

Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895, by Jill Lane

Dr. Kenya C. Dworkin y Méndez
Associate Professor, Carnegie Mellon University

The book *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 274 pp.), by Jill Lane, is an audacious and extraordinary analysis of how blackface *bufo* theater in nineteenth-century, colonial Cuba represented a stage upon which Cubans—while in blackface—could imagine and play out their Cubanness and, with it, their desire for unfettered independence from Spain and its dominant culture. With the possible exception of W.T. Lhamon, Jr.'s book *Raising Cain. Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), most (not all) other U.S. and Cuban books that examine the phenomenon of blackface performance (minstrel shows or *bufo*) are often so limited by their condemnation of the explicit racism of this white theatrical form that they do not permit any deeper or more enriching exploration. Such is not the case with *Blackface Cuba*, which intrepidly and reasonably submits that through performance Cuban blackface farce (*bufo*) was, in fact, an oppositional space and imagined

reality that despite its explicit racism and colonial mimicry challenged the island's colonial conceptualization and reality. Lane problematizes any possible uncomplicated criticism of this genre by citing, for example, the extremely important play "La mulata de rango" [The Ranked Mulata], José María Quintana's 1891 work that "dramatizes the notion of race as performance..." (199). The play made a timely and audacious plea for racial equality at a time when Cuban independence depended almost entirely on the full participation of its blacks, who had only recently (1886) achieved total emancipation, in the struggle for freedom. It came in the form of a (drunken) white father who attempts to persuade his *mulata* daughter, Julia, to remember her obligation to her and her mother's people:

Manuelillo: "You, as a *mulata*, as the daughter of a black woman...favor your own kind; be a friend to the blacks."

Julia: "I love them all well."

Manuelillo: And so you do right by your conscience! They are your brothers; until yes-

Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895

Jill Lane



terday they were slaves and now that the law give them the right to be brothers, so we must treat them!” (Quoted on 200-201)

Lane demonstrates an impressive familiarity with and knowledge of nineteenth-century Cuban texts (e.g., plays, novels, newspaper and magazine articles), and her book’s bilingual presentation of them make them entirely accessible. *Blackface Cuba* focuses both on the white stereotype of blacks and on received notions of them throughout a crucial period in the early history of the evolution of Cuba’s troubled independence movement. According to Lane, the simultaneous rise of *bufo* theater in Cuba and the nearly fifty-year period of nationalist (and abolitionist) literature (and actual fighting) were no coincidence at all. Quite to the contrary, they were all intimately related.

The *persona* of the *negrito*, who since his inception in 1840 undergoes a transformation from a *bozal* black (one who is a native of Africa and can hardly speak Spanish), to a *catedrático* black (who is more urban and uses many malapropisms when attempting to sound intelligent [white]) and then beyond, serves, with *bufo*’s many other stock characters—the *mulata*, the *gallego* (Spaniard), the *chino* (Chinese man) and the white Cuban *vivo* (the *negrito*’s street smart, white Cuban counterpart)—to define Cuba and Cubans as entirely different from Spain and Spaniards (or Africans). As Lane so succinctly puts it, *bufo* plays, with their cast of characters, allow one to see ‘difference’ in Cuba “in terms of the colony’s ‘others’—both its internal others (Africans, slaves, black Cubans) and its external other (Spain and Spaniards as a colonizing power)” (226). Cultural and social (and even political) independence from Spain required that white Cubans be able to see themselves as different from the citizens of their *madre patria*—an important vehicle for this was performance and blackface theater.

The intention of Cuban playwrights between 1840 and 1895, of writers such as Bartolomé José Crespo y Borbón, José Socorro de León, Juan José Guerrero, Antonio Enrique de Zafra, Francisco Fernández, Alfredo Toroella, Ignacio Saragacha, Pedro N. Pequeño, Raimundo Cabrera y Bosch, José María de Quintana, Migual Salas, Manuel Mellado y Montaña, José Tamayo, Ramón Morales Álvarez, Alfredo Piloto and Vicente Pardo y Suárez, who wrote *bufo* pieces in which their (white) players had to black up to represent the *negrito* (the principal character), was not only to criticize colonial mores and domination, by ‘misusing’ the image of black Cubans, but also to problematize the very

concept of Cuban whiteness and nationality. By using racial and racialized stereotypes of all possible Cuban citizens, these writers were pointing towards a new social and historical context that went beyond the original Spanish stereotype of Cubans, white or black. In Cuban *bufo* theater, it is the street smart *negrito* who outsmarts everyone else, particularly Spaniards; Afro-Cuban music that permanently changes ‘Spanish’ music; and, Cuban Spanish (with its African inflections and vocabulary), as spoken by both black and white Cubans, that beats out Peninsular (colonial) Spanish. Lane explains that this:

“[abuse] of proper Spanish produced a defamiliarizing operation.... [The] distortions of the so-called ‘African’ make audible a ‘new’ or an ‘other’ Spanish—one that was later recuperated as, precisely, ‘Cuban’.... [This] abuse of Spanish was so fully enjoyed by its white Cuban audience that countless of [these] ‘African’ aberrations were subsequently embraced and introduced into a wider vernacular. Today... they are commonly known as ‘cubanisms.’”

Lane avails herself of Cuban historians and critics—Salvador Bueno, José Juan Arrom, Raimiro Cabrera, Francisco Ortiz and Federico Villoch, for example—, and recent, internationally known theorists like Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, Samuel Feijoo, Rine Leal, Doris Sommer, Diana Taylor and Slavoj Žižek to contextualize her understanding of the role *bufo* played in Cuban nationalism and independence. Using Martí’s essay

“Nuestra América” as a point of departure, she examines and summarizes an extraordinary number of *bufo* plays and characters, many of them virtually unknown to contemporary theater historians, to argue that blackface plays provided a discursive space in which white Cubans could envision what Anderson would later call “the imagined community.”

The causes for the sociopolitical distress that triggered the rise of *bufo* in colonial Cuba may have been addressed by eventual Cuban independence, but later tensions stemming from a retracted neo-colonial relationship with the U.S. (and capitalism), socialism both during and after its engagement with the Soviet Union, and subsequent economic and social woes, continue to inspire new, modified versions of *bufo* theater in Cuba. *Blackface Cuba’s* analysis may end with the last decades of the nineteenth century in Cuba, but its critical approach has much to offer anyone interested in twentieth- and twenty-first century Cuban popular theater on the island or in exile, particularly in Miami. The exile community of Miami relies on *bufo*-style theater to express its discontent with the post-1959 Cuban situation and its own difficulties. Lane’s *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895* offers an impressive historical and cultural analysis of the role *bufo* theater played in nineteenth-century Cuba and an excellent theoretical framework with which to examine twentieth-century *bufo* theater in Cuba, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century émigré communities, and in post-1959 exile communities in the U.S.

Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895 offers a critical history of the relation between racial impersonation, national sentiment, and an anticolonial public sphere in nineteenth-century Cuba. Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895. Jill Lane. 2005 | 288 pages | Cloth \$59.95 Literature / African-American Studies/African Studies / Latin American Studies/Caribbean Studies View main book page. Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895 offers a critical history of the relation between racial impersonation, national sentiment, and the emergence of an anticolonial public sphere in nineteenth-century Cuba. Through a study of Cuba's vernacular theatre, the teatro bufo, and of related forms of music, dance, and literature, Lane argues that blackface performance was a primary Blackface Cuba is a specialized book, more appropriate for graduate students in various fields (music, history, Latin American studies, African American studies, theater) than for a general readership or for undergraduates. The author is strongly influenced by performance studies theory. Her primary materials of investigation are nineteenth-century newspapers from Cuba and popular theater pieces, many of which have appeared in reprint anthologies within Cuba over the past thirty years.