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Márquez has managed to give us a true anthology of Puerto Rican poetry, one that avoids the twin pitfalls of previous efforts that either saw the island production as the most significant (ignoring U.S.-based work) or rejected the sometimes stifling canon from more traditional island approaches. Here poets took the opposite road, claiming that mainland production (mostly, but not always in English) was the more vibrant, innovative, and representative of “lo puertorriqueño.” Márquez clearly shows that one cannot exist without the other. Perhaps that’s why he included the wonderful poem “Child of the Americas” by Aurora Levins Morales: “I am not African. Africa is in me, but I cannot return. I am not taino. Taino is in me, but there is no way back. / I am not European. Europe lives in me, but I have no home there. / I am new. History made me. / My first language was spanglish / I was born at the crossroads / and I am whole.” Puerto Rican poetry is a historical, existential, linguistic, and cultural crossroads. We make our own light by wandering.

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**Boricua Power: A Political History of Puerto Ricans in the United States**

By José Ramón Sánchez


304 pages; $24.00 [paper]

**REVIEWER:** **ALDO LAURIA SANTIAGO**, Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey—New Brunswick

This book has posed quite a challenge to this reviewer. Its goals are very important. It makes many contributions along the way, and it will inevitably lead to fertile discussions—it will be difficult for any reader interested in the Puerto Rican experience in the U.S. not to be affected by its enthusiasm and its engagement with the critical issues. But in some fundamental ways the book fails to provide a coherent analysis, either as history or as social science. I’ll first discuss what I think are the book’s main contributions and then address what I think are its main problems. *Boricua Power* is an attempt to provide an over-arching explanation for the failure of Puerto Ricans in New York to consistently hold on to any significant quantum of power. The author provides cursory critiques of why past explanations for these failures are inadequate. The book, despite the title, focuses only on the Puerto Rican experience in New York, and seeks to show that Puerto Ricans have never been passive agents despite the failure to gain much social power.

In its first chapter the text reviews and in most cases rejects the different strands of social theory and political science approaches that have been used to explain the social origins of power as well as specific debates on the status of Puerto Ricans. These critiques are often insightful but other times seem arbitrary and superficial. In the end, the author proposes an alternative conceptual framework best summarized here as the “dance” theory of social-symbolic power. The “dance” theory is presented in the first chapter and in fragments throughout the rest of the book. It is not easy to summarize this approach, and at time it seems like the author is striving to conceptualize what is the normal modus operandi of anthropologists and historians, that is, the study of historically contingent and culturally constructed alliances. So I’ll let the author’s own words do this work, but ultimately readers will have to decide for themselves.
whether this approach contributes a coherent interpretation of the historical experience of a racialized, colonial, migrant, second-class citizenry. For Sánchez, “Dance reminds us that power is an unstable combination of structure and energy between passionate, interested partners” (p. 20). His approach to the “theory of power as dance” is based on “social power” theory of the early 1960s and borrows lightly from Bourdieu (pp. 27–30). So his emphasis is on Dance as an unstable, shifting interaction between parties that requires engagement and will. At the theoretical level, the main problem with this analogy or approach, or perhaps the extent to which the interactive aspect of the analogy is pushed, is that it diffuses the multiple sources of power in a white supremacist, urban, industrial, capitalist order while insisting that power comes from a singular process of dance or direct engagement between those who desire and those who have something to offer in the way of symbolic capital. The extent to which this approach differs from social capital or social network analysis remains unclear (p. 148).

The book contains important contributions to the study of the experience of Puerto Ricans in New York. The book offers concise and empirically rich discussions of specific episodes or moments in the history of the Puerto Rican community that often include archival evidence and other innovative sorts of data. The world of tobacco workers during the 1910–1930 period explains the decline of a well-paid, literate and relatively successful sector of the working class, of which Puerto Rican male workers formed a significant minority. Despite the fact that the decline of tobacco workers affected the Puerto Rican community, this was hardly a case of Puerto Ricans themselves failing to engage with dance partners. The chapter discusses the attempts at empowerment in the pre-1945 period and how they basically failed and resulted in a decline in the value of Puerto Rican labor. Chapter three provides a careful review of Puerto Rican support (especially in Spanish Harlem) for radical leftist politicians like Vito Marcantonio and others and assesses how the community’s real or perceived pre-McCarthy era radicalism shaped its ability to develop and retain sources of support and empowerment. A brief spurt of attention (1948–1955) by city officials and the island’s government failed in gaining the community a permanent basis for empowerment. The author also provides other important case studies of Puerto Rican empowerment and disempowerment including the struggles relating to public housing access and the rise and decline of different political alliances. One important element of this discussion is that it highlights the importance of the 1940s, ‘50s and early ‘60s—a period that is not well understood. From this period the author moves to a discussion of the Young Lords (Chapter 5) and how their politics, in his opinion, were undermined by the group’s underestimation of the power of the media in shaping the political arena and mainstream responses to Puerto Rican mobilization.

The author’s treatment of the relationship between Puerto Ricans and the city (or nation’s) economy is episodic and relies mostly on irregular historical evidence. In this sense, the author’s discussion is only as good as the existing historical research despite his own empirical contribution, and here lies a fundamental problem for the book. The 1940s, ‘50s and early ‘60s have not been studied well, and all our attempts at making generalizations about the Puerto Rican economic well-being or power (in any sense) will inevitably fall short. There are small problems with big issues that get short and speculative treatment. In his attempt to discuss nearly every aspect of Puerto Rican poverty,
for example, Sánchez claims that the real source of the extreme feminization of poverty experienced by Puerto Rican households during the 1970s and ‘80s (basically a result of the combined stagnation of incomes and increase in female-led single-parent households) resulted from a resistance strategy by Puerto Rican women to male control. But the author provides no evidence for this assertion and does not explain why the existing literature on this question is wrong. The discussion in passages such as this one borders on being impressionistic and reinforces stereotypes of the poor (p. 145). The disappearance of work opportunities, the island’s economic crisis, or welfare policies are not discussed.

The author’s goal, only partially fulfilled, is to show that the political and economic success of the “Puerto Rican community” (or the Puerto Rican demographic, the distinction is never made clearly enough) can be explained by the closing of a “cultural path to social power” (p. 90). In this context, the book discusses the experience of African Americans but with little reference to the vast literature on black empowerment, politics, and struggles in the U.S. and New York. The author argues that blackness has a cultural value among some whites, a claim that has some basis in African-American scholarship, but the author presents this sort of material as the cause of the relatively greater empowerment of African Americans, a dubious and simplistic claim. The author’s theory of culture-as-power is suggestive, but it is not well developed and often dissolves into impressionistic discussions that seem to be based on the author’s personal judgment rather than any careful examination of evidence or a literature. One example:

...unlike African Americans, Latinos have not projected a distinct cultural style worth widespread coveting or theft by others, at least not since the Carmen Miranda fruit basket head dress and Desi Arnaz “babalu” days. What made the Will Smith character in Independence Day so appealing, for example, was precisely the fact that he was a “black man” rather than of “any race.” The role could have been played by anyone, but the fact that it was played by an African American introduced distinctive dramatic and comedic possibilities of speech and style that were fragrantly displayed in the movie and understood and enjoyed by American viewers of all races.... Sadly, the same could not have been said of a Latino. (p. 178)

What the author terms the “invisibility of Puerto Rican culture,” then, is seen—correctly so—as part of the powerlessness of Puerto Ricans. It is impossible to argue with this truism. The book often derails from a focused discussion to a consideration of too many issues without providing a clear argument. The reader loses the ability to sort cause from effect because cause and effect are conceptually confused.

Sometimes, the discussions are very rich in suggestions, claims, facts, and ideas, so that the absence of a conclusive argument is beside the point. This is the case of his discussion of the Young Lords, where the claim is that Puerto Ricans received no enduring form of power after the successes of the Young Lords except for the launching of Badillo’s political career. Here a truism—that the radicalisms of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s did not endure or transform into something else—ignores the fact that this was the fate of all similar movements from this period; Sánchez also neglects the rich possibilities of discussing how important the Lords have been in the Puerto Rican political imaginary and their significant contribution to Puerto Rican performance of race, politics, and nationalism. To conclude that the
Lords and other politicians from this period did not understand the power of the media and that this is why they failed at gaining more power seems off the point, especially if the argument is not accompanied by a more compete assessment of the effectiveness of Puerto Rican politicians in general.

The attempt to offer a singular theory for explaining Puerto Rican political failures is weighed down by its rigidity (success, then failure; power, then disempowerment) and ultimately remains vague and selective in the use of evidence. Paradoxically, the attempt to explain the failure to find Dance Partners also diffuses the analysis into many other subsidiary explanations, as if Puerto Ricans engaged with a random set of power-players: “what holds Puerto Ricans back is the lack of opportunities to dance with those who accept them and can provide them with power” (p. 145). In the end, after considering the rich empirical materials and case studies, the “dance” analogy and cultural theory of power seems to obscure as much as they explain and clarify, especially when applied in such an all-encompassing manner. Ultimately this reviewer found the “dance” concepts to be too vague and confused.

Within the author’s attempt to provide an all-encompassing interpretation, this reviewer found some interesting and promising suggestions for how the power of marginalized racialized communities might be studied, but the application of the approach as suggested by the author remains undeveloped. Within (or perhaps, besides) the “Dance” approach, the author suggests what we can call a theory of racialized cultural value. Part of this proposal is the idea that racialized minorities (like African Americans and Puerto Ricans) required the attention of a social/political elite other in order to stake their claims to power. This attention can be gained (or not) from the subaltern’s ability to mobilize the “desire” of the powerful, but for Sánchez “Puerto Ricans remained mostly irrelevant as a culture” (p. 52) and failed to attract consistent interest. It is not completely clear how the approach suggested here is superior to the status quo that emphasizes human capital, colonialism, racialization, discrimination, and the political economy of urban decline and deindustrialization in the 1960s and ‘70s. The author does not seem to take racialization seriously, nor does he seem to consider the effects of Puerto Rican entry into the very lower levels of a declining labor market as a major structural factor that, as other scholars have pointed out, helps explain much of our lack of political and economic clout. At another level, the comparison with African Americans dismisses the deep historical differences in the formation of these two communities and the lack of a significant Puerto Rican diasporic economic elite due in part to Puerto Rico’s long colonial history. Ironically, the discussion of the visibility of Black culture is so arbitrary that the author misses the opportunity to develop a more relevant comparison in relation to Black political invisibility and empowerment: the experience of West Indian immigrant communities in New York.

The value of this book is in not accepting existing traditional explanations that focus on the attributes and characteristics of Puerto Ricans themselves. In this he is not referring only to culturalist (a la Sowell or Chavez) approaches but to interpretations that often create tautologies (many Puerto Ricans are poor because they have low incomes) but provide little insight into the larger context and sources of the outcome. Instead, the book poses the need to establish what we can call a contextual-historical approach. However, by not establishing clearly who the powerful dance partners were, that is, those who so often refused the favor (of a dance) to the Puerto Rican community, the book does not fulfill
its challenge. If we agree with Sánchez that the community had little to offer in terms of consumable cultural capital, we still need to establish who was the [white, capitalist, boss, landlord, police, teacher, gatekeeper, official…?] dance partner whose recurrent *no gracias* doomed Puerto Ricans to persistent poverty and powerlessness. Whiteness, “the man,” the power elite, the power structure… our failed interlocutors are absent from this analysis and surprisingly get little attention given the importance of their actions and choices. The book runs the risk of putting the onus on us again: we failed to make them dance by not offering attractive cultural bait. Furthermore, historicized discussions of how Puerto Ricans were pathologized, seen as a “problem” culture and a fundamentally deficient people from the day we arrived, receive little attention (see books by Duany, Grosfoguel, Ramos-Zayas and Whalen for examples of this sort of work).¹ It might very well be that the era of single explanations of large questions is over. Puerto Ricans are too complex a group, our experiences more heterogeneous than what is often acknowledged. Moreover, the persistent tendency to see our experience with poverty as one that is not related to that of other urban poor people has limited our ability to explain the origins of even this singular problem.

The author’s persistent references to a “larger society” provide opportunities for discussions of contests over wealth and power, however defined. But this sort of analysis would require more careful work on how Puerto Ricans related to mayors, city councils, borough presidents, employers, and union leader power-brokers of the urban context, who had a role in shaping Puerto Rican attempts to achieve their “objective” needs and desires. Ironically, the book’s persistent emphasis on failure and failed dance moves ends up obscuring the many ways in which Puerto Ricans might have participated as members of other constituencies (and perhaps won) in struggles that do not foreground or prefigure their racial/identities: as union members, as workers, public employees, teachers, veterans, sexualized bodies, etc. Puerto Rican cultural invisibility, marginalization, and stigmatization have been real and in periods truly intense, but by themselves they don’t explain the experience of Puerto Ricans in all arenas, let alone our poverty between the 1960s and ’80s. In the Puerto Rican experience there are trends that are at odds with each other and in constant contradiction—I could cite the middle-classing of sectors of the Puerto Rican population in New Jersey, or the middle-classness of parts of the migratory flow from the island, or the great strides in educational achievement when the 1990s are compared with the 1950s, or the relative empowerment of Puerto Ricans in specific towns or small cities. Similarly, what can we say about the recent success of Reggaetón? That it marks the emergence of important dance partners that will signify a trend toward empowerment? Besides the market (and cultural) success of some (or many) Reggaetón artists and the pan-Latino consumption of the music, how does this *dance of cultural capital* help explain any particular larger trends in the socioeconomic status of Puerto Ricans? There have always been successful Puerto Ricans, but the source of their success is not necessarily an indication of anything in particular about the experience of the larger community.

My final comment, inevitably, comes from this reviewer’s own discipline. As a historian I find the juxtaposition of enticing bits and pieces of empirical research with far-reaching but inconclusive claims particularly frustrating. Not simply because of the book’s shortcomings, but also because the book reveals the failure of historians to produce a large and consistent body of work that researches,
documents, and theorizes the Puerto Rican experience in New York and other states. The critique, however, must work at both ends. Social scientists have to break past the way in which the question has been posed when studying the varying realities of Puerto Ricans (failure, poverty, and dysfunction), and historians have to more completely engage with the study of the century-old Puerto Rican presence. In many ways, this confused, challenging, and ambitious work by a political scientist should serve as a reminder for historians of the work that lies ahead.2

NOTES

Extended Statehood in the Caribbean: Paradoxes of Quasi Colonialism, Local Autonomy and Extended Statehood in the USA, French, Dutch and British Caribbean
Edited by Lammert de Jong and Dirk Kruijt
Amsterdam: Rozemberg Publishers, 2005
206 pages; $41.00 [paper]
REVIEWER: AARÓN GAMALIEL RAMOS, Universidad de Puerto Rico—Río Piedras
The years that followed the end of World War II saw the beginning of a decolonization process that turned many of the colonies of the region into independent countries. However, in the emerging postwar political landscape a group of colonies remained under the control of Great Britain, France, Holland, and the United States. These are the territories that are the central concern of the book Extended Statehood in the Caribbean: Paradoxes of Quasi Colonialism, Local Autonomy and Extended Statehood in the USA, French, Dutch and British Caribbean, edited by Lammert de Jong and Dirk Kruijt.

From a comparative perspective, the diversity of colonialism in the Caribbean is extraordinary. Significant differences between the political conceptions and the legal traditions have historically informed the colonial policies of the British, the French, the Dutch, and the United States. Thus, the non-independent territories of the contemporary Caribbean manifest a broad range of constitutional arrangements. The French Antillean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique and the French Guiana are “overseas departments” of France, with an administrative
Boricua Power explains the creation and loss of power as a product of human efforts to enter, keep or end relationships with others in an attempt to satisfy passions and interests, using a theoretical and historical case study of one community—Puerto Ricans in the United States. Using archival, historical and empirical data, Boricua Power demonstrates that power rose and fell for this community with fluctuations in the passions and interests that defined the relationship between Puerto Ricans and the larger U.S. society. Power exists as much in the way that lovers relate to each other as in electoral contests for political office. Community Life—United States—History. Puerto Ricans—United States—Politics and Government. Puerto Ricans—United States—Social Conditions. The Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (English: Armed Forces of National Liberation, FALN) was a Puerto Rican clandestine paramilitary organization that, through direct action, advocated complete independence for Puerto Rico. It carried out more than 130 bomb attacks in the United States between 1974 and 1983, including a 1975 bombing of the Fraunces Tavern in New York City that killed four people. Puerto Ricans were outraged after the war. Instead of becoming citizens, Puerto Ricans were in limbo. Is there any hope for Puerto Rico becoming a state in the future? After all, the reason they’re not is because more than a century ago, a judge said that Puerto Ricans were too racially inferior to be a part of the U.S. legal system. Today, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, whose parents were born in Puerto Rico, sits on the highest court of law in the United States—the Supreme Court. Just a few months before Hurricane Maria, Puerto Ricans actually voted in favor of a referendum for statehood. The Long, Complicated History of Political Leaks. The Thorny History of Reparations in the United States. 6 Short-Lived Republics in the United States. Ad Choices. Advertise. the Puerto Rican cultural and ethno-class struggle in America. Boricua Power is scholarly yet heartfelt and recommended to anyone interested in ethnicity and social power. —Michael Parenti, author of The Culture Struggle "Boricua Power is a scholarly, insightful and above all original take on an enduring political problem. Highly recommended!"—Bertell Ollman, author of Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society. The political history of the Puerto Rican community illustrates how an ethnic group interacts with interested partners on the dance floor of the urban political economy. In its hundred-year-long history in New York, Puerto Ricans have seized (and lost) a surprising range of opportunities to improve their status.