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**Compound his Yankee Soul in the Entrails of Hell!
Resistance and Colonial Shame in "Castor Oil: Simple or Compound"**

In the opening lines of "Nuestra Apatía," Jesús Colón writes, "Una de las grandes faltas del puertorriqueño de hoy día es que casi nunca le da coraje, no se entusiasma por nada, todo lo toma como venga" [One of the greatest flaws of today's Puerto Ricans is that they never get angry, they do not feel passionate about anything, and they react to everything that comes to them in a passive way] (70). Countermeasures against these flaws greatly influenced the work of Jesús Colón and "Castor Oil: Simple or Compound?" is no exception. This autobiographical text appears in *The Way It Was and Other Writings* by Jesús Colón, which was published posthumously by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies in Hunter College, New York in conjunction with Arte Público Press. These institutions work to recover Latino/a literary and historical texts of the past that have been forgotten. Colón was a prolific writer during his lifetime, but his work mainly appeared in the magazines and newspapers that were published during the latter half of the twentieth century. He published only one autobiographical text in his lifetime, *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches*, but a wealth of other stories remained unpublished until *The Way It Was* and *Lo que el pueblo me dice*.

Jesús Colón was born in Cayey, Puerto Rico in 1901. He moved to New York at the young age of seventeen in the quest for better economic opportunities (Edna Acosta-Belén 13). Edna Acosta-Belén notes that "all of the men and women who succumbed to the lure of the continental shores sought to make a better life for themselves than what was promised in the homeland [...] The common ground in each of their experiences was rooted in the Island government's inability to provide a future for an impoverished population" (13). Colón had a humble upbringing among the *tabaqueros*¹ of his neighborhood. Despite the illiteracy of most cigar makers, many cigar factories at the time had a *lector*² who read to the workers during the day. Colón grew up listening to the *lector* because of his house's close proximity to the cigar factory. In "A Voice through the Window" Colón expresses how he enjoys listening to the writings of "Zola, Balzac, Hugo, [...] Kropotkin, Malatesta or Marx" ("A Voice through the Window" 11). These critical writers fostered a love for communism within Colón that would shape his life. The bulk of his writing took place in the aftermath of Operation Bootstrap, which was a period wherein "Puerto Rican writers, from the Island and those living in New York, turned their attention to lending fictional representation to the migration and resettlement experience" (Flores xiv).

Colón's writing is significant to the field of Nuyorican Literature because he was the first Puerto Rican author to publish texts in English for an audience of Puerto Ricans who wanted to stay in New York. According to Juan Flores, Colón's contribution to literature influenced the work of "Piri Thomas, Nicholasa Mohr, Tato Laviera and Sandra Maria Esteves, to name a few, [who] are carrying forward traditions introduced by [him]" (xvii). Colón was an important Puerto Rican writer because he broadened the traditional Puerto Rican audience to include those who lived in the United States and mainly spoke English. Colón's use of English in his autobiographical writing did not point to a preference for that language. Flores points out that Colón "continued to write and carry out much of his

activity in his native tongue [...] He was always a staunch upholder of the right of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic people to participate in North American society free of prejudice because of their language background” (xv). Colón’s writings, irrespective of the language used, were inspired by his desire to eradicate oppression.

Many scholars agree that Colón played a seminal role in the development of Latino/a literature in the twentieth century. Scholars such as Juan Flores, Faythe Turner, Ramón A. Gutiérrez et al, and Virginia Sánchez Korroll have read Colón with the collective goal of examining and outlining the emergence, transformation, and dissemination of Latino/a literature in the United States. Recent scholarship on Jesús Colón’s body of work is limited and centers on the areas of race and identity. Maritza Stanchich and Adelaine Holton explore how his racial makeup affected his personal politics. Colón was actively involved in New York politics and identified himself as a black Puerto Rican. He occasionally discussed the controversial issues of race and ethnicity in his writings. Perceptions on skin color among Puerto Rican migrants were different than they were in the United States, a fact which left many Puerto Ricans struggling to grapple with their identity. Several scholars have explored the ramifications of this peculiar and elusive concept of identity within Colón’s work, including Alejandra Balestra, Karina A. Bautista, Linda Delgado, José Irizarry Rodríguez, José Torres-Padilla, and David Vázquez. However, there is a lack of scholarship related to the detailed analysis of Colón’s autobiographical texts. While I do agree that a big picture analysis of the work of Colón is helpful to the field of Latino/a Literature, I also think that it is important to analyze his individual vignettes due to their autobiographical nature, which, at the time, rang true to many Nuyoricans. Careful, rhetorical analysis of these texts can shed light into the complex relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. Textual analysis of his lesser known works could point to trends that developed during the first mass migrations of Puerto Ricans to the mainland while identifying repercussions that are still felt today.

“Castor Oil: Simple or Compound?” is a brief vignette that tells the story of an incident that occurred during Colón’s first week on American soil. He explains that, after arriving in New York, he suffered an awful stomachache resulting from the mix of cold weather and American food. This simple autobiographical tale spans only three pages, yet it chronicles the real struggles Puerto Rican emigrants faced after they made the journey to the United States. This text deals with crude topics such as the discussion of feces and stomach ailments, but it always gives one the impression that there is something more to the story, which is why I employ Metaphor Criticism as the basis of my methodological framework in order to uncover and illuminate the complexities present within the early Nuyorican experience. The argument that drove my analysis of “Castor Oil: Simple or Compound?” is that this text displays numerous metaphors designed to offset Puerto Rican shame by exalting Puerto Rican culture over American culture.

I use Metaphor Criticism over other types of methodological frameworks because I feel that it best sheds light on Puerto Ricans living in New York during the first half of the twentieth century and allows me to identify perceptions they had of Americans. Sonja Foss, in *Rhetorical Criticism*, defines a metaphor as the “nonliteral comparisons in which a word or phrase from one domain of experience is applied to another domain [...] a metaphor involves the process of transferring or carrying over aspect[s] that apply to one object to another object” (267). Foss explains that all metaphors have two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor is the topic or subject that is receiving the critique or explanation and the vehicle is the “mechanism or lens through which the topic is viewed” (267). Foss gives the example of “my roommate is a pig.” In this statement, the roommate is the tenor and the pig is the vehicle. In other words, the roommate can be viewed through the lens of a pig, which means that he is stinky, messy, etc. The process of completing a Metaphor Criticism on an artifact requires several steps. First, an artifact must be selected. This artifact should have several obvious metaphors, but this is not necessary. Next is the analysis of the artifact. According to Foss, the analysis of the artifact entails: “(1) examining the artifact for a general sense of its dimensions and context; (2) isolating the metaphors in the artifact; (3) sorting the metaphors into groups according to the vehicle or tenor; and (4) discovering an explanation to the artifact” (272). Through close reading and study of “Castor Oil: Simple or Compound?” I managed to include all of these steps in a metaphorical analysis of the text.

My research is also influenced by several theoretical perspectives, such as post-structuralism, which is defined by Donald Hall as the examination of the social construction of discourse and the “power deployed and social relationships organized through discourse” (162). Post-structuralists agree that, “their own interpretations are never definitive—although they are certainly defensible (because of their supporting detail) —and emphasize that their own articulations are certainly fair game for further critique” (Hall 164). I am aware that my interpretations of Colón’s short vignette are not definitive, but they will contribute to igniting and continuing discussions and further research concerning Nuyorican Literature. Post-structuralists ask themselves several questions when analyzing texts, such as: “What are the text’s presuppositions and blind spots? What does the text assume to be unassailable ‘truth’? What foundation [...] is the text so inflexibly built on that a challenge to it would threaten to bring down the entire structure of reference and meaning?” (165). These questions have guided my analysis of the text under consideration. Hall also states that “Post-structuralism is rooted in the tradition of close textual reading, and it examines the many ways that texts betray the instability and tenuous nature of their own presuppositions and sign systems” (166). This is a key aspect of my research because I understand that other scholars may interpret the metaphors in this autobiographical vignette differently.

I also take into consideration the notion of Puerto Rican colonial shame, as defined by Frances Negron-Muntaner in *Puerto Rican Pop*. According to Negron-Muntaner, Puerto Rican people tend to suffer from an immense shame brought on by the passive way in which Puerto Rico reacted to the American invasion. This shame stems from their lack of resistance to colonization and formed the catalyst for many characteristics of Puerto Rican culture. To offset this shame, there have been frequent attempts to portray Puerto Rican culture as superior to American culture. This is demonstrated in many Puerto Ricans’ ardent patriotism, even though Puerto Rico is not an actual country. Negron-Muntaner points out that “political objectives in the United States have been articulated in ethno-national terms, with a strong emphasis on ‘ethnic defense’ strategies that have consistently valued *boricua*³ culture as a political resource and generative of nonlegalistic (sic) conceptions of citizenship” (6). The emphasis of off-putting shame through ethnic defense is interesting in light of the metaphors I identify below.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, as found in *Rebels and His World*, is also useful in my analysis of the metaphors found within the text. Colón’s short autobiography deals with a subject matter that is grotesque by modern standards. His use of bodily functions, such as digestion and fecal evacuation, are carnival-like elements that readers can identify with. Bakhtin explains, “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7). This technique transforms the grotesque into a poignant social commentary that is easy for readers at all levels to understand while also providing profound insights.

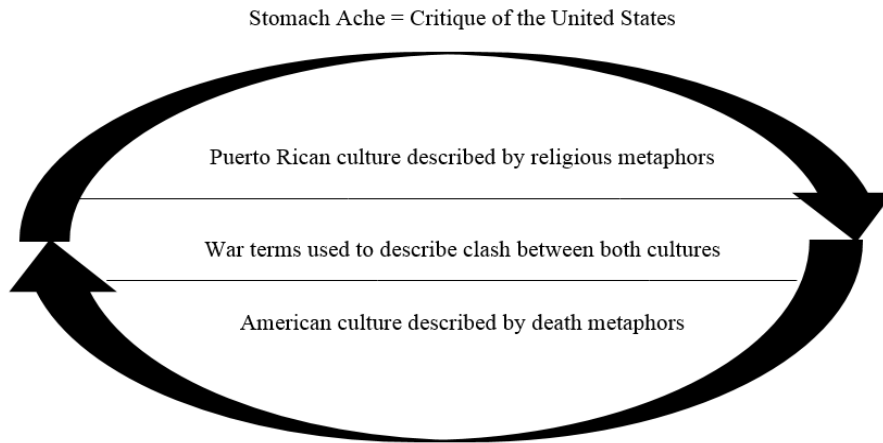
The overarching metaphor I discovered in this narrative centers on how Colón perceived the United States in relation to Puerto Rico. In this sense, the stomachache served as the vehicle, which was a physical manifestation of the rejection, reaction, and critique against American culture: in this case, the tenor. Table 1 outlines the major metaphors in chronological order within the text. Figure 1 provides the analysis of the metaphors. The three major metaphors outlined in Figure 1, Puerto Rico, war, and American culture, are divided by two lines in order to represent heaven, earth, and hell respectively.

Table 1. Metaphors found in “Castor Oil, Simple or Compound?”

Tenor	Vehicle
Language	
English language	Baggage
English class	Somnolence/ third-rate orchestra
English teacher	Conductor
Food	
Oatmeal	Cold cadaver/ hard baseball
Bowl	Dirt
Body	
Stomach ache	Historic
Stomach (before)	Obedient/ miraculous/ religious

Stomach (after)	Internal rebellion/ revolution about to erupt/ pregnancy pains
Bowels	Revolution
Laughter	Roar
Castor Oil	
Compound castor oil	Ashes/ infernal ingredients/ fiendish oils and ashes
Simple castor oil	Diabolic taste/ pure, heavy, sluggish/ innocent, crystal clear

Figure 1. Metaphors as a critique of American culture



Colón began his anecdote by explaining that he had moved to Puerto Rico about a week prior and that he had a poor command of the English language. He sets the story up this way in order to excuse his inability to communicate, which led to undesirable consequences later on. Therefore, a perceived weakness in his character is seen as being a symptom of his poor schooling by “North American” teachers, painting him as the blameless victim. Language policies in Puerto Rico have been a controversial subject since the American invasion in 1898. His description of the useless and ridiculous English classes he endured in his youth is typical of the rhetoric that surrounds language policies on the island. Several scholars have attempted to analyze why, despite twelve years of instruction and close interaction with American culture, a startling number of Puerto Rican students graduate without knowing English. Jorge Vélez and Sharon Clampitt-Dunlap found in their respective studies that Spanish retained its supremacy because it was used by politicians, poets, and the media as a way of linking Spanish with Puerto Rican national identity and English with Americanization. Potentially more important, there has never been a sizable influx of people to the island who only speak English. Edith Algren de Gutiérrez argued that “the movement against the teaching of English in Puerto Rico,” which she closely linked to the autonomist movement, would continue until the island’s political status is clearly defined. This subversive ideological movement describes the resistance that English education received on the island. Colón describes his (lack of) English language skills as “the linguistic baggage I had to deal with” (33). Baggage in the metaphorical sense refers to the past emotions, beliefs, and experiences related to the English language—and more broadly to American culture—that influenced his stomach ache and the subsequent events.

After this brief discussion of language, he proceeds to describe how this *linguistic baggage* was responsible for the unfortunate events that took place at the pharmacy later on. Colón takes great care in describing the exact address of the pharmacy and even noted that it “had been in the same corner for the last hundred years” (33). The multi-generational permanence of the pharmacy, juxtaposed with the recent emigrant, serves a unifying function. In order for a pharmacy, or any establishment that sells

products to consumers, to survive in capitalism, it must be able to cater to the needs of the community. Therefore, Colón's predicament is not unique. The pharmacy, we learn later on, is stocked with several kinds of castor oil, meaning that there is enough demand for it that the pharmacist maintains a regular supply. Edna Acosta Belén notes that Puerto Rican emigrants during the first half of the twentieth century lived in tight-knit communities. The age of the pharmacy and the ready availability of certain products create a mental image of a seemingly mundane situation that his contemporary Puerto Rican readers can identify with.

Colón explains how his stomachache was the result of either the American food or climate, which were both vastly different from that of Puerto Rico. He describes his breakfast that day by using words associated with death to further critique the U.S. The oatmeal he ate that morning was the color of a cadaver and as "hard as a baseball" (33). The image of a cadaver is meant to demonstrate how repugnant the oatmeal was. The use of the baseball as a metaphor is significant because the game is considered an important part of American culture, frequently called an all-American sport. Baseballs are also very hard objects, which bring to mind the stiffness that a body obtains after death. The bowl that the oatmeal was served in was yellow, cracked, and "pasted with dirt" (33). He also had a coffee, which instead of providing warmth and energy, was cold and watery, cementing the breakfast experience as both unappetizing and uncomfortable. These metaphors work together to paint a grotesque picture of American food and culture.

After describing his unappealing American breakfast, he went on to explain how his stomach worked in Puerto Rico. He metaphorically compared his stomach in Puerto Rico to a religious ritual. He explained that his stomach used to be calm, serene, pleasant, obedient, and efficient before arriving in New York. He said that his stomach performed the daily "miracle" of turning his food into the nutrients and tissue his body needed. The end product (or, his feces), he described, was always "agreeable" (33). For Bakhtin, the celebration of the grotesque and mundane bodily functions allowed people to enter "the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" (9). Therefore, this contrast between the inner workings of his stomach in two different contexts juxtaposes the spiritual, pure, and miraculous digestion he had in Puerto Rico with the death imagery he associates with American food, which he blamed for his upset stomach. This contrast between the two cultures is consistent with the idea of Puerto Rican shame because it maintains the ideology that Puerto Rican culture is superior. Negron-Muntaner explains that Puerto Ricans often offset their colonial shame, asserting their difference and superiority to the colonial power, through exaggerated ethno-national pride that demonstrates their agency through the idea that "Puerto Ricans are not yet fully 'Americans'—that is, dead *boricuas*" (40). His body metaphorically took on the task of starting a revolution against American colonialism, which Puerto Ricans have historically shied away from compared to other Latin American countries. His body became a utopic space where colonial conflict could be resolved.

Colón was experiencing so much discomfort with his stomach affliction that he wanted to desperately get a hold of castor oil. Castor oil was familiar because he remembered using and hearing about it in Puerto Rico. He knew it was hard to swallow, but it was the only cure he trusted to purge the American food from his body. His stomachache was metaphorically compared to war imagery. He explained: "An internal rebellion threatened to become external any minute. A revolution to erupt from all available outlets of my body" (33). The comparison of the stomach ache to a war metaphorically linked his rejection of American culture with a violent rebellion. Therefore, Colón's body physically rejected and rebelled against the U.S. unlike the Puerto Ricans after the Spanish-American war, who remained passive. This reaction against America further removed him from Puerto Rican colonial shame because he did not take the invasion passively. His body transformed into a vessel of resistance that actively opposed the United States and in turn proposed an alternative to the historical hegemony between both cultures.

Desperate for relief, he ran to the nearest pharmacy while holding his stomach as if he was about to give birth. The comparison of his ailing stomach to a pregnant woman painted a picture of how much pain he felt. Revolutions and protests are often difficult and painful in nature, but these birth pains are often necessary to yield the desired results. Bakhtin argues that "Grotesque realism knows no other lower level. [...] It is always conceiving" (21). This degradation destroys earthly norms (which, in

this case, is America) and allows it to be reborn with new possibilities. The pharmacist acted oblivious to Colón's obvious body language and pretended not to know how to help. Colón was sure that the pharmacist knew exactly what was going on because he noted that the pharmacist showed a "knowing smile" (34). Colón believed that the pharmacist acted oblivious to the situation in spite of him and to cause humiliation by forcing him to use the English language. Colón quickly asked for castor oil but was met with a choice. The pharmacist asked him "Simple or compound?" which made Colón reflect on which to choose. While deliberating which type of castor oil to drink, he imagined "flashes of castor oil *compuesto* with ashes and other ingredients equally infernal [... and] translated automatically the 'compound' word" (34). He ultimately chose simple and drank it. He did not like the taste or texture of castor oil, but he wrote:

I drew a note of consolation when I congratulated myself for having chosen the castor oil simple, instead of the castor oil compound. Only my dead grandmother and the devil himself would have known all the fiendish oils and ashes that this yankee (sic) chemist would have mixed into the simple innocently crystal clear castor oil! Compound, eh? Compound his yankee (sic) soul in the entrails of hell! (34).

This quote illuminates his feelings towards America. He believed that Americans were evil tricksters who went out of their way to harm people who did not know English. Bakhtin explains that "Various deformities, such as protruding bellies [...] are symptoms of pregnancy or procreative power. Victory over fear is not its abstract elimination; it is a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, a gay transformation. Hell has burst and has poured forth abundance" (91). The death imagery related to American food comes up again in this quote as the ashes to be mixed with the castor oil. Ashes commonly allude to a religious context, but here Colón turns tradition on its head by making it a tool for evil. To him, the exchange between him and the pharmacist was a battle, and he believed that he was the victor due to his perceived cleverness and keen memory. He was proud that he chose well and outsmarted the "blondie (sic)" apothecary.

On his way to the bathroom on his apartment floor, Colón meets who he described as the fat North American landlady (34). He noted that "she managed to squeeze herself down [the stairs], while I was forcing myself up" (35). His word choice invokes the image of a struggle between two opposites: a thin foreign man versus an overweight native woman, both fighting over the same space in order to reach opposite ends. During this moment, he said that "curiosity conquered the revolution of my bowels" and he pauses a moment to ask her the difference between the two types of castor oil (35). The landlady roars in laughter at his question and explained that compound castor oil was mixed with various flavors in order to make it easier to drink. For Bakhtin, laughter is universal in nature and includes the person laughing just as much as the person who is being laughed at. The laughter of the landlady puts Colón's over-the-top situation into perspective. Not only is Colón's lack of English skills troubling, but the American invasion and subsequent efforts to quickly Americanize Puerto Ricans and their cultural resistance were also ridiculous. She offers help and attempts to diffuse the situation with humor but her efforts come across to Colón as being solely mocking. He leaves for the bathroom immediately after the brief interaction. During this short exchange, Colón learns that he was indeed wrong in his assumption about compound castor oil. However, he does not show defeat. War words are used in relation to his stomachache, which evoke the feeling that this exchange was also a battle. Instead of admitting defeat or staying a while longer and risking humiliation, he quickly leaves the scene after learning the information. By swiftly retreating, he does not allow the landlady to ask him any questions and removes himself from a situation that might have required the use of more English.

Snow, a uniquely American feature, was named as a specific element of his torment during his trips to the bathroom that followed the exchange with the landlady. Snow fell on his bare head from a broken skylight in a continuous stream during that troubled night (35). He was forced to endure this slow torture without any options of resistance because of his predicament. Snow in this context represents the reality of the American dream for Colón. He moved to the United States, like many immigrants, in search for a better life. What he found instead was an unwelcoming country that

stripped away the comforts he was accustomed to in Puerto Rico. Like the broken skylight, which was too high for him to fix, his situation in America would remain difficult because of his circumstances.

Colón reflects on his English education during the long periods that he was sitting in the toilet or laying down on his beer-smelling couch. It was a memorable night that would trouble him for the rest of his life. He explains, “during the long periods of semi-wakefulness on that couch, I dreamt of the English language classes conducted by the North American teacher” (35). He recalls how the teachers used meaningless drills and monotonous exercises to get them to learn English. However, Colón concludes that these efforts were in vain because “that completed the teacher’s daily effort to make us hate forever the language of Shakespeare and Whitman” (36). While sitting on the toilet for the final time, he thinks about how English teachers should have made the classes more useful. Nowhere in the text does Colón admit responsibility for his lack of English skills. Therefore, by playing the role of the blameless victim and not admitting own faults, he was able to off-put the shame associated with his situation and also the shame that came with being a Puerto Rican in New York.

Colón uses specific descriptive (and sometimes derogatory) terms for all of the people who caused him pain throughout the text. He mentions specifically North American English teacher both at the beginning and end of the text. English teachers in Puerto Rico were recruited from the United States in order to teach English. Textbooks were immediately translated to English and students were not provided with sufficient scaffolding to learn the language. Colón explains, “I realized [...] that all our school books, except our Spanish grammar, were written in English. It would be just as if you New Yorkers or Pennsylvanians discovered one good morning that your children’s school books were all written in German or Japanese⁴” (“Bitter Sugar” 70). He specifically refers to the pharmacist as a “blondie” and he identifies the landlady as being both fat and North American. He categorizes these *enemies* as being specifically American, yet the only person he references from Puerto Rico is his grandmother, whom he collectively calls “our grandmothers” as if to generalize that all Puerto Ricans are inherently good compared to their North American neighbors (34). This dichotomy between Americans and Puerto Ricans is odd in light of the fact that both are American citizens, but rhetorical strategies that promote ideological difference and ethno-national pride is a common feature of texts written by Puerto Ricans after the invasion.

Jesús Colón has the unique ability to transfer complex ideas into short humorous vignettes. Acosta-Belén explains that⁵

for him, writing was a didactic and consciousness-raising tool about class, racial and gender oppressions much as the means to forge a historical record and tradition for his community. It was up to working class people like himself to provide his fellow *compatriotas* with that voice, to speak with the authority of experience in the everyday struggles for survival in the face of poverty and discrimination in the metropolis while building their own communities. Colón always intended his writing to help counteract the prevailing misconceptions and biased views of the Puerto Rican people held by the larger U.S. society (27).

“Castor Oil: Simple or Compound?” is an extended metaphor that critiques American culture in order to eliminate colonial shame through the exaltation of Puerto Rican culture. All references to Puerto Rican culture are painted under the light of religious purity through metaphors that use religious signifiers. On the other hand, all things associated with American culture are painted in a negative light, which includes words that signified images of death. The clash between the two cultures takes place within his stomach, which is frequently described in harsh terms and with war motifs. The only remedy he trusts to purge his body from American influence is the castor oil, which is bitter and difficult to swallow, but a trusted ally in his new surroundings. His interactions with Americans are described as if they are battles that he took fierce precautions to win. When he discovers that he had committed an error, he does not admit defeat but instead blames his short-comings on his North American English teachers. The carnivalesque features and humor present in the text allude to Colón’s utopia, where he could break free from the shame of being a colonial subject and live in a world without racism and the misunderstandings that arose due to poor language competency. Autobiographical vignettes such as this

are worthy of more study because they shed light into the controversial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico while also pinpointing the germinating seeds of trends that still affect both cultures.

Notes

1. *Tabaqueros* is the Spanish term for cigar makers.
2. Edna Acosta-Belén explains that a “*lector* (reader) focused the morning’s presentation on current news and world events, while the afternoon highlighted more substantial literary fare, creating thereby the most enlightened men and women among the working class” (15).
3. *Boricua* is the indigenous way to refer to a Puerto Rican; the word comes from Borinquén, which is the Taino name of Puerto Rico.
4. His reference to German and Japanese is significant in the context of 1948 during the time that this piece was written. He uses these countries as a comparison to the unjust condition of the Puerto Rican colony.
5. *Compatriotas* is Spanish for compatriots.

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