Alison Fraunhar, *Mulata Nation: Visualizing Race and Gender in Cuba*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2018. viii + 262 pp. (Cloth US\$70.00)

Over a 20-year-long trajectory, Alison Fraunhar has been culling imagery of the way the mulata as a paradigmatic figure of *cubanidad* has over time been represented and performed. In *Mulata Nation* she argues that formative nineteenth-century imagery depicted the mulata as “European enough to be visible and beautiful to the white male subject, and African enough to be typologized as sexual, primitive, desirable and available” (p. 4). In the vein of Benítez Rojo’s “repetition, rhythm, return, circularity, and productive chaos, with no final answers, no definitive readings, only endless coalescences and dissolutions” (p. 5) and Bhabha’s ambivalence, mimicry, and slippage, she sets out to explore the social, cultural, and ideological contours of *mulataje* and the blurring of reality and image in an age of visual culture.

The book unfolds chronologically, starting with visual culture in the nineteenth-century Spanish colony, with a burgeoning economy open to foreign investment, based on sugar, tobacco, and slavery. With an eye to *costumbrismo*, reinforcing bourgeois values while fashioning a burlesque, and *choteo*, as irreverent satirizing of high and low, the span covers fine art, graphic art, print culture, lithographs, cigarette labels, and the popular stage with its holy trinity of vernacular ridicule—the wily *negrito*, gullible *gallego*, and uppity mulata. And prostitution is ever-present.

Fraunhar seamlessly transitions from the sensual and tragic mulata in Cuba’s classic nineteenth-century novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1882) to the trope change with José Martí’s end-of-century political rallying call of Cubans being more than black, more than white, more than mulato. This was a formative era for Cuban nationalism and Cuba’s “visual turn” as a “technique of nation self-construction” (p. 34), bearing witness to the final abolition of slavery (1886) and the end of Spanish colonial rule (1898). The era also, however, ushered in U.S. occupation and dominance of the ensuing republican period, with new imagery reflective of growing U.S. influence and tourism.

In the throwback early-republic years, and the 1920s and 1930s, with Cuban culture drawing on African heritage while Afro-Cubans themselves were written out of nation-building discourse, tropi-erotics re-emerged in mulata performers, along with cross-dressing, blackface, and gay icons. A valuable aspect of Fraunhar’s argument is her demonstration that between the avant-garde and the popular, mulata performers were able to exercise a degree of control over their representation and their lives. A key section also explores the work of influential illustrators, including those of *Carteles* magazine, whose 1934 *mulata rumbera* cover graphic is reproduced on the book’s cover.

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After the revolution, Fraunhar traces changed depictions of the mulata as citizen, acting out the social, political, and cultural drama of revolutionary change and everyday life. The film *Cecilia* (1982) also depicts its protagonist re-enacting agency within the confines of her situation. The gamut runs from the 1960s blossoming to the post crisis 1990s wilting of a cinematographic convention linked to national identity within an insular circuit. New technologies, more international coproduction, and exhibition in international markets, as well as the wane of the Cuban Film Institute, all contributed to a new era in projecting subjects and nation.

A final chapter signals this foreclosure with a 1990s return to Cuban tropicotics of the mulata for foreign consumption in a tourism-driven economy reminiscent of the colonial and republican eras. Important points made here include “returning the gaze,” as tourists look at and are looked back at by Cubans, and the “transactional turn” in social and sexual relations, with drag as a site of ambivalence and camp as a form of resistance as well as pleasure. An asymmetric academic discourse—foreign scholars on sex tourism, Cuban scholars on sexual relations among Cubans—and parallel differences between artistic representation in Cuba and the diaspora are all part of a new *vaiven* in the mulata sea.

Occasional dubious factual claims are made, such as the idea that the greatest concentration of post-1990s tourism and tourist services is clustered around Havana (p. 178), when there are major tourist enclaves on keys and beaches around the country. More importantly, however, is the troubling question as to whether the choice of imagery is in the end in danger of perpetuating the mulata stereotype it purports to debunk, when the history of the nation has been shaped by many whose lives bear little resemblance to this imagery. While a fascinating tour de force in its own right, one that has been meticulously researched and is well written, it tantalizingly cries out for further study if we are to interrogate fully the complexities of race, gender, and nation in the Cuban context.

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