Isar P. Godreau

Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico.
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A growing number of studies document the struggles of black communities in Latin America for official recognition of cultural distinctiveness, territorial-based claims, or social rights. Isar Godreau's brilliant analysis of the historical development and contemporary politics of one of Puerto Rico's most famous black communities is not one of these studies. It is, rather, an illuminating account of how the barrio of San Antón, Puerto Rico—reputed birthplace of the *bomba e plena*—came to be defined by outsiders as a “black community” in the first place; how that has shaped local identities and politics; and how local and state actors deploy “scripts of blackness” in ways that selectively constrain and enable community development.

Scripts of Blackness analyzes the complex historical interplay of national and racial ideologies in Puerto Rico, and traces how these interwoven ideologies shape public policies that directly affect the subjectivities and material well-being of residents in the community of San Antón. Using a controversy over a housing redevelopment project in the 1990s as a point of departure, Godreau presents a richly woven historical and ethnographic account of the intricate politics of defining and delimiting blackness in Puerto Rico. She takes the government project as the empirical focal point of the analysis, arguing that it was well intentioned yet laden with problematic assumptions about the community's history and its contemporary needs. While the government framed it in terms of recognizing and preserving the distinctive “cultural roots” of San Antón, most residents greeted it with concerns about “improving their modern standard of living, not in terms of gaining cultural recognition as a black or Afro-descendant community” (p. 4).

The book is organized around three ideological tropes that were evident in the government's housing plans for San Antón and that also situate the place of blackness within Puerto Rican national identity: the story of benign and geographically delimited slavery; the story of *hispanidad* as a defining trait of the nation; and the story of harmonious race mixture yielding an increasingly uniform and whitened Puerto Rican people. In distinct ways, each of these tropes valorizes whiteness and displaces or folkloricizes blackness. At the same time, Godreau argues, these tropes construct Puerto Rico's path to reconciling racial diversity and modern nationhood as morally superior to the path followed by the United States.

Godreau's analysis juxtaposes state-sponsored narratives of blackness in Puerto Rico to the historical and contemporary experiences of San Antón's

residents. And it exposes how “power-laden” official narratives masquerade as neutral description of historical demography and geography. Recognizing fissures and tensions in official accounts of race and nation, residents of San Antón challenge and resist homogenizing, marginalizing, or folkloricizing representations of blackness in a variety of ways. The juxtaposition of official representations of blackness and the meanings of blackness to residents of San Antón reinforces two main arguments: that official constructions of race and nation are powerful and consequential, but never completely hegemonic; and that local representations of blackness are also selective, political, and often contested—much more than official representations of blackness allow.

The pivotal concept that ties the empirical chapters together is what Godreau calls “racial scripts”—“dominant narratives and stories that set standards, expectations, and even spatial templates for what is publicly recognized, celebrated, and sponsored as black *and* Puerto Rican” (p. 14). Scripts are similar to stereotypes, but they often valorize rather than stigmatize blackness—or at least, they valorize certain folkloricized aspects of blackness. Racial scripts are developed and performed within a broader narrative of national identity, which in turn is constructed historically in direct opposition to the racial and national scripts of the colonizing United States.

In a provocative concluding chapter, Godreau reminds us that official recognition of racial difference can cut multiple ways. On the one hand, when governments recognize a community as Afro-descendent, local actors can deploy scripts of blackness to make claims for material or cultural goods. On the other hand, government officials and local actors can also deploy racial scripts in ways that reinforce racial hierarchies and justify preservation of the status quo. As Godreau writes, “Scripted exaltations of black heritages ... can serve national elite interests and ideologies of *blanqueamiento*, especially when they bind blackness to a place and define such places (and their attributes) as exceptional, raw, and fading elements of the nation” (p. 233).

It would be fascinating to read an extension of Godreau’s analysis into the 2010s. How have political, economic, and cultural changes over the last decade shifted the terrain for constructing, deploying, and embodying racial scripts in San Antón and other parts of Puerto Rico? By providing an example of how to research racialization without reifying racial groups, Godreau’s *Scripts of Blackness* offers an inspiring invitation to scholars who will tackle such questions in the future.

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