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Beyond U.S. Dominance: Cuban and Local Influences on the Origins of Puerto Rican Commercial Television

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On March 29, 1954, at 4:30 p.m. Tele-mundo (WKAQ-TV, channel 2) aired *Cocina Frigidaire*, its first regular program on Puerto Rican television.¹ This cooking show’s main purpose, according to Frigidaire’s Puerto Rican president, was to “ayudar a revivir el arte de la buena cocina en los hogares de Puerto Rico, con especial énfasis en los platos típicos de nuestro país.”² As this incident suggests, since television’s beginnings some of Puerto Rico’s locally produced programs have been influenced by United States formats while concomitantly portraying the island’s socially constructed culture and identity. Also, as was typical in the beginning of U.S. television, advertising agencies sponsored all television programming.³ Because the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates all media industries on the island and because the Commonwealth’s government has no legal rights over its communication systems, television, like other media industries in Puerto Rico, has reproduced the same economic and legal structures that characterize the U.S. media.

At first glance, these elements, coupled with the island’s political status, situate Puerto Rican commercial television as a medium solely influenced by the United States. However, in this article I argue that any interrogation of the history of Puerto Rican television must also include an analysis of the creative exchanges of people and cultural artifacts between Puerto Rico and Cuba, especially during Puerto Rican television’s first years. An inquiry into this triangular communications scenario sheds light on programming patterns on the island, cultural transformations of some U.S. shows/concepts on Puerto Rican television by way of Cuba before the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and Cuban immigrants’ influence on contemporary Puerto Rican television. Taken together, these explorations contextualize the complexity of Puerto Rican commercial television.

My sources consist of newspaper articles published in *El Mundo* between 1954 and 1955 and personal interviews conducted during July 1997, September 2000, and December 2000. In July 1997, I interviewed several technical people and executive personnel from Telemundo de Puerto Rico (WKAQ-channel 2). I also conducted interviews with Paquito Cordero, a prominent Puerto Rican producer, and the production personnel of *Mi Familia*, one of many sitcoms produced during the trajectory of Puerto Rican television and written by a Cuban migrant.⁴ To contrast the perspectives expressed by Telemundo de Puerto Rico media professionals, in September 2000 I interviewed Pablo Cabrera, a distinguished Puerto Rican theatre and television director, producer, and writer who worked for Puerto Rico’s government radio and television stations (WIPR) from 1962 to 1972.⁵ Finally, in December 2000, I conducted interviews with Raúl Nacer, a well-known Cuban television director and actor who began working in Puerto Rico’s media in 1957, and Luis Antonio Rivera (“Yoyo Boing”), a Puerto Rican actor who has been working in Puerto Rican television since 1954.

To map a pattern for Puerto Rico’s locally produced television, I begin with an overview of Telemundo’s first year of programming and news stories regarding television’s arrival in Puerto Rican society. I then examine some of the cultural exchanges between Cuba and Puerto Rico during 1954–1955 and explore the ways in which these interactions permeated the genesis and development of the medium. This section also includes an
analysis of the 1960s Cuban migration to Puerto Rico, the power of this community in particular aspects of television production, and the ways in which Cubans have been constructed in locally produced comedies. Finally, the essay problematizes the importance of examining local aspects of Puerto Rican television and competing forces that have shaped the medium’s history. Taken together, these explorations are fundamental to understanding Puerto Rican television as a terrain whose soil has been cultivated by multiple entities, including but not limited to the United States.

A preliminary discussion of the first year of Puerto Rican commercial television also engages current debates in media studies regarding what constitutes a local television cultural product. Locally produced programs from that period can be categorized by what Milly Buonanno calls “the paradigm of indigenization.” Buonanno contends that even though local television products are influenced by foreign (mostly U.S.) forms, concepts, or genres, these local productions “give rise to new forms and products which are hybrid, original, and unmistakably domestic.” In the case of Puerto Rico’s locally produced programs during 1954–1955, I argue that although some local producers “borrowed” U.S. commercial television genres and concepts, or bought scripts from Cuba, these local productions created original cultural products that contained the cultural meanings associated with Puerto Rico’s national and identity spaces.

Telemundo’s Programming Pattern, 1954–1955

In 1954 two commercial stations were broadcasting in Puerto Rico: Telemundo (WKAQ-TV), which began transmissions in March under the ownership of Puerto Rican entrepreneur Angel Ramos; and WAPA-TV, which began official operations in May under the ownership of Ramón Quiñones, another Puerto Rican businessman. At that time Ramos also owned El Mundo, one of the two major newspapers in Puerto Rico and the only paper to include television programming information. El Mundo devoted little attention to WAPA’s inauguration, El Mundo’s television section did not include reviews of WAPA’s programming during 1954–1955. Thus, it seems that Ramos may have attempted to use his media power to shape consumer/audience behavior.

At the end of Telemundo’s first six months, a total of forty different programs had been scheduled for broadcasting from Monday to Sunday from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Twenty of these programs were produced locally, while the other twenty were imported from the United States and Mexico. At the end of Telemundo’s first year, locally produced programs sponsored by both United States and Puerto Rican corporations dominated Puerto Rican television. For example, Taberna India (variety show), and Romance Keebler (romance stories) were locally produced programs whose sponsors were Puerto Rican and United States companies, respectively.

In Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, local television productions followed the United States “broker system” model. On some occasions advertising agencies adapted a specific U.S. program to Puerto Rican culture and hired local talent, while on others, Puerto Rican actors/producers sold program ideas to advertisers who were developing shows with one specific sponsor in mind. The actors/producers’ primary strategy was to create a generic program that would incorporate the sponsor into the show’s title. Thus, many of the programs produced locally during Puerto Rican television’s early stages were designed, performed, directed, and sold by a group of actors who took advantage of the medium as an unstructured enterprise. During its first year, Telemundo (WKAQ-TV) did not have a sales department. Instead, the station’s management dealt primarily with the transmissions’ technical aspects without
yet envisioning the financial opportunities of producing its own programming.¹³

Telemundo’s proliferation of local programming did not represent a strategic plan by local actors/producers to create a series of Puerto Rican cultural products to counteract United States “media imperialism”; rather it was simply a commercial strategy to attract and sell Puerto Rican audiences to United States and Puerto Rican corporations. As was the case with advertising agencies, the island’s culture was a crucial element for attracting these audiences.¹⁴ Thus, culture and people were constructed as profitable commodities for the benefit of the nation’s elite and for United States companies that were taking advantage of the economic growth that characterized Puerto Rico during the 1950s. To attract consumers, U.S. and multinational companies needed to “glocalize” their product with elements of Puerto Rico’s culture, and without United States capital, television development would have been difficult to achieve.¹⁵

The arrival of television in Puerto Rico coincided with the implementation of “Operation Bootstrap,” an economic development plan aimed at changing Puerto Rico’s economy from an agricultural to an industrial base. To attract United States corporations, the government offered incentives such as a cheap labor force, special tax exemptions for a maximum period of thirty years, and tariff benefits to industries willing to invest in the “new market.” Ricardo Campos and Frank Bonilla assert that this economic transformation changed the social organization of production and converted the island into a “consumer market for U.S. goods.”¹⁶ As soon as Telemundo began its transmissions, several United States and Puerto Rican corporations incorporated their ads into its programming, taking advantage of the new medium’s advertising opportunities.¹⁷ Accordingly, a series of newspaper articles emphasized television’s benefits for both consumers and advertisers.

In February 1954, one month prior to WKAQ-TV’s first transmission, El Mundo began publishing a series of supplements regarding the arrival of a new medium in Puerto Rican society. In addition to program summaries and reviews, newspaper stories focused on “the wonders” of the new technology for consumers and commercial industries and how this technology would even change interactions within the household.¹⁸ Most of these articles were written by El Mundo journalists and top managers of the advertising agencies; others were translated from United States newspapers.

Telemundo began its transmission in 1954 with programming scheduled from 4:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. The imported United States programs included Public Prosecutor, Perry Como, and Victory at Sea while locally produced programs included Buscando estrellas Coca Cola, Músicas del Monte, and Gran show Libby’s. During this beginning and transitional period, United States programs were incorporated primarily because local program production was not yet ready for implementation.¹⁹

Telemundo’s locally produced prime-time programming during 1954–1955 included some shows that were indigenous versions of United States programs and others that reproduced United States genres/concepts. In addition, other shows were based on scripts that originated in Puerto Rico and Cuba. These locally produced entertainment programs can be divided into eight main categories: talent shows, theater, variety shows, sports, romance, cooking shows, children’s programs, and comedies/sitcoms. Talent shows presented various amateur singers who competed weekly for selection as the “week’s most talented” Coca Cola busca estrellas. Theater pieces were television adaptations of Spanish, Latin American, and Puerto Rican plays or original locally written scripts for television Gran teatro Caribe Motors. Variety shows, one of the most popular genres on Puerto Rican television, were programs that presented contemporary singers and bands from Puerto Rico and Latin America and also
incorporated comedy sketches. *Show de shows*. Sports programs offered commentaries on boxing and baseball events from the United States, Puerto Rico, and Latin America. *Deportes Esso*. Romance stories, which could be considered predecessors to Puerto Rican *telenovelas*, were episodic narratives that, as the name suggests, dealt with romance. *Romance Keebler*. Cooking shows presented recipes for the “Puerto Rican housewife” *Cocina Frigidaire*, while children’s programming targeted Puerto Rico’s young population. *El payaso Pinito*. Finally, comedies and sitcoms were primarily adaptations of Puerto Rican and Cuban radio comedies that had been influenced by U.S. sitcom and comedy formats and also by Puerto Rican and Cuban theatrical traditions.

Several locally produced comedy shows illustrate the Cuban–Puerto Rican and United States–Cuban–Puerto Rican adaptations. For example, *La tremenda corte*’s scripts, which originated in Cuba, were purchased and then adapted to Puerto Rico’s culture; the show first aired on WKAQ-radio, and later on Telemundo. On the other hand, in 1954 the first Puerto Rican situation comedy, *Mapy y Papi*, was an adaptation of the United States’ sitcom *I Love Lucy*. The translation and adaptation of *I Love Lucy*’s scripts were done in Cuba and then both the concept and the scripts were adapted to Puerto Rican culture.

A curious observation regarding *Mapy y Papi* was the absence of reference to the sitcom as an adaptation of *I Love Lucy* in reviews of its first broadcast, even though the “original” *I Love Lucy* (dubbed in Spanish *Yo amo a Lucy*) was also aired by Telemundo in 1954. When describing *Mapy y Papi*, reviews focused on the principal actors (Mapy and Fernando Cortés, two celebrated Puerto Rican performers who worked in the Mexican movie industry) and the local talent participating in the program.

In *Mapy y Papi*, one can see the ways in which an imported concept (from the United States and Cuba) might have created diverse cultural artifacts. Although it is extremely difficult to obtain access to 1950s Cuban television productions and producers, it would be useful to perform an analysis of this specific program to examine the ways in which languages, cultures, and production processes transformed the “original” *I Love Lucy*. According to Cordero (who worked on *Mapy y Papi*’s production and who is the nephew of Mapy Cortés), the shows “were different.” Although one could question Cordero’s observations, one should certainly ask why Telemundo would broadcast two “identical” programs. Through the scripts’ adaptations, the incorporation of local talent, and *Mapy y Papi* reviews that emphasized the interconnection between the characters to Mapy y Fernando Cortés’ public personas, the show was constructed as an original local production. Nonetheless, *Mapy y Papi* is not the only example of an adaptation of a foreign concept during Telemundo’s first year. *Show de shows* also demonstrates the ways in which a United States program *Your Show of Shows* was transformed to Puerto Rico’s culture.

*Your Show of Shows*, a ninety-minute program that aired on NBC on Saturdays from 9:00 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., presented comedy sketches, singers, dancers and “big name stars.” On the other hand, *Show de shows* was a one-hour program that aired on Telemundo on Tuesdays from 9:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. and featured Puerto Rican, Latin American and Spanish singers, dancers, and comedians. Directed by Fernando Cortés and written by Tommy Muñiz, a prominent Puerto Rican television scriptwriter, producer, actor, and director, *Show de shows*’ scenario recreated “el ambiente lujoso e imaginario” of “El Casino Tropical.” Entertainment such as *Los Hispanos* (a Puerto Rican trio), *El trovador Portabales* (a Cuban singer), *El profesor Dilmer* (an Argentinean magician), Paquito Cordero, Miguel Angel Alvarez, and Yoyo Boing (Puerto Rican actors) performed in this “tropical ambiance.” *Show de shows* emulated...
the United States variety-comedy genre, but presented performers, comedic sketches, and cultural artifacts originating a domestic cultural product with the purpose of targeting Puerto Rican audiences.

In sum, the 1954–1955 prime-time season on Telemundo’s schedule was a mixture of United States programs and movies, Mexican movies, and locally produced programs. Genres and sponsors reproduced the U.S. commercial television structure, wherein consumption of U.S. and Puerto Rican products permeated the televisual representation of the island’s cultures. Nonetheless, I will not categorize Telemundo’s first year solely as a “free world supermarket,” nor will I claim that Puerto Rican television in general and Telemundo’s first year in particular, marginalized the island’s cultures. If we examine the shows themselves, the reviews of the locally produced programs, and the ongoing incorporation of local talent, we discover that both dominant and vernacular cultures comprised Telemundo’s locally produced programming. Furthermore, although the United States played a pivotal role in the development of Puerto Rican television in general and Telemundo in particular, another influence was critical: that of Cuba. The Cuban presence was significant to the beginning of Puerto Rican television and currently many Cuban immigrants hold powerful positions in local television production. The following discussion analyzes some of the cultural flows between Puerto Rico and Cuba and the ways in which they shaped Puerto Rico’s local television.

“Cuba y Puerto Rico son de un pájaro las dos alas”: The Influence of Cuban Modes of Production on Puerto Rican Television

In reference to the two countries’ combined and ongoing struggles to obtain their independence from Spain, in 1893 the Puerto Rican poet Lola Rodríguez de Tío expressed that “Cuba and Puerto Rico are the two wings of a single bird.” Rodríguez de Tío’s verses epitomize the interconnections of these two nations not only in terms of their colonial past, but also in terms of contemporary invasions of their cultural and social arenas. Although these ongoing cultural connections with Cuba have permeated the origins and development of Puerto Rico’s media in general and television in particular, none of the existing studies of Puerto Rican television present a historic analysis of the Cuban influence. A revision of the interactions in Puerto Rico illuminates some of the ways in which Cuban creative people (directors, writers, and actors) were influential prior to the 1959 Cuban Revolution and after 1960 when many members of this creative community migrated to Puerto Rico.

This historic predominance became evident in interviews with Telemundo de Puerto Rico television professionals. References to Cubans were integral to many conversations. Some of the remarks concerning the Cuban influence on the development of Puerto Rican television were full of admiration. Interviewees observed that, thanks to Cuban media professionals, “Puerto Rican television became the successful enterprise that it is today,” and that “the golden age era” of both television and advertising was achieved thanks to the Cuban influence. Since Cuba was one of the first countries in Latin America to incorporate television technology in 1950, Angel Ramos and many Puerto Rican actors/producers subsequently reproduced Cuban modes of television production that had already been shaped by the United States’ commercial television model.

Nevertheless, some of the comments regarding Cuban influence were more critical. Concerning the beginning of Telemundo, one interviewee remarked that, “Don Angel se enamoró primero de los americanos y luego de los cubanos. Pues, por eso es que ahora se quedaron con el kiosko.” This “love-hate” relationship embodies both the respect that many Puerto Rican television professionals have for the Cuban
immigrants' expertise as well as the resentment of Cuban control of the medium and the economic success that many members of this community achieved when they migrated to Puerto Rico. To understand this contentious dichotomy, one must examine the collaborative efforts of Puerto Ricans and Cubans during the first years of Puerto Rican television, the power that many Cuban immigrants have in today's television arena, and the larger social discourse associated with Cubans as a migratory group in Puerto Rico.

Several factors explain Cuba and Puerto Rico's close economic, political, and cultural connections. First, although not culturally identical, Puerto Rico and Cuba share similar traits in language, traditions, religion, and vernacular Spanish use patterns. The origins of these similarities can be traced to their shared colonial history, their nation building processes, and their ethnic composition. During the late nineteenth century, Puerto Ricans and Cubans formed political alliances to fight against the Spanish colonial regime. New York City became an effervescent cultural and political center where Puerto Rican and Cuban political refugees built coalitions and founded a series of organizations to raise funds for their respective independence movements.32 Intellectuals from both countries expressed their desire to form an “Antilles Confederation” whereby Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic would create a combined “national” project for the Caribbean.33 Furthermore, in terms of ethnic and racial composition, this region is mainly mulatto or black.34 Several Puerto Rican intellectuals claim that what unifies these territories is their “blackness,” their language, and their rhythms, which are vividly present in the literature and music of the region. Although each nation's cultural production relates to specific historical, political, and economic conditions, these various trajectories merge in their “blackness,” a pivotal element in the cultural enclave.35

Cuba and Puerto Rico's close economic, political, and cultural connections can also be explained by the popularity of cultural exchanges between the nations before and after 1898. For example, the first representations of “blackness” in Puerto Rico's cultural mélange can be traced to the Cuban bufó comedic tradition. This theatrical tradition, a popular genre whose origins are traceable to France and Spain, flowered in Cuba by the nineteenth century and prescribed the ways in which “black” characters were first portrayed on Puerto Rico's stage, radio, and later, on television.36 As early as 1879, Cuban bufó theatre companies were part of Puerto Rico's cultural arena. Following this theatrical form, several nineteenth century Puerto Rican theatre writers incorporated the stereotypical negrito into their creative work and adapted it to Puerto Rican culture.37

Ramón Ortiz del Rivero (“Diplo”), the most famous bufó actor in Puerto Rico, initially constructed his negrito character in theatre and radio, and eventually carried it into television shows such as La tremenda corte and La taberna India. “Diplo” emulated the stereotypes embedded in the Cuban theatrical form, and on some occasions used scripts purchased from Cuba (for example, La tremenda corte). In actuality, “Diplo’s” negrito character, and subsequent representations of the problematic theatrical tradition, constructed the roles during the 1950s as representative of a Caribbean culture, rather than a Puerto Rican culture.38 Another example of this Caribbean and stereotypical negritud was presented in the Puerto Rican versions of the Cuban radionovela Sierra negra and the radionovela and later telenovela El derecho de nacer.39 In addressing these cultural products and their main characters (La negra Balbina and Mam Dolores), journalists referred to the negras as Caribbean, not as Puerto Rican or Cuban. Although these television constructions of negritud were later transformed into “Puerto Rican” and j barito/a versions during the 1960s, it is clear that the first representations of
“blackness” in Puerto Rico’s commercial television were directly influenced by Cuba’s *bufo* comedy.40

Another element bridging Cuba and Puerto Rico can be demonstrated in both nations trade connections with the United States. By 1830 in New York City, merchants from both islands had established *La sociedad benéfica cubana y puertorriqueña*, a business organization that created a triangular economic relationship among the three nations.41 Their business relations continued after 1898, despite changes in the colonial regimes occasioned by the Spanish–American War. As a result of the war and the Platt Amendment, the United States controlled most of Cuba’s economy and political structures.42 Once Puerto Rico became a United States colony in 1898, it was easy to establish business relations between the two Caribbean islands until 1959. Even today, although on a limited scale due to government limitations on United States–Cuban cultural exchanges, a plethora of musical and theatrical touring groups, Cuban films, and literature form part of Puerto Rico’s cultural mélange.43

Finally, considering all of the aforementioned historic, cultural, economic, and political factors, and the fact that before the “television era,” many radio scripts came from Cuba, it is not difficult to understand why many Puerto Rican television actors/producers, advertisers, and creative people in general longed to emulate the success of Cuban television.

In several articles published in *El Mundo* during January and February 1954, before the arrival of television on the island, and during Telemundo’s first year, one can observe the close alliance between Cuban and Puerto Rican advertisers and the creative community. In a February 12, 1954, *El Mundo* article titled, *Cuba marcha al frente de América Latina en televisión*, several key elements depict both countries’ embedded connections and the trajectory that characterized the origins and development of television production in Puerto Rico.44 The author reveals his admiration for Cuban television production and his goal of imitating its success, noting that:

> la calidad de los programas en la televisión cubana es excelente, y poco o nada tienen que envidiar a los mejores programas de televisión radiados por las cadenas de televisión de los Estados Unidos. [...] En Cuba, muchos de los programas se han adaptado de los programas que han tenido éxito en el extranjero, al gusto latino, y en muchos casos han sido mejorados.45

It is interesting that the passage reflects the presence of the United States television formats as part of the “success formula,” even as the author contends that Cuban programs are better because they have a “Latin flavor.”

It seems that in Puerto Rican television’s early years, ongoing communication between Cubans and the Puerto Rican advertising communities was typical. For example, following Badillo Corporation’s business tradition (Badillo is an advertising agency located in Puerto Rico), McCann-Erickson Corporation in Puerto Rico sent one of its employees to Cuba to conduct research on the island’s radio and television industries.46 Furthermore, it was common to see actors, directors, and singers from Cuba working in Puerto Rican theatre, radio, and television during the 1950s.47 Cuban radio and television professionals such as Raúl Nacer (television director), Leopoldo Fernández “Tres Patines” (comedic actor), Evelio Otero (journalist), and Alberto Cuevas (scriptwriter) were among the creative individuals who actively participated in the beginning of Puerto Rican television. In addition, a curious aspect of this period’s
cultural exchanges between Cuba and Puerto Rico is revealed in a short article that addressed WKAQ’s reception in the Rodas province of Las Villas, Cuba. Although the primary objective of the article was to publicize Telemundo’s strong signal and the excellent quality of Puerto Rico’s local programming, the writer emphasized the Cuban interviewee’s approval of Puerto Rico’s locally produced programs.

These ongoing cultural and business exchanges enable an understanding of the origins of Cubans’ predominance on Puerto Rican television. During the first years of Puerto Rican television, a majority of the translations and adaptations of United States programs were done in Cuba. As previously mentioned, the first Puerto Rican sitcom, Mapy y Papi, an adaptation of the United States show I Love Lucy, came from Cuba and was subsequently adapted to Puerto Rico’s culture. Additionally, Puerto Rican radio and television actors/producers often purchased Cuban comedy scripts, radionovelas and telenovelas. The main reason for this trend was the cost of the scripts, which were so inexpensive that the adage comprados por libra was coined. Although a new cadre of Puerto Rican comedy scriptwriters began to work in television in 1954, some local writers rejected the low salary paid by the actors/producers and the “fast pace” characteristic of commercial television production. Consequently, many of the local actors/producers continued with the tradition of buying Cuban scripts por libra. On the other hand—at least during these early years—there was no space for Puerto Ricans to develop their telenovela scriptwriting skills since U.S. advertising agencies made Cuba the center of “mass production” telenovela scriptwriting for the Latin American region. While all of Telemundo de Puerto Rico telenovelas were produced locally, the scripts came from Cuba. After the 1959 Cuban Revolution, many Cuban scriptwriters, directors, and artists migrated to Puerto Rico and began to work in television. Puerto Rican producers subsequently hired these creative people and bought scripts that were originally written for Cuban television.

After the 1960s, Cuban immigrants dominated many areas of television production, but in particular, they were in charge of writing most of Puerto Rico’s locally produced television programs. According to one interviewee, part of this trend was associated with the fact that most television producers had been working in the industry for many years and were familiar with the “old modes of production.” Notwithstanding this, Paquito Cordero offered a different explanation regarding the predominance of Cuban scriptwriters in local commercial television. Although Cordero praised the work of various creative people from Puerto Rico, especially Tommy Muñiz and Israel “Shorty” Castro, a television actor, director, and scriptwriter, he perceived that there was (and has been) a lack of Puerto Rican writers. Cordero observed that:

En Puerto Rico tenemos un problema. En Puerto Rico no se cultivaron los libretistas. La razón es porque al principio [los libretos] venían de Cuba. Se conseguían novelas y libretos de comedia muy baratos. Excelentes libretistas se pueden contar con los dedos de la mano. Cuando comienzo mi compañía, yo tuve que recurrir a los libretistas cubanos que salieron. En estos años hemos tratado de incorporar libretistas nuestros . . . empezaron a surgir uno que otro. En muchas ocasiones los pusimos a colaborar con nuestro libretista . . . pero tu me preguntas ahora de libretistas puertorriqueños y yo me quedo corto.

The realities of this transcultural influence become evident when specific examples are discussed. When asking some participants about successful sitcoms, for example,
three titles consistently came to mind: *Los García*, *Los suegros*, and *En casa de Juanma y Wiwi*. Although these are only three of the sitcoms produced on the island, it is important to mention that only *Los García* was written by a Puerto Rican (Tommy Muñiz), while the other two, similar to most of the sitcoms produced locally, were written by Cubans (Manuel Montero “Membrillo” and Felipe San Pedro). While it should not be assumed that these programs were successful because they were written by Cubans, one should consider the fact that local producers tend to hire people who have mastered television writing techniques and who have had experience in television production. Thus, it seems that for many years, an ongoing pattern of hiring already commercially successful (Cuban) writers was common. Along with hiring practices, we should also consider the economic aspect of television production. As Cordero observed, Cuban scripts were inexpensive; therefore, it was more profitable for local producers to buy these “already made” and inexpensive products.

Pablo Cabrera agreed with Cordero’s explanation concerning the accessibility of Cuban scripts and the talent of many Cuban writers. However, Cabrera argued that the problem was not the lack of talented Puerto Rican writers, but the scarcity of opportunities for this creative community. As he observed:

> Yo no creo que había tal escasez. Simplemente no se les dio la oportunidad que se les debía haber dado. . . . No se les brindó un terreno fértil para que se desarrollaran. En la década del 60 en WIPR teníamos excelente libretistas puertorriqueños tanto en la televisión como en la radio. La televisión comercial no quiso sacar el dinero para pagar el talento local.54

In considering these two diverse postures, one should reflect on the power hierarchies and struggles within the field of cultural production and the fact that commercial television is a business enterprise. Therefore, one might contend that the Cuban predominance during the early years of Puerto Rico’s commercial television responded not only to this community’s prestige, but also to the accessibility and low cost of its cultural productions.

Considering all these factors, one can ask, was Puerto Rican commercial television informed by a “Cuban hegemony” with the consent and active participation of local cultural producers? Or did some of the participants rearticulate the prejudice that emerged in Puerto Rico after the 1959 Cuban Revolution?

**Cubans and Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico after 1959: Are They Still the Wings of a Single Bird?**

The first Cuban migration to Puerto Rico after the 1959 Cuban Revolution occurred during 1960–1961 when Luis Muñoz Marín, the island’s governor, invited professionals to the island.55 According to José Cobas and Jorge Duany, successive Cuban migratory influxes were influenced by language, the similarities of cultures and climate, the economic growth that Puerto Rico experienced during the 1960s, and the political, social, and economic ties between Puerto Rico and the United States. At first, Puerto Ricans received the group with enthusiasm, but the positive environment was transformed when the Puerto Rican middle-class perceived that many of the immigrants were being hired over Puerto Ricans.56

One important factor regarding this migration is that most of the Cubans were part of the migratory group classified as the “Golden Exiles,” a categorization that referred
to their upper socio-economic status in Cuba. Before migrating to Puerto Rico, most of these exiles’ professional occupations were related to business, management, or other professional jobs. Thus, in general, the prejudice against Cuban immigrants in Puerto Rico is primarily rooted in their rapid economic success and the fact that they have been socially constructed as people who took away jobs that were supposed to be for Puerto Ricans.

Cubans in Puerto Rico are generally and pejoratively constructed as the “Jews of the Caribbean,” and as “opportunistic and ungrateful parasites.” As well, in Puerto Rico’s vernacular culture in general and certain sectors of the population in particular, Cubans are depicted as “worms,” (gusanos) a derogatory term referring to Cubans who abandoned and opposed the Cuban Revolution. In numerous television sitcoms and comedies, Cubans in general are portrayed as white, upper-middle class, and right-wing conservatives who support Puerto Rico’s annexation to the United States. In addition, through their habanero accent and Cuban vernacular language, Cuban characters usually make references to the sugar cane industries they owned in Cuba and their hope that someday, when Fidel Castro dies, they will return to the island and reclaim their properties. In these constructions, Cuban men are generally portrayed as greedy and pushy business owners who dress in guayaberas, smoke cigars, and wear multiple gold chains. Cuban women are commonly represented as sensual, attractive women who dress in bright colors, wear exaggerated jewelry, and constantly make reference to “Casa Cuba” and its parties.

Puerto Rican and Cuban actors, actresses, and scriptwriters have constructed these representations in local television. Among these are Puerto Rican performers Awilda Carbia and her character Dulce María, José Miguel Agrelot and his character Pancho Matanzas, the actor and scriptwriter Raymond Arrieta; and Cuban actors and scriptwriters such as Cary Oliver and her character Caridad, Manuel Montero “Membrillo,” and Felipe San Pedro. The performers’ and scriptwriters’ constructions of Cubans have been a recurring comedic element in locally produced programs. Although television's stereotypical constructions of Cubans depict them as culturally different, in a general sense, they are portrayed as active participants in Puerto Rican society and as foreign but welcome members of the “imagined community.”

Still, social discourses regarding the Cuban community articulate a different panorama. In the case of television, both admiration and resentment towards Cubans working in the medium today is evident. As previously discussed, this admiration is associated with Cubans’ expertise, while the ongoing bitterness is connected to the economic and political power of this immigrant group on the island and its control of important positions in television. This resentment should be contextualized in light of the competing forces that shaped the origins of Puerto Rican television and the social, political, and economic transformations and prejudices that emerged after the 1959 Cuban migration. Based on interviewees’ responses, one can deduce that Puerto Rican commercial television did in fact operate within a “Cuban hegemony” developed by local producers and the stations’ management. Instead of creating a workshop where-in Puerto Rican writers could have learned from these talented and experienced Cuban professionals, local producers preferred to purchase already profitable cultural productions (scripts) and hire successful producers scriptwriters.

In light of U.S. industrial/economic predominance, the adaptation of U.S. and Cuban shows to Puerto Rico’s culture, the production of local shows, and the interactions between Puerto Rican and Cuban television professionals during the development of Puerto Rican television, one is prompted to ask, How can we begin examining the
multiple cultural, political, business, and creative influences in tracing the origins and development of the island’s television?

Puerto Rican Local Television, 1954 and Beyond: A Historical Revision

One way to understand this interaction between Cuba and Puerto Rico is through César Salgado’s concept of anastomosis. Salgado uses this biological term to locate the ongoing cultural, social, economic, and political influxes between these two nations, which are interconnected to each other and to additional powerful nations (Spain and the United States). By categorizing this relationship as CubaRican, he positions Puerto Rico and Cuba as a third cultural region that is influenced by colonial or imperial powers but maintains a distinctive and unique cultural enclave. This symbolic third cultural space is presented in “discourses, populations, words, nightmares, utopias, gestures, movements, ornaments, and rhythms.” Certainly, this cultural anastomosis is palpable in the interactions between creative people and local production during Telemundo’s early years.

Yet one should also consider the economic aspect of television production and the fact that U.S. advertising agencies used successful genres (particularly the telenovela, but also other types of programming) to create a consumer culture in the Latin American region. As Fátima Fernández observes, Mexico and Cuba were principal agents in the expansion of the U.S. commercial radio and television models in Latin America. Still, prioritizing these economic factors risks overgeneralization by classifying locally produced programs in Latin America in general and Puerto Rico in particular as examples of U.S. cultural imperialism. Also, in the case of Puerto Rico, it would be problematic to categorize some of the shows written by Cubans as “Cuban” without examining the cultural transformations and the multiple elements that shaped these locally produced programs.

Several questions come to mind when addressing the U.S. economic and cultural predominance in Puerto Rican and Latin American television. Would one believe, for example, that Cuban radionovelas were not Cuban and were a product of “American imperialism” because the U.S. controlled the island’s economy and political environments after 1898 and some Cuban radio stations were National Broadcasting Corporation affiliates? Was the Puerto Rican Show de shows and its Casino Tropical “American” because it copied the U.S. variety show genre, it was sponsored by a U.S. company, and the island’s media were controlled by the FCC? If these questions are answered affirmatively, then we should begin with a historical revision of cultural artifacts produced in previously colonized regions. If we only consider imperialistic economic and political forces without analyzing indigenous cultures and identities, we may as well begin with the nonsensical generalization that after 1492 anything produced in the Americas was either Spanish, Portuguese, British, or French, and later, of course, American.

Finally, regarding the Cuban predominance in Puerto Rico, should one categorize the popular locally produced situation comedy La criada mal criada and the celebrated local character Petunia as “Cuban” cultural artifacts because many of the show’s scripts were written by the Cuban scriptwriter Felipe San Pedro? My answer is no. This and many other locally produced programs written by Cubans were adapted and responded to Puerto Rican vernacular and constructed cultures and addressed some of Puerto Rico’s social, political, and economic issues in specific historical periods. More important, television production is informed by ongoing negotiations among actors, directors,
scriptwriters, and set designers (just to mention a few media professionals) who actively participate in rehearsal and taping processes with the indirect and direct purpose of recreating, rearticulating, and reproducing elements of Puerto Rican cultures for Puerto Rican audiences. A complete history of the development of Puerto Rican television then, would require a far more complicated survey of multiple elements than now exists.

Such a history should establish the interconnections between the island and other Latin American nations’ televisual cultural products and cultural exchanges. In addition, we must include an analysis of other popular culture artifacts and the ways in which they are interrelated to television’s products. Literature, theatre, and music are some of the cultural forms that are directly and indirectly related to televisual portrayals of the national. We have seen in the examples presented in this essay that some of the 1950s locally produced programs appropriated various United States genres or adapted specific United States shows. We have also seen that some of these programs included cultural references and performers from Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries, recreating Puerto Rico’s 1950s cultural mélange. This cultural mixture transcended Puerto Rico’s national space, and established connections between the island and other nations, including but not limited to the United States.

Producers, directors, and actors from various Latin American nations have worked in Puerto Rican television since its origins. In addition, Puerto Rican creative people have participated in numerous Latin American television productions, and Puerto Rican telenovelas and other types of programming (mostly variety shows and comedies) were (and continue to be) sold to various Latin American countries and United States Spanish language television stations located in cities with large Puerto Rican and Spanish Caribbean diasporic communities/audiences. Accordingly, one must ask, How do these interactions permeate Puerto Rican television’s cultural products? How did producers and writers adapt imported scripts and concepts from the United States and other Latin American nations? Which programs originated in Puerto Rico and were later sold to other countries’ television stations? What, and how, are local audiences consuming/reading television cultural products? In addition, we should examine the programming that originated in U.S. cities with vast settlements of Puerto Rican communities and their cultural, political, and social interconnections to the island, to their communities, and to other diasporic groups in particular historical periods.

Chon Noriega and Lillian Jiménez inform us that during the 1970s, in the United States, Puerto Rican/Boricua and Mexican-American/Chicano media professionals coproduced television programs addressing Latino cultural heritage and issues pertinent to these communities (for example, Realidades and Carrascolendas). Still, we have not explored specific programs targeting Puerto Rican and other “minority” communities (for example, Mundo Real, on CPTV in Connecticut and The New Voice on WGBH Channel 2 in Boston). Furthermore, we lack information regarding 1940s and 1950s Spanish language radio programs that, through elements such as music, news, and interviews, might have recreated a cultural space for the representations of Puerto Rican diasporic identities. There is still much to be done regarding the history of Puerto Rican radio and television programming.

Revising the history of Puerto Rican television should not minimize the importance of examining issues of ownership, sponsorship, the globalization of media outlets, the spread of capitalism, and the fact that the “global” permeates the “local.” Nor should it position local television products as pristine sites of global resistance. These cultural artifacts do incorporate local cultures and identities to promote capitalism
and consumption. But there is clearly a need for an exploration of the cultural elements embedded in locally produced programs in Puerto Rico and elsewhere. More complete and complicated critical explorations may help foster an understanding of some of the ways in which Puerto Rico’s (and other nations’) cultures and identities are depicted on television, illuminate the hybridity that informs the island’s culture, and expose the multiple arenas that permeate indigenous television cultural productions.
NOTES

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2 [help revive the culinary art in Puerto Rican homes, with an emphasis on our country’s typical dishes]. “Primer programa regular será Cocina Frigidaire,” El Mundo, March 26, 1954, A36. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.


4 To avoid conflict with my participants, I have omitted their names when addressing “controversial” issues.

5 WIPR, the Commonwealth television station, began broadcasting on January 6, 1958. Although in 1978 the station became part of the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), in 1987 WIPR became a public corporation (Corporación de Puerto Rico para la Difusión Pública).


9 I define prime time during Telelundo’s first year as the hours between 7:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.

10 Mexican imports were mainly movies. There is no information in El Mundo regarding distribution patterns.


Robertson defines “glocalization” as “the tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near global basis to increasingly differentiated local and particular markets. Glocalization involves the construction of increasingly differentiated consumers and the ‘invention’ of ‘consumer traditions.’” Robertson, “Glocalization,” 28–29. This market and culture combination has been present in advertising campaigns since the beginning of Puerto Rican radio (1922) and television. Dávila, Sponsored, 170.


See for example the article “Al llegar la televisión necesitará más asientos,” El Mundo, March 26, 1954, A25. As was the case in the U.S., this article presents specific guidelines for housewives about what kind of chairs should be part of the living room, the distance between the chairs and the television set, and the kind of light that should be used in the living room. For information regarding the cultural, social, political, and gender-family transformations informed by the incorporation of television into U.S. society, see Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

José Luis Torresgrosa, Historia de la radio en Puerto Rico (Hato Rey: Esmaco, 1993); Cordero, interview.


One example is María Judith Franco, a locally renowned Puerto Rican theatre and radio actress.

It is important to mention that many of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s Puerto Rican locally produced programs are in the hands of private individuals. Telemundo de Puerto Rico burned many of the early shows due to “lack of space,” although a few media professionals rescued some of the programs. Apparently, neither the station’s management, nor the government, nor the academic community saw any importance in saving these cultural artifacts.

Cordero, interview.

One may assume that these “big name stars” were mostly Broadway (and some Hollywood) performers since the show was produced in New York City. Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981).

[the luxurious and imaginary ambiance]. “Gran programa musical se inicia mañana en Telemundo,” El Mundo, November 29, 1954, B2; Luis Antonio Rivera, interview by author, tape recording, December 2000.


Astroff, “Communication.”
30 Cuba, Mexico, and Brazil introduced this new technology in 1950 and these three countries adopted the United States commercial television model. Fernández, “Algo más sobre,” 34.
31 [Don Angel first fell in love with the Americans and later with the Cubans. That is why today they (Cubans) rule the roost]. Telemundo media professional, interview by author, July 1997.
34 Silvio Torres-Saillant, Caribbean Poetics: Toward an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47.
40 An example of this Puerto Rican negritud can be seen in characters such as Lirio Blanco (in the 1960s comedy El Colegio de la Alegria), Panchita and Chianita (on the 1973 adaptation of the Venezuelan telenovela El hijo de Angela María), and Pirulo el Colorao (on the 1990s comedy Al aire libre). Within these Puerto Rican constructions of negritud, one can see traces of the Cuban–Puerto Rican negrito types and the influence of the U.S. black stereotypes (for example, the pickaninny).
41 Sánchez-Korrol, From Colonia, 12.
43 Most of these cultural exchanges are sponsored by academic institutions in Puerto Rico. The general construction of these cultural products in mainstream media is primarily negative because they are depicted as artifacts of Fidel Castro’s Communist propaganda.
44 The article was written by Harwood Hull Jr, the vice-president of Badillo Corporation advertising agency.
45 [the quality of Cuban television programs is excellent and they have little or nothing to envy in programs aired on United States television networks [. . .] In Cuba, many programs that have been successful abroad have been adapted to the Latin taste, and in many cases these programs’ formats have been improved]. (A2).
46 “Agencia de publicidad entrena a sus expertos,” El Mundo, March 26, 1954, A35.
49 [buy them by the pound].
Emilio Huyke, Tommy Muñiz, Ramón Ortíz del Rivero, and José Luis Torresgrosa were some of the Puerto Rican scriptwriters who actively participated in local television. Previous to the television era, these men worked in radio and theatre. Rivera, interview.


Casos y cosas de casa, written by Alberto Cuevas, is one of these cases. Cordero interview and Pablo Cabrera, telephone conversation with author, October 2000.

[In Puerto Rico we have a problem. In Puerto Rico we did not cultivate scriptwriters. The main reason was that at the beginning, the scripts came from Cuba. We were able to find soap opera and sitcom scripts very cheaply. One can count excellent (Puerto Rican) scriptwriters on one hand. When I began my company, I had to hire Cuban writers who came from Cuba. Recently, we have hired new scriptwriters . . . you could see one or two. On many occasions, we tried to incorporate our scriptwriters (from Puerto Rico). . . but if you ask me now about Puerto Rican scriptwriters, I have a short list].

[I do not think there was such a scarcity. Simply, they were not given the opportunity that they should have been given. . . . They were not offered a fertile ground for their development. During the 1960s, at WIPR we had excellent Puerto Rican writers in radio and in television. Commercial television did not want to spend the money to pay the local talent].


Ibid., 26.

Ibid., 2; S Arana-Soto, Cuba y Puerto Rico no son . . . o la enfermedad de Cuba (San Juan: Luis D. Paret, 1963), quoted in Cobas and Duany, Cubans, 43.

Casa Cuba is a Cuban Club in Isla Verde, one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Puerto Rico’s metropolitan area.


During July 1997, December 1998, and December 1999, I was a participant observer in the production of Mi Familia, a locally produced program which has been broadcast on Telemundo’s affiliate in Puerto Rico (WKAQ-TV) since 1994. I observed the ongoing negotiations between Mi Familias production members and the ways in which actors and the director transform the scripts via improvisations, incorporation of lines, performances, and shot selections. Prior to this “formal” academic experience, I had the opportunity to be directly and indirectly involved in several taping sessions of local television productions.

Chon Noriega, Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Lillian Jiménez, “From the Margin to the Center: Puerto Rican Cinema in New York,” in Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media, ed. Clara Rodríguez (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 188–199. Although Carrascolendas was not a Chicano/Boricua co-production, it is worth mentioning that Aida Barrera, the show’s producer, hired many Latino media professionals. Noriega, Shot in, 141–141; Cabrera, interview.

Cabrera, interview.