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Reseña de "None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era" de Frances Negrón Muntaner (edit.)
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Disponible en: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37720118
None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era
Edited by Frances Negrón-Muntaner
New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2007
296 pages; $26.95 [paper]
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This collection of essays, edited with an introduction and a coda by Frances Negrón-Muntaner, remarkably reassembles and repositions what could be addressed as—if I may borrow and adapt the title of a book on antisemitism by the young Marx—“the Puerto Rican question.” It is by now a commonplace to start any inquiry into things Puerto Rican by invoking the island’s ambiguous political status as a Commonwealth: cultural nationalism vs. political colonialism. This anthology is no exception, and it does not deny such ambiguity, nor does it shy away from its implications; on the contrary, it declares it an “insufferable” state of being, quoting one of the authors included, but at the same time it does not attempt to attenuate it, nor does it claim to be in possession of any particular theory, discourse, or ideology that would forever dissipate what Arturo Torrecilla, in a recent book, describes as “the anxiety of being Puerto Rican.”

Actually, both the editor and the majority of the participants in this anthology seem to believe in the benefits of anxiety, that is, the critical and analytical gains of negotiating the intractability of anxiety when discussing the issue of national/ethnic/migrant identities in these arduous times of globalization. This is a way of saying that the project of an anthology such as this one is fearless in a very precise sense. Fear tries to dispel anxiety by providing a common enemy, by organizing a threat around a common focus. We could say that the notion of a terrorist threat, to mention a pointed example, has served such a purpose in the current climate of concern after the 9/11 attacks. It has been the concerted effort of the Bush administration to rally national discontent against a clearly perceived target of the enemy of the United States as an actual or potential terrorist.

But it is the business of critical thought, of politically envisioned critical thought, I may add, to debunk such facile common denominators and look, instead, for intractable ambiguity as the proper climate of our times and as a rich and productive site of intellectual pursuit. It is for these same reasons that this selection of articles diligently shies away from such facile acts of naming and framing. By replacing the classical ontological framework (which centered on what is it to be a Puerto Rican or who is the real Puerto Rican), perfunctorily declaring it pretty much defunct, and focusing instead on a diverse set of pressing phenomenological interrogations—how is the Puerto Rican signifier performed and how does it change, mutate, collapse, or differ under varying circumstances?—None of the Above treats its controversial subject as a voluble, albeit powerful, shifter.

The title refers to the plebiscite of 1998, in which, next to the categories of Statehood, Independence, Associated Republic, and Commonwealth a fifth column was added, a column which provided a “None of the Above” option. Negrón-Muntaner makes clear in her introduction that the addition of this possibility, which actually became the winning category of the plebiscite, with slightly more than fifty percent of the total votes, was a cleverly engineered strategy of the Popular Democratic Party to divert voters away from Statehood as a viable political option. But the anthology claims a larger and more complex potentiality for the fifth column; it, in fact, uses it as a resourceful point of departure for imagining the Puerto Rican
signifier away from the usual constraints of party politics, national sovereignty, the tyranny of geography, hardened binary oppositions (like, for example, The Nation vs. The Colony) or fixed identities, such as the islander versus the mainlander.

The anthology is carefully and strategically ordered. It begins with an essay by Fernando Picó, Puerto Rico’s foremost historian of the island, who downplays the role of the State in Puerto Rican history. Picó’s essay sets the stage for a type of inquiry where history will no longer be perceived from the standpoint of its classical institutions, like the State, the Party, or the Nation. Carlos Pabón’s essay, in turn, declares the very notion of the supremacy of the nation-state and its concurrent constrictions of local politics—with its mandatory choice between independence, statehood, or the status quo as not only an outdated, but ultimately useless category in our globalized era, where sovereignty is no longer tied to the nation-state, but also an all-encompassing globalized market.

Likewise, the usual sacred cows of nationalist politics are equally debunked: the idea of a national language and literature, for example (the essays of Gloria Prosper and Yolanda Martínez address these issues), or the island as the “natural” locus for the nation (Juan Flores and Jorge Duany convincingly discuss diasporic culture as a dislocation or relocation of the usual spaces of “national” culture). Such redefinitions of the political and the historical open up the stage for the intervention of alternative strategies and perspectives, which include the media (as in essays by Juan Duchesne and Silvia Álvarez Curbelo), popular culture, particularly music (see the writings of José Quiroga and Raquel Rivera), as well as alternative spaces for cultural reappropriation and agency, like beauty parlors (María Quiñones) or even the mall, which is interpreted by Laura Ortiz Negrón as a place where consumption generates newly empowered subject positions. Two essays (by Juana María Rodríguez and Alberto Sandoval) assail such concepts as the nation or the state from a queer perspective. In her previous book, Boricua Pop, Negrón Muntaner used a similar approach to inflame the entire issue of being Puerto Rican.

This is obviously not the place for a detailed analysis of the many directions these twenty essays propose and consider throughout the anthology. I am not equally satisfied with all of them, nor am I in agreement with some of their findings or pronouncements. But to overemphasize a negative reaction would be to miss the point. Projects of this kind, which aim at placing an apparently well-researched topic under a freshly reconsidered set of perspectives, will, more often than not, prefer assertion over tentativeness, the radical statement over the nuanced proposition.

In this respect, Christina Duffy’s essay, “Why Solving Puerto Rico’s Status Problem Matters,” is a welcome rebuttal of Pabón’s radical dismissal of the juridical nature of the political in Puerto Rico. It is, actually, the only essay that clearly contradicts the avowed direction of the anthology, not only from Pabón’s perspective. For that very reason it is perhaps a good standpoint from which to assess the considerable performative power of an anthology of this sort.

If one places the juridical issue of the island’s political status within a larger context, the question of the law and of its applicability is far from trivial or dismissable. We are living in times where the question of the law and its exceptions has become a central aspect of the practice of sovereignty in the world. If we pay attention to what happens with the political prisoners in Guantanamo, for example—a subject widely discussed by Agamben, Butler, Zizek, or Badiou—we hear how sovereignty is precisely that which names the power that suspends and withdraws the law. Legal protection is suspended or withdrawn by a power, the power of exception, which defines the very notion of sovereignty in modern times. It is important to note that this sovereign power,
which excludes itself from the law, does not excuse its sufferers from extricating
themselves from the very mechanisms these exclusions lay bare. In other words, the
paralegality of the law does not necessarily abolish the constraints and limitations of
the juridical, it just enforces the necessity of becoming aware of its transgressions and
whimsicalities. It is important to envision a contradictory scenario, where the issue of
the status and its juridical implications would be properly re-considered and eventually
resolved in a world where, yes, the law does not exhaust its powers within its legalities
or its “proper” forums. The fact that the political parties in the island have co-opted
(sometimes demagogically so, as Pabón rightly asserts) the juridical issue and turned it
into a theater of national identity does not imply that the juridical discussion of Puerto
Rico in the sphere of nations should be automatically discarded or seen as useless.
By the same token, the fact that a historical or a conceptual category (like the nation,
or the state) is eroded or superseded does not automatically mean that it is useless or
that we can afford to act as if it no longer exists.

Negrón-Muntaner is incisively aware of the perfidious nature of the juridical in her
final postscript about José Padilla’s tribulations as a political prisoner. She skilfully
underscores how he has become the perfect target for the obscenities of the state
of exception. It becomes, for the anthology, the ultimate example of how powerless
identity becomes as a political tool when it does not match the expected scripts of
the current multiculturalist agenda. Hard to pinpoint as a Puerto Rican, Chicago-
based Latino, African-American, and professed Muslim, Padilla lays bare how truly
vulnerable the category of identity becomes when it ceases to operate “properly.”

But we live in times where such categories seldom operate according to the script.
Such demanding times call for truly imaginative coalitions and a more generous and
inclusive understanding of the contradictory nature of political allegiances and radical
activisms. In his brilliant and cynical debunking of the Vieques cause in Puerto Rico
as a blatant and banal spectacle of manipulations, narcissisms, and facile pieties Juan
Duchense, for example, misses a central point. In spite of this “consensual spectacle,”
which he describes with such clarity, a political event did take place. Vieques is no
longer a bombing range or a munitions depot. The fact that this outcome does not
tell the whole story should not blind us to its empowering possibilities.

Likewise, the deconstruction or the actual cancellation of the concept of the
nation-state will not preclude it from exercising its enormous and sometimes
disastrous powers in the years to come. Living in a dirty world implies using
moribund categories and resorting to self-contradictory and mutually exclusive
strategies and aberrations. Such a troubling world is still not the subject matter of an
anthology like this one, which perhaps still clings too tightly to its tidy radicalism.
But it is a promising and even a spectacular move in the right direction.

Latinos and American Law: Landmark Supreme Court Cases
By Carlos R. Soltero
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006
252 pages; $19.95 [paper]
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There is minimal scholarship that addresses the impact of the United States legal
system on Latinos/as and civil rights both in the continental United States,