



# the *Caribbean Writer*

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*Dignity, Power and Place*  
in the Caribbean Space

Licensed to Carmelo Rivera

### **Writing Race, Righting Racism**

Gabriel Haslip-Viera, ed. *White Latino Privilege: Caribbean Latino Perspectives in the Second Decade of the 21st Century*. New York: Latino Studies Press, 2018, 215 pages, trade paper, \$32.74 (USD).

Ed Morales, *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico*. New York: Bold Type Books, 2019, 344 pages, cloth (English), \$16.99 (USD); Kindle ebook (English, Español), \$17.15 (USD); audiobook (English), \$35.00 (USD) or free with Audible trial; paper (Español), \$16.99 (USD).

Clelia O. Rodríguez, *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain*. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2019, 150 pages, trade paper \$20.00 (CAD; ebook \$19.99 (CAD)).

Hungry to fill the historical-cultural knowledge gaps caused by my diasporic situatedness, this puertorriqueña became aware of over-simplification in her writing (elsewhere, not here in TCW) by describing Puerto Rican culture as “an amalgam of Spanish conquistador, Indigenous Taíno, and black slave descendants,” unwittingly perpetrating this false historical-cultural-political myth despite knowing this is flawed. Instead of a cultural amalgam, contemporary Puerto Rico perpetuates a hierarchy with white conquistador descendants firmly on top, brown mestizo-striving-to-whiten below, blacks at the bottom, and a smattering of Marranos, Mariscos and Asians scattered into the mix. But I fell for the romantic amalgam, which was just too convenient and compelling to resist. Interpret the following essay-in-book-review-clothing through my puertorriqueña eyes.

I was aware of historical race issues prior to reading *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics* (Marcus Weiner, 2001), but this collection of symposium papers edited by Dr. Gabriel Haslip-Viera provided more nuanced perspectives about racial hierarchy, even though

the focus was Taíno identity. The race-class problematics addressed in *Taíno Revival* receive full-frontal exposure in *White Latino Privilege* where, after a socio-historical contextualization provided by Haslip-Viera, nine chapters by Millennial and Generation X scholars and writers explore issues of non-white experience. This reading evokes for me the closing words from Pedro Pietri's famous Nuyorican "Puerto Rican Obituary" poem—to be called negrito / Means to be called LOVE—because the entire tenth chapter, devoted to internet posts responding to the nine edited chapters, documents blatant racial tensions and divides.

These internet posts in *White Latino Privilege* constitute innovative scholarship that plunges readers into the lived experience of racist diatribe, requiring comments from the editor and his authors to distinguish fact from fallacy. The text suffers copyediting blips I attribute to self-publishing fallout due to fewer eyeballs on the page compared to Haslip-Viera's previous collections. Minor mechanical issues aside, *White Latino Privilege* provides a significant contribution and is necessary reading, particularly for anyone who doubts the existence of racism or white privilege.

Ed Morales also addresses white privilege in *Latinx* (Verso, 2018), shortlisted for the 2019 Al-Rodhan Prize, but here I review *Fantasy Island*, which discusses Puerto Rican history, second-class American citizenship, and how colonial wounds fester there still. Naomi Klein's shock doctrine theory (*Shock Doctrine*, Knopf Canada 2007; *The Battle for Paradise*, Haymarket 2018)—that in the wake of disaster, regimes accomplish change that would otherwise be unacceptable during calmer times—explains how the Puerto Rican government instituted unwanted reforms in the wake of the mass exodus after the 2017 hurricanes. Morales shares Klein's conception of a dual Puerto Rican agenda: one that favours a small,

opportunistic elite and the other that favours the common good of the people.

Morales explains how the Puerto Rico debt was commodified on the backs of the puertorriqueños, far beyond what could be paid back under a corrupt, racist capitalism. He concludes with a call for a “full and fair citizens’ debt audit to vastly reduce—or even eliminate—the debt and to advocate for independence with reparations, combining self-determination with social justice.” Fantasy Island leaves me hopeful that some good might come out of the devastation wrought not just by hurricanes, but by the neocolonialist policies that created industrial agriculture, a failed economy and a deficient energy grid.

I cheered from the diaspora as RickyLeaks erupted on the streets of Old San Juan this past summer, ousting corrupt officials. May Puerto Rico rise like a phoenix from its colonial ashes powered by sustainable energy, and that a return to traditional intercrop farming of the rich, volcanic soil will nourish the people. I’m unsure if I share Morales’s conviction about independence, but this decision is not mine to make as a non-resident. I certainly do endorse reparations, self-determination and social justice. Acknowledging that decolonization may be a slow process, I bolstered my hope by donating to the Puerto Rican Center for Investigative Journalism.

El Savadorian Clelia Rodríguez eloquently voices in *Decolonizing Academia* the knowledge of her grandfather, who taught her “how to read and write differently about time, patience, humility, water, ants, bees, trees, air, days, land, respect, dignity, gratitude, and love.” She thanks “turtles for their exemplary lessons on time ... [and] ... their ability to walk earth acknowledging their environment.” Dr. Rodríguez evokes issues of ontology and epistemology—what is truth and how we can know it—and at its core is what radical love is about, which she claims is “the commitment to dismantle systemic racism while knowing we’re against the current.”

*María Helena Auerbach Rykov*

The work of scholars and authors I review or mention here all write about race. But righting racism can't be achieved without reparations for the historical wrongs perpetrated. Similar to Martin Luther King's contention that people be judged by their character, Canadian scholar-poet George Elliot Clarke, himself a descendant of the Underground Railroad and Indigenous peoples, advocates for recognition of merit based on ability and goodwill, which I interpret means not based on skin colour, tribal affiliation or privileged nepotism.

Puerto Rico gave my father refuge from the Nazi holocaust, but he didn't live long enough to witness post-WWII American "progress" fail. He undoubtedly lies unquiet in his Puerto Rico grave. Righting racism in my beautiful birthland entails embracing traditional knowledge usurped by a harsh history that precedes the Commonwealth government, hearkening back to Spanish colonialism and the slave trade. American colonial greed surpasses Spanish colonial greed, perpetuating an entrenched racial inequality that privileges whiteness (regardless that Borinquén never was white to begin with).

Endemic racism in Puerto Rico can only be righted by embracing [read: restoring] Indigenous [read: traditional] knowledge of the island. Reparations for Puerto Rico, beginning with repealing the 1915 Jones Act, must ensure equitable opportunities for people of all complexions, including the darkest Afro-Caribbeans. Jíbaro knowledge ought to be venerated and jíbaros recognized not as hillbillies, but as respected stewards who know how to farm the island. We ignore the merits of Indigenous knowledge—in Puerto Rico, Canada, and everywhere—at our peril.

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