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Drops of inclusivity: Racial formations and meanings in Puerto Rican society, 1989-1965

Milagros Denis-Rosario, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2022, 240pp., \$99.00, ISBN: 978-1438488691 (hardcover)

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Drops of Inclusivity draws on archival, quantitative, and qualitative data to analyze racial formations, emergent racial hierarchies, and racism in Puerto Rico during the modernization process and in the construction of a national identity. The analysis also importantly reveals the various ways in which Afro-Puerto Ricans navigated racial hierarchies, challenged racial discrimination, and created a place for themselves in Puerto Rican society. The book is organized into six chapters that examine, by decades, the era from US occupation to the early years of the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Commonwealth of Puerto Rico). Denis-Rosario situates the study in scholarship of and debates about the role of race and racism in Puerto Rico and contends that racist practices and racism have existed historically and continue to exist in Puerto Rico.

The Introduction, "The Illusion of Living in a Non-Racist Racist Society," which reviews the racial system introduced during Spain's four-century colonial rule in Puerto Rico, is particularly insightful. Spanish colonizers create racial hierarchies based on race, class, and enslavement status; this racialized system included castes of racial mixtures that were situated at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and subjected to forms of social, legal, and economic exclusion. This important discussion illustrates that Puerto Rico's society was racialized prior to US arrival and occupation. Chapter 1, "A Revised Account of the New 'Colored' Possession: 1898–1920," argues that the Americanization project launched in Puerto Rico illustrates Puerto Ricans' early racialization under the United States. This chapter traces the ideologies, debates, decisions, and policies, at various levels of the US government, that show the intersection of race and citizenship that shaped the types of exclusion granted to territories acquired in the Spanish-American War and specifically to Puerto Rico. The chapter concludes by illuminating Afro-Puerto Ricans' important

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roles during this period—as critics, labor leaders, writers, contributors to public and intellectual discourse, and leaders in Puerto Rico politics—which disrupted racial and social structures implanted under Spanish colonialism and further solidified during US occupation.

Chapter 2, "Reshaping Education, Race, and Citizenship: 1920–1930," demonstrates that the institutions of education and citizenship were deployed as mechanisms to support the US colonial project. The Puerto Rico education system was used to promote supposedly superior American values, principles, culture, English language, and liberal democracy. Denis-Rosario expands on the previous discussion of citizenship and illustrates that perceptions of Puerto Ricans' racial otherness informed policymaker debates and ultimately contributed to granting Puerto Ricans an inferior form of US citizenship. Notably, Puerto Ricans were perceived as unworthy of full political inclusion and rights in the United States, yet their inferior US citizenship conveniently allowed for enlisting them to fight on behalf of US empire during World War I. This chapter also centers Dr. José Celso Barbosa, a Black Puerto Rican of modest origin who became the first Black surgeon in Puerto Rico, who was the founder of the *Partido Republicano* of Puerto Rico and held public offices. The analysis provides insight into how Dr. Barbosa navigated distinct racial models in the United States and in Puerto Rico and used his public platform to advocate for Black Puerto Ricans. Through his political work and public writing, Dr. Barbosa also grappled with and drew attention to the intersections of race and class in Puerto Rico.

Chapter 3, "The Twisted Evolution of National Identity: 1930–1940," shows how Puerto Rico's elite reimagined Puerto Rican history and shaped a new national identity—a politicized process informed by the presence of and stance on US colonialism. The dominant Hispanic-centered approach to Puerto Rican national identity during this period glorified Spanish heritage and culture as superior while subordinating, denying, and erasing African and Taíno components, an approach that led to the construction of the *jíbaro* (white rural man) as the emblem of Puerto Rican identity. This chapter also traces the rise and political journeys of iconic Puerto Rican figures: Pedro Albizu Campos (leader of the independence movement and Nationalist Party) and Luis Muñoz Marín (leader and founder of the Partido Popular Democrático, PPD). Denis-Rosario's compelling analysis complicates these figures, demonstrating their respective contributions to constructing and popularizing a Puerto Rican national identity founded on Hispanic-centered ideologies and reinforcing the notion of Puerto Rico as a raceless nation. Denis-Rosario concludes that a paradigm of racial exclusion was a key feature of Puerto Rican national discourse throughout the 1930s. Further analysis of the role of gender and the intersections of gender, race, and class in national discourse and in the construction of Puerto Rican national identity and its symbols would have contributed further to an already compelling chapter.

Chapter 4, "Intersecting Race and Modernization: 1940–1950," examines the modernization process and identifies social and cultural forces that uphold and reinforce the myth of racial harmony. Chapter 5, "Strategizing Modernity: 1950–1965," centers the experiences of Afro-Puerto Rican women. The analysis of Ruth Fernández, a prominent Black Puerto Rican singer, demonstrates how she negotiated spaces



marked by class, race, and gender and how she constructed a persona embraced by the Puerto Rican elite, including PPD leaders. Denis-Rosario importantly notes that the consumption of Afro-Puerto Rican music in elite and upper-class clubs did not signify acceptance but rather social appropriation of Afro-Puerto Rican culture. The experiences of Cecilia Orta, an Afro-Puerto Rican educator, artist, and political activist, are also significant. The analysis reveals the various forms of exclusion, barriers, and silencing that she experienced, as well as her persistence in pursuing a teaching career, expanding arts programs for low-income communities, and expressing her political voice. These cases challenge the depiction of Puerto Rico as the supposed racial paradise that Puerto Rican political leaders and intellectual elites were committed to promoting.

Chapter 6, "The Liga Opened Pandora's Black Box: 1950–1965," uncovers persistent forms of racial discrimination despite Puerto Rico's socioeconomic progress. During the mid-twentieth century, intellectual discussions and media commentary often pointed to US race relations and racism to deny that racism existed in Puerto Rico. The elimination of racial classification from the Puerto Rico censuses (1960–1990) also served as a tool for constructing Puerto Rico as a raceless nation, as it erased racial identities, inequalities, and hierarchies. Denis-Rosario examines the Civil Rights Commission in Puerto Rico (including the political interests that led to its creation) which found political discrimination targeting nationalists and racial discrimination against Black Puerto Ricans. The chapter reveals that racial exclusion, denial, stigmatization, and codes were not only features of Puerto Rican society; they were also perpetuated in social institutions (housing, schools, the labor market, businesses, government, and politics). Yet Black Puerto Ricans took various actions to uncover and draw domestic and international attention to systemic racial discrimination.

Drops of Inclusivity seeks to show that anti-Blackness and racism have long been features of Puerto Rican society, and, just as importantly, to document Afro-Puerto Ricans' manifold "moral, demographic, cultural, intellectual, economic, developmental, and political" contributions to Puerto Rico (p. 148). The analysis recovers, reveals, and centers Black Puerto Ricans' acts of agency, and in doing so, challenges their historic "erasure, silence, and denial" (p. 149). To borrow from Denis-Rosario, *gota a gota, se llena el vaso* (drop by drop, you fill the glass) of equality and justice; this book makes a significant and commendable contribution to that effort.

