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Ismael García-Colón. *Colonial Migrants at the Heart of Empire: Puerto Rican Workers on U.S. Farms.*

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Ismael García-Colón tells the little-known story of the rise and fall of Puerto Rican participation in farming fields across the eastern seaboard and the role of these workers in the foundation of Puerto Rican ethnic communities. He aims to show how Puerto Ricans became part—and were subjected to the fluctuations—of the political economy of U.S. agriculture and its demand of farm labor, and to understand the social forces that shaped Puerto Rican farm migration to the United States.

García-Colón's approach is twofold, and generally corresponds to the two-part structure of the book. In the first part, "The Formation of Agrarian Labor Regimes," he analyzes the intersections of politics, law, and political economy regarding the attempts to manage domestic and migrant farm labor in the United States and Puerto Rico. Using Eric Wolf's concept of "structural power,"¹ García-Colón examines how specific U.S. colonial policies, legal and administrative decisions, and actions made migrants part of U.S. labor market (8-9). For example, the reader will understand how Puerto Ricans benefitted from the limitations to immigration and guest-worker programs (of which the Mexican Bracero Program is the most famous), or how citizenship was an obstacle at times because farmers and host communities feared Puerto Ricans could not be deported and would become a welfare burden. Finally, the author proposes that the attempts to manage migration and farm labor are best understood as "state formation" (7) efforts in the United States and especially Puerto Rico. In the latter, those efforts, in conjunction with other U.S. legal and political developments, gave way to the establishment of a "modern colonial state" (9). Puerto Rico's particular relationship vis-à-vis other countries (such as Mexico) allowed government officials not just to lobby the federal government but also to be part of federal agencies' managing efforts.

Three chapters compose the first part of the book. Chapter 1 centers on the United States and gives an overview of the tense and troubling history of immigration debates and policies. It demonstrates the ways in which U.S. colonial policies and legal decisions helped to create a variegated pool of farm workers out of colonial subjects and guest-immigrants. Chapter 2 then moves to Puerto Rico and reveals how the Puerto Rican government enacted laws and created agencies to manage its farm work migration. Under the Popular Democratic Party's "neo-Malthusian ideology" (66), the government concluded that a managed migration was beneficial for everyone involved—farmers, migrants, and host communities. The main program in those efforts was the Farm Labor Program, which resembled the Bracero Program. Chapter 3 takes a closer look at Puerto Rico's migration management efforts. The discussion centers on how contract labor migration became the path to overcome the limits of Operation Bootstrap (the government's program of rapid industrialization) in jobs creation. It details the establishment of the Migration Division (MD) that oversaw the recruiting, contracting, transportation, housing, employment conditions, and health of workers. This section also chronicles the establishment of the Puerto Rico's

¹ Eric Wolf, *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

State Insurance Fund to cover workers injured in the U.S. and the creation of a health insurance with workers' contributions (to assuage fears of welfare burden) to manage labor migration.

In part two—"Managing Hope, Despair, and Dissent"—García-Colón centers his attention on the experiences of farmworkers. Leaning on Tania Murray Li's concept of the "will to improve,"² he investigates migrants' construction of networks, their perceptions of working and living conditions, their own reproductive labor, farmers' recruiting and labor practices, and attitudes of rural communities toward migrants (11-12). For example, as other authors have done, he shows how migration networks were constructed through relatives and friends.³ He also sheds light on how paternalistic networks between farmers and workers were built—with farmers sending their children to stay with workers' families on the island. But he also makes clear how migrants exercised their agency and protested what they viewed as harsh, poor, and unjust living and working conditions, especially claiming their rights as U.S. citizens.

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The second part of the book consists of four chapters. Chapter 4 explores workers' migratory experiences, focusing on their efforts to exercise some measure of control over their lives. García-Colón shows migration's effects on migrants and their families (for example, the heavy emotional and psychological toll, or the importance of remittances). He examines the different ways migrants tried to cope with the harsh realities of labor migration—abandoning contracts and moving to cities or returning to Puerto Rico, or taking the airplane ride and then never arriving to the farm, among others. The author also depicts the contentious relationship between the MD and farmers because of the former's interventions in favor of workers, even those who did not travel through the agency.

Chapter 5 focuses on the labor camps as places that "served to discipline and control migrants" and a "social arena where workers learned about work and life in the United States" (131). Following Erwin Goffman, García-Colón conceives of the labor camps as "total institutions," places that contained everything needed for survival—food, work, lodging, entertainment, and even stores—and where "top-down strategies of domination" seeking "to obliterate and destroy workers' agency" were exerted (135).⁴ As he aptly indicates, labor camps served to keep an unwanted population invisible. But labor camps also became the centers where, after long, hard battles to gain access to them, the MD and other organizations could provide workers with the means to improve their situation—teaching English classes, for example—and help them organize.

² Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

³ For a work that shows those connections see the classic, Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Interestingly, this text does not appear in García-Colón's bibliography. Carmen Teresa Whalen, in *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), demonstrates how Puerto Rican communities in Philadelphia function as supporting entities for those who wanted to travel to the city in search of jobs. For Philadelphia see also, Víctor Vázquez-Hernández, *Before the Wave: Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, 1910-1945* (New York: Centro Press, 2017). Ruth Glasser's *My Music is My Flag: Puerto Rican Musicians and Their New York Communities, 1917-1940* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1995) touches upon the circular migration of many musicians, not only from Puerto Rico but Cubans also. Gina M. Pérez's, *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement, and Puerto Rican Families* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) examines the migration from San Sebastián, P.R., to Chicago and in doing so also proves the existence of those familiar connections. More recently, some of the works of Jorge Duany on Puerto Ricans in Florida point to those connections, too. Jorge Duany, "The Orlando Ricans: Overlapping Identity Discourses Among Middle-Class Puerto Rican Immigrants" in Jorge Duany, *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration Between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Duany, "Mickey Ricans? The Recent Puerto Rican Diaspora to Florida," Paper presented at the "Florida's Hispanic Heritage" Conference, University of South Florida-Tampa, 13-20 October 2012.

⁴ Erwin Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

In chapter 6, García-Colón discusses a Puerto Rican migrants' protest in North Collins, NY, to illustrate the tense relations between migrants and their host communities. The protest against unfair treatment and unjust situations—establishing curfews, denying due process, or voting rights, among others—showed that that Puerto Ricans did not accept a system that “define them as inferior colonial subjects” and, to the contrary, they would claim their rights as U.S. citizens (164). The response of local authorities and residents proved their ignorance about migrants' realities and that the former did not want any responsibility toward the latter.

Chapter 7 narrates the fall of the MD and the FLP under the neoliberal ideology and policies enacted by the different New Progressive Party's administrations. Starting in the 1970s, each NPP administration helped dismantle the framework that sustained the management of labor migration, until that of ex-governor Pedro Roselló's in the 1990s put an end to offices and programs that helped stateside communities.

In the epilogue, García-Colón brings the discussion to the present. President Donald Trump's type of enforcement of immigration laws and aggressive deportation policy have made Puerto Rican workers more appealing to farmers and growers. However, conditions continue to be harsh and wages low and there is no interest on the part of any government—federal or Puerto Rico's—to manage today's migration. There is no government's supervision of contract negotiations, no monitoring of working or living conditions.

García-Colón's attention to the politico-legal framework of the debates about immigration and guest-workers programs falls within the historiographical current of the late-1980s and early-1990s known as “bringing the state back in” that proposes to look at states as autonomous entities that shape social, political, and cultural processes.⁵ At different moments in the text he alludes to the “state formation” efforts of the Puerto Rican government and correctly argues that by bringing them to the forefront he forces scholars to consider that “colonial entities have more agency than perhaps was previously assumed, even though that agency is limited by the unequal power relationship between metropolis and colony” (16). However, there are several instances in the book which García-Colón could have identified as “state formation” to make his argument clearer and stronger. For example, he could have discussed the arrest of illegal recruiters and Puerto Rico's government fight to curtail the recruitment of farm workers without government sanctioned contracts, as the use of policing in “state formation” efforts (114-115). Additionally, a recap of this central argument—one of his most penetrating insights—would have been valuable in the epilogue.

The book shares a characteristic of most historiography about Puerto Ricans in the United States that can be considered problematic: it exposes and denounces the harsh, unjust, and unequal living and working conditions of Puerto Ricans in the United States, but tends to stop there; it does not critique the Puerto Ricans themselves.⁶ Although exposing and

⁵ The classic work on that historiographical school of thought is Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer & Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also, Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff & Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), and Theda Skocpol, *Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁶ In addition to Sánchez-Korrol and Whalen mentioned before there are many other important texts that tend to present an epic view of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. Most of the pioneering works in the field have that tone – maybe because they were breaking ground and establishing the area of study. See, History Task Force, *Labor Migration Under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience* (New York and London: Center for Puerto Rican Studies and Monthly Review Press, 1979); Félix M. Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) and *Puerto Rican Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987). More recent works such as Gina M. Pérez's *The Near Northwest Side Story* and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas's, *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race, and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) continue the tendency. Linda C. Delgado's “Jesús Colón and the Making of a New York City Community, 1917-1974” can be read as an apologetic text. The same happens with Iris López's, “Borinkis and Chop Suey: Puerto Rican Identity in Hawai'i, 1900 to 2000.” See Linda C. Delgado, “Jesús Colón and the Making of a New York City Community, 1917-1974,” in Carmen T. Whalen & Víctor Vázquez-Hernández, eds., *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia:

denouncing such conditions and the system that allows them to exist is of the utmost importance, it is necessary that scholars question their subjects' concepts, notions, assumptions, and values, too. Notions such as 'better wages,' 'better living,' and 'decent wages' are not naturally occurring concepts. They are social constructs, and, as such, they must be deeply scrutinized. The author dedicates a chapter to an analysis of the labor camps and the social relations that took place there. He acknowledges that labor camps were a space where migrants learned about life and work in the United States. How did the social interactions with U.S. workers influence Puerto Rican workers' ideas about a "decent living"? What did they mean by those concepts? He addresses such issues when he notes that "migrants, their families, and neighbors hoped to achieve progress within the new consumption-based lifestyle of the 'middle class' in the United States" (125). Did those hopes play a role in conceptions of citizenship?⁷ The point remains underdeveloped, its analytical possibilities lost, and we end with a picture that conflates the fight against a system of injustice with the fight against the economic system. If scholars do not probe into such constructed meanings, we risk idealizing our historical subjects and their actions, in this case, the fight of workers against a system of injustice. That fight was undertaken because they wanted their share of the economic system, not because they wanted to bring it down.

Finally, García-Colón's focus on the politico-legal framework of farm labor migration and on farmworkers' experiences on the farms is well done; it allows readers to grasp, in detail, the complex ways the different subjects of his analysis intersect. At the same time, we do not get to follow the 'radial lines'—that are hinted in the text, but not developed—of the myriad communities whose roots are tightly linked to farm workers.⁸

But these minor points do not diminish the value of García-Colón's work. He effectively illuminates the historical forces and processes that connected the fate of Puerto Rican farmworkers to U.S. agriculture and their responses to them. His work expands our understanding of the links among labor, citizenship, migration, imperialism, and colonialism, and, as such, it is a welcome addition to the historiography of Puerto Rican colonial relationship with the U.S., and Puerto Ricans in the United States.

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Temple University Press, 2005), 68-87; and, Iris López, "Borinkis and Chop Suey: Puerto Rican Identity in Hawai'i, 1900 to 2000," in Whalen & Vázquez-Hernández (eds.), *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*, 43-67.

⁷ In raising these questions, I take the work of Lawrence Glickman and Charles McGovern as models. In his *A Living Wage*, Glickman shows how between the 1870s and the New Deal, workers' claims of a living wage came to mean an enhancement of their participation in the consumer society. McGovern points to the links established, in the American imaginary of the first half of the twentieth century, between consumption and citizenship. There is a notable lack in the historiography about Puerto Ricans in the United States of analysis on how Puerto Ricans' notions of identity, belonging, citizenship, among others, have been altered or influenced by their engagement with consumer society. Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Charles McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁸ I take the concept of "radial lines" from Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof. He uses it to imagine how the life stories of his characters, from Puerto Rico and Cuba, converged on one point – New York City. I am using it in the opposite direction – how some life stories that converged in the labor camps moved out to other places. Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations: New York City and the Revolutionary Politics of the Spanish Caribbean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 6.