lince de la barandilla in Pablo Cabrera’s 1980 play

La verdadera historia de Pedro Navaja

Ok, and now you are going to look at the camera and you are going to say these very simple lines: “bunga, bunga, water.” Remember the character . . . give me more flavor . . . more . . . it is the Caribbean, more . . . rhythm.

Javier Cardona’s 1997 performance piece *You Don’t Look Like*

On September 14, 1994, after forty years of local programming Telemundo’s network affiliate in Puerto Rico (WKAQ–channel 2) began to broadcast *Mi familia* (My Family), the first locally produced situation comedy in the history of Puerto Rico’s commercial television featuring a fictional “black” family. According to one of *Mi familia*’s production members, the show’s idea originated after witnessing the commercial success of U.S. “black”-oriented situation comedies such as *The Jeffersons* and *The Cosby Show*. However, the media professional noted that contrary to these U.S. programs, in *Mi familia* “there is no color, there is nothing established. The show is about a Puerto Rican family, period.”¹

In contrast, on January 17, 2000, the Ramón Rivero Foundation announced the possibility of reviving Ramón Rivero's character Diplo, the most famous "black" voice and blackface character in Puerto Rico. According to the president of the foundation, "the people longed for that figure who made them laugh for many years and who had become part of the people's consciousness."² Although the foundation's plans have not yet become a reality, a plethora of blackface *negrito* and *negra* characters performed by "white" actors and actresses have intermittently surfaced on the island's commercial television since its beginning in 1954.

The transformation from U.S. televisual "blackness" to a "colorless" *Puerto Ricanness* expressed by a *Mi familia* production member and the ongoing use of blackface hint at the differences between U.S. and Puerto Rican racial ideologies and cultures. In addition, while seemingly not interconnected, "colorless" and blackface bring to light the U.S.-P.R. cultural, political, and social tensions on the island and the ongoing debates regarding the distinctions between these two nations. Within these discourses of difference, "race" and "race" relations in Puerto Rico are generally located as distinctly superior antitheses to U.S. racial practices.

This study examines the ways in which "blackness" has been represented and discussed in Puerto Rico's commercial media entertainment programming. By focusing on "black" voice and blackface characters that became popular media icons, locally produced radio and television shows, and particular racialized TV events, this book disentangles the ways in which Puerto Rico's racial discourses and cultural, political, and social practices have permeated the island's mediated "blackness." I do not aim to deconstruct every single "black" character or locally produced show with "black" performers who have been part of Puerto Rico's commercial television. Rather, this study considers the translations and significations of the media's racial representations during particular historical periods and the ways in which the island's racial ideologies, together with specific political, economic, and sociocultural conditions influenced these constructions.

In exploring how race was constructed within Puerto Rican television and media, the concept of translating blackness is a useful analytical tool. Translating blackness refers to a multiplicity of meanings that relate not only to the appropriation and adaptation of a particular foreign theater genre, character, or television show but also to the media professionals' and audiences' negotiations of race, politics, culture, and socioeconomic shifts during for-

mative historical moments. From Ramón Rivero's 1940s black voice radio era to the 1990s situation comedy *Mi familia*, the island's media constructions and discussions of blackness functioned through historically specific ideological processes that fostered a variety of racial, political, cultural, and social meanings. These diverse manifestations of mediated blackness were largely informed by four primary discursive *translations*: the articulation of Puerto Rico's *mestizaje* and racial democracy discourses; debates regarding U.S. colonial control and cultural influences on the island; the conciliation of "local" and "foreign" alternative political, cultural, and social movements; and the sociocultural responses and contentions associated with the post-1959 Cuban migration to Puerto Rico. In other words, embodiments of "blackness" within Puerto Rico's entertainment programming were connected not only to the nation's racial discourses but also to the relations between Cuba and Puerto Rico before 1959, the Cuban post-Revolution migration, and Puerto Rican-U.S. colonial relations.

Puerto Rico's hegemonic national culture and its ideology of a racially integrated (*mestiza*) and raceless "ethnic family" were defining elements in the translations of blackness in Puerto Rico's media from the late 1940s to the 1990s. The ongoing rearticulation of discourses of Puerto Ricanness that mark the boundaries of "family" membership circumscribed portrayals of "blackness" and their significations. Who was (and still is) deemed a member of the Puerto Rican ethnic family, the member's position within the family's racial and cultural hierarchical structures, as well as the "outside" (ethnic) members' historically ingrained connections, racial mobility, and power to negotiate their inclusion into the family were fundamental ideological factors in the representations and interpretations of mediated blackness in Puerto Rico.

Whereas this project primarily focuses on the discursive realms of signification that specific media artifacts, dialogues, and televisual events conveyed in relation to "family," racial ideologies, and "blackness," more generally this study also addresses the academically unexamined and thus uncertain location of Puerto Rico's commercial television. The relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States is pivotal in this research, not only to understand some racial translations, political discussions, and familial marginalizations but equally important, to comprehend the cultural, legal, and economic position of the island's commercial media. Culturally, to delve into Puerto Rico's commercial local programming is to map routes through moments in

history and observe the ways in which some producers, scriptwriters, and performers utilized the medium to discuss, reproduce, and sometimes even radically challenge dominant social, political, and racial discourses. To explore locally produced programs is also to discover multiple crossroads that directly and indirectly linked Puerto Rico to the United States, the Spanish Caribbean, and Latin America. Legally and economically, to broach the subject of Puerto Rico's commercial media one should consider its unique position within the U.S. broadcasting system.

Even though since its inception the island's commercial medium has been interconnected to both the United States and Latin America, television in Puerto Rico has been largely erased from these regions' media histories. In terms of U.S. studies, the island's complex, unresolved, and even confounding political situation might have accounted for this academic exclusion. Simply put, the fact that Puerto Rico is defined as a Commonwealth, a political status that nationally situates the island as autonomous within the United States, even while it is completely beholden to it in practice, might have influenced the academic invisibility. However, given that in 1898 Puerto Rico became a U.S. colony, that in 1917 Puerto Ricans obtained U.S. citizenship, and that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) controls the island's media, Puerto Rico's commercial television is U.S. Spanish-language television.

From a strict political and legal perspective then, the first U.S. Spanish-language television stations were on the island.³ Therefore, while some scholars locate the first station in San Antonio, Texas (KCOR-TV, 1955), and others situate the 1961 KMEX (Los Angeles) and KWEX (San Antonio) as the first two Spanish-language television stations, in reality, those stations emerged after Puerto Rico's WKAQ-Telemundo, channel 2 (March 1954) and WAPA-TV, channel 4 (May 1954).⁴ My aim in including this basic chronological information is not to question research on U.S. Spanish-language media or the significance of exploring these early groundbreaking stations. Instead, I cite these examples to illustrate the absence of Puerto Rico in U.S. television scholarship.

Although most television scholars completely ignore Puerto Rico, some of the few who include it often focus exclusively on the island's colonial position to the United States, rendering indigenous elements and discussions of the national invisible.⁵ In other words, these scholars' analyses are overdetermined by the cultural imperialism paradigm. True, if one considers that the

Commonwealth government has no legal control over its communication systems and that currently all commercial television stations are part of U.S. and multinational conglomerates, Puerto Rico might be characterized as the epitome of media imperialism. These political, legal, and economic conditions might explain why, according to some scholars, U.S. colonial power has precluded the possibilities of any debates in the local televisual landscape. This position is clearly laid out by Roberta Astroff:

Because of the economic, political, and social constraints and motivations that shape television in Puerto Rico, there cannot even be discussion on the possible uses of broadcasting as a forum for questions of national concern. The questions of political status, of the use and quality of Spanish on the island, of solutions to social and economic problems, and of national culture are excluded by both the economic system of broadcasting, i.e. the “logic” for the industry, and by the decision makers in the industry who have no interest in creating a public forum for questions they would rather see disappear. There is considerable question as to whether television can be that forum under any circumstances.⁶

Throughout this book it will become evident that Astroff’s analysis is indeed misleading. Puerto Rico’s locally produced shows have in fact created various sites for discussions of social, cultural, and political issues. What is more, media and television professionals’ (or “cultural *bricoleurs*”) identities have been significant in the representation of particular political and social themes in media texts.⁷ Privileging television’s economic and legal components without performing close analyses of texts and of the diverse creative individuals involved in the production of televisual cultural artifacts risks overgeneralization by classifying locally produced programs as examples of U.S. cultural imperialism.

On the other hand, with rare exceptions, studies on Latin American television have also neglected Puerto Rico.⁸ Considering the multiple exchanges between television professionals among Puerto Rico and countries such as Cuba (before 1959), Peru, Venezuela, and Mexico, one might expect Latin American scholars to be fully aware of the island’s commercial medium. Yet, research on Latin American television has largely focused on telenovelas or on the major players (Mexico and Brazil) that since the 1980s have dominated the regional and global exportation of this cultural product. To be sure, these studies are valuable because they demonstrate that exchanges in the re-

gion transcend the predominance of U.S. commercial television. Still, there seems to be a research fixation on powerful media conglomerates. Not surprisingly, a small television market such as Puerto Rico, which for the most part remained “local,” has been ignored. In addition, the island’s Commonwealth status and FCC regulation may also be responsible for Puerto Rico’s exclusion from Latin American television histories.

Similar to the cultural imperialist approach, Latin American scholars may tend to see Puerto Rico’s commercial television as lacking cultural autonomy from the United States. However, this silence implies either that Puerto Rican television is insignificant because of its minor influence outside the island or that because of its colonial status, the island’s television is not a site of local cultural agency. In the process, academics have silenced the voices of those on the island who have been producing, writing, directing, and performing on television. Through large-scale political economy interpretations, scholars have obfuscated the cultural, social, and political debates that have been part of Puerto Rico’s locally produced programs since 1954.

The value of examining local television, its cultural elements, creative interactions, and production processes brings us to a vast and critical group of individuals—media and television professionals. In Puerto Rico, television professionals include station executives (station director, programmer, sales director, and sales representatives, among others), station technical staff, independent production teams (producer, assistant producer, scriptwriter, director, and so forth), and *talento* (talent) (such as actors, masters of ceremony, models, singers, and bands). Based on my formal and informal conversations with members of these distinct subgroups, it is clear that media and television professionals in Puerto Rico are fully aware of the Commonwealth government’s lack of control. The selling of local stations that first began in the mid-1970s and then intensified in the 1980s and the drop in local programming that accelerated in the 1990s have directly affected the lives of technical staff, independent producers, scriptwriters, directors, and performers. Actually, at the end of the 1980s when telenovelas ceased to be produced by the two most successful stations in Puerto Rico (WKAQ-Telemundo, channel 2 and WAPA-TV Televisión, channel 4), several unemployed actors migrated to Miami, New York City, and Los Angeles. Despite disparate legal, political, and economic conditions, members of media and television’s diverse subgroups still categorized locally produced shows as “Puerto Rican.”

This mediatic Puerto Ricanness alludes to the cultural, social, and political

ideological discourses associated with Puerto Rico's national and vernacular cultures that have been repackaged and represented in local texts. This Puerto Ricanness also implies the multiple mediations of the local where through accents, embodiments, performances, and commentaries, televisual shows have operated as *acts of transfer* "transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity."⁹ In sum, the media and television professionals' description of locally produced programs as Puerto Rican refers to the island's distinct culture and identity based on a common heritage and history, a culture that makes it both Caribbean and Latin American.¹⁰

Puerto Rican also describes the ethnicity of the audience-consumers that are sold to advertisers in the U.S. dollar-run local television world. For programming, production, advertising, and rating purposes, television audiences in Puerto Rico are categorized by age and gender. Although social class is not part of the audience ratings classification, commercial stations tailor their programs to the lower-middle-class segment of the population.¹¹ Thus, the programming broadcast on commercial stations is designed and scheduled to sell and appeal to the majority of Puerto Ricans.

Implicitly, the media and television professionals' description of local shows as Puerto Rican brings to the forefront not only the local but also the regional (Spanish Caribbean and Latin American) and U.S. influences that have informed locally produced programs. Since 1954 many shows produced in Puerto Rico have borrowed genres, concepts, ideas, and scripts especially from the United States but also from pre-revolutionary Cuba and Latin American commercial television. Nonetheless, despite these "foreign" mediations, Puerto Rico's locally produced programs have functioned through what Milly Buonanno calls "the paradigm of indigenization." Buonanno contends that even though local television around the world is influenced by foreign (mostly American) forms, concepts, or genres, these local productions "give rise to new forms and products which are hybrid, original, and unmistakably domestic."¹² In the case of Puerto Rico's entertainment programming, these productions have created media artifacts that contain the cultural meanings associated with Puerto Rico's social spaces, even though, in some cases, the "original" idea was "borrowed" from a "foreign" place.

Bearing in mind the U.S. and Latin American intersections that have been part of Puerto Rico's commercial television since its inception, I locate the island's medium in an in-between cultural space. In fact, commercial television has functioned as a mediatic bridge. While maintaining a

local perspective in terms of production, cultural representations, and interactions with audiences, it has also been connected with and influenced by these diverse regions. In terms of the Spanish Caribbean and Latin American dynamic, the main associations have been present in the exchanges of creative people, the incorporation of performers and musicians in locally produced programs, the purchasing of scripts (particularly from Cuba before 1959), and the importation of programming (first Mexican movies, but then also movies produced, for example, in Argentina, and Latin American telenovelas).

In the case of U.S. mainstream commercial television, the cultural influences have been more prevalent in relation to television genres and program ideas and concepts. Whereas U.S. mainstream television programs and movies (dubbed in Spanish) have aired in Puerto Rico since 1954 and English-language cable television has been available in Puerto Rico since 1970, these cultural artifacts, at least until the late 1990s, were not widely consumed by local audiences.¹³ It appears that audiences in Puerto Rico, as Joseph Straubhaar has argued in relation to Latin American television audiences, prefer to watch locally produced programs or shows that are “culturally similar” to their own experiences.¹⁴

However, while this mediatic bridge has linked the people on the island to Latin America and the United States, the results of contemporary globalization processes have been detrimental to local programming. For example, consider Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord’s observation regarding the 1990s revisionist research on media imperialism and the contemporary television globalization process:

When revisionist studies first appeared, Brazilian and Mexican programming was flooding television screens in Latin America, Spanish-language networks in the United States, and newly opened markets in Europe. Perhaps it is necessary to take this revisionism a step further and analyze television programming flows inside one region. Television in Latin America suggests that analysis of flows inside regional/linguistic markets also needs to discriminate among complex inflows and outflows.¹⁵

In the case of Puerto Rico, the main problem is not U.S. mainstream television programs. The principal menace comes from powerful Latin America media conglomerates such as Televisa and Venevision and from the U.S. Spanish-language networks, particularly the new (2001) player in Puerto

Rico: Univision.¹⁶ One must remember that Puerto Rico's commercial television is legally and economically entrenched in the U.S. broadcasting system. Therefore, while television, as Thomas Streeter contends, "is something people do," the legal and economic ramifications of U.S. corporate liberalism "doings" have had a direct impact in Puerto Rico.¹⁷ Given that the Commonwealth government has no way of controlling the ownership of local stations and the importation of programming, the FCC deregulations that have taken place in the United States have affected the people who work on and culturally "do" television.

Until the early 1980s, four principal commercial stations operated on the island: WKAQ-TV, WAPA-TV, WKBM-TV (channel 11), and WLUZ-TV (channel 7).¹⁸ Although all of these stations combined local and imported programming, prime time (6:00 P.M.–10:30 P.M.) was dominated by locally produced shows. Additionally, even though producers have tested a wide variety of program formats in prime-time television, the genres that dominated prime-time until the 1980s for the most part included locally produced telenovelas, situation comedies, comedies, variety shows, music shows, game shows, and news magazine shows. Throughout the 1980s, as I previously mentioned, all stations became part of U.S. and multinational conglomerates and the production of local programming has gradually decreased. Although, according to some television professionals, local business groups were interested in buying either WKAQ or WAPA (the most profitable stations in Puerto Rico), these stations were sold at "exorbitantly high" prices and local groups "could not compete with the offers made by U.S. media conglomerates."¹⁹

Presently, three major commercial stations operate in Puerto Rico: WKAQ-Telemundo (channel 2)—part of Telemundo's network, which is owned by NBC; WAPA-TV Televisi3n (channel 4)—owned by LIN Television; and WLII-TV (channel 11)—bought by Univision's network in 2001.²⁰ Before the arrival of Univision, all of these stations functioned as semi-independent entities. They established commercial autonomy through business arrangements with independent producers, programming selection, audience viewing measurements, and sponsors. Yet, this semi-independent business practice is being transformed by Univision. The Univision-Puerto Rico station (contrary to the Telemundo-Puerto Rico station and Televisi3n) operates as a network—a totally new business entity in Puerto Rico's television market.

It is difficult to predict the future of Puerto Rico's commercial television.

Nonetheless, based on recent changes, the island seems to be rapidly moving toward becoming part of the U.S. Hispanic television market. For example, performers who formerly worked in Puerto Rican telenovelas were recruited to be part of Univision's "pan-ethnic" morning program produced in Miami. Some Puerto Rican comedians were hired to participate in Univision's Miami-based productions but were then required to eliminate vernacular Puerto Rican phrases and words from their acts in order to appeal to the U.S. Mexican majority that comprise the Hispanic television market.²¹ A token Puerto Rican actress was hired by Televisa to participate in their telenovelas (which were then broadcast on Univision) and she substituted her Puerto Rican accent for a Mexican one. Miami, as John Sinclair writes regarding U.S. Spanish-language television, is the place "of exchanges between American continents," a space "of production, as well as distribution, and distribution of programs as well as of signals."²² However, through the Univision-Miami signal, prime-time Hispanic television is dominated by Mexican imports.²³

The in-between cultural space that has characterized Puerto Rico's commercial television could be transformed into a cultural place where the local may cease to exist. If Puerto Rico's television professionals are able to travel on what would become a new and exclusively one-way mediatic bridge, they would have to produce, write, direct, and perform television artifacts with generic (pan-ethnic) phrases and de-centered social, political, cultural, gendered, and racial meanings disconnected from the local. What is more, if Puerto Rico becomes Hispanic, audiences will consume a predominantly white televisual world. Yet, this U.S. Hispanic television whiteness does not correspond to the U.S. black and white racial ideologies and practices. Instead, its whiteness comes from the Latin American televisual invisibility of blacks, mulattos, and indigenous-looking people.²⁴ Thus, all the struggles that black Puerto Rican performers endured to have a place for translating blackness in the local televisual landscape might soon become anecdotes from the past. I therefore hope that the research presented throughout these pages will open dialogues not only about the absence of black and indigenous citizens in Latin America's commercial televisual world but equally important, about the relevance of maintaining local television sites of production and consumption.

Given that this project examines local media and audience translations of blackness, I would like to clarify my own position as a cultural translator. I

was born and raised in Puerto Rico, which situates me as part of the constructed “ethnic family.” I grew up watching Puerto Rico’s commercial television and was an avid fan of some of the shows and characters discussed in this research. I donned blackface for my second grade talent show and became a miniature version of the hugely popular 1970s Puerto Rican blackface character Chianita. In the Catholic school where I studied, none of the Spanish nuns or Puerto Rican and Cuban teachers seemed to have a problem with my performance. All of us sang and danced to Chianita’s hit song *Chianita gobernadora* (Chianita for governor).

For many years I was oblivious to the racial hierarchies and racist practices that affected the daily life of the black and mulatto islanders. Like many Puerto Ricans, I had been taught that racism was not part of the culture despite the fact that I had grown up listening to derogatory remarks about black and mulatto people. It was not until I began my studies at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) Drama Department that my privileged middle-class and “white” (I am considered white in Puerto Rico and the Spanish Caribbean) perceptions crumbled and my process of *conscientização* (consciousness raising) began.²⁵ It did not matter how hard my black and *trigueño/a* (mulatto) colleagues worked for a college play audition or how talented they were or how elegantly they dressed for a commercial casting call, they were nearly always dismissed. Indeed, few of these former colleagues were able to enter Puerto Rico’s commercial television. Still, some of the people I met during my theater years, following the long established tradition of negrito characters, have performed in blackface.

The connections and friendships that I established while studying and performing in college and commercial theater productions in Puerto Rico and in New York City (Spanish-language theater) facilitated my access to various sources of information that are not generally available to the public. Also, while I cannot provide any concrete evidence, I assume that because of my race, class, and education, some of the media and television professionals interviewed for this research were more open than they might have otherwise been about their understanding of blackness and race relations in Puerto Rico. Along with my associations with the less powerful individuals in Puerto Rico’s commercial television (the actors) and my Puerto Rican and Spanish Caribbean whiteness, the respect that I have for television’s creative community established an ambiance of camaraderie between me and this study’s participants. In their view (and mine, too), they are important agents

in the production of culture and they understand that because of the elitism (i.e., high versus low culture hierarchies) that characterizes some academic circles in Puerto Rico, their contributions are frequently devalued.

Nonetheless, throughout this book, I am critical of television characters, performers, producers, writers, journalists, and the industry. It is not my intention to characterize media and television professionals as insensitive and bigoted individuals. It is counterproductive to blame media and television professionals because, as Stuart Hall argues, ideologies are part of a larger system of meanings located in specific social formations.²⁶ Instead of focusing on the often prejudiced actions and views of media and television creators, journalists, and audiences, a far more valuable endeavor is to examine these performances and opinions within the context of Puerto Rican culture, society, and historical processes. Consequently, to understand Puerto Rico's commercial media and audiences' translations of blackness, one first needs to consider the formation of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* (the wide Puerto Rican family) discourse.

Puerto Rico: A Mestiza “Family”

Since 1898 and as a result of the Spanish American War, Puerto Rico has been defined as a territory that “legally belongs to but is not part of the United States.”²⁷ Whereas Puerto Rico is not sovereign, this Spanish Caribbean island is, as Nancy Morris contends, a nation, “a self-defined community of people who share a sense of solidarity based on a belief in a common heritage and who claim political rights that may include self-determination.”²⁸ Despite constant and multidimensional efforts by the U.S. government to Americanize the islanders and the existence of three political parties largely differentiated by their stance on the island's status (pro-statehood, pro-commonwealth, and pro-independence), many Puerto Ricans do not feel culturally attached to the United States.²⁹ The direct and indirect U.S. colonial, legal, economic, political, and cultural presence along with the island's complex status has actually “strengthened the sense of peoplehood among Puerto Ricans.”³⁰

Although the levels of cultural nationalism in Puerto Rico might fluctuate according to political preferences, there has been an ongoing official discourse regarding Puerto Rican national “authenticity” and ethnic unity vis-à-vis the U.S. cultural, political, and economic influences.³¹ Several scholars have argued that the core of Puerto Rico's national culture and identity dis-

courses emerged during the 1930s.³² The intellectual discussions of this era crystallized the location of blackness within the island's national culture and the formation of the ideologies of racial and cultural *mestizaje* that inform Puerto Rico's identity.

During the economic and political transformations generated by the island's annexation to the United States, several intellectuals questioned the essence of its culture and identity.³³ *La gran familia puertorriqueña*, an ideological discourse developed by nineteenth-century Puerto Rican *hacendados* (landowners) to forge class and racial solidarity against the Spanish colonial government, was rearticulated to affirm Puerto Rico's national unity against the new colonial regime. Throughout this period of identity formation, "race" and "blackness" became integral elements in the discussion of the spirit of Puerto Rico's people and culture. Although it is difficult to summarize the 1930s debate, particularly because intellectuals presented numerous perspectives in terms of Puerto Rico's historical, social, economic, political, cultural, and gender dynamics, one can map distinctive discursive formations of race.

Some intellectuals, influenced by the Eurocentric biological paradigm of race, assigned specific moral, cultural, and psychological attributes to white, black, and mulatto populations, while concomitantly situating the white race as intellectually and morally superior.³⁴ Others focused on the distinctions between the U.S. and Puerto Rican (Spanish) slavery institutions and race relations, describing the island's culture as nonracist and *mestiza* (mixed), but primarily occidental (Spanish), thus positioning African elements and people as moderate influences within the island's cultural and social terrains.³⁵ A final group "celebrated" the African elements of the culture through the *cultura negroide* movement.³⁶ These writers' cultural productions located blackness as a key component of Puerto Rico's identity, and more broadly, as the unifying cultural and racial symbol of a transnational *Caribbeanness*. Although the 1930s debates depicted complex and even contradictory postures regarding race and blackness, the core of Puerto Rico's hegemonic identity was defined as racially and culturally *mestiza* yet as a predominantly white (European or Spanish) family.

In Puerto Rico, as in many Latin American and Spanish Caribbean nations, *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, is a key factor in the construction of a racially integrated society, because everyone, regardless of skin color, is racially mixed and hence, an equal member within the nation.³⁷ However,

behind the comforting screen of racial *mestizaje* lies the racist ideology and process of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) where racial mixing with white (European) people makes populations whiter, thereby improving on or lessening the supposedly inferior black or Indian racial traits. Conversely, this racial mixing is sometimes constrained by class. For example, mixing among lower-class segments of the population was commonly practiced during the Spanish colonial period in Puerto Rico and in the Spanish Caribbean.³⁸ Also, while some mixing may occur among upper classes in Puerto Rico and other Latin American and Spanish Caribbean nations, the practice is more common among lower classes who might see it as a path to material gain and social status.³⁹

Mestizaje not only delimits sexual mixing between distinct sectors of the population, it also permeates the ways in which gendered racial bodies are socially constructed. In Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, the Eurocentric-patriarchal gaze has informed discourses of beauty and sexuality, situating whiteness as the epitome of elegance for the female body. From beauty pageants to televisual representations, the beautiful body embodies “the mythical norms of [a] Eurocentric esthetic.”⁴⁰ Conversely, in Puerto Rico and Cuba, black and *mulata* women have been socially constructed as hypersexual and sensual bodies. In addition, the *mulata* has also been positioned as a socially permissible outlet for white males’ sexual desire, and as a result, an acceptable avenue for racial mixing.⁴¹

On the cultural terrain, *mestizaje* highlights the egalitarian fusion of European, African, and indigenous cultures and traits, constructing a nationally mixed culture and identity. In Puerto Rico, cultural *mestizaje* represents the amalgamation of *Taíno* (indigenous), African, and Spanish elements. Within this cultural formation, black and mulatto contributions (for example, musical styles such as *Bomba* and *Plena*) are part of the national culture.⁴² Nonetheless, the primary symbols of Puerto Ricanness are the *jíbaro* (white mountain peasant) and *jíbaro* music. An iconic figure created by the nineteenth-century hacendados, the *jíbaro* represents Puerto Rico’s authentic culture and identity, a symbol that reaffirms racial and class hierarchies among white, black, and mulatto Puerto Ricans.⁴³ Furthermore, within this hegemonic negotiation of Puerto Ricanness, “whiteness” is defined as the central component of the national culture, while Spain is situated as the motherland in historic and contemporary public discourses.

La gran familia puertorriqueña discourse, the ideology of an integrated

mestiza culture and identity, and contentions on the island between Puerto Rico and the United States informed locally produced programs' black representations, racialized debates, and discussions of the national from the 1940s to the 1990s. From Ramón Rivero's complex use of blackface and black voice to criticize class stratification and colonial subjugation in the 1940s and 1950s, to the 1970s battle between black actors and television industry officials over blackface and antiblack racism, to the 1990s creation of a situation comedy with a black family that was "Puerto Rican, period," *la gran familia puertorriqueña* played a prominent role in the media's and audiences' translations of blackness. In sum, the social and historical construction of the Puerto Rican national culture and identity that emerged in the 1930s, but that has been constantly rearticulated through the decades, has functioned as a symbolic shield against the United States. By creating an imaginary island-based unified cultural space that can counteract U.S. influences and Americanization, discussions of race and racism are generally evaded because problematizing the national culture can result in the division of a unified collective identity. However, although *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse creates and promotes a color-blind and culturally mixed sociocultural space, a series of racial categorizations and cultural practices that comprise the vernacular exposes the myth of racial equality.

"Race" and Racial Categories in Puerto Rico

"Race" in Puerto Rico, the Spanish Caribbean, and Latin America can be understood as a social construction influenced by Western (colonial and racial) ideologies but which manifests itself in particular cultural practices. In other words, even though there might be similarities regarding race and racial constructions throughout the (Western) world in general and the Spanish Caribbean and Latin America in particular, race responds to specific "colonial/racial formations" based on distinct social, historical, political, and cultural contexts.⁴⁴ In Puerto Rico, as previously discussed, the established polarity between Puerto Rican and U.S. cultures and racial ideologies has produced a dominant misconception that prejudice is effectively nonexistent on the island.

Despite the widespread prevalence of the ideology of an egalitarian national space, the island is not a racially harmonious society. This is clearly seen in the ongoing racial prejudice against Puerto Rican blacks in general, and, more recently, against Dominican immigrants. These immigrants,

who are primarily mulattos and blacks, have been cast as scapegoats for the island's economic and social problems.⁴⁵ Furthermore, according to the 2000 Census, 10.8 percent of the island's population defined themselves as "black," while 84 percent categorized themselves as "white."⁴⁶ It seems that, as one writer has remarked, Puerto Ricans opted to become "Nordic."⁴⁷ Certainly, one of the reasons for this outcome was that the census used in Puerto Rico followed U.S. black-white categorizations. However, these classifications do not tell the whole story.

Similar to other Latin American and Spanish Caribbean nations, racial categories in Puerto Rico are most clearly associated with physical appearance and in some cases social status but not the specifics of biological descent.⁴⁸ The range of racial classifications includes *negro*, *moreno*, *prieto*, *trigueño*, *indio*, *jabao*, and *blanco*. It is extremely difficult to translate these terms because they are rooted in the island's vernacular language. However, in general, *negro*, *moreno*, and *prieto* mean black; *trigueño* is a shade of brown and can be categorized as mulatto; *indio* means Taíno (indigenous) looking; *jabao* refers to a person whose skin color is white but who has features commonly associated with black people; and *blanco* means white. In addition, like some of the previous categorizations (*trigueño* and *prieto*), *gente de color* (colored people) and *negrito* have been used in Puerto Rico and in some Latin American societies to avoid using the term *negro* (black).⁴⁹

Negrito/a (diminutive for black) is currently used in Cuba and Puerto Rico and is sometimes employed as a derogatory reference to black people. Although *negrito/a* and *negro/a* may be used in reference to blacks, in Puerto Rico it has also been adopted as a term of affection, regardless of race. A person may be called *negrito/a* or *negro/a* despite the fact that this individual may have white skin. Likewise, a series of phrases rooted in racial stereotyping inform the vernacular and espouse a problematic construction of blackness. For example, the expression *mejorar la raza* (improve the race) codes the belief that black and mulatto people should marry white individuals to improve or *blanquear* (whiten) their race. Conversely, the socially constructed and derogatory phrase *tiene raja* or *se le ve la raja* means that a person has visible black features (nose, hair, or lips) even though her or his skin is white.

The issue of racial consciousness and the historically and culturally ingrained ideology of a nonracist society permeate the recurrent use of the aforementioned socially and culturally normalized proverbs. Puerto Rico,

contrary to the United States, South Africa, and Brazil (*Movimiento negro*), has never witnessed any large-scale political and social mobilization against racism. Newspaper articles, local organizations, individuals, and performers have certainly criticized the island's closeted racism.⁵⁰ Still, many of these discussions have occurred on special occasions such as the discovery of the Americas, the emancipation of slavery, or more recently, the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Furthermore, as Miriam Jiménez-Román contends, those who have protested against racism on the island "have been labeled overly sensitive, as suffering from an inferiority complex, or as unwitting victims of an imported, i.e. alien racial ideology."⁵¹ Protests against racism generally reactivate the U.S.-Puerto Rico cultural debates and the historical differences between the two nations' racial discourses.

Through these racial categorizations, cultural discourses, and historical processes, Puerto Rico's commercial media representations of and discussions on blackness functioned within the theatricality of nationalism embedded in *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse. The theatricality of nationalism to which I refer relates to the ways in which public performances and discourses (or to use James C. Scott's theoretical concept, *public transcripts*) across historical periods have operated as theatrical, staged, or scripted discursive representations to create "scenarios" of racial equality.⁵² These scenarios of *mestizaje*, racial fairness, and ethnic unity have been performed in an ongoing juxtaposition to the also locally and theatrically scripted scenarios of U.S. racial segregation, racial discrimination, and national fragmentation. In other words, since the 1930s these discursive and scripted formations have been theatrically represented on the national stage as a way of maintaining the unity within the ethnic family.

What is more, these scenarios have been frozen in time. Regardless of the transformations of racial discourses in the United States after the civil rights and black power movements or the fact that U.S. political, social, popular, and mediatic cultural elements have infiltrated the nation, the scenarios have been recreated in the island's public spheres as unchangeable, memorized, and hegemonically scripted representations. Indeed, despite their recurrent reenactment, the fragmentations within the nation are never really dissolved. However, when social actors (which in the case of this research mostly refers to television's mimetic actors and performers) have tried to incorporate a new ideological performance on the national stage that rearticulates the marginalization of blackness or have attempted to transform the discourse of *la*

gran familia puertorriqueña, their Puerto Ricanness (i.e., family authenticity and membership) has been questioned.⁵³ When social performers have publicly denounced racial prejudice in Puerto Rico, the national audience (which obviously comprises other social actors) has delivered (like a Greek chorus) the scripted lines, “Puerto Rico is not like the U.S. There is no racism in Puerto Rico. We are all equal regardless of race.” In short, the theatricality of nationalism embedded in la gran familia puertorriqueña discourse has been staged across historical periods to achieve a national or familial consensus that ultimately reinforces the racial and cultural *mestizaje*.

The use of the term *theatricality* is not meant to imply that Puerto Ricans do not experience or feel a strong nationalistic sentiment. The cultural artifacts and debates analyzed throughout this book will illustrate the ways in which Puerto Rico’s cultural nationalism was used, in some instances, as a symbolic weapon to counteract U.S. colonial exploitation (for example, the 1930s persecution of nationalist sympathizers, the 1940s–1950s massive consignment of Puerto Ricans to the United States for cheap labor, and the process of economic modernization and development). Furthermore, through multiple performances in radio and on television, media creators spawned “forums” wherein U.S. imperialistic practices and abuses of power by the local government were challenged.⁵⁴ Actually, one of the television shows examined in this study directly and indirectly attacked Puerto Rico’s cultural nationalism and Puerto Ricans’ prejudices against particular immigrant communities on the island. Still, in the national imaginary, either in times of pride or crisis (real or fabricated), the nationalism embedded in la gran familia puertorriqueña has functioned as a hegemonic strategy to break down the internal divisions within the nation.

Puerto Rico’s ideologies of cultural and racial *mestizaje*, racial categorizations, and the conflicts regarding U.S. colonial influences were key elements in the local media constructions and discussions of blackness from the 1940s to the 1990s. In addition, and intertwined with Puerto Rico’s cultural nationalism, the binary ideological constructions of us versus them, wherein “us” is defined not only around nationality but also around territorial space (the island), permeated local television dialogues on blackness.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the U.S. presence was highly influential not only concerning the adaptation of black-oriented programming, but more importantly, in terms of alternative racial, sexual, and gender mobilizations. A significant factor in these U.S. alternative influences in Puerto Rico was the circular migrations that char-

acterize Puerto Rican movements from the island to the United States.⁵⁶ The “here” (Puerto Rico) and “there” (the United States) have marked the boundaries of “a transient and pendulous flow, rather than a permanent, irrevocable, one-way relocation of people.”⁵⁷ Therefore, the 1960s–1970s New York City and Chicago African-American–Puerto Rican–Afro Puerto Rican coalitions that were formed during the civil rights and black power movements and the process of (partial) desegregation that took place in U.S. commercial television had an impact on the island’s commercial medium during the 1970s.

Consequently, in this research I call attention not only to the ways in which foreign television ideas or formats have at times influenced indigenous productions and created spaces for marginalized communities, identities, and cultures but also to how the flows of people (or what Arjun Appadurai defines as “ethnoscape”) have permeated the local.⁵⁸ In the case of Puerto Rico’s television, media cultures, and representations of and dialogues on blackness, one needs to examine the U.S.-Puerto Rico multiple flows and intersections along with the close relationship between Puerto Rico and Cuba before the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the colliding tensions that emerged after the post-1959 massive migrations of Cubans to Puerto Rico.

In sum, the local aspect of television in Puerto Rico has been hybrid in nature because, as Nancy Morris argues, “identity and the practices and symbols that express it are never pure and ‘uncorrupted,’ symbols and traditions—whether invented, imposed, emergent, constructed, begged, borrowed, or stolen—change all the time.”⁵⁹ Even though *la gran familia puertorriqueña* hegemonic discourse constructs a unified and impermeable culture and identity, the migrations of various ethnic groups to the island (particularly Cubans, but also, and more recently, Dominicans), the circular migration of Puerto Ricans from the island to the mainland and vice versa, and the political and cultural connections with the United States have influenced the local cultural elements of Puerto Rico’s television. Despite the fact that some of the identities submerged within Puerto Rico’s societal and cultural terrains have been marginalized, the multiple levels or stories that inform the nation will become evident through my analyses in ensuing chapters.⁶⁰

Interpreting Race in Puerto Rico’s Entertainment Programming

Throughout the following chapters I use *negro*, *trigueño/a*, *mulata* and *mulato*, and *blanco* as intertwined socially and ideologically constructed ra-

cial categorizations and cultural signifiers when addressing particular characters, shows, and cultural elements. These labels are somewhat problematic given their connection to a biological paradigm of race and the fact that the racialization of various groups transcends skin color. Nevertheless, in the case of the cultural artifacts and events examined in this book, specific cultural practices and racialized discourses are associated with *lo negro*, *lo mulato*, and *lo blanco*, which cannot be grasped without these racial and cultural categorizations.

The book is organized chronologically. Chapter 1, “Caribbean Negritos: Ramón Rivero, Blackface, and Black Voice in Puerto Rico,” focuses on Ramón Rivero (Diplo), the most famous blackface and black voice actor in Puerto Rico. Examined through Cesar Salgado’s theoretical concept of *anastomosis* and the creation of the CubaRican space, the first representations of blackness in Puerto Rico’s commercial media were a product of the exchanges between Cuba and Puerto Rico and the translations of Cuba’s *Bufo* theater tradition and its *negrito catedrático* type to Puerto Rico’s culture.⁶¹ By considering the economic and political conditions that informed Puerto Rican society during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, I maintain that Rivero’s “Caribbean” blackface and black voice characters’ criticism of the island’s colonial conditions and the subjugation of the working class, together with his charismatic public persona, normalized blackface as a symbol for the marginal sectors of the Puerto Rican population.

Chapter 2, “Bringing the Soul: Afros, Black Empowerment, and the Resurgent Popularity of Blackface,” analyzes the 1970s and explores the debates surrounding a television performer who wore an Afro, programs that directly and indirectly dealt with blackness, the resurgent popularity of blackface, black actors and actresses’ protests against racism, and the selection of a mulata as Miss World–Puerto Rico. Although initially the translations of alternative political, social, and cultural movements and practices and the indigenization of U.S. black-oriented programming concepts destabilized the whiteness that characterized local television, blackface was ultimately reinstated as a protected masquerade for social criticism. Furthermore, the emerging prejudices against the Cuban community in Puerto Rico following the post-1959 migration were crucial to the 1970s ethnic transformation of Caribbean blackface to a Puerto Rican jíbara version.

The participation of Cubans in Puerto Rico’s commercial television production processes, their predominance in the area of scriptwriting, and the

construction of Cubans in locally produced entertainment programming are the subject of chapter 3, “The CubaRican Space Revisited.” As seen through the 1980s locally produced situation comedy *Los suegros* (The In-Laws) and the narrative’s rearticulation of Puerto Rican–Cuban tensions after the 1959 migration, by the 1980s Cubans were televisually portrayed as ambivalently welcome members in Puerto Rican society and family. This representation of Puerto Ricans and Cubans as family members reasserted the alleged whiteness of these two ethnic groups and discursively transferred the undesirable blackness to the new immigrant group in Puerto Rico: Dominicans.

Chapter 4, “*Mi familia*: A Black Puerto Rican Televisual Family,” examines the incorporation of black Puerto Ricans into the previously predominantly white situation comedy genre. Since the initial conceptualization of *Mi familia*, the media professionals involved in the production processes downplayed the fictional family’s blackness. Although *Mi familia*’s text rearticulated ideologies of racial and cultural mestizaje and never problematized the island’s racist ideologies, this cultural product reconfigured the local television family sitcom genre, creating a space that reinstated black and mulatto members as part of the Puerto Rican and televisual ethnic family.

The concluding chapter, “Translating and Representing Blackness,” locates performers, producers, and the television industry as the primary translators of blackness in Puerto Rico’s commercial media. Whereas these translations of blackness contained a variety of meanings, and while journalists and audiences produced diverse interpretations, the ideology of ethnic unity that informs *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse permeated the translating processes and in some cases the erasure of blackness. Moreover, even though Puerto Rico’s commercial television has the potential for more complicated representations of racial ideologies and culture, recent changes in the local television landscape might impede not only the production of more shows with black performers but could also eliminate the possibilities of exploring the problem of racism in Puerto Rico or anywhere else in the Spanish Caribbean.