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COLONIAL MIGRANTS:
RECENT WORK ON PUERTO RICANS
ON AND OFF THE ISLAND

Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective. RAMÓN GROSGOUEL. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. xi + 268 pp. (Paper US\$ 21.95)

Boricuas in Gotham: Puerto Ricans in the Making of Modern New York City. GABRIEL HASLIP-VIERA, ANGELO FALCÓN & FÉLIX MATOS RODRÍGUEZ (eds.). Princeton NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004. viii + 240 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

Recent studies of Puerto Ricans have revisited their colonial status, national identity, and transnational migration from various standpoints, including postcolonial, transnational, postmodern, queer, and cultural studies.¹ Most scholars in the social sciences and the humanities no longer question whether Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States. What is often discussed, sometimes angrily, is the exact nature of U.S. colonialism, the extent to which the Island has acquired certain “postcolonial” traits such as linguistic and cultural autonomy, and the possibility of waging an effective decolonization process. The issue of national identity in Puerto Rico is still contested as intensely as ever. What is new about current scholarly discussions is that many intellectuals, especially those who align themselves with postmodernism, are highly critical of nationalist discourses. Other debates focus on the appropriate approach to population movements between the Island and the U.S. mainland. For example, some outside observers insist that, technically speaking, the Puerto Rican exodus should be considered an internal, not international, migration, while others, including myself, refer to such a massive dispersal of people as transnational or diasporic. Much of this

1. Duany 2002; Pabón 2002; Martínez-San Miguel 2003; Ramos-Zayas 2003; Rivera 2003; Negrón-Muntaner 2004; Pérez 2004.

controversy centers on whether the geopolitical “border” between the Island and the mainland is equivalent to a national “frontier” in the experiences of Puerto Rican migrants.

In *Colonial Subjects*, Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel proposes “an alternative reading of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans within the ‘modern world-system’” (p. 1), as well as “a new interpretation of the global process that conditioned Caribbean migration to the United States” (pp. 39–40) and Western Europe. On the one hand, Grosfoguel surveys Puerto Rico’s colonial history, economy, and politics, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, he compares the Puerto Rican diaspora with those from other Caribbean territories, both independent and dependent. Both intellectual moves are rare in Puerto Rican and Caribbean studies, which still tend to adopt an insular and short-term approach. In contrast, *Colonial Subjects* offers a valuable historical and contemporary overview of Puerto Rico’s place within the capitalist world economy.

Grosfoguel’s theoretical framework derives primarily from Immanuel Wallerstein’s approach to the modern world-system as “a single multidimensional system with multiple and entangled structuring logics such as capitalist accumulation, state military security, symbolic strategies of prestige and honor, struggles of antisystemic social movements, and racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies” (p. 49). Despite Puerto Rico’s persistent colonial status, Grosfoguel classifies the Island as “semiperipheral” because it concentrates certain management and control functions for high-tech manufacturing industries, particularly banking (Chapter 2). Moreover, Puerto Rico has become a “modern colony” akin to other Caribbean islands such as Martinique and Curaçao through shared citizenship with the metropolis, extensive civil rights, relatively high wages, modern working conditions, mass consumption, welfare transfers, and sponsored migration. According to Grosfoguel, the metropolises granted such economic and political reforms after World War II “to preclude the success of any potential anticolonial struggle” (p. 67) and to “offset the inequalities produced by core-periphery exploitation” (p. 11). Compared to the independent nations of the Caribbean, modern colonies enjoy higher standards of living, more democratic regimes, and unlimited freedom of movement to their metropolises.

Colonial Subjects relies heavily on the notion of “coloniality of power,” elaborated by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. Grosfoguel defines the term concisely as “the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations” (p. 4), including racial, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual forms of exploitation. He contends that the modern world-system is organized along a male/female axis, as well as a heterosexual/homosexual-lesbian axis, in addition to the European/non-European and capital/labor divides. As he argues, “power structures are still colonial in that ‘white’ European/Euro-American males continue to control the most impor-

tant positions in the world economy” (p. 31). This insistence on subsuming all forms of subordination as “colonial” (even though some migrant groups such as Dominicans in the United States were not “colonized” by their host societies) is both provocative and problematic.

Grosfoguel gives few details (such as sampling, instruments, or procedures) about his fieldwork in Puerto Rico, the United States, or Europe. I could find references only to interviewing one Puerto Rican on the Island (pp. 68-69), several casual Cuban informants in Miami (pp. 89-90), a Puerto Rican in Paris (p. 158), and a Dominican in New York City (p. 167). Most of Grosfoguel’s sources of information are secondary, especially published census data and surveys conducted by others. Consequently, many of the book’s generalizations and interpretations could be better documented. Although I agree with Grosfoguel’s claim that Puerto Ricans have a strong sense of national identity (p. 9), for example, I found no supporting evidence for it in the book. More difficult to prove are hypotheses such as these: that Puerto Ricans imagine themselves simultaneously as a nation and as an ethnic group (p. 77); that the movement in defense of the Spanish language excludes working-class people in Puerto Rico (p. 62); and that Caribbean people prefer to live in a modern colony rather than in a nation-state (p. 68).

Nonetheless, *Colonial Subjects* makes an original and substantial contribution to Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and Latino studies. One of the book’s major findings is that “the emigration processes of colonial people [from the Caribbean] ... have more in common than when compared to ... Caribbean nation-states” (p. 183). In two lucid chapters (3 and 6), Grosfoguel spells out several striking parallels among Caribbean immigrants in the metropolises: (1) their long colonial histories, (2) incorporation as racialized subjects, (3) subordinate location in the local labor market, (4) legal status as metropolitan citizens, and (5) lower-class origins, as well as (6) the organized character of much of their migration, and (7) their concentration in world cities, such as New York, Paris, and Amsterdam. In Chapters 5 and 7, Grosfoguel argues that most Puerto Rican (and Dominican) immigrants have been racialized as black or colored Others, and hence are exposed to “racist stereotypes such as laziness, criminality, stupidity, and uncivilized behavior” (p. 149), similar to French Antilleans in Paris, Dutch Antilleans in Amsterdam, or West Indians in London. Finally, Grosfoguel shows that comparing Puerto Ricans with other Hispanics in the United States, such as Mexicans, Cubans, or Dominicans, may be inappropriate because these last groups originate in postcolonial states. Here he makes a convincing case that the sending country’s geopolitical position within the modern world-system shapes the migrants’ economic and political incorporation into the host country (p. 181).

In sum, Grosfoguel’s work advances our understanding of Puerto Rico’s role within the capitalist world economy, U.S. imperialist strategies, and postwar decolonization and recolonization processes in the Caribbean. His

book raises intriguing issues about lingering colonial discourses and practices, national and postnational identities, transnational migration, and racial and ethnic discrimination, as well as the utopian project of a “radical democracy” on the Island and in the U.S. mainland. *Colonial Subjects* situates the Puerto Rican case in a broad regional and global perspective that illuminates its particular and general implications.

In contrast to the sweeping approach of *Colonial Subjects*, *Boricuas in Gotham* focuses on a specific locality and time period. It is the product of a conference held at the City University of New York in 2000, inspired by the Puerto Rican activist-scholar Antonia Pantoja. The participants in that meeting reviewed the history of the Puerto Rican community in New York City since World War II, especially its settlement patterns, community organization, economic development, and political institutions. The publication contains four substantive chapters, five extended commentaries, the editors’ introduction, and an appendix. The contributors include three historians (Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, Félix Matos-Rodríguez, and Gabriel Haslip-Viera), two political scientists (Angelo Falcón and José Cruz), an anthropologist (Ana Celia Zentella), a sociologist (Clara Rodríguez), an economist (Francisco Rivera-Batiz), and two community leaders (Pantoja and Fernando Ferrer).

The editors’ main purpose was “to update and reassess the evolution and status of New York’s Puerto Rican community” (p. xvii), largely “in response or reaction to earlier publications by social scientists, journalists, and other writers, especially Anglo Americans” (p. xviii). Several chapters rebuke the claims made by the journalist Mireya Navarro in 2000, in a *New York Times* article entitled “Puerto Rican Presence Wanes in New York.” For instance, both Falcón and Rodríguez take exception to the article because it suggested that the Puerto Rican population was declining, not only in numbers, but also in economic and social capital. As Rodríguez further notes in her commentary, much of Puerto Rican scholarship in the United States has been devoted to combating pejorative portrayals of the Puerto Rican community, such as the infamous culture of poverty thesis by Oscar Lewis or its more recent incarnation in the urban underclass literature inspired by William Julius Wilson. As colonial subjects, to use Grosfoguel’s apt phrase, Puerto Ricans have been continually exposed to prejudice and discrimination, within both academic circles and the mass media.

Most of the chapters in this volume lack an explicit theoretical framework, concentrating instead on describing the socioeconomic experiences of Puerto Rican migrants in New York between the 1940s and the 1990s. Implicitly, the authors question the applicability to the Puerto Rican case of traditional models of assimilation that were developed to understand earlier European immigrants in the United States. For instance, bilingualism and biculturalism continue to characterize a large part of the Puerto Rican community in New York City, as Zentella eloquently documents in her memoirs

of growing up in El Barrio (Spanish Harlem). In general, the book adopts a chronological narrative approach that shies away from examining Puerto Ricans from a global perspective, as Grosfoguel would have it. By and large, the authors remain close to the immediate historical events and social actors they depict.

Perhaps, as Falcón argues in one of his two essays for this collection, “most of the current research and analysis on Puerto Rican migration is ... much too general or theoretical” (p. 165). He later laments that “a once confident and deadly serious Marxism has given way to often flaky and fun-filled postmodern meditations” (p. 172). Perhaps, as Haslip-Viera suggests in his commentary, Puerto Rican studies have experienced a paradigmatic shift over the past decade. In his view, current research exaggerates the importance of “identity and other issues connected to ‘postmodernism’ and ‘cultural studies’” (p. 139). Instead, this collection centers on “economic and social issues of critical importance to New York’s Puerto Rican community during the 1990s,” what Haslip-Viera calls “the real day-to-day lives of people in our communities” (p. 138). Unfortunately, the book does not articulate an integrated analysis of the processes of migration, resettlement, incorporation, or exclusion of Puerto Ricans in New York City. Nor does it illuminate ongoing discussions about whether Puerto Rican migrants can be considered transnational or diasporic in a broad comparative sense.

Most of the essays are based on recent census and archival data – especially journalistic articles – on Puerto Ricans in New York. A lively discussion emerges from Cruz’s reliance on one major source of information, the *New York Times*, harshly criticized by Falcón. No such critical reflection appears on the widespread use of census data in Falcón’s own work or in Francisco Rivera-Batiz’s analyses. In addition to these sources, some authors – notably Sánchez-Korrol, Zentella, and Pantoja – recur to personal narratives and documents that may help to undermine standard treatments of the Puerto Rican experience in New York City. Still, the volume as a whole does not identify new data sets or advocate alternative approaches to the Puerto Rican diaspora, from either a quantitative or qualitative viewpoint. One must look elsewhere for more creative and persuasive counternarratives based on historical, literary, artistic, photographic, and other primary documents. The archival materials housed at the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College are still a largely untapped mine of information. From an anthropological perspective, ethnographic fieldwork in local settings such as New York’s Spanish Harlem or Chicago’s Near Northwest Side still has no adequate substitute.²

Unlike Haslip-Viera, I feel that some of the most exciting and innovative research in contemporary Puerto Rican studies is taking place precisely along

2. Ramos-Zayas 2003; Rivera 2003; Dávila 2004; Pérez 2004.

the lines of cultural, postcolonial, subaltern, and transnational studies. What impressed me the most about this collection were not the relatively familiar numbers in the tables, but rather the vivid testimonials by several contributors, especially what Zentella dubs “a Nuyorican’s View of Our History and Language.” The most significant finding of this book may be the sheer tenacity of Puerto Rican identity in the United States against all odds: xenophobia, racism, stigmatization, poverty, unemployment, economic restructuring, deindustrialization, displacement, dispersion, diminished migration, and even rejection by Puerto Ricans on the Island. Another central finding is that despite their “waning presence,” Puerto Ricans remain the largest ethnic group in New York City, which has by far the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. Moreover, New York Puerto Ricans have recently increased their electoral representation. Culturally, they continue to leave their mark in the city’s popular music, language, religion, arts, food, education, and media. This waxing presence must be thoroughly documented, analyzed, and interpreted.

Overall, *Boricuas in Gotham* provides a commendable account of some of the leading “bread-and-butter” issues in the study of New York’s Puerto Rican community. The volume brings together a wealth of statistical data on the economic and political situation of Puerto Ricans in the city. The chapters by Cruz, Falcón, and Rivera-Batiz, in particular, are packed with useful information on poverty, unemployment, income, education, occupation, industry, and other important variables for understanding the socioeconomic well-being of New York Puerto Ricans. However, the field of Puerto Rican studies is not advanced by branding all recent scholarship on “race, identity, popular culture, and related topics” (p. 138) as “abstract and detached,” “romantic” (p. 166), “much too theoretical” (p. 165), and “often flaky” (p. 172). It would be much more productive to engage in a respectful dialogue between various theoretical and methodological positions, such as Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, positivism, and constructivism, as well as across disciplines, such as the “hard” social sciences as opposed to the “soft” humanities. As Falcón notes in his closing remarks, many topics await further study, and much of this research will be conducted by a post-Marxist, post-positivist, post-Civil Rights generation of scholars. This younger generation should be encouraged to explore new issues, epistemologies, and methodologies, wherever they may lead them.

Together, the two books under review document some of the intense contemporary debates surrounding colonialism and migration in Puerto Rico. Given that the Island remains a colony of the United States, a crucial theoretical and political question becomes whether colonialism has impregnated all forms of social inequality, such as those based on gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Furthermore, does the concept of “coloniality of power” adequately explain the current situation of Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the United States? Assuming that Puerto Ricans are colonial migrants similar to other Caribbean diasporas in their respective metropolises, it is important

to pursue a comparative research agenda on Puerto Ricans in New York City, Martinicans in Paris, Dutch Antilleans in Amsterdam, and so on. Both theoretically informed and methodologically sophisticated treatments of Puerto Rican colonialism and migration are urgently needed. Without abandoning legitimate concerns for economic development, political empowerment, and community organization, there is still much room for fine-grained analyses of cultural identities, practices, and discourses. Such studies would do well to move beyond artificial dichotomies such as those between global and local, macro and micro, structural and cultural forces, placing the experiences of ordinary Puerto Ricans on and off the Island within their broader socioeconomic contexts. After all, the best social science usually dwells on the multiple intersections between collective biographies and historical trajectories.

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