



The Puerto Rican Blueprint

A tired Deton Brooks sat down on an early July 1943 morning to type his first column for the *Chicago Defender* from a desk in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Getting to San Juan had proved arduous for the reporter. Days earlier, Brooks had left Chicago on a two-day trip to Miami, Florida, where he boarded a Pan American Airlines flight to the island. The difficulty of Brooks's trip to Miami had nothing to do with the distance he traveled. Rather, as Brooks made his way by train to the southernmost point in the continental United States he witnessed and felt the harsh realities of Jim Crow segregation. These experiences reminded him of his standing as a second-class citizen in the United States. The dehumanizing encounters extended beyond his segregated train ride and his housing at Miami's all-Black Lowrie Hotel.¹

In Miami, waiting to board his flight, matters got worse for Brooks. Because he would be traveling to Latin America, workers questioned whether or not Brooks had a right to eat his complimentary breakfast in the same dining area as whites. To resolve the issue, a manager escorted Brooks to a side room and said she hoped he understood enough English to read the menu.² By the time Brooks boarded his flight to San Juan, his marginal status within the United States had come into even sharper focus. Not only did Brooks require "separate but equal" accommodations, he no longer even appeared to belong in the United States.

All of this weighed on Brooks's mind as he typed away in the humid San Juan summer. Puerto Rico presented its own challenges for Brooks. "Color is a delicate problem to the Spanish-Speaking American" on the island he wrote in one of his first articles after arriving in Puerto Rico.³ Witnessing family members with different complexions and features walking

alongside each other on the streets of Puerto Rico and entering the same social spaces shocked Brooks. Based on his experience in the continental United States, Brooks speculated that “color” must be something Puerto Ricans “keep in the background.”⁴ This observation fascinated Brooks so much that he believed the success of Puerto Rico to be critical to the larger war effort. In order for the U.S. to accomplish its goals in World War II—including projecting itself as a beacon of equality in the face of fascism—Brooks felt that Americans had to learn a lot from tiny Puerto Rico.

U.S. military brass and government officials, however, viewed the island with greater uncertainty. For its part, the U.S. military intended to use the island as a strategic colonial outpost for its wartime military maneuvers in the Atlantic. Puerto Rico and the larger Lesser Antilles served as tactical points of entry into the Caribbean and, more importantly, the Panama Canal Zone. Throughout World War II, German submarines exacted a huge toll on ships in the region, sinking almost 350 ships carrying food and oil supplies.⁵ Puerto Rico’s earlier colonial relationship to Spain also complicated the island’s role in the war. Puerto Ricans continued to object to the U.S. colonial occupation of the island throughout the 1930s, with some opting to remain loyal to Spain and retain their Spanish citizenship. Found mostly in the upper echelons of Puerto Rican society, Spanish loyalists on the island faithful to military dictator Francisco Franco proved to be a security nightmare for U.S. military intelligence given Spain’s ideological and material support of the Axis nations.⁶

Puerto Rico was also in the midst of a major political transition. Just two years earlier, in 1940, the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), led by the charismatic senator Luis Muñoz Marín, assumed the presidency of the Puerto Rican Senate—at the time the highest political office for which Puerto Ricans could vote. Muñoz Marín and several others founded the PPD in 1938 shortly after their expulsion from the Liberal Party for challenging the monopolization of the sugar industry on the island. The PPD organized its party platform to appeal to Puerto Rico’s class of rural proletariat farmers and peasants (*jibaros*). Muñoz Marín ran primarily on the promise of major land reforms that would empower the proletariat as small landowners, a goal perfectly captured in the party’s slogan of “Pan, Tierra, y Libertad” (Bread, Land, and Liberty).

The bulk of these reforms consisted of the development of farming cooperatives and the enforcement of a provision in the Organic Act of

1900 (more commonly known as the Foraker Act) that restricted ownership of land by corporations to five hundred acres. Muñoz Marín, the son of a prominent politician, campaigned by traveling from town to town, often by foot and on horseback, through the Puerto Rican countryside. During his town meetings and conversations, Muñoz Marín listened to local farmers tell of their daily struggles and needs. He hoped that by paying close attention to this rural class of agricultural laborers he might ultimately mobilize them as a large political bloc. Despite his early *independentista* sympathies, Muñoz Marín avoided the issue of the island's colonial status, believing it might internally fracture his new party. Instead, Muñoz Marín and the PPD focused on the wide-scale poverty on the island and proposed social and economic reforms rooted in the radical transformation of traditional arrangements of landownership.

Given this historical background, in this chapter I move between the island and the United States, exploring how the practice of racial imbrication was expressed in writings about Puerto Rico that appeared in the Black press in the 1940s. Reporters for the Black press facilitated a high level of synergy between Black radical thought and the practices of Black intellectuals and labor organizers. Specifically, the mid-twentieth century brought increased interest in Black sovereignty and internationalism, on which basis African Americans rethought their own subjugation and exclusion in the U.S. racial regime. Ideas about (internal) colonialism served as a crucial pivot point around which Black writers considered the unequal application of political rights and uneven economic development experienced by African Americans in the United States vis-à-vis Puerto Rico. The search for new political models outside the United States was a direct indictment of the inability of the American Left to properly address racism in its everyday organizing and institutional life.

Maintaining a race-conscious agenda that fostered some of this race radicalism, the Black press operated at the margins of the mainstream media, struggling to secure enough advertising revenue to maintain its operations. As this chapter shows, in spite of the challenges of writing from the margins, the Black press made significant interventions in the study of U.S. race relations through its coverage of diasporic racial regimes that more effectively linked racism and imperial endeavors. Specifically, looking to Puerto Rico helped African Americans bridge their domestic political and economic struggles with a growing (Black) internationalism.

Puerto Rico's colonial status enabled the Black press to make larger connections between racism, imperialism, and global capitalism. Using Puerto Rico as their point of reference, Black journalists made invaluable connections between the practices of the U.S. racial regime and of colonialism even as they imagined new conditions for Black life based on the island's radical land reform program.

Unfinished Reconstruction and the Rise of Black Radicalism

Northwest and across the Atlantic Ocean from Puerto Rico in the U.S. South, land reform remained an unfulfilled promise. In 1935 W.E.B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction in America*, his classic treatise on the post-Civil War moment when the United States could have permanently altered the racialized dimensions of economic inequality in the antebellum South. The radical structural transformations he proposed included building schools for Black children, electing African American legislators to state senates, and passing major pieces of legislation rooted in principles of land reform.

However, the structural gains made in the first decade following the Civil War proved difficult to maintain in the face of White resentment and violence.⁷ Du Bois concluded that the "lawlessness" that never ceased in the South following the Civil War undermined the radical projects undertaken by African Americans and white progressives. During the early twentieth century white laborers and violent clandestine groups like the Ku Klux Klan perpetrated much of this lawlessness. Du Bois documented that white labor "joined the white landholder and capitalist and beat the black laborer into subjection through secret organizations and the rise of a new doctrine of race hatred."⁸

The need for industrial labor created by the advent of World War I coupled with the failure of Reconstruction ultimately pushed millions of African Americans north. Between 1910 and 1935 more than 200,000 African Americans settled in Chicago alone.⁹ While migration provided greater work opportunities, it did not mean an escape from racism or racialized terror. African Americans migrating north to cities like Chicago faced restrictive racial covenants that prevented the renting or sale of housing to nonwhites.¹⁰ The Chicago race riots of 1919, for example, reminded these

migrants that violence remained a looming threat against African Americans regardless of where in the United States they lived.

Given these circumstances it is not surprising that radicalism flourished among Black workers and intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century. Political scientist Cedric Robinson defines the Black radical tradition as the Black diaspora's historical negotiation and analysis of Western racial capitalism and imperialism, and its own resistance to what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the "matrix of domination."¹¹ Du Bois and his contemporaries, including Booker T. Washington and Ida B. Wells Barnett, wrestled with the outcomes of the failed period of Reconstruction and how African Americans might radically rework their place in American society.¹² These prominent Black thinkers thought of the workplace as a pivotal location where African Americans valiantly proved their worth and value to the nation. Between 1910 and 1920 the number of Black industrial workers almost doubled, from 550,000 to more than 900,000.¹³ Industrial factories and mills were not the only places where African Americans proved their worth to the nation. During the same period another half million African Americans joined the ranks of the U.S. Armed Forces.¹⁴ One month before the United States entered World War I, Puerto Ricans were granted a form of U.S. citizenship under the terms of the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917, enabling their conscription into the Armed Forces. These Puerto Rican troops contained a significant number of segregated units that often served alongside African Americans.

Like Reconstruction, the end of World War I proved to be a difficult time of disillusionment for African Americans. Despite having fought for freedom on their country's behalf, they continued to experience daily threats of racial violence and discrimination. Feeling that black workers had displaced them from jobs in factories and on shipping docks, resentful white soldiers returning from the war openly clashed with African American industrial workers and soldiers. For African American soldiers, their time abroad had imbued them with a stronger sense of their rights as members of U.S. society. In a context of growing discrimination, violence, and unemployment, African Americans developed and turned to other models of social life as a way to counter the increasing threats against Black personhood in the United States. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Cyril Briggs's African Blood Brotherhood (ABB)