

Morales, Ed. *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico*. New York: Bold Type Books, 2019. 343 pp. \$28.00.

Puerto Rico has been an American fantasy island throughout its 122 years as a US possession. Many on the mainland consider it a US Caribbean playground, if they know of its colonial status at all. Some Puerto Ricans, on the island and mainland alike, adopt the idea that being a US overseas territory would come with benefits and the trappings of American exceptionalism. Ed Morales disabuses his readers of these notions in his enlightening book *Fantasy Island*. He frames the story around the twin crises of hurricane recovery and debt relief to demonstrate that Puerto Ricans hold a “second class” US citizenship as a “colonial satellite” (3). Highly readable and instructive, this book uses Puerto Rico as the lens through which to scrutinize the myth of the American Dream and explain what it means to be the “other” from within the United States (17).

Morales’s early chapters detail the history of Puerto Rico under US colonial rule. Morales documents how the introduction of the US dollar devalued local currency and permitted international investors to penetrate the island’s economy in ways detrimental to its economic self-sufficiency (36). Insights into mainland views on Puerto Rico, and the implications of US citizenship, are this early section’s main contributions. US policymakers considered Puerto Rico to be a fantasy island that belonged to, but would not be part of, the United States. Like with other colonies, Puerto Rico appeared racially and culturally incompatible with the mainland, and through some linguistic wizardry, Washington was able to justify retaining it as a possession without violating the rights of its citizens. The 1917 Jones Act granted US citizenship to Puerto Ricans, but as Morales shows, it was a vehicle for further exploitation of the island during wartime and established the façade of a citizenship that was truly second class (48).

The middle chapters cover the roots of Puerto Rico’s debt crisis. The granting of commonwealth status in 1952 shielded Americans from reality, allowing them to believe that they were not “colonial masters,” when in fact, colonialism shaped the Puerto Rican Constitution and the ongoing financial exploitation of the island (76-77). Done to appease the United Nations’s call for decolonization, the establishment of the Puerto Rican commonwealth sharpened a cognitive dissonance among Puerto Ricans, whose mid-century nationalist movement took issue with the lingering colonial status. Morales illustrates that Washington

leveraged this position to place Puerto Rico into an exploitative debt trap. Operation Bootstrap, a postwar industrialization project, transformed the economy in ways that disproportionately affected working class agriculturalists who lost their autonomy over the island's foodstuffs (80). Furthermore, this program facilitated the mass migration of young and middle-aged Puerto Ricans to the mainland US, leaving little local reinvestment for the fledgling island economy. As a result, the island's demographics shifted dramatically, leaving it with a disproportionately aged populace. To meet these rising healthcare needs, the commonwealth government had to borrow large sums from Congress. Lacking any state sovereignty, Puerto Rico could not turn to the International Monetary Fund, but remains indebted to a Congress unwilling to offer the same bankruptcy measures it gave to Detroit in the 2000s (116).

Morales carries this narrative of exploitation and betrayal to the current day. The devastating effects of Hurricane Maria in 2017 debunked most of the fantasy cloaking America's relationship with Puerto Ricans. President Trump's assertion that "you Puerto Ricans are throwing off our budget" delineated the island's second-class status in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (207). As the territory tries to recover from Maria and settles into another decade under mainland fiscal oversight, there is no longer any illusion that Puerto Rico is not a colony. Morales knows this realization will not prompt any improvement in mainland-island relations, but advises Puerto Ricans to take up one of two remaining options: migrate to the mainland or turn their widespread pessimism into an organized resistance to US policies (286).

*Fantasy Island* tackles the themes of US colonialism, exploitation, and its ultimate betrayal of Puerto Rico. A well-researched book, it provides examples to help illustrate the island's situation. For example, Morales compares the fiscal oversight board used in New York City during the 1970s with the board implemented in Puerto Rico in 2016. This highlights the inequitable austerity measures placed on the island. Morales also connects Puerto Rico to the wider US empire, noting that the violation of the social contract that many Puerto Ricans have faced is something they share with Virgin Islanders and Guamanians. This point is especially interesting in Morales's coverage of the Puerto Rican statehood debate. Each plebiscite has failed to clarify what statehood or independence means for the island and political infighting has resulted in low voter turnout. Furthermore, Congress – the only authority with the power to grant a status change – refuses to take these plebiscites seriously (176). Morales details how statehood

has “captivated some islanders” (174), but he leaves the reader wanting more of an analysis into the divisiveness of the issue from the Puerto Rican perspective.

Moreover, one must take into account that Morales is not a historian. This helps explain the mistakes he makes while providing historical context to the island’s perils. For example, Morales writes that the Haitian Revolution happened “at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth (20)” – a century after it occurred. He also indicates that Puerto Rican revolutionary Lolita Lebrón participated in the 1950 Blair House attack (51) after Morales already explained that her involvement was actually in the 1954 attack on the Capitol. These errors do not draw from the argument but imply poor editing. Furthermore, Morales could have placed US colonialism in Puerto Rico into better context with evolving US foreign policy, from the time of acquisition through the Cold War. This would have enhanced his explanations for Washington’s changing approach to Puerto Rico.

Nevertheless, *Fantasy Island* is a welcome addition to the literature on US colonialism in Puerto Rico. It provides historical context to a hot button issue making waves in the press. Although its scope may be overwhelming to the general reader, it will be of interest to anyone studying the current state of Puerto Rican affairs or the history of US rule on the island.

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