New Centro Journal

Focuses On

Historic Debate over U.S. Citizenship for Puerto Ricans

The debate over the extension of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Rico has “proven to be one of the most vexing constitutional issues for United States colonial rule,” writes Pedro Cabán in his essay “The Puerto Rican Colonial Matrix: The Etiology of Citizenship—An Introduction,” which is prominently featured in the new edition of the Journal.

The essay is part of a special section titled “Puerto Rico, the United States and the Making of a Bounded Citizenship.” The articles in this section, Cabán said, analyze the “intersecting dimensions of citizenship, colonialism and empire.”


Cabán’s essay identifies common themes among the articles, with the goal of presenting a unified narrative of the individual contributions.

“The four articles included in this special issue demonstrate the continued interest the subject generates,” Cabán states. “The articles revisit the complicated legal and political history of the extension of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Rico. However, each article attempts to contribute to this copious body of intellectual production by focusing a new analytical lens on the multiple dimensions of citizenship and its intersections with empire, race, and representation. The themes addressed in these articles are distinctive, and each article raises intriguing insights about the development of the U.S. state as an imperial power during the American century.”

Xavier F. Totti, Journal editor, said, “These papers begin to set the table for further research on the topic of the granting of American citizenship to Puerto Ricans.”

Among the essays in the Journal that are not part of the special series is “From Freedom Fighters to Patriots: The Successful Campaign to Release FALN Political Prisoners, 1980-1999” by Margaret Power. The Puerto Rican political prisoners issue has recently made headlines again when several prominent Puerto Ricans, including athletes, entertainers and politicians locked themselves in a jail cell to protest the 32-year imprisonment of independence fighter Oscar López Rivera. The protesters hope to bring President Barack Obama's attention to the issue.

López Rivera, 70, was charged with “seditious conspiracy” in 1981 and sentenced to fifty-five years in jail. Former President Bill Clinton offered twelve Puerto Rican political prisoners clemency in 1999, including López Rivera, but he declined the offer. López Rivera headed the Chicago wing of the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN in Spanish), a Puerto Rican separatist group known in the 1970s and 1980s for various bombings across the United States. López Rivera is currently serving the remainder of his sentence in a U.S. federal prison in Indiana.

But not all the Journal is about politics.

Tace Hedrick has a piece titled “Neoliberalism and Orientalism in Puerto Rico: Walter Mercado’s Queer Spiritual Capital” on the Latin American and Caribbean historical context for thinking about the sources,
performance and reception of the contemporary famed astrologer and television personality Walter Mercado, who is now known as Shanti Ananda. The article explores more than a century of a Latin American (and United States) fascination with the kind of sabiduría oriental (Oriental wisdom) – astrology, reincarnation, tantric knowledge—to which Mercado’s performances appeal.

[3] Also featured in the Journal is “Melancholic Readings, Precarious Authority: The Work of Mourning in Edgardo Rodríguez Julia’s Funereal Chronicles” by Jason Cortés, which explores mourning and its effects on material culture.

There are also six book reviews: Street Therapists: Race, Affect, and Neoliberal Personhood in Latino Newark by Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, reviewed by Arlene Torres; Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race by Wendy D. Roth, reviewed by Carlos Vargas-Ramos; Blessing La Política: The Latino Religious Experience and Political Engagement in the United States, edited by Carlos Vargas-Ramos and Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, reviewed by Catherine E. Wilson; Words Were All We Had: Becoming Biliterate Against the Odds edited by María De la Luz Reyes, reviewed by Carmen M. Martínez-Roldán; The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its People, edited by Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano, reviewed by Jorge L. Chinea; and Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration: Narratives of Displacement, edited by Vanessa Pérez Rosario, reviewed by Sharina Maillo Pozo.

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