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*Drops of Inclusivity* is an apt title for a book documenting and analyzing racial formations, their meanings, and the experiences of everyday and historical Afro-Puerto Ricans. As a metaphor, drops hint at the slow progression of racial inclusivity into the Puerto Rican national body endured by Afro-Puerto Ricans. Carrying this metaphor throughout the book, Milagros Denis-Rosario offers a critical and lively analysis that documents Black men and women who challenged existing oppressive and exclusionary racial hierarchies. In so doing, they contributed to Puerto Rico’s sociocultural development, thereby opening a path for other Afro-descendants to follow. Building the emancipatory path of Afro-descendant inclusion between 1898 and 1965 was, of course, incredibly difficult, requiring great self-possession, strength, pride, ingenuity, and perseverance. The Afro-Boricua men and women documented in this book navigated and persisted in the face of Puerto Rico’s unique brand of white supremacy, racism, sexism, oppression, and exclusionary practices to build meaningful lives for themselves, their families, their communities, and later generations.

*Drops of Inclusivity* is part of a growing Puerto Rican scholarly genealogy that engages in the urgent act of what I call sociocultural and historical narrative rescuing of marginalized, invisibilized, forgotten, ignored, or simply “not even worth thinking about” Afro-Boricua lives, stories, and history. The men and women in Denis-Rosario’s pages are the kind of icons that national history is made from, and given that Puerto Rican historiography, with few exemptions, is exclusionary, centering almost exclusively on Europatriarchal narratives, one might assert that this book’s significance lies in that it joins a small but growing reparative canon of Afro-Boricua sociocultural history written from the insider’s perspective of Afro-Puerto Rican culture.[1] This “insider” historiographic perspective makes *Drops of Inclusivity* a noteworthy offering to Puerto Rican cultural history more broadly.
This is a concise, teachable book. It will make an important contribution in a broad range of undergraduate and graduate courses such as Afro-Diaspora, Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, and Puerto Rican studies courses, and disciplines such as history, African American studies, and American studies. The book’s corrective tenor is apparent in its introductory chapter, “The Illusion of Living in a Non-Racist Racist Society,” in which Denis-Rosario writes, “Despite attempts to exclude Black Puerto Ricans from the national identity and modernization of the island, as a Puerto Rican saying goes, ‘ellos no se quedaron da’o,’ they stroke back” (p. 14; emphasis mine). In chapter 1, “A Revised Account of the New “Colored” Possession,” Denis-Rosario reveals that Afro-Puerto Rican intellectuals were largely left out of debates about Puerto Rico’s new status as an American colony. As is common in Puerto Rico, whenever the Black intelligentsia publicly raised the issue of existing racial inequality and racism, they were labeled as “traitors to Spain” (p. 37). Nowadays, when Black and Afro-Puerto Ricans demand racial inclusivity and speak up against Puerto Rico’s brand of anti-Black racism, they are often accused of having become “Americanized.” In sum, the accusation of being a traitor to Puerto Rico’s national identity continues to be leveraged tactically by the archipelago’s white and Criollo intelligentsia. For Black Puerto Ricans to be accepted as part of the Puerto Rican national politic, they must show their loyalty by remaining compliant and silent (“mantenerse en su sitio/staying in their place,” p. 104) about the injustices of anti-Black racism built into the very fabric of the society. Nevertheless, remaining silent in the face of racism has never been an option for Black Puerto Ricans. As Denis-Rosario explains, “determined to voice their position before the Spanish and then the American ruling class, they used literature as a vehicle to participate in the cultural conversation” (p. 37).

Chapter 2, “Reshaping Education, Race, and Citizenship,” focuses on the ways in which education was used to assimilate Puerto Ricans into the labor force. In a context that positioned Black Puerto Ricans as second-class American citizens destined to serve as workers in a modern, Americanized labor force, “vocational education became popular” (p. 41). Thus, by and large, the white and Criollo educated ruling class remained in power intergenerationally, whereas the Black working classes, with a small number of exceptions, advanced only nominally through educational attainment. Dr. José Celso Barbosa, Puerto Rico’s first Black surgeon, who in 1900 founded the archipelago’s Partido Republicano, figures prominently in this chapter. Celso Barbosa rose from humble beginnings and after attaining a medical education in the continental United States returned to Puerto Rico to, among other endeavors, advocate for Afro-Puerto Ricans. A populist leader widely known and respected because of his medical practice as well as his political work and writings, Celso Barbosa became known as “‘un hombre del pueblo’ (a man of the people)” (p. 48). Today, he is remembered as a beloved and brave Black luminary whose advocacy work and stance against anti-Black racism remains an example to current generations. Chapter 3, “The Twisted Evolution of National Identity, 1930-1940,” introduces the reader to that era’s major social commentators. The majority white and Criollo commentators of the time were tenacious in their work to define and cement Puerto Rico’s national identity as a harmonious amalgamation of three, with the Spanish culture predominating and Taínos and Africans as minor players. There were critical and vocal Black and Afro-Puerto Ricans detractors of this view, notably Isabelo Zenón Cruz and later, José Luis González. The fact remains that those years were pivotal to the construction of the Puerto Rican national identity orthodoxy that persists to this day.

Chapter 4, “Intersecting Race and Modernization, 1940-1950,” focuses on the era’s nation-building efforts and the elite’s project to remain culturally Spanish, affirming Spain as the motherland but at the same time embracing US citizenship and inserting Puerto Rico into the American economic
system. The era’s cultural intelligentsia and politicians promoted racial harmony as a core feature and defining element of Puertoricanness. This placed Puerto Rico on a higher moral plane than its colonizers with their violent Jim Crow racism. Matters of race remained a sticking point in debates about national identity and modernization, but anti-Black racism remained constant. The cultural elite denied that racial discrimination was a reality in the archipelago, all the while maintaining their white supremacy and privilege and drawing firm boundaries around allowing Black Puerto Ricans access to positions of decision-making power. “Despite flourishing signs of modernity in Puerto Rico, racial discrimination appears to have persisted” (p. 90), but even so, Black Puerto Ricans continued to challenge anti-Black racism through advocating, writing, creating, sporting, and performing themselves into the historical record.

In chapter 5, “Strategizing Modernity, 1940-1950,” Denis-Rosario introduces us to two of the book’s more striking Black Puerto Rican avant-garde historical figures. In Puerto Rico, history has been a largely masculinist enterprise with white and Criollo men as narrators as well as principal characters. Enter Ruth Fernández, singer/performer, and Cecilia Orta Allende, artist/art teacher. “Fernández became the first Black Puerto Rican female leading vocalist in all-male band in Puerto Rico” (p. 101). Fernández enraptured not only Puerto Rican audiences, including the island’s elite, but also the Puerto Rican diaspora. Still, “she confronted prejudice not only because of her skin color—as she identified it—but also because she was one of the few females who gained prominence in a male-dominated circle (the other female performer was Myrta Silva, who was white)” (p. 103). Orta was an artist, art teacher, and activist hailing from a large family “who trace its origins to Africa via the town of Loíza,” but who grew up in Carolina (p. 107). She began taking art classes at the age of fifteen. She would go on to earn a teaching degree in education at the University of Puerto Rico in 1945 and later studied art in Mexico City, graduating in 1954. She exhibited her work, taught in public school, for a period communicated regularly with Governor Luis Muñoz Marin, established an art school, and embodied her African heritage proudly. Cecilia Orta was a self-possessed and proud Black Puerto Rican woman who understood the power of her multiple and intersecting identities as artist, educator, and activist and used her positions to call out anti-Black racism and demand justice in the Puerto Rican archipelago.

Chapter 6, “The Liga Opened Pandora’s Black Box, 1950-1965,” introduces Juan Falú Zarzuela, an activist who in 1939 founded the civil rights organization Liga para Promover el Progreso de los Negros en Puerto Rico, which worked to achieve social equality and inclusion for Black Puerto Ricans. This organization accused the archipelago’s government of anti-Black racism because it “did not provide equal employment opportunities” (pp. 126-127), as well as publicly voicing their concern that “faculty at the University of Puerto Rico blocked Black Puerto Ricans who wanted to pursue graduate degrees at that institution” (p. 127). During this period, the local government officials and intelligentsia doubled down on their claim that Puerto Rico was a color-blind society where a racial democracy prevailed. During these years of political upheaval, courageous Black Puerto Ricans did not let that stop them; instead, they continued to advocate for better living conditions, access to education and professional work opportunities, equality, and inclusion. As Denis-Rosario explains, “In the battle against erasure, silence, and denial, each drop, each person, each story matters” (p. 149).

This essential history book offers readers the perspective of many of the Black Puerto Rican trailblazers who from their positions as advocates, bankers, civil rights activists, teachers and professors, police officers, lawyers, and writers, as well as those working in the military, music, per-
forming arts, plastic arts, politics, and other pursuits “stood up for their rights and dignity, insisting on their own inclusion” (p. 148) and who, as a result, are silenced and left out of history no more. This book serves as a comprehensive overview for beginning and advanced students of Puerto Rican history of Black Puerto Rican agency and their demand for civil rights during the pivotal early years of American colonization of Puerto Rico. Further research into Afro- and Black women’s advocacy and activism during these years is still needed to do justice to their significant but marginalized place in Puerto Rican historiography. *Drops of Inclusivity* adds a meaningful and complementary account to the existing scholarship about Puerto Rico’s anti-Black racism, civil rights activism, and demands for social inclusion that Black Puerto Ricans have been waging all along.

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