

Sugar and Civilization: American Empire and the Cultural Politics of Sweetness.* April Merleaux. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. 2015. 302 pp.

Reviewed by Vivian Nun Halloran

Any new study analyzing the impact of sugar cultivation and trade upon Western civilization faces the challenge of simultaneously acknowledging a debt of influence and differentiating itself from the enduring masterpiece of commodity analyses: Sydney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Penguin, 1986). April Merleaux meets this challenge head on in the introduction of *Sugar and Civilization*, admitting a shared interest in "the parallel development of agricultural and urban modernities" but focusing her own intervention on what she terms "U.S. imperial capitalism" (23), which emerged on the world stage as the influence of the British Empire, which was Mintz's concern, began to wane. That said, some of the chapter titles nonetheless bear traces of the author's anxiety of influence: three out of the eight include some variation of the word "sweetness." Merleaux's thorough and engaging history of the transnational dealings in sugar—which the US orchestrated, arbitrated, and from which it profited—makes for an informative and even entertaining read.

The two particular strengths of *Sugar and Civilization* are its clear analysis of the visual rhetoric of contemporary photography depicting sugar production and consumption in a variety of contexts, as well as its expansive definition of race relations in a US context. Rather than relying on visuals to break up the monotony of blocks of print, *Sugar and Civilization* pauses to examine the implicit ideology embedded within illustrations from sugar industry handbooks, advertising materials, postcards, political cartoons, family portraits, and in articles in popular magazines like *Good Housekeeping*. Merleaux claims that the discourse surrounding the nutritive value of sugar consumption, American taste preferences between cane and beet sugar, and concerns (or lack thereof) about the exploitative nature of its manufacturing process changed significantly through the centuries in accordance to shifting US trade policies, both internationally and with its overseas territories. As a historian, Merleaux helpfully breaks down the monolithic concept of "the American people" and analyzes how specific subsections, like Chinese Americans, or Mexican Americans, favored less white, less processed types of sugar like *piloncillo* than did their white compatriots, even when employed in the beet or cane industry themselves. She also uses two primary case studies of sugar tycoons through which to analyze the changing market of sugar consumption and production.

In its concluding effort to collapse the discussion of the late twentieth century into the space of a few pages, Merleaux leaves a few key questions unanswered: What happened to Japanese American farmers post-internment? Why are there no references to the Jones Act of 1917, which granted US citizenship to people born in Puerto Rico? Likewise, why not mention the resolution of the island's political status as a Commonwealth in the federally approved constitution of 1952? These questions matter because of how much attention Merleaux paid to the negative impact of Executive Order 9066 on the one hand, and to the contrast that she draws between

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Cuba's and the Philippine's independence and Puerto Rico's continued colonial relationship to the US on the other.

These are minor criticisms. *Sugar and Civilization* is a welcome addition to the existing canon of commodity histories; its focus may be unitary, but the book's diverse definition of who constitutes the "American" people makes it worth the read.

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