Puerto Rico: A National History. By Jorell Meléndez-Badillo. Princeton UP, 2024, 312 pp.

In his book's prologue, historian Jorell Meléndez-Badillo mentions the migration of more than 835,000 inhabitants of Puerto Rico to the continental United States between 1940 and 1970. To "highlight the personal and intimate dimensions of this history" (xi), however, the author starts by telling the story of Carlos Alberto Nieves Rivera, a man who left the island with the intention of living the American Dream but finally came back to Puerto Rico. The publication's subtitle, "A National History," already indicates that the stories and histories collected by the author aim at depicting the island as more than just a "non-state" within a historically anglophone country but as a specific politico-cultural area with a unique identity. At the same time, the legal absence of state- or nationhood makes Meléndez-Badillo's account both tragic and optimistic, critical and provocative. For example, he asks himself and readers: "Does the cultural nationalism that was produced in the mid-twentieth century count as a legitimate form of nation-building?" (xiii). His approach to these kinds of questions is to identify diverse Puerto Ricos, coexisting at the same time, and to characterize the island as a liminal, more-than-geographical space of both self-determination and subordination. His prologue offers readers more questions than answers, but asking these questions seems highly relevant in order to fully grasp the complex histories of Puerto Rico.

Keeping in mind the lack of pre-colonial sources, it is not surprising that Meléndez-Badillo begins his historical observations around the time of the first European arrivals on an island known as Borikén. Spanish expeditions "brought with them Bibles, crosses, and germs" (2). While this statement could also have included the word "swords," it correctly hints at a tragic fact of colonialism: the transfer of diseases. The "first smallpox epidemic in America, in 1518, introduced the disease in Puerto Rico" (Rigau-Pérez 423). Dramatic population losses notwithstanding, indigenous Taíno groups fiercely resisted Spanish domination. While colonial sources show a "regime of terror sustained by labor and sexual exploitation" (7) already at the time of Columbus' second voyage to the Americas in 1493, there definitely were forms of Taíno agency. The author also brings up another important topic: numbers and names of Indigenous people found in Spanish documents refer to persons *within* the colonial framework. Many others, however, "took to the mountains to live outside the limits of the state . . . Disappearing from the archive and from history may have meant surviving the conquest's genocidal thrust" (13). The early colonial era also saw the

first African-descended people moving or being moved to Puerto Rico. By 1514, Antón Mexía had accumulated enough social and financial capital "to be the only Black person to own enslaved indigenous people" (15), a harsh reminder of the complexities of multi-ethnic colonial societies that defy a dichotomy of European rule versus non-European subjugation.

In chapters two and three, Meléndez-Badillo shows how Puerto Rico was increasingly integrated into global networks and affected by events such as the Haitian Revolution. With Spain having lost most of its American colonies by 1826, Puerto Rico gained importance as producer of sugar, coffee, and tobacco: "In that triad, sugar became king. Its production, however, depended on the uninterrupted continuation of the system of chattel slavery" (35). While the book shows the legal and administrative workings of colonial Puerto Rico and its connection to the Iberian Peninsula, one of its main strengths is the depiction of social realities *and* imaginations. In the mid-nineteenth century, *criollos* such as Ramón Betances strove for Puerto Rico's independence and "[r]evolutionaries in New York, the Dominican Republic, and Saint Thomas created an impressive communications network" (45). During this era, Spain was already "filled with young Puerto Rican intellectuals yearning for their idealized island" (52) who would play important roles later on.

In chapter five, Meléndez-Badillo deals with the War of 1898 and Puerto Rico subsequently coming under the control of the United States. While this period saw, for example, the merging of organized labor with partisan politics, thus strengthening regional identity, "most Puerto Ricans lived a precarious existence and the US occupation only heightened their insecurity" (68). Natural disasters regularly devastated the island. A hurricane in 1899 resulted in 3,400 deaths. As Meléndez-Badillo points out in chapter six, the period after 1898 saw increased religious tensions, as Protestant missions flocked to Puerto Rico to evangelize. At the same time, the island – "inhabited by an alien people, of a race diametrically opposed to the Anglo-Saxon in very many respects" (Henry 1475), as the US military governor stated in 1899 – was used "as a testing ground to control tropical diseases" (75) according to the principles of social Darwinism and eugenics. When the military regime ended in 1900, Puerto Ricans did not receive the same rights as citizens living in states such as New York, and the Supreme Court characterized Puerto Rico as "unincorporated territory" under the control of Congress. Only in 1917, the "Jones Act" made the inhabitants citizens of the United States. The first half of the twentieth century was a conflict-laden period for Puerto Rico. The Communist Party focused on organizing laborers and had strong ties to Moscow, while Nationalists also caused concern for US administrators. In March 1937, during a protest march against the arrest of Nationalist Party leaders,

shots rang out. 21 people were killed in what became known as the "Ponce Massacre." After the Second World War, in the context of global support for decolonization, Jesús Piñero became the island's first Puerto Rican governor, and, in 1952, voters ratified a constitution, paving the way for the island to become a United States commonwealth. As Meléndez-Badillo states, this new status also created a need "to craft a new idea of the nation" (112). The ruling *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD) embraced the image of Puerto Ricans as mixture of Spanish, African, and Indigenous heritage, but, quite obviously, European culture (i.e., "civilization") was highlighted.

Meléndez-Badillo then dedicates chapters nine and ten to Puerto Rican experiences in a bipolar world and to the issue of migration. The booming United States economy needed workers, while "modernization" efforts in Puerto Rico uprooted traditional networks. In the early 1970s, the island was hit by the oil crisis and its repercussions. "The local agricultural industry all but disappeared, leaving thousands of people without steady income" (131). Chapter twelve, focusing on Puerto Rican politics during the 1990s and early 2000s, might be one of the weaker parts of this otherwise fascinating book. The large number of names, acronyms, and political positions will likely confuse many readers. At the same time, the chapter is too short to provide any really deep insight – even though the author manages to forcefully point out the island's problematic political status, embodied, for example, by Obama-era Supreme Court decisions shattering "any lingering illusion of Puerto Rico's sovereignty" (173) or the so-called PROMESA bill, a bankruptcy law dealing specifically with the island's enormous debt and establishing a presidentially-appointed oversight board.

The two subsequent chapters undoubtedly stand out as highlights. Dealing with Hurricane María (in 2017) and its aftermath, as well as the 2020 earthquake, Meléndez-Badillo, in an emotionally gripping manner, depicts federal mismanagement, popular protest, and political conflict. The disasters "exacerbated social problems that many people had been living with for years. And . . . people could not depend on the local or federal government" (201). The book ends on a somewhat somber note. It speaks of a defunded education system, widespread corruption, and challenges connected to migration. However, the idea of different Puerto Ricos "being imagined *aquí o allá* (here or there)" (217) can also be interpreted as an optimistic approach acknowledging the possibility of safeguarding Puerto Rico's identity in the past, present, and future as well as for Puerto Ricans in different places.

Puerto Rico: A National History provides fascinating insights into the island's complex history, considering political, economic, cultural, and social perspectives. Meléndez-Badillo has to be commended for an approach that integrates Puerto Rico into the history of the Spanish Empire, the Caribbean world, and the United States, while

at the same time never losing sight of the unique mixture of realities and imaginations that ultimately define the island, its history, and its people.

Works Cited

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