

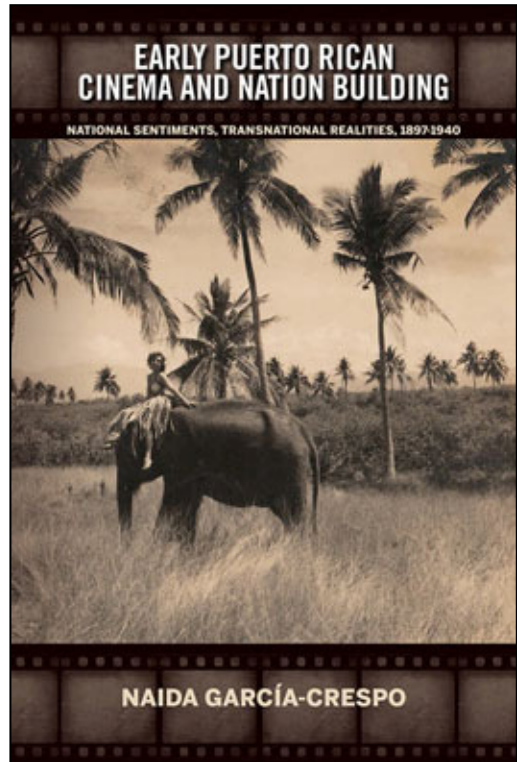
About García-Crespo, Naida.
Early Puerto Rican Cinema and Nation
Building: National Sentiments,
Transnational Realities, 1897-1940

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At the core of García-Crespo's archivally-based study of early film production in Puerto Rico is the island's paradoxical status as a nation or "imagined community"¹ in the absence of a sovereign state, whose existence was foreclosed through colonial occupation by Spain and later the United States. García-Crespo links this contradiction at the heart of Puerto Rican nationalism—now inevitably defined in opposition to US control—to the transnational turn in film studies since the 1990s. Challenging definitions of "authentically" Puerto Rican cinema that exclude work from the diaspora and other forms of cultural dialogue with the US mainland, García-Crespo examines homegrown productions with Puerto Rican casts and crews alongside Hollywood films shot on the island. Through "examining how, in one historical instance, cultural productions made in the absence of a state have helped to form and maintain a national identity" (13), García-Crespo identifies early Puerto Rican cinema before 1940 as a compelling case of the cross-border flows that define modern mass culture.

In reconstructing cinema's origins on the island through the circulation of both individuals and films, *Early Puerto Rican Cinema and Nation Building* delves deeply into a wide range of documents, including press accounts, scripts, legal filings, census



¹ ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006.

records, and ship manifests. García-Crespo's meticulous archival research acts as a generative response to a challenge familiar to many scholars of silent-era Latin American cinema: the loss of the films themselves to the historical record. Among the productions discussed in detail in the book, apparently only *Romance tropical* (Juan Viguí, 1934) survives, having been uncovered in the collections of the UCLA Film & Television Archive in 2016. While one cannot help wondering how access to the film—which García-Crespo notes she was unable to consult—might have altered aspects of her analysis, her careful research in reviews and scripts herein offers tantalizing, if indirect, access to vanished films.

The opening chapter of *Early Puerto Rican Cinema and Nation Building* outlines key contexts for film production by tracing shifting discourses of Puerto Rican nationalism. García-Crespo highlights key moments—the short-lived independence revolt of 1868, the island's 1898 occupation in the course of the Spanish-American War, and the (unilateral) extension of US citizenship to Puerto Ricans in the 1917 Jones Act—in the island's 19th and early 20th century history. Discussion of key political figures like Pedro Albizu Campos, leader of the Partido Nacionalista and a fierce advocate for the island's independence, and Luis Muñoz Marín of the Partido Popular Democrático, who worked to negotiate Puerto Rico's change in status to an *estado libre asociado* or commonwealth of the United States in 1952 as a means of ensuring US-sponsored economic development, round out the chapter.

Across the book's six chapters, García-Crespo corrects a number of misconceptions oft-repeated in Puerto Rican film historiography, whose origins can be traced to earlier studies based on interviews with the island's film pioneers. Perhaps most notably, in the book's second chapter she revises the date of the earliest motion picture screening on the island from 1901 to 1897.² Weighing the (ultimately inconclusive) historical evidence for the longstanding belief that the first films shot in Puerto Rico documented the events of the Spanish-American War, the chapter delves into the

² ORTIZ JIMÉNEZ, Juan "40 años de cine puertorriqueño," *Puerto Rico Ilustrado* (San Juan), February 16, 1952, p. 42.

popular fascination with the conflict that took hold in the US, evidenced by the Lubin Manufacturing Company's production of staged battle films made on the mainland. García-Crespo contends that while nationalist ideals have led scholars to link the origins of filming in Puerto Rico to the historical trauma of 1898 despite the lack of historical documentation to support this, the earliest films depicting the island in fact made racial hierarchies and forms of social control imposed by US occupation. The 1898 actuality *Washing the Streets* (Selig Polyscope) depicted the implementation of a US government decree intended to promote public health, which participated in a broader discourse justifying US occupation by referencing Puerto Rico's supposed backwardness and lack of hygiene. Similarly, *How the Porto Rican Girls Entertained Uncle Sam's Soldiers* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1899), a narrative vignette most likely adapted from a vaudeville routine performed in a New York theater, presented women from the island as alluring, sexually available, and convinced of the superiority of Anglo occupiers over local men, as a surviving publicity still suggests.

Over the next decade and a half, film production in Puerto Rico would shift from brief actualities and story films to more elaborate non-fiction works and narratives. In the book's third chapter, García-Crespo turns to the early work of camera operator Rafael Colorado who, despite his Spanish birthplace, has been valorized as a pioneer of Puerto Rican cinema due in part to his role fighting the US occupation (albeit on the side of the Spanish colonizers). Beginning his career in the film world as a distributor for Pathé Frères and later part owner of a San Juan movie theater, Colorado produced the first narrative film shot on the island, the sparsely documented *Un drama en Puerto Rico* (1912). In addition to releases like *Por la hembra y por el gallo* (For the woman and the rooster, 1916), which exalted the *jíbaro* (rural farmer) as the national type *par excellence*, Colorado produced non-fiction films depicting the travels of political figures like José de Diego, president of Puerto Rico's House of Representatives, and pro-independence politician Luis Muñoz Rivera, father of Luis Muñoz Marín.

The book charts Colorado's later career trajectory through his involvement with the Tropical Film Company, a partnership with Nemesio Canales and Luis Lloréns

Torres, Puerto Rican intellectuals and editors of the literary magazine *Juan Bobo*. García-Crespo tentatively traces the origins of the company's incongruous English name to an earlier US-based company owned by William Cox and Carl Deforest Pryer, who overlapped with Colorado in New York and may have sold the company name and equipment to him, although no definitive evidence exists to confirm this theory. Active in 1916 and 1917, the company sought to disseminate images of the island's social and cultural advancement—and turn a profit—by producing films aimed at Puerto Rican elites as well as US and European audiences. Beyond the topical non-fiction film *Los funerales de Muñoz Rivera* (1916), which depicted the aftermath of the politician's passing, the company embarked on the production of two serial films with nationalistic themes: the melodramatic *Paloma del Monte* (1917), a tale of star-crossed love between two jíbaros and *El tesoro de Cofresí* (The treasure of Cofresí), a tale of a Robin Hood-like historical pirate that appears not to have been completed or released. García-Crespo reiterates the significance of the Tropical Film Company within Puerto Rican film histories while highlighting the tensions between elite ambitions and popular tastes that informed its efforts.

Turning from celebrated figures of Puerto Rican film history to a body of works with a much more tenuous claim to Puerto Rican-ness—Hollywood productions set on the island shot between 1917 and 1925—García-Crespo argues that these releases staged colonialist fantasies of power and racial mixture. *Heart and Soul* (J. Gordon Edwards, 1917) adapted a historical romance set during the Boer War to US colonial territory (reviews of the period offer conflicting accounts of the film's setting, with some identifying it as Puerto Rico and others as Hawaii), stoking anxieties about “primitive” native populations being easily roused to revolt. Similarly informed by imagined racial hierarchies, fears of miscegenation in colonial space drive the plot of Edmund Lawrence's *The Liar* (1918). The film stars Theda Bara in the uncharacteristic role of an innocent ingénue whose impending marriage is nearly derailed by an unscrupulous suitor, who falsely convinces her that her mother was Black and her union is thus impossible. By the early 1920s, US production companies had begun to shoot on location in Puerto Rico thanks in part to the efforts of F. Eugene

Farnsworth, a land speculator and, disturbingly, a Ku Klux Klan organizer who successfully bankrolled the construction of a film studio in San Juan with funds from local investors. Farnsworth's company Porto Rico Photoplays produced only one feature, *Tropical Love* (Ralph Ince, 1921), whose plot again turned on racial ambiguity. The heroine, raised in Puerto Rico, does not know her father nor that she is white, presumably a stumbling block to a budding romance with a young male character. In addition to two other Pathé features shot in Farnsworth's studio (both lacking Puerto Rican themes), Famous Players-Lasky produced portions of *Aloma of the South Seas* (Maurice Tourneur, 1926) on the island. This tale of convoluted love affairs surrounding the dancer Aloma blurred the distinction between Puerto Rico and the Pacific archipelago and capitalized on a sense of exoticism and sexual allure, becoming the year's top-grossing Hollywood film.

A final chapter examines how aspiring Puerto Rican filmmakers took advantage of new opportunities offered by the transition to sound, focusing on Juan Viguié, a prolific producer of educational films (including several works sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation to promote public health) and director of Puerto Rico's first sound feature *Romance tropical*, and on exhibitor-turned-director Rafael Ramos Cobián. Taking its cue from earlier Hollywood films set or shot in Puerto Rico, *Romance tropical* featured an exoticized story that unfolded between Puerto Rico (here representing "civilization") and a "savage" island off the coast of Africa. Comparing the film to *Aloma of the South Seas*, García-Crespo notes that "Both films present a scorned white lover who sets sail for 'savage' tropical islands. Both films offer an alternative 'uncivilized' love interest in a native princess Finally, both leading men eventually reunite with their original white lovers and return to their 'civilized' lands" (148). Punctuated with musical numbers, *Romance tropical* proved an enormous commercial success on the island, running for more than fifteen weeks, while also screening at Spanish-language theaters in the United States. Similarly targeting a pan-Latino audience, Ramos Cobián headed to Hollywood to direct *Mis dos amores* (My two loves, 1938) for Paramount and *Los hijos mandan* (*The Son's Command*, 1939) for Fox. These melodramas of frustrated love and family obligation starred prominent

Mexican performers like Tito Guízar and Arturo de Córdova, respectively, but the latter's reception seems to have suffered due to its setting in Spain, foregrounding the decisive role of Mexican and Mexican American viewers in determining Spanish-language films' commercial success, a sharp contrast with the smaller and less powerful Puerto Rican market.

As the first book-length study in English of Puerto Rican cinema before 1940—indeed, it appears to be the first English-language monograph exclusively dedicated to Puerto Rican film, period—*Early Puerto Rican Cinema and Nation Building's* greatest strengths are its historical rigor, exhaustive use of archival sources, and important revisions to prevailing assumptions about Puerto Rican film history. The study's multinational frame renders it a significant contribution to a major trend in cinema studies. Yet one aspect of the transnational turn is addressed only in passing by the book: the pivotal role of imported cinema in forging local film cultures, as charted with insightful results in Laura Isabel Serna's study of US films in Mexico and its diaspora, *Making Cinelandia*.³ While García-Crespo includes salient details about the growth of exhibition culture in Puerto Rico and the fondness for foreign serial films, for instance, the study's otherwise exclusive focus on production leaves questions about the broader social meanings of moviegoing for the island's residents, and their possible intersections with notions of national modernity, largely unexplored. Within its chosen scope, *Early Puerto Rican Cinema and Nation Building* provides a clear and accessible consideration of the contradictions of Puerto Rican nationalism as mediated through film, with important insights to offer scholars and students of Latin American silent cinema and Caribbean culture more broadly.

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