Berman Santana, Déborah
Reseña de “Yo Soy Boricua, Pa’ Que Tu Lo Sepas” de Rosie Pérez and Liz Garbus
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Brooklyn-born Rosie Pérez is an accomplished actress and choreographer. She is perhaps best known for her explosive film debut in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989), as well as for her powerful performance in the 1993 film *Fearless* (for which she received an Oscar nomination). Pérez is also well known for her dedication to her Puerto Rican community, particularly in and around New York City, where she is sought after for school lectures and charitable events. Her passion for social justice received much media attention when she was arrested in 2000 along with a dozen other women during a protest outside the United Nations headquarters against the U.S. Navy’s continued occupation and bombing of Vieques, Puerto Rico. So it is not surprising that Pérez recently completed a documentary about Puerto Rican identity, entitled *Yo Soy Boricua, Pa’ Que Tu Lo Sepas* (I’m Puerto Rican, just so you know).

The hour-and-a-half-long documentary is directed at English-speaking audiences in the United States. The film is almost entirely in English without Spanish translation (English subtitles are provided for the few Spanish-language scenes). Numerous scenes make a strong effort to debunk negative stereotypes about Puerto Ricans in the United States. For example, Perez recounts how one of her lectures was publicized as “From Homelessness to Hollywood.” She complains that she has never been homeless, and that it is simply a negative stereotype directed against people of color in the U.S. Her film both begins and ends with a look at the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City, which has become the city’s largest parade and an obligatory event for politicians and other newsmakers. The parade’s importance in promoting a positive self-identity for Puerto Ricans provides one of the common threads throughout the documentary, which otherwise tends to jump back and forth between New York and Puerto Rico, from past to present, and from theme to theme. Additionally, throughout the film Perez’s family—both in interviews and through displaying numerous family photos—plays an important role in tying the different themes of family, history, colonialism, culture, and identity together.

Among the many themes Pérez explores are the ethnic origins of Puerto Rican culture, presented stereotypically as Taino, African and Spanish (with brief mention of other Europeans). Pérez recalls the constant question “What are you?” asked even as early as the second grade and as late as college, as motivating her to explore her roots. While photographs of ancient petroglyphs appear on the screen, she observes that the indigenous civilization stretched back at least 4,000 years before Columbus. She also reads a list of Taino cultural practices such as generous hospitality, to which her relatives excitedly respond, affirming the similarities to today’s Puerto Ricans. In particular she highlights the generally peaceful nature of Puerto Ricans’ indigenous ancestors until “they get pushed against the wall.” This is followed by a graphic portrayal of the atrocities that the Spanish invaders committed against the Taínos. In this and many other scenes one gets the sense that Pérez was impacted emotionally from what she learned during the making of this documentary. While insufficient

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**Yo Soy Boricua, Pa’ Que Tu Lo Sepas**


**REVIEWER:** Déborah Berman Santana, Mills College
attention is paid to Puerto Rico’s African heritage, Pérez gives some hint of widespread internalized racism when visiting cousins in Miami. Here the cousins speak of their great-grandfather’s two households: one with his white wife and the other with his black mistress, and how the children struggled with the efforts of the wife to keep the other part of the family a secret. Since Pérez hails from the “black side” of the family, it is perhaps disappointing—though not surprising—that she does not explore further her proud Afro-boricua legacy, although she does mention the efforts towards abolition of slavery of the “father of Puerto Rican independence” Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances (though not that he himself was black).

A historical clip portrays the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898. Pérez follows with a walk through the fruit tree-studded backyard of her cousin in Aguadilla, from where the family hails—and city girl Rosie evokes her cousin’s laughter when she is frightened by a lagartijo (lizard). In several scenes Pérez poignantly underscores the sense of loss felt by many diaspora Puerto Ricans, such as the push out of Puerto Rico toward the urban ghettos of New York and the loss or “Spanglish-ization” of her first language, clearly linking it to colonization. At the same time she is fiercely proud of how so-called “Nuyoricans” have defended their heritage and created a vibrant community that is an integral part of the Puerto Rican nation.

Pérez includes many clips detailing the history of independence struggles since the 1898 invasion, particularly focusing on the Nationalist Party. She begins with a visit to the famous wall in Old San Juan with the mural of Nationalist leader Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, who Chilean Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral once called “the last Latin American liberator.” This mural is located where Albizu lived in 1950; the walls still contain bullet holes from the police attack. Historical footage depicts the 1937 massacre of Nationalists in Ponce (despite the guide’s remark that “no one knows who fired the first shots” it is known that the protesters were unarmed) as well as the 1954 attack on Congress led by Lolita Lebrón. She also discusses the history of Puerto Rico’s national anthem “La Borinqueña,” which had pro-independence lyrics long before it was rewritten by the Puerto Rican government. Pérez speaks movingly of the radiation torture suffered by Albizu while in prison, and refers to him as “our Ché.” Interestingly she also compares him with Martin Luther King, rather than with Malcolm X. This may seem to indicate the film’s interest in educating (white) North Americans about Puerto Ricans, as well as a general reluctance to appear to identify too strongly with “radical” politics and its “violent” connotations in mainstream U.S. society. In fact, she quickly follows her discussion of Albizu by mentioning a long list of famous Puerto Ricans such as José Feliciano and Rita Moreno. Her seeming ambivalence about the Puerto Rico-U.S. relationship—for example, her fiercely proud treatment of the Puerto Rican flag accompanied by her displaying the U.S. flag without mentioning the controversy among Puerto Ricans—may seem contradictory but in fact reflects widespread conflicting sentiments, both in the island and in the diaspora.

The scenes in New York include visits to the Museo del Barrio and the Museum of the City of New York, as well as several clips of performances in the Nuyorican Poets’ Café. In one early scene we learn that the first Puerto Rican recorded in the city was a liberto (freed ex-slave) names John Torres—although she doesn't mention the date. She also shows clips from the 1950s of Manhattan's growing
Puerto Rican community, as a result of Operation Bootstrap, Puerto Rico’s pioneering “development via export-led industrialization” program, which also attempted to reduce population partly through emigration. The other part of that population reduction program, of course, was the infamous policy of sterilization of Puerto Rican women without informed consent, which by 1965 had sterilized 35 percent of Puerto Rican women. This shameful legacy was documented in the film La Operación (1982); Pérez includes a few clips of the film with her narrative, along with additional information about how Puerto Ricans were used as guinea pigs in developing birth control pills and the Dalkon Shield intrauterine device.

Meanwhile, in New York Puerto Ricans such as her beloved Aunt Dominga (who raised her) worked two or three jobs to maintain an extended family; she speaks lovingly of her “bedroom” in the hallway of the apartment. Here Pérez includes historical footage of the late great poet Pedro Pietri performing his epic Puerto Rican Obituary immortalizing the poor boricua immigrants who Operation Bootstrap pushed out of Puerto Rico and into the lower stratum of New York’s economic and social life, but whose hard work and dedication to their families provided the backbone for today’s vibrant community. She also includes a bit of history of the impact of the Young Lords Party in promoting Puerto Rican pride and consciousness during the 1960s and 1970s, featuring segments from the film Palante, Siempre Palante (1996) — although one wouldn’t know from Pérez’s treatment that the organization began in Chicago instead of New York. She mentions briefly the importance of the casitas movement, where Puerto Ricans reclaimed devastated and dangerous vacant lots in New York City by building brightly colored wooden houses reminiscent of Puerto Rico, surrounded by flowers and used by the community for barbecues, drumming and dancing, and domino tournaments.

Later the film jumps to scenes of Vieques protest in New York City in 2000. Pérez recounts her experience of getting arrested along with a group of women outside of the United Nations. Her brief discussion of the Vieques, Puerto Rico, story may erroneously leave the impression that the Navy expropriated the whole island during the 1940s, when in fact 76 percent of the lands were taken, leaving viequenses squeezed in the middle. This is an important point, since even some Congress members expressed the erroneous belief that the Navy had been bombing an uninhabited island. Pérez includes some historical footage from the 1986 documentary The Battle of Vieques, as well as scenes from the mass protests and arrests during the final anti-bombing campaign that resulted in the Navy’s leaving Vieques in 2003. Significantly, she points out that because Vieques is still contaminated and the related cancer rate is still climbing (among other problems), “la lucha continua.” She briefly touches on the 1998 referendum on Puerto Rico’s political status (the most recent of four since the 1950s), in which “none of the above” won. However, since she did not include any discussion of the context in which the pro-commonwealth party helped lead a protest of the terms of the referendum, this was not particularly informative.

The final part of the film returns to New York, where Pérez stresses the importance of Puerto Rican food in promoting pride and a strong sense of identity. This segment is reminiscent of the PBS ethnic immigrant series episode entitled Puerto Ricans: Our American Story (1999), which (not so?) coincidentally was aired at the same time that the Vieques issue and the release of 11 Puerto Rican
independence fighters from prison raised fears among pro-statehood Puerto Ricans about the island’s “anti-American” image in the U.S. media. However, that film did not touch on the ambivalence that so many Puerto Ricans feel, which Pérez’ documentary highlights very personally.

Pérez’s hour-and-a-half-long film might have benefited from crisper editing and more coherent organization. She may have tried to include too many themes, thus shortchanging some of the details needed to convey information correctly. Other films dealing with the Puerto Rican diasporic experience and the island’s history include Mi Puerto Rico (1996) and Brincando el Charco (1994), both by accomplished Puerto Rican women filmmakers. Nonetheless, Pérez has managed to create an intensely personal as well as educational film that shows her as much more than a famous Hollywood star—she is a proud Boricua from the barrio with whom many Puerto Ricans—and others—will closely identify.

REFERENCES

One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just Like Other Immigrant Groups

By Herman Badillo
New York: Sentinel, 2006
240 pages; $23.99 [cloth]
REVIEWER: ANGELO FALCÓN, National Institute for Latino Policy

In One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just Like Other Immigrant Groups, Herman Badillo at age 78 sums up his considerable life’s lessons for the Puerto Rican and Hispanic community. Published under the auspices of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, where Mr. Badillo is a senior fellow, this book created a big stir within the Latino community even before it was released. First announced in the infamous tabloid, the New York Post, on December 19, 2006 with the headline, “Badillo Lashes Latinos, Rips Hispanic Values,” it generated strong feelings, not only about Badillo’s views on the issues, but also about him personally. It was a little eerie in the manner this response was so similar to the reactions in the Black community to comments made by Bill Cosby, the anti-affirmative campaigns of Ward Connery, the recent book by Juan Williams, and the rulings of Supreme Courts Justice Clarence Thomas. One Nation, One Standard, with a foreword by former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, is 228 pages long, with an additional eight pages of black-and-white pictures of Mr. Badillo’s early career in politics. Its eleven chapters cover the author’s life growing up in Puerto Rico and the United States, his rise to power as the first Puerto Rican to serve as a full commissioner of a city...