

Marisol LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. ix + 301 pp. (Paper US\$29.95)

*December 2016.* Alma Yariela Cruz-Cruz, an eleven-year-old Black girl with a cognitive disability, was expelled from her school after responding aggressively to racial harassment by two other minors. She was handcuffed and taken to Juvenile Court, and the case was published on the front page of *El Nuevo Día*, with the headline, “Children facing a mano dura in court.” Alma was accused (though ultimately freed) of five crimes: one for simple aggression, two for threat, and two for disturbing the peace.

*July 2019.* Puerto Ricans participated massively in street protests, demanding that Governor Ricardo Rosselló resign. On July 24 he announced his resignation. It was a true victory for Puerto Ricans who were outraged by his poor governance during hurricane Maria, as well as the revelation of a chat in which the governor and members of his government made derogatory remarks about minorities, including the 4,645 deaths that resulted from the hurricane.

*February 2020.* Neulisa Luciano Ruiz, 28, was found dead in the street, her body riddled with bullets. Better known as Alexa, she was a homeless trans Black woman who suffered from depression. The night before her murder, she had been accused of being a “man with women’s clothes” and having a mirror in a women’s restroom. The policeman who arrived on the scene released her without channeling any kind of mental health or housing service.

Marisol LeBrón’s *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* is intended as a political project that denounces the repressive policing of the Puerto Rican archipelago, a U.S. colony since 1898. LeBrón unmasks the punitive governance in contemporary Puerto Rico and the power and hierarchical structures of the State: “By *punitive governance* I mean the ways in which the Puerto Rican state has reasserted itself in the lives of Puerto Ricans through technologies of punishment such as policing and incarceration, as well as the violence (state sanctioned and other) they often provoke ... punitive governance has left an indelible mark on how life and death are understood and experienced in Puerto Rico and has done so in a way that reinforces societal inequality along lines of race, class, spatial location, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status” (p. 3).

LeBrón provides evidence of the Puerto Rican police department’s use of excessive force, and the police officers’ tendency to link poverty, Blackness, and location with criminality and danger. A core question she explores throughout the book is how policing initiatives like *mano dura* have led us to conclude that some Puerto Ricans don’t care if their fellow citizens experience violence or die. Interestingly, the punitive governance coexists in spite of the fact that

“those very communities are reimagining their own futures in ways that expand the meanings of safety and justice in the contemporary period” (p. 6). LeBrón argues that “Puerto Ricans are contesting punitive governance and working toward a future grounded in justice and freedom” (p. 22).

*Policing Life and Death* is well written and robustly worked. Throughout the seven chapters and a postscript, LeBrón manages to articulate and support her argument by a deep critical and geopolitical review of the country, and “interviews with activists, participant observation of protests, and informal conversations with a range of Puerto Ricans about how they understand policing, as well as the narratives marginalized and criminalized Puerto Ricans use to represent themselves in news outlets, expressive culture, and social media” (p. 18). She traces a journey from the genesis of the punitive governance by the state, headed by different governors, and analyzes student and citizen protests and the tension between young people and the state, through a critical look at the underground music genre and the imposition of the law PROMESA, all the way to Puerto Rico posthurricane Maria.

The book contributes in several ways to the academic and nonacademic understanding of the racialization processes in Puerto Rico. LeBrón uses the analysis of punitive governance as an example of the way race operates in the archipelago, and its intricacies. Her book exhibits the myth of racial democracy and the importance of an activist, queer, decolonial, and deprovincializing approach to the study of intersectionalities between race, class, culture, gender, and nationality in Puerto Rico.

This unique, pivotal book will help to continue the study of other forms of punitive governance such as that in the Alma Yariela Cruz case, the summer 2019 protests, and the assassination of Alexa. In all three, the resistance of community and minority groups has challenged the police intervention toward social death.

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