

Book Review

Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico by Ileana M. Rodríguez-Silva

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“Blacks are the worst pests you could ever find... Blacks never get old and live long...I don’t want to have anything to do with blacks or deal with them, because they are the lowest, because blacks are always blacks wherever they stand and whites, like us, are always white and better than them” (218-219).

The above are not the words from a United States (US) troglodyte of the antebellum or Jim and Jane Crow eras. Instead, they are the racist rants of a Puerto Rican *jíbaro* (highland peasant) who in the 1930s expressed these sentiments to sociologists José Colombán Rosario and Justina Carrión. These revealing *jíbaro* attitudes run counter to what author Ileana Rodríguez-Silva asserts in *Silencing Race*: that Puerto Ricans rather not talk about race and racism. Throughout six chapters within two sections, she uses the “analytics of silence” as a tool to explore the complicated racial history of Puerto Rico. Rodríguez-Silva—Latin American and Caribbean History associate professor at the University of Washington—examines the social, political, and economic structures on the colonized island from particular moments within its racial history between the 1870s and 1910s. In so doing, she successfully addresses her thesis, “to track both the fraught processes through which silences are constantly reconstituted and the overall effect of a plurality of silences, intended and unintended, which have prevented open discussions about racialized domination” (4).

For centuries many Puerto Ricans viewed the island as “a unified nation...whose people originated from a *mélange* of three cultural roots: the indigenous *Tainos*, Africans, and Spaniards” (3). This gallant idea had the disastrous effect of privileging the European (and to a lesser extent the *Taino*) heritage at the expense and suppression of African culture (190). The myth of “Puerto Rico’s racial democracy (the notion that racial hierarchies are nonexistent and

manifestations of racisms are minimal, nonsystematic, and therefore irrelevant)” would perceivably increase its global economic and political standing (2). Whether this was successful is debatable; However, Black Puerto Ricans paid dearly in the form of an “emancipation that emerged out of their struggles” that would not “fundamentally alter the racial hierarchy forged throughout the previous four centuries under European colonialism” (28). Furthermore, racist attitudes abound nearly unabated about Afro-Puerto Rican women’s “hypersexuality and eroticism” and the “musicality, rhythm, and festive attitudes” of all Black Puerto Ricans that ultimately “evoked images of the noble savage, emphasizing their primitive and uncivilized state” (221).

A strength of *Silencing Race* is Rodríguez-Silva’s ease in explaining the potentially perplexing philosophies of the political left, right, as well as moderates within Puerto Rico. She uncovers the racism of politicians, along with bureaucrats, medical and public health officials, intellectuals, and labor leaders. Rodríguez-Silva exposes the consistent coyness in communicating the language of race and racism by these disparate groups. The historian reminds readers that white supremacy was not imported to Puerto Rico by the US colonial project in 1898, but as a continuum of the efforts started by the Spanish conquistador invaders after 1493 when she declares “US Army racial practices did not instill racism among Puerto Ricans. Instead it provided new means for its manifestation” (217). The myriad of primary sources Rodríguez-Silva delves into is noteworthy, particularly since finding them in Puerto Rican archives to document this specific story was difficult. Similarly to be extolled from the book are the voices of Black Boricuas who attempted to preserve or disrupt the racial status-quo including activists Sylvia del Villar[d], Juan Boria, Tomás Carrión Maduro, Louis Felipe Dessús, Eleuterio Derkes, Alonso Gual, and prominent physician and political leader Dr. José Celso Barbosa Alcalá.

This is an intellectual history of Puerto Rican racism with all its subtleties, while not too laced with theory as to discourage the reader. Thus, scholars, and students alike, of

Afro-Puerto Rican studies and labor, medical, cultural and political history will find this useful text address several issues such as “immigration, US colonialism, national identities, constructions of whiteness/blackness/racial mixture, and gender.” There is no doubt that other countries throughout the western hemispheric African Diaspora have been ‘silenced’—albeit with variances predicated on time, place, and space. Unfortunately, many Puerto Ricans of all hues, both on the island and dispersed throughout the world, are too

quick to dismiss “the historical and contemporary realities of racialized marginalization” by deeming “race, racialization, and racism as foreign matters, specifically a US phenomena” and “to question one’s commitment and love to the Puerto Rican nation” (1). This, as Rodríguez-Silva has proven in her first monograph, is a disservice to our African ancestors who built the country and bore the brunt of racial repression with respect to the constructs of *raza iberoamericana*, *mestizaje*, and *blanqueamiento* during the last 524 years.