

## Preface

What do you consider most humane? To spare someone shame.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

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“There has never been,” wrote the columnist Taki Theodoracopulos in the London-based journal the *Spectator*, “—nor will there ever be—a single positive contribution by a Puerto Rican outside of receiving American welfare and beating the system.”<sup>1</sup> Deeply disgusted by the “fat, squat, ugly, dusky, dirty and unbelievably loud” people who disrupted his bagel breakfast during the 1997 National Puerto Rican Day Parade, Taki Tacky—as some Nuyorican intellectuals called him<sup>2</sup>—further declared that “Puerto Rican pride” was an oxymoron, only comparable with that of the city’s other “ghastly” community: gays.<sup>3</sup>

Taki is of course mistaken in his historical analysis; Puerto Ricans have been a major force in the creation of significant cultural practices (“positive” or not), including U.S.-born ones such as *salsa*, hip hop, and Nuyorican poetry, and have been prominent participants in important social struggles against racial discrimination, police brutality, and educational segregation. But he is right about one thing: Puerto Ricans make a lot of “noise.”

Puerto Ricans constitute less than 3 percent of the U.S. population, but the community's concerns in culture and politics are continuously making headlines. Between 1999 and 2001, President Clinton pardoned a dozen pro-independence political prisoners to a divided response among Puerto Ricans and to the distress of many in Congress.<sup>4</sup> Yet when his wife, Hillary Rodham, objected, still thinking that conservative white voters were worth more than Latinos in her race for the Senate, she felt the political muscle of one million Puerto Ricans—mostly Democrats—in the city of New York. As Congressman José Serrano (D-Bronx) bluntly put it, Puerto Ricans will “make sure that she’s not our next senator.”<sup>5</sup>

Rodham nearly bombed before she found a way to make up with Puerto Ricans and win the race. But the election results did not have as significant an effect on the representation of Puerto Rican–American relations as the death of David Sanes Rodríguez, a security guard working at a navy facility in the small island of Vieques, who died when two bombs accidentally hit his observation post. Political opportunism aside, the militant cry to get the navy out of *la isla nena* (the “baby island,” a term of endearment used by Puerto Ricans to refer to Vieques) became the new political trope on the Big Island and the Big Apple, as well as occasion for an intense display of patriotic exhibitionism, widely indulged in by the news media.<sup>6</sup>

The Vieques scene was just one of many examples that represented Puerto Ricans in a different light on a world stage during the past few years. The Vatican, for instance, beatified native son Carlos Manuel “Charlie” Rodríguez, proving that Puerto Ricans are the *más* saintly; Denise Quiñones won the title of Miss Universe, to confirm that women from the Island are the *más* beautiful; and boxer Félix “Tito” Trinidad knocked out both “golden boy” Oscar de la Hoya and William Joppy to show that Puerto Rican men were the *más* machos.

Most spectacular of all, a constellation of pop stars burst on the global scene, the brightest among them Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony, and Jennifer López. Even if reluctantly at times, these entertainers made their Puerto Rican identity an important part of their star personas and at times conspired

to raise the value attributed to *boricuas* in American culture. After decades of being ignored or humiliated by government institutions and the mass media, *boricuas* (the indigenous name many Puerto Ricans call themselves in a nativist gesture to indicate the end of colonial subordination and the beginning of a still politically undefined new era) finally seemed to be blessed by God, civilization, and *Billboard* magazine.

Unlike most empathetic commentators, however, I do not offer this list of *boricua* accomplishments to simply promote pride in place of Taki's disgust. Rather, this book aims to understand *why* and to *what effects* our attempts to value ourselves as Puerto Ricans have so frequently been staged through spectacles to offset shame. In raising shame, I am not arguing that all *boricua* exchange can be explained by this trope, but instead that modern Puerto Rican ethnic and national *identity* has been historically narrated or performed by tropes of shame and displays of pride.

By speaking to—and from—the shame of Puerto Rican identity, I do not mean to invoke the reductive terminology of an “inferiority complex,” which assumes that shame is a characteristic of the individual (or the “social” as an amalgam of individuals) and can somehow be treated with therapy. I will instead theorize shame as constitutive of social identities generated by conflict within asymmetrical power relations, not privatized pathologies. For “the forms taken by shame,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, “are not distinct ‘toxic’ parts of an identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, if it were not for the “shame” of being Puerto Rican, there would be no *boricua* identity, at least not as we know it.

The specific ways *boricuas* have been constituted by shame are not, however, the same, nor do they have identical effects. The shame of the privileged tends to be performed as “disgrace-shame,” a sense of having done wrong by not living up to their own anticolonial principles and/or being confused with Puerto Ricans of a lower status by others deemed equal or superior.<sup>8</sup> The shame of the *boricua* majority (popular) is associated with what Carl D. Schneider calls “discretion-shame,” an affect that “sustains

our personal and social ordering of the world” by delimiting sacred spaces that are proscribed to us not only as Puerto Ricans, but as workers, blacks, women, queers, and/or migrants.<sup>9</sup>

Since the Puerto Rican elites represent themselves as normative subjects—white, sovereign, endowed—their strategies to offset shame tend to require simulacrum and denial. As the early-twentieth-century writer Bernardo Vega observed, better-off *boricuas* in New York would try to “pass” as Spaniards while workers “were not afraid of being called ‘spiks.’ They did not deny their origin.”<sup>10</sup> Although not at all times, popular performances are more likely to ebb out in the enjoyment or display of their lacking selves, including transgressive symbolic acts or bodily violence.

These distinctions are of course theoretical, as both forms of shame will often be congealed in the same cultural objects and exhibited by dissimilar subjects. “Elite” subjects on the axis of class, for instance, can be feminine, queer, or racialized, whereas “low” subjects on the axis of race can be highly educated and hence act upon their identities (and interests) in intricate ways. Yet the fact that all Puerto Ricans are constituted as colonial subjects, however differentiated, has resulted in a common and sometimes painfully heightened awareness of being—or potentially being confused with—a spic.

Consequently, *boricua* cultural production is largely made up of the desire to purge, flaunt, deny, destroy, resignify, and transfigure the constitutive shame of being Puerto Rican from our bodies and public selves. Shame, as Sedgwick elaborates, is also a “kind of free radical” that “attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people’s behavior toward oneself.”<sup>11</sup>

As shame is simultaneously the “affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation” through which the subject feels “lacking in dignity or worth,”<sup>12</sup> the *boricua* bodies re-membered here give face to shame under multiple guises, depending on the subject’s class, racial, gender, sex-

ual, and migratory histories. The book's emphasis on the body is not fortuitous. Shame is not only the affect most associated with the face, but as Susan Miller argues, it is also "invariably linked to a body concern," as pride is constituted by "matters of body investment"—of how we become socially visible as subjects.<sup>13</sup>

*Boricua Pop* then looks at the most conspicuous of Puerto Ricans—movie stars, artists, and entertainers—to see how these bodies are being shown and showing off. By collecting the detritus of mass culture, the book pieces together the public "biographies" of (professional) cultural performers to show not only the role of shame in constituting *boricua* identity, but also how seeing and being seen contribute to its attenuation or resignification.<sup>14</sup> Each of *Boricua Pop's* chapters hopes to offer a different gift to this poetics and reconstitutes a "grotesque" (or as Taki might say, a "ghastly") Puerto Rican body brought forth literally (and often literarily) by shame.

In order to account for Puerto Rican performances to offset shame in popular and high culture, *Boricua Pop* opens with three chapters gathered under the heading of "Founding Spectacles." The introductory chapter describes two of the most salient historical junctures by which Puerto Rican identity has been constituted as shameful: the 1898 invasion of Puerto Rico by the United States and mass migration to the mainland. A closing section of chapter 1 explores how the political, symbolic, and economic devaluation experienced by Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects has sought release in political performances as well as mass-mediated spectacles.

Following the introduction are two chapters that analyze how the invasion and mass migration have found a privileged articulation in Island high culture and American popular culture respectively. Chapter 2 discusses how the shame of Puerto Rican identity became the trauma of nation-building literature. Special emphasis is granted to the faux historical chronicle *Seva* (1983), by Luis López Nieves, which narrates that Puerto Ricans in fact—and contrary to historical accounts—did resist the U.S. invasion of the island, and the short story "1898," by Edgardo Sanabria Santaliz, one of the few Island

literary texts that acknowledge shame as a constitutive feature of Puerto Rican national identity.

In chapter 3 I will examine the most important cultural product to hail *boricuas* as devalued American “ethnic” subjects, the Broadway show (1957) and film *West Side Story* (1961), directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise. Without denying its long-term effects on representing Puerto Ricans in the United States as racialized others, I propose to review *West Side Story* as a queer film, in which the social and sexual desires of Jewish gay men were performed by means of *boricua* bodies, anticipating the current juncture of cultural Latinization in certain hierarchical terms. In rewinding *West Side Story*, I will also argue that the film succeeded not in excluding Puerto Ricans from “America” but in incorporating *boricuas* to the national imagination in a specific way: superficially black, criminally stylish, and queerly masculine.

Part 2 includes three essays under the heading “*Boricuas* in the Middle.” Two of these chapters are about Puerto Ricans who attempted to valorize their black and queer identities in the cultural marketplace at a time when only white performers and artists could fully accomplish this transaction. Specifically, chapter 4 examines the career of Warhol Superstar Holly Woodlawn, the transculturated drag star of the 1970 underground hit *Trash*. Chapter 5 focuses on Jean-Michel Basquiat’s short life as the world’s most famous Caribbean-American painter and his visual legacy of disarticulated black bodies.

The last chapter of part 2 discusses Madonna’s successful commodification of New York Latino cultural practices and her performance of an erotics of transculturation that required racial hierarchies to be globally consumed. In approaching *boricua* practices as a product of transculturation, I am recalling, first, the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz’s definition of transculturation as a process through which a new formation is created as a result of cross-cultural contact,<sup>15</sup> and second, Mary Louise Pratt’s narrower definition, which further elaborates on the ways subaltern groups “select and

invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture."<sup>16</sup>

Part 3, "*Boricua Anatomies*," highlights how the shame of Puerto Rican identity can lodge itself in specific body parts, even when the bodies displaying it are greatly appreciated cultural commodities showing off pride. In chapter 7, the writer Rosario Ferré gives up the prestige of her native tongue by publishing three novels written originally in English for the globalized literary market. In chapter 8 the question of what kind of hair—"good" or "bad"—*boricua* bodies should exhibit in public is raised by the conflicted reception on the Island and across the mainland to a "fake" *boricua* that also embodies a distinctly American icon—Puerto Rican Barbie.

Chapters 9 and 10 discuss the obsessive attention to the actress Jennifer López's buttocks, widely seen and debated after she starred in the Hollywood film *Selena* (1997), and the entertainer Ricky Martin's "queer" hips as a way to discuss how Puerto Ricans are *differently* racialized in the pop culture marketplace, and how the perception of queerness affects their circulation as commodities. A postscript reconsiders the limits of culture as a political trope centered on the diffusion of national shame.

In making this offering, I am aware of the risk I have taken. Addressing shame is in itself shameful, and likely to stir powerful emotions. Yet studying shame as a socially constituted affect is part of valorizing subaltern groups and recovering that which shame tends to inhibit—interest in the world and enjoyment. Equally important, if contempt has often been the affect of Americans as (white) "nationals" when facing the groups they have devalued, rallying our shame has been an important strategy for social change.

As I write this, I can still, for instance, hear the chants of Act Up, one of the most vital organizations produced by the AIDS crisis during the 1980s, chanting "shame, shame, shame" to those who were indifferent to the epidemic because of the low value attributed to gay men and racialized minorities. An illness that also connoted sexuality, poverty, race, drug use, and the

wasting away of the body, AIDS was deemed shameful at multiple levels. But the transfiguration of the bearer's shame into art, political action, and community building saved the lives of many by facing straight on the question of whose shame it was that HIV-positive people were dying.

Always engaged in an effort to—as *West Side Story* would have it—feel pretty, *boricua* bodies are persistently negotiating their shameful constitution, refashioning the looks that aim to humiliate or take joy away from them. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that our most vital cultural production as *boricuas* has sprung not from the denial of shame, but from its acknowledgment into wounds that we can be touched by. While shame, like any self-awareness, is painful, it is no less true that as the affect of reflexivity and self-discovery, it is a precondition to transformation and hope.<sup>17</sup>