Meléndez, Edgardo
Reseña de "PUERTO RICAN CITIZEN: HISTORY AND POLITICAL IDENTITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY NEW YORK CITY" de Lorrin Thomas
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37722223009
Lorrin Thomas’s *Puerto Rican Citizen* is an excellent contribution to the history of Puerto Ricans in New York City from the 1920s to the 1970s. Its extensive look at the community’s development through so many decades is sustained by thorough primary research and attention to many issues that characterized Puerto Rican struggles during most of the twentieth century. The book travels the road studied before by such classic texts as Bernardo Vega’s (1984) memoirs and Virginia Sanchez-Koroll’s *From Colonia to Community* (1994), but adds new archival material and topics to the understanding of this community’s evolution in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, the author extends her analysis to the 1970s and provides new insights and some coherence to a period studied by several scholars and activists in a somewhat fragmented fashion. *Puerto Rican Citizen* thus presents an extensive and yet sometimes very detailed panorama of Puerto Rican history in New York City for most of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the book’s major contribution is its focus on the relationship between U.S. citizenship and Puerto Rican incorporation in New York City. Thomas’s central argument is that although U.S. citizens since 1917, Puerto Ricans—“the United States’ first and only citizen-immigrants”—remained “invisible” to New York City politics and society for the first half of the twentieth century. Puerto Rican invisibility is rooted in Puerto Rico’s colonial status and thus Puerto Ricans’ status as colonial citizens. A corollary of this “invisibility” is the political marginalization of Puerto Ricans throughout most of the twentieth century. Thomas argues that as a consequence of this status a defining element in the struggles of Puerto Ricans in New York city has been the attempt to get “recognition” for their presence in the city with all that that implies socially, economically, culturally, and politically. According to the author, these three elements—colonial citizenship, invisibility, and the struggle for recognition—define the evolution of the community in the period under study and thus they are central topics in all the chapters. Another important element in the book is the discussion of the way Puerto Ricans perceive themselves—and how others perceive them—as members of the city, that is, their ethnic identity in the United States. This identity, she argues, transforms historically from one of colonial immigrants in the 1920s to radical citizens demanding equal rights and social justice in the 1970s.

The book’s richly detailed research and complex analysis cannot be justly assessed in a brief book review. Thus, I will touch on a few topics of interest. The book’s chapters follow the traditional periodization we have grown accustomed to by now: the community emergence in the 1920s, the 1930s economic crisis, the rise of nationalism, and so forth. But Thomas’s discussion of these periods presents a different perspective on how to analyze the historical evolution of the Puerto Rican community. For example, her chapter on the 1920s deals with the differences between the Brooklyn and East Harlem *colonias*, as well as with conflicts with other ethnic groups. The discussion on the 1930s centers on how Puerto Ricans dealt
with and how they were positioned within the American racial structure. This chapter discusses, for example, two distinct yet interrelated accounts on racial accommodation. Thomas analyzes the identification cards filed in the Puerto Rican government’s Office of Employment and Identification in the 1930s and how migrants and bureaucrats played with racial identification in the metropolis. She offers an extremely telling account of the 1935 Harlem riots that erupted as consequence of the actions of a black Puerto Rican youth. Chapter 3 centers on the effects of New Deal politics—both nationally and locally—on Puerto Ricans from the 1930s to the end of the war. Thomas ends the analysis of this period by arguing that even though Puerto Ricans had achieved some level of protection and representation with Vito Marcantonio, they remained politically marginalized and still “invisible” as a community. The chapter on postwar migration centers on how Puerto Ricans were “represented” as a “problem” to the city and as a subject of study for American academia. Her extensive analysis of the “Puerto Rican problem” from the late 1940s to the late 1950s provides a much needed account of this important phenomenon in the postwar incorporation of Puerto Ricans. Chapter 6 covers the period from the 1950s to the early 1970s, touching known topics as the role of the Migration Division in the community’s development during these years, the emergence of a new generation raised in New York City with its own interests in community development and social justice, to the radicalization of its young members by the late 1960s represented by the Young Lords. The title of the book’s final chapter—“From Colonial Citizen to Nuyorican”—offers a glimpse of her concluding remarks.

In the book, Thomas relates the incorporation of Puerto Ricans in New York City to the events and processes of different historical periods in the United States and of the city itself. There is a continued emphasis on race issues: how Puerto Ricans were defined racially in the United States and how they saw themselves in the U.S. racial structure. The author also underscores the relationship between Puerto Ricans and African Americans, their neighbors in Harlem, and a basis for both groups’ racial identification by mainstream America. The linkage between the Island and the diaspora—political, social, and cultural—is a consistent theme, as is the different manifestations of Puerto Rican nationalism in the United States.

While the first three chapters that examine the period between the 1920s to 1945 are filled with detailed research and discussion, the last three dealing with the postwar period are more general and lean more heavily on secondary works. As the community grows larger and more complex, it becomes more difficult to cover all the historical events and processes with equal detail. This I think is a consequence of the book’s broad historical agenda and not a fault of the author’s excellent scholarship.

The book would have benefitted from a discussion on the nature of Puerto Ricans’ colonial citizenship. Thomas assumes this as a given and we never read about what it is specifically in the U.S. citizenship of Puerto Ricans or in the political or constitutional status of Puerto Rico that makes “Puerto Rican citizens” in the United States so inferior and marginal. Race and cultural difference are important elements in this characterization, but these elements do not necessarily define them as “colonial subjects.” A discussion of why these colonial subjects—though citizens— were seen as “alien” and “foreign” to the United States would have been helpful to her argument.

Finally, I would like to comment on implications of Thomas’s book for future research on “Puerto Rican citizenship.” As we approach the centenary of the extension (or imposition, depending on one’s point of view) of American citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917, Puerto Rican Citizen should be used as a model for future research on this topic. As we know, most of the (scant) scholarly research on Puerto Ricans’ U.S.
citizenship has dealt with the implications of this institution for Puerto Ricans on the Island. Recent scholarship on this issue—mostly related to the increasing literature on “American empire”—has provided new insights on its consequences for the United States and its colonial citizens.¹ But we have to remember then Chief Justice William Howard Taft’s admonition in *Balzac v. People of Porto Rico* in 1922 in which he stated that the most important right extended by U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans was that of migrating freely to the United States and *once there* enjoying all “the blessings” and political rights of American citizenship. *Puerto Rican Citizen* clearly shows how limited such “benefits” of American colonial citizenship played out in the metropolis itself. This is something we should remember as research activity increases leading up to the centenary in 2017.² And if indeed scholars produce more literature on the role of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans on the mainland, then Thomas’s *Puerto Rican Citizen* will lead the way. Her book is not only a welcome addition to the study of Puerto Ricans in the United States but should be required reading for those interested in the Puerto Rican experience as a whole.³

NOTES
² Thomas begins her study in the 1920s, after Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens in 1917. There is a need to study the experience of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. when they were U.S. nationals between 1900 and 1917. This historical period has been literally forgotten in the study of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.
³ There are some inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the book regarding events and dates in Puerto Rico. There are fewer errors regarding events in New York City, although one bears mentioning. Beginning on page 163, Thomas discusses the role played by West Side Story in the representation of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. She states that in the song “America,” the character María sings of the American dream and despairs about the misery she felt in her homeland, Puerto Rico. But anyone who has seen the play or the movie knows that the character who sings this song is Anita and not María. Anita is María’s best friend in New York and Bernardo’s (Maria’s brother) girlfriend. María has recently arrived in the city and, until she met Tony, she was bored by work and life at home with her patriarchal father. Anita, on the other hand, has lived in New York for a while and cherishes the freedom gained in the city. But alongside Anita’s lament about Puerto Rico, there is another chorus (sung in the play by other *muchachas* and in the movie by Bernardo and the *muchachos*) that laments life in New York. Thus “America” presents a more nuanced picture of Puerto Rican life in New York than Thomas argues. There is another difference between Anita and María that is very important to the West Side Story (which also relates to issues in the book). María is a newcomer to the city, not yet fully socialized into ethnic rivalry. She thus can fall in love with Tony, an Italian-American linked to her brother’s rival gang. Anita would never do such a thing, and it is her hatred for the Jets (after they almost rape her) that leads to the story’s tragic end.

REFERENCES
This is a superb and compelling story about community gardens and casitas in New York City’s Lower East Side, the people who created them by reclaiming abandoned property and nurturing them into vibrant social spaces, and their struggles to save the gardens from developers, developer allies in government, and gentrifiers. It is not one story but a collection of stories, each with its own drama and appeal. It focuses especially on the role of Puerto Ricans in Loisaida and the intersections between class and culture as they play out both in the gardens and community politics.

Unlike many scholarly works about gentrifying neighborhoods, Miranda Martinez sees the economic and political transformation of communities up close, with believable examples involving real people with whom she has talked. Most importantly, her characters are people who have agency: they engage in struggles and resistance and they have had an effect on the future of their neighborhoods. They are neither passive nor invisible victims, but players in a larger political and social environment. They show resilience even as their social and cultural institutions are assaulted and weakened by the homogenizing structures of globalized real estate and finance and assimilationist public policies. Martinez emphasizes how praxis by committed long-time residents and activists has forced developers and their government supporters to change their strategies and restrain the appetite for new luxury housing at the expense of community gardens.

Even while gentrification and displacement may continue to transform the neighborhood, the outsiders are unable to proceed in steamroller fashion. Many community activists are also united by what Martinez calls latinidad.

Many studies of gentrification look at events from a distance and consequently minimize the role of people who interact with and resist it. They fail to see the community organizing or the various ways that people react to gentrification, with both exasperated resignation and conscious resistance. They fail to hear those who say, in effect, “Hey mister, we’re still here! Y nos quedamos!” A host of books on the Lower East Side add up to the impression that the older low-income residents are gone and the fight to stay is inevitably a losing one. To many analysts, gentrification has been a totalizing process, overcoming and dominating poor