

## A Powerful Narrative: Public Health Paternalism, Puerto Rican Nationalism, and the Story of Cornelius Rhoads and Pedro Albizu Campos

Western industrial capitalism has historically been predicated on the conquest of overseas markets, but early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonialism was also justified along moral grounds in a time of pervasive white supremacy. In modern thought, imperialism has become increasingly deprecated, and decolonization has granted independence to most but not all colonies. Puerto Rico is one notable exception, and remains a U.S. territory despite calls for change both internally and internationally.<sup>1</sup> This is not strictly a recent phenomenon, and the Puerto Rican independence movement briefly achieved international notoriety in the interwar period under the leadership of the charismatic Pedro Albizu Campos, known as “Don Pedro.” Harvard-educated Albizu published an anti-American, anti-capitalist manifesto that appeared in many press outlets. In framing his polemic, Albizu drew upon a controversial letter written by Dr. Cornelius Rhoads, an American doctor conducting anemia work on the island. The sardonically racist note referred to human experimentation and ethnic extermination, igniting a firestorm. Albizu used Rhoads’ own words against him and the broader public health interventions of his employer the Rockefeller Foundation, a charitable organization which conducted worldwide campaigns against disease. The story of the Rockefeller efforts in Puerto Rico offers a backdrop for the scandal and portrays not dispassionate scientists, but politically and socially engaged people who arrived with their own ideas and prejudices. The Rhoads scandal itself and the response it provoked from the Puerto Ricans illustrates not only how paternalistic interventionism can

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<sup>1</sup> "Special committee on decolonization approves text calling on United States to expedite Puerto Rican self-determination process". Department of Public Information, United Nations General Assembly (June 13, 2006).

bolster a narrative for rabidly anti-colonial protest despite noble intentions, but also how this narrative can play into a system of speculation and repurposing to fuel unrest in pre- and partially literate societies. Rhoads' letter was so intrinsically jarring that it became a standardized propaganda tool and a reliable political fallback for the Puerto Rican separatists, whose presidential assassination attempt could itself be traced to the letter's effect. The Rhoads-Albizu narrative construction increasingly took on a life of its own in exerting influence on affairs, and transcended its creator's original scope and context of meaning as an enduring narrative.

Puerto Rico was annexed in 1898 as one of several American overseas possessions gained from the Spanish-American War. Unlike most of the others, in particular the Philippines, Cuba, and Hawaii, it has never been independent since its original colonization. However, there has been a Puerto Rican national separatist movement since at least the 1870s; it has persisted although many Puerto Rican bourgeois elements, including a number of pre-war separatists, supported the American annexation.<sup>2</sup> In 1917 Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones Act making all Puerto Ricans American citizens, extending conscription to the island and sending thousands to war. A 1918 earthquake and a general strike in 1920 led to the formation in 1922 of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, a split from the left-leaning Unionists who opposed the conservative Republicans. It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which the Nationalists gained support from the population before 1932, but certainly they were relatively obscure in both a local and international context. Pedro Albizu Campos joined the party in 1924 and was elected as its president in 1930.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marisabel Brás, *The Changing of the Guard: Puerto Rico in 1898; The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War*; Hispanic Division, Library of Congress <http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/>

<sup>3</sup> Michael González-Cruz, "The US Invasion of Puerto Rico: Occupation and Resistance to the Colonial State, 1898 to the Present," *Latin American Perspectives* 25:5, 1998

In February 1932, Albizu sent a manuscript to the major Puerto Rican political parties, the Puerto Rican Medical Association, the League of Nations, the Pan-American Union, the Civil Liberties Union, and several governments, as well as the press. The manuscript contained a letter written by Albizu as well as another letter. In his letter, Albizu attacked American industrial capitalism and expansionism, alleging exploitation and ill intent. “The mercantile monopoly is backed by the financial monopoly.... The United States have mortgaged the country to their own financial interests. The military intervention destroyed agriculture. It changed the country into a huge sugar plantation....” Albizu’s letter had socialist undertones and attacked the unequal distribution of wealth in the years after the occupation, which he claimed was then predominantly held by Americans. He evoked a fall from a pre-American Eden that never really existed. “At the time of the North American invasion... wealth was well distributed, there was work, as well as an abundance of the necessities of life... We were in fact a rich people.” Criticizing mercantilist consumerism, he insisted that American products were not only the world’s most expensive, but dangerous and “unfit for consumption.” He then accused American interests of attempting to exterminate all Puerto Ricans, comparing them to Native Americans and Hawaiians, whom he alleged were “nearly extinct.” “Evidently, submissive people coming under the North American empire, under the shadow of its flag, are taken ill and die. The facts confirm absolutely a system of extermination.”<sup>4</sup> The agents of this extermination he identified as the Rockefeller Foundation, an American charitable institution which had been treating diseases such as hookworm and anemia in Puerto Rico since 1919. “It has in fact been working out a plan to exterminate our people by inoculating patients unfortunate enough to go them with virus of incurable diseases such as cancer.”

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<sup>4</sup> “Charge Race Extermination Plot,” *Porto Rico Progress*, February 4, 1932, Folder 7, Box 1, Series 243, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

Albizu did not spuriously invent these allegations, which were seemingly well-supported by the second letter. It contained a boastful, racist confession written by pathologist Dr. Cornelius “Dusty” Rhoads, a 1924 Harvard Medical School graduate who had previously worked at the Rockefeller Institute in New York. Rhoads traveled to Puerto Rico to study anemia at the Presbyterian Hospital with Harvard Professor of Medicine William B. Castle. In the opening to the letter, Rhoads addressed a colleague back in the United States, and reacted bitterly to the news received from previous correspondence about another doctor’s job appointment. It went on: “I can get a damn fine job here and am tempted to take it. It would be ideal except for the Porto Ricans – they are beyond doubt the dirtiest, laziest, most degenerate and thievish race of men ever inhabiting this sphere. It makes you sick to inhabit the same island with them. They are even lower than Italians. What the island needs is not public health work but a tidal wave or something to totally exterminate the population. It might then be livable. I have done my best to further the process of extermination by killing off 8 and transplanting cancer into several more. The latter has not resulted in any fatalities so far. The matter of consideration for the patients’ welfare plays no role here – in fact all physicians take delight in the abuse and torture of the unfortunate subjects.”<sup>5</sup>

This was not the first American group to study anemia in Puerto Rico, and the earlier examples of such expeditions are explanatory for background contextual reasons, and in and of themselves. The history of American public health work in Puerto Rico begins with Bailey K. Ashford, an Army doctor who served in Puerto Rico during the war. After annexation, he remained on the island and became director of the Ponce General Hospital in 1899. Early on, Puerto Rico became a center for coffee and sugar production, and these were common industries

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<sup>5</sup> “The sensational case of a North American physician who says he has assassinated 8 Porto Ricans and Inject cancer germs into many more. [trans.]” *El Imparcial*, January 26, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

for poor sharecroppers. Ashford became interested in the seemingly pervasive anemia that affected some workers in the coffee plantations, eventually concurring with Charles Wardell Stiles, who observed similar anemia cases in the American south, that hookworm disease, also known as ankylostomiasis or uncinariasis, was to blame. In 1904, the U.S. Department of Insular Affairs appointed an Anemia Commission to control hookworm disease.<sup>6</sup>

The hookworm is a type of helminth, or parasitic worm, which lives in the small intestine of mammals, including dogs, cats, and humans. The modern discovery of hookworm was made in 1838 in Italy, and by 1852 it was associated with iron deficiency anemia, its primary symptom. A breakthrough in its treatment was made in 1880, when Italian physicians determined that hookworm was being transmitted through eggs in stool absorbed through the skin, specifically the feet, in improperly sanitized latrine areas. Hookworm is cured by administering chemical purgatives, which cause the worms to be excreted. In developed countries hookworm is uncommon and when present rarely fatal, but is considered a leading cause of maternal and child morbidity in tropical countries where medical care is tougher to obtain. Although it has been effectively eradicated in North America and Europe, today some regions in Asia, Africa and South America have hookworm infection rates upwards of 50%.<sup>7</sup>

Hookworm came to represent the Progressive Era's growing emphasis on scientific methods to solve social problems. Anemia's symptoms of extreme fatigue and physical weakness led to hookworm's characterization as the "germ of laziness," and for cash crop barons this proved to be a productivity issue worth throwing money at. The eradication of hookworm

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<sup>6</sup> Bailey K. Ashford, Pedro Gutiérrez Igaravidez. *Uncinariasis (Hookworm disease) in Porto Rico: a medical and economic problem*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911. p.28

<sup>7</sup> "Hookworm." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/hookworm/>

was billed as a measure to improve labor efficiency.<sup>8</sup> Stiles, a prominent zoologist and an advisor to the Theodore Roosevelt administration, prepared a report on the health of Southern states, which in a sense were “occupied” by the industrial North as they experienced a post-Reconstruction economic and social malaise. Following the recommendations of the report, hookworm was briefly a political issue: some blamed hookworm for the South’s persistent economic disadvantage, claiming that its eradication would pave the way for Southern industrialization. Others, ignorant of hookworm’s existence and doubtful of the idea of microscopic worms living inside their guts, accused physicians of slandering the community. Pro-eradication elements won out, and in 1909 Stiles helped establish the Sanitary Commission for the Eradication of Hookworm Disease, and Rockefeller donated \$1 million to the program, which took place in 11 Southern states.<sup>9</sup>

Emboldened by the success of eradication campaigns in the American south, and seized by an American paternalism that made an international expansion of the campaign a burden and a responsibility, the Foundation took the show on the road. The Sanitary Commission became the International Health Board (later renamed Division), part of the Rockefeller Foundation, in 1913, and soon took aim at hookworm in the Caribbean, Latin America, South America, and Asia. In 1919 the Puerto Rico Department of Health and the Rockefeller Foundation concluded an agreement to conduct a joint hookworm campaign, replacing 1904’s Anemia Commission. Although the Anemia Commission had spent \$357,000 between 1904 and 1920 (over \$3 million inflation-adjusted) on hookworm control, poor sanitation had allowed significant re-infection. Foundation doctor John B. Grant conducted a survey in 1919 and reported that Puerto Rico

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<sup>8</sup> John Ettlign, *The Germ of Laziness: Rockefeller Philanthropy and Public Health in the New South*, Boston: Harvard Press, 1981

<sup>9</sup> Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p.194-196

remained “apparently one of the worst hookworm infested spots in the world”<sup>10</sup> with an incidence of 80% on average for the entire island. Rockefeller anti-hookworm work consisted of education in schools, latrine construction to prevent reinfection, and administration of anti-helminthics designed to kill the worms and force their excretion.<sup>11</sup>

Though they attempted to remain impartial scientists, doctors abroad frequently betrayed prejudices toward the native population. Many of these ideas were representative of mainstream thought for the time period on subjects like race. From the beginning, hookworm was attacked along racial lines, such as by North Carolina doctor Charles T. Nesbitt: “The hookworms, so common in Africa, which are carried in the American Negroes’ intestines with relatively slight discomfort, were almost entirely responsible for the terrible plight of the southern white. It is impossible to estimate the damage that has been done to the white peoples of the South by the diseases brought by this alien race.”<sup>12</sup> This racial focus spread with the campaign to Puerto Rico. “We cannot believe that vicious idleness comes natural [sic] to the Spanish colonist,” Ashford wrote in 1911. “Is it ‘laziness’ or disease that is this very day attracting the attention of the United States to the descendant of the pure-blooded English stock... despised by the negro who calls him ‘po’ white trash?”<sup>13</sup> The so-called *jibaros* or mountain people of Puerto Rico, working class sharecroppers and fieldworkers who were generally of mixed heritage, were singled out as treatment and education moved through rural municipalities. “I must confess that the intelligence of some of the *jibaros*, especially the women, is low,” Grant wrote to Dr. Victor

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<sup>10</sup> John Farley, *To Cast Out Disease, A History of the International Health Division of Rockefeller Foundation (1913-1951)* New York: Oxford Press: 2003. p. 299

<sup>11</sup> “Porto Rico As A Field For the Study and Investigation of Tropical Diseases.” F130, B21, S2, SS243, RG5, RAC.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, p.196

<sup>13</sup> Ashford, p.7

Heiser, director of the IHB in March 1920.<sup>14</sup> Describing Puerto Rican politicians later that year, with whom Heiser had asked him to negotiate a contract for continuing public health efforts, Grant wrote, “Even a most sympathetic onlooker cannot but admit that for a collection of men, who bear the name of legislators, there is an absence of patriotism and fair play that would justify a majority of these gentlemen being classed under the moron class.”<sup>15</sup> This use of what was then scientific terminology for human intelligence categorization would not have prompted particular notice by Grant’s colleagues, but today is a blatant example of racial conceptions coloring Grant’s perspective of the Puerto Rican legislature. Despite his low opinions of them, Grant did execute an agreement with the legislators to continue public health efforts, with the eventual goal of turning them over to the natives.

Aside from ethnic prejudice, public health campaigns also incorporated other non-scientific attitudes. Hookworm treatments subtly advanced the ideals of temperance movement. Carbon tetrachloride combined with oil of chenopodium, one of the main treatments used in Puerto Rico for hookworm, could cause poisoning and sometimes death when combined with alcohol, even if it had been consumed the previous day. The Rockefeller Foundation was a known donor to temperance-related groups, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. wrote later regarding U.S. alcohol prohibition, which had begun in 1920 and lasted until 1933, “When Prohibition was introduced, I hoped that it would be widely supported by public opinion, and the day would soon come when the evil effects of alcohol would be recognized.”<sup>16</sup> Puerto Rico, as part of the United States, was technically under the effects of prohibition, but alcohol was readily available and consumed often. Although there is no evidence that anyone directly sought to poison alcohol

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<sup>14</sup> Grant to Heiser, March 25, 1920, F19, B3, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>15</sup> Grant to Heiser, May 12, 1920, F20, B3, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Okrent, *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center*, New York: Viking Press, 2003. p 246.

drinkers, certainly today a widespread health intervention harmful to drinkers couldn't be applied near-universally to unsuspecting people. A 1923 Foundation "science" report entitled "Health in the Tropics" expressed this prevailing viewpoint, "Alcohol is a predisposing cause to all endemic diseases; on this point all authors in exotic pathology are unanimous; in epidemics, the intemperate are the first and surest victims.... Alcoholic drinks especially in the Tropics not only unfit a person for work, but throw additional strain on the liver and kidneys and depress the nervous system.... To seek pure water and shun alcoholic drinks is the beginning of wisdom."<sup>17</sup> In 1925, Dr. Rolla B. Hill wrote to Dr. H.H. Howard that there had been no serious cases of poisoning that month, "except the one man who also took a few good drinks the day he took treatment.... Such is prohibition in Porto Rico."<sup>18</sup> Every time a poisoning like this occurred, the doctor in charge was required to file a form "Report of Case of Poisoning by Anthelmintic [sic]," recording in many cases the race of "Negro" or "Mulatto." Two pertinent fields on the form were "Addiction to alcohol or such alcoholic drinks as palm toddy, rum, etc." and "Did the patient take any alcohol just before or just after treatment?" Many patients did not speak English which may account for a number of poisonings. One case from 1925, which did not cause death but required medical attention, indicated a "habitual drinker of native rum" had had "2 or 3 drinks night before treatment," showing that "just" before was relative.<sup>19</sup> Though that patient did not die, many others did over the years, though this was a small fraction of the thousands treated, the vast majority of which did not experience any reportable ill effects. Nonetheless, the

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<sup>17</sup> "Health in the Tropics," F418, B64, S2, SS899, RG2, RAC.

<sup>18</sup> Hill to Howard, September 1, 1925, F129, B21, S2, SS243, RG5, RAC.

<sup>19</sup> Hill, "Report of Case of Poisoning by Anthelmintic," F130, B21, S2, SS243, RG5, RAC.

widespread application of treatments which interacted adversely with alcohol reveals the influence of American ideals about temperance.<sup>20</sup>

Despite progress in education and latrine construction and widespread administration of anti-helminthics, hookworm proved resistant to treatment. The foundation's work was originally intended to last only five years, but continued until 1939.<sup>21</sup> Treatments were measured based on the quantity of hookworm eggs excreted in the feces, which is the hookworm's primary method of transmission, and lower egg outputs indicated relative success of treatment. In 1926, Dr. George C. Payne wrote, "Studies of the reduction in the egg output after treatment in routine work showed that the results... were far from satisfactory. There were instances where even three treatments failed to reduce the egg-count. No satisfactory explanation for the difficulty was found during the year."<sup>22</sup> Despite the questions this raised about the treatment's efficacy, the work continued unchanged for another year. When the poor results persisted, the doctors tried several different treatments in a process of trial and error. They also employed the "shotgun method," applying treatments universally to all citizens in an area regardless of whether they actually had hookworm, or whether they had been drinking recently. Hundreds were killed, including at least a few children, the deaths generally being blamed on patients' diets or use of alcohol.<sup>23</sup> Again, this was a small percentage, but certainly a high price to pay if the treatment isn't even effective. Payne and his colleagues did not appear concerned that they were using the Puerto Ricans as an experimental group for the testing of inconclusively proven treatments, but

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<sup>20</sup> Payne, "Annual Narrative Report to the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, Year 1927." F897, B73, S243, RG5.3, RAC.

<sup>21</sup> Payne, "Porto Rico Anemia Studies Report for First Half of 1939," June 15, 1939. F893, B72, S243 RG5.3, RAC.

<sup>22</sup> Payne, "Summary of Progress In Hookworm Control in Porto Rico During the Year 1926." November 23, 1926. F1, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>23</sup> Payne, "Annual Narrative Report to the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, Year 1927." November 25, 1926. F897, B73, S243, RG5.3, RAC.

focused on advancing the cause of medicine even at the expense of a relatively small but consistent casualty rate.

Furthermore, later studies conducted by the Foundation showed that regularly administered iron pills were a significantly less invasive and more effective treatment for anemia than targeting hookworm specifically. Even when the treatment was successful, the most advanced physical fitness tests of the day, including the vaunted Dynamometer, showed no statistically significant correlation with hookworm egg-counts.<sup>24</sup> Confounding the studies, anemia was also caused by two other conditions endemic to Puerto Rico: malaria and tropical sprue, a dietary deficiency related to celiac disease. Although malaria was also targeted for many years, the inclusive anemia results apparently undermined the stated rationale for the hookworm campaign. So, why did Foundation doctors continue chasing hookworm in Puerto Rico? Grant wrote to Heiser in 1920, explaining that the Rockefeller Foundation did not care about hookworm explicitly; the campaign was really a pretense for entry and a “demonstration” of the value of a “sanitary society,” as interpreted by the Foundation.<sup>25</sup> The goal was to prove the value of the American style of hygiene in a visible and impactful way, and hookworm, with its latrine construction and education techniques, was a much better candidate for this than sprue or simple dietary iron deficiency. The image of a parasitic worm is also much more viscerally disturbing than a missing mineral in the diet. Other efforts, including malaria and yellow fever, were similarly powerful symbols for this hygienic imperative. This was indicative of the

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<sup>24</sup> Persis Putnam, “A Preliminary Statistical Analysis of the Results of Schneider and Dynamometer Tests made by Dr. Rolla B. Hill on Adult Hookworm Patients before and after Treatment, in Arana and Florida-Adentro, Porto Rico 1925-1926.” June, 1927. F1, B3, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>25</sup> Grant to Heiser, May 12, 1920, F20, B3, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

“Gospel of Health” ideas about exporting hygiene that characterized many similar efforts by the Rockefeller Foundation and other American institutions of the time period.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to the 1930s, these hygienic goals were soon undermined in a significantly more visible way with the breaking of the Rhoads scandal. In December 1930, Dr. William B. Castle, after giving a presentation about anemia at the Rockefeller Institute in New York, was approached by F.F. Russell to travel to Puerto Rico and join Dr. Payne in studying the ongoing treatment efforts there.<sup>27</sup> Castle and Rhoads arrived in June 1931. Rhoads, like some of his contemporaries in medicine, considered his subjects somehow less than human. “We have only two experimental ‘animals’ and will increase the number to ten in a week or so.” Rhoads’ research specifically focused on the dietary deficiency angle, and he sought to experimentally induce anemia in subjects through manipulations of their diets, “the production of the experimental disease in animals.” “The exciting experiment now is the attempt to cause experimental sprue in humans. If they don’t develop something they certainly have the constitutions of oxen.”<sup>28</sup> There are ethical concerns with the attempt to induce a disease in patients instead of curing them, but these are not atypical for the time period. While Rhoads did not comment on the specific ethnicity of his “animals,” even before his infamous missive, Rhoads had revealed himself to hold a common viewpoint of the time with respect to his patients’ humanity.

The sequence of events leading directly to the Rhoads scandal begins on November 5, 1931, with a party. This event was held at the home of a social worker Rhoads with whom

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson

<sup>27</sup> Russell to Castle, December 5, 1930. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>28</sup> Rhoads to Flexner, 19 Sept. 1931, Simon Flexner Papers, folder Cornelius P. Rhoads, American Philosophical Society. Cited in Susan E. Lederer, ““Porto Ricochet”: Joking about Germs, Cancer, and Race Extermination in the 1930s.” *American Literary History*, 14: 4, Winter 2002, pp. 720-746

worked, in the town of Cidra, 30-40 miles away from the hospital. Rhoads parked his car, which the Foundation had bought him at non-trivial expense for traveling educational campaigns, on the street. Rhoads had several drinks before leaving the party, when he found his tires flat and that some items (never identified) had been stolen from his car, including “a bag with several articles which he disliked to lose.” In a drunken rage, Rhoads tried to fight bystanders and “made a disturbance” at the police station.<sup>29</sup> Then, he went home and wrote the infamous letter. The drunkenness justification for the writing of the letter is worthy of note for several reasons, not the least of which is that apparently Rhoads had planned to drive 40 miles drunk on rural Puerto Rican roads, although the attitude toward drunk driving in 1931 is unclear. As mentioned, the prevailing intellectual view of alcohol use in general, even in moderation, was quite negative throughout the 1920s, and alcohol was technically illegal in Puerto Rico despite its widespread use. More interestingly, even if Rhoads did have a drink or two at the party, a February 1932 statement taken by the Puerto Rican police from another party attendee claims that Rhoads “was in normal conditions” and lacked “any signs whatsoever that he may have used alcohol at all.”<sup>30</sup> Finally, the idea that Rhoads’ inebriation would excuse his letter is somewhat lacking as a moral defense, although it certainly has some explanatory power, but its use as an official public relations line is somewhat perplexing.

This letter was discarded in the Presbyterian Hospital where Rhoads and Castle worked, where it fell into the hands of Puerto Rican employees, who circulated it amongst themselves. A second letter with similar content but a different addressee was also found. Rhoads apologized publicly to the staff on November 14, but several days later Dr. Payne “observed incidents”

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<sup>29</sup> Payne to Howard, February 22, 1932. F8, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>30</sup> “Sworn Statement of Francisco Matos,” February 2, 1932, Puerto Rico National Archive. Cited in Pedro Aponte-Vázquez, *The Unsolved Case of Dr. Cornelius P. Rhoads: An Indictment*. San Juan, PR: Publicaciones René, 2005, p.58

which caused him to ask Rhoads “if there were not some undercurrent of antagonism there which was interfering with the work.”<sup>31</sup> Around this time Luis Baldoni left the hospital and missed several days of work, eventually showing the letter to Pedro Albizu Campos. Rhoads became increasingly depressed when he learned that the letter was beginning to be publicly disseminated and would be discussed at a meeting of the Puerto Rico Medical Association, and left for the United States in December.<sup>32</sup>

On January 29, 1932, former Attorney General of Puerto Rico and World War I veteran Governor James Beverley began a formal investigation into the Rhoads affair, which soon went to trial.<sup>33</sup> The press soon caught wind of this, and Rhoads called the Manhattan office of the Rockefeller Foundation to tell that a newspaper had contacted him for an interview. Ivy Lee, the Foundation’s public relations mastermind, arranged for several pro-Rhoads articles to be published, such as “Patients Say Rhoads Saved Their Lives” in *The New York Times*,<sup>34</sup> and an article in *TIME* magazine which portrayed Albizu as a shrewd manipulator, compared Rhoads favorably to a fictional doctor hero, and edited out some of the most shocking portions of the letter, including the references to cancer and Italians.<sup>35</sup> Rhoads sent an urgent telegram to Beverley, “Regret very much that Fantastic and playful composition written entirely for my own diversion and intended as parody on supposed attitude of some American minds in Porto Rico should have become public document and taken literally by any one. Of course nothing in the document was ever intended to mean other than opposite of what was stated. Nevertheless, if slightest seriousness is really attached to any aspect of this subject I will be glad to return to

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<sup>31</sup> Payne to Howard, February 21, 1932. F8, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>32</sup> Payne to Howard. February 17, 1932.F8, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>33</sup> Payne to Howard. February 18, 1932.F8, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>34</sup> “Patients Say Rhoads Saved Their Lives.” *The New York Times* February 2, 1932: 19.

<sup>35</sup> “Medicine: Porto Ricochet.” *TIME*. Monday, Feb. 15, 1932

Porto Rico immediately and place myself at your disposal.”<sup>36</sup> Payne was skeptical, writing to Howard, “No one, continental or Porto Rican, can think of the things said by him as a ‘joke or parody.’” “The Governor does not accept the ‘joke’ explanation of the letter.”<sup>37</sup> Ivy Lee visited the Governor and apparently convinced him to give Rhoads the benefit of the doubt.

Aside from the self-incriminating document passed off as a joke, the prosecution could find little evidence against Rhoads. Puerto Rican doctors Dr. Morales and Otero testified that a careful review of the hospital records revealed that Rhoads had neither intentionally killed nor had he transplanted cancer into anyone.<sup>38</sup> Nor did any of the witnesses have any evidence for this, and several testified for the defense that Rhoads had saved lives and was the model of a responsible physician. “Just a few words of appreciation of the many kindnesses shown me by you, not to mention the miraculous cure of my ‘sprue’ or whatever you may call it,” wrote one.<sup>39</sup> Former patient Rafael Zeppendfelt claimed that he owed Rhoads his life after an emergency hospital visit during which Rhoads had donated him his own fresh blood on the spot. He felt that the racist part of Rhoads’ tirade could not have been his true opinion of Puerto Ricans, and he saw the comments about cancer as an “unimportant... joke, in good or bad taste... that makes me laugh,” finishing that “actions speak louder than words.”<sup>40</sup> On the strength of these testimonies and the lack of evidence to the contrary, the trial appeared to be heading for an acquittal. The second letter was never entered into evidence. Beverley wrote, “Incidentally another letter in Dr. Rhoads’ handwriting turned up during the course of the investigation, but was suppressed by the Government, and no publication was given to it. The second letter seemed to me to be even

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<sup>36</sup> Rhoads to Beverley, January 29, 1932, F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>37</sup> Payne to Howard, February 14, 1932, F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>38</sup> “Conclusions reached in Rhoads investigation. [Trans. copy]” February 24, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>39</sup> George W. Roberts to Rhoads, January 27, 1932, F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>40</sup> Rafael Arroyo Zeppenfeldt, Letter to the Editor of La Correspondencia. January 29, 1932. San Juan, P.R. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

worse than the first...”<sup>41</sup> The second letter has never been located and the suppression appears to have been successful. It was concluded on February 15, 1932 that Rhoads was “mentally ill or lacked scruples,” but had not taken any exterminatory actions toward the Puerto Ricans, nor had he transplanted cancer into anyone.<sup>42</sup> Beverley wrote February 17, 1932, “I am very happy that the investigation resulted as it did.... We here in Porto Rico appreciate most highly the work that was done here by the Rockefeller Foundation.”<sup>43</sup> By March, Howard wrote to Payne, “I am very glad indeed to know that the Rhoads matter has lost its importance to some extent, and the prominent place which it occupied in the mind of the public for a time.”<sup>44</sup> To this day, the trial stands as an exoneration of Rhoads, and there is no direct evidence that his confession was in any way legitimate.

The witness testimonies reveal a great deal about the perspective the natives held regarding the incident. As already discussed, some witnesses like Zeppendfelt were almost slavish in their apologia for Rhoads. Luis Baldoni, who had discovered the letter, was equally unable to implicate him, but significantly less complimentary. The 20-year-old son of a Puerto Rican public health official from the town of Utuado, Baldoni was comparatively well-educated, holding a high school diploma. He also had some experience with scientific tools such as microscopes, making him well-qualified to work at the hospital as a research assistant. He supported a family of five with his job at the hospital, which he began in August 1931.<sup>45</sup> Baldoni found the letter on November 11, 1931 and propagated it amongst the hospital staff. On November 14, Rhoads called a meeting of the Puerto Ricans working at the hospital and publicly apologized for the letter, claiming he had written it in a moment of anger. Baldoni testified that

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<sup>41</sup> Beverley to Sawyer, February 17, 1932, F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>42</sup> “Conclusions reached in Rhoads investigation. [Trans. copy]” February 24, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Howard to Payne, March 15, 1932, F8, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>45</sup> Baldoni to Payne, June 30, 1931, Puerto Rico National Archive, cited in Aponte-Vázquez, p.59

Rhoads seemed nervous, and his eyes were moist.<sup>46</sup> Rhoads claimed that he had “a high opinion of” and “a very high idea of the honor and industry of the Porto Rican people,” adding, “After all, remember that the letter was not sent, and once more I beg your pardon.” Baldoni was not reassured and indicated that “the confession filled us with horror.” He also testified that one of his colleagues was openly weeping, and the others remained apprehensive. Dr. Castle, who would not make any comment, distressed them further. “The silence of Dr. Rhoads’ companion, Dr. W. C. Castle, in view of all that had happened, inspired us with distrust and filled us with fear.”<sup>47</sup>

Baldoni left the laboratory “full of indignation and terror” and returned on November 16, with the intention to quit his job. Rhoads was waiting for him, and the Puerto Rican “felt a tremor at the thought that I might have been another victim of his.” Rhoads, for his part, was more concerned that Baldoni harbored ill will toward him, which he asked in an “emotional” tone that “moved” Baldoni to say “no.” Baldoni also testified that Rhoads, previously brusque, had become quite amiable after his apology. In his final conversation with Rhoads, Baldoni said he needed to take a trip to see his ailing aunt in Utuado, for which Rhoads offered him ten pesos. Ironically, that trip would result in the letter falling into the hands of Pedro Albizu Campos. Baldoni’s testimony includes several other interesting points, that “alongside of the laboratory there was a small room in which cultures of different infectious diseases were kept,” and that Rhoads had his own separate book of records from Castle’s. Baldoni also took the opportunity to comment on Rhoads’ improper sterilization of needles, suggesting some kind of disregard for

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<sup>46</sup> Sworn testimony of Luis Baldoni, reprinted in “The sensational case of a North American physician who says he has assassinated 8 Porto Ricans and Inject cancer germs into many more. [trans.]” *El Imparcial*, January 26, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

patients and reinforcing the idea of Rhoads' dehumanizing view of them.<sup>48</sup> However, Baldoni was unable to offer any evidence, even circumstantial, of any other negative activity.

Baldoni's fear is understandable given the circumstances, and illustrates not only his view of the relative plausibility that Rhoads had actually done what he had claimed despite the lack of proof, but the effect that the entire event had had on some Puerto Ricans given their pre-existing conceptions. Baldoni believed Rhoads was capable of the extermination he suggested, and even feared for his own life. Although Rhoads was quick to pass off his letter as a joke, and was eventually exonerated in court, this explanation did not placate Baldoni or his colleagues, who likely objected not simply to the extermination remark or the cancer claim, but the overall light in which it portrayed them as people and as co-workers. For Baldoni, this attitude managed to negate any amount of positivity toward Rhoads' medical work, and cast the entire hospital and job in a negative light, causing him to resign. The only thing that really makes the details of Baldoni's account suspicious is the original Rhoads confession. Baldoni, who had worked in the hospital without complaint until the scandal, identified aspects of his experience that seemed to *ex post facto* support the idea that Rhoads was indeed transplanting cancer into patients. The presence of some level of anti-American resentment or nationalist leaning, which may be inferred in Baldoni's case from his association with Albizu, undoubtedly strengthened his negativity and the self-perceived "truth" of the narrative. For example, Baldoni observed that Rhoads was collecting disease cultures and had his own separate notebook, details which would be innocuous without a looming threat of medical extermination in mind. Similarly, Dr. Castle's silence, which was likely advised by Ivy Lee or George Payne for legal reasons, took on a sinister tone with his inability to confirm or deny the Rhoads confession. Without a confession

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

to deny, silence is simply a lack of information. The most striking thing about Baldoni's testimony is how desperate and supplicatory Rhoads seems in the context of the letter's release. Rhoads' offer of money for Baldoni's trip is a kind gesture in isolation, but is portrayed as uncharacteristically generous: the sign of a guilty conscience. Rhoads' attempt to be nicer than usual to his Puerto Rican colleagues does not exonerate him, but further creates an image of guilt that says Rhoads "doth protest too much," yet Castle, too little.

Despite Baldoni's gut feeling that Rhoads is a bad person and the suspicious light in which some of his details may be viewed, Rhoads' wrongdoing remains only a suspicion if we consider the original confession entirely nonfactual. We do know from Baldoni's testimony that, prior to Rhoads' public apology and the subsequent explosion of the scandal, rumors were understandably flying in the hospital in the immediate aftermath of the letter's appearance. Luise White has analyzed the effect of rumor in semi- and pre-literate societies with respect to foreign colonists, and this has some explanatory power by analogy in this case. Like the Africans of White's *Speaking with Vampires*, who created frightening narratives of vampirism and cannibalism to demonstrate the colonialists' wickedness, some Puerto Ricans already saw the Americans as aggressive invaders and similarly incorporated this viewpoint into a new narrative. As White demonstrates, many of the narratives contained an essential truth even as they were embellished and distorted to fit into their creators' cultural perspectives. Although whites were not actually vampires, they were indeed racist former slave traders who had in the past captured Africans, although not for blood-related goals.<sup>49</sup> For Africans, the creation of a vampire narrative was somehow empowering, and it also reduced the shame of having been exploited, by painting the victims as justifiably helpless against a supernatural threat. Similarly, although

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<sup>49</sup> Luise White. *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. U of California Press: 2000.

Harvard-educated Albizu likely knew that the United States was not engaged in a conspiracy to use cancer to exterminate the population of Puerto Rico, his portrayal of this narrative gave him a political potency which he used to great effect.

However, the contraposition of the Puerto Ricans and Rhoads has many notable differences from that of the Africans and slave traders, not least that the American doctors did not actually enslave anyone or take orders from the U.S. government, despite Albizu's crypto-socialist critique. Rhoads' own work with blood, inasmuch as it is documented, was of a well-intentioned, ethical and non-vampirical nature. Until the letter became public, Rhoads' integrity as a doctor in service of humanity was unimpeachable. Even from an anti-American perspective, Rhoads himself as an individual is difficult to blame in any way for the colonial system, except as simply a cog in a larger machine. Another important distinction is that the Rhoads-as-exterminator narrative is taken more or less directly from his letter, and is not a fantastic invention out of whole cloth and cultural archetypes like the vampire narratives were. The Rhoads letter was printed and promulgated in full, and did not need any kind of distortion to be damning. Nonetheless, if we accept that the confession is nonfactual, it is similar to a rumor as a received narrative that cannot be confirmed. In fact, the Rhoads story is in many respects significantly more powerful than a vampirism rumor-like narrative, because it is based on a confession that may be taken literally for maximum impact, and does not require fantastic distortion.

Comparable to White's colonial Africa, 1931 Puerto Rico was a largely illiterate society. A difficult aspect of the Rhoads story is that aside from transcribed court testimonies, there are few primary sources which represent the broader Puerto Rican perspective, since the poorer classes were largely illiterate at the time. There are literally no sources from the Puerto Rican

perspective dating from before the event became international news and went to court, and none whatsoever from most of the hospital patients, given that many were quite poor and still possibly in ill health. The Rockefeller spin control efforts have also dampened the strength of the storyline, although at least in the American news sources this influence emerges clearly. Given these limitations, the conclusions made by the trial appear sound. However, a very close review of the internal Rockefeller correspondence reveals a notable oversight in the original investigation which other writers on this subject have ignored or glossed over.

Aside from the censored second letter, the trial comprehensively examined all the records of patients admitted to the Presbyterian Hospital, and all of the official Rockefeller Foundation records. However, Rhoads did not explicitly mention the hospital in his letter, and he had performed one research study outside of the hospital which the investigation *did not* examine. Earlier in 1931, Castle approached Payne about funding a parallel research project he wished to undertake in conjunction with Dr. Donald H. Cook of the Department of Chemistry of the University of Puerto Rico's School of Tropical Medicine, and a Puerto Rican social worker, Celia Núñez. The research would take place "in the field," primarily at Núñez' home, in Cidra.<sup>50</sup> As mentioned earlier, Rhoads was at a social worker's house in Cidra when he "made a disturbance" about his car: this was Núñez, with whom Rhoads had a working friendship.<sup>51</sup>

Although at first Payne was enthusiastic about the idea, he decided to reject funding the Cidra study. Writing to Dr. Howard, Payne explained he had rejected Castle's request for funding for a number of reasons: it was not approved by the Puerto Rican commissioner of education, the supervision would have been inadequate, facilities were not available for adequate

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<sup>50</sup> Castle to Payne, October 5, 1931, F5, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>51</sup> Payne to Howard. February 22, 1932. F8, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

measurements, there was not a proper definition of the relationship to the other institution under which the studies were started (the University), and he considered it “premature.”<sup>52</sup> Castle considered his arguments invalid and incomprehensible, and proceeded anyway, using Harvard money to fund the research and keeping Núñez on a volunteer basis, later returning to ask for Rockefeller funding once again.<sup>53</sup> “In spite of my disapproval and without my knowledge, Dr. Castle entered upon the experiment....” Payne wrote to Howard, “He argues that the support should now come from the Rockefeller Foundation, since it would be unethical [otherwise].... In my opinion, the unethical act was performed when he began the work.”<sup>54</sup> It is not clear exactly what Castle or Payne thought would be unethical about the source of funding, though this could also be a code word for “too expensive,” not experimentation on humans. Reviewing the memorandum containing the proposal for the Cidra study reveals nothing unusual, except how closely it resembles the other anemia studies that were performed back at the hospital.<sup>55</sup> Aside from the inclusion of the outside social worker, the study is very similar to many others conducted by the Foundation in Puerto Rico, except not performed on hospital patients.<sup>56</sup> Why, then, did Payne insist so strongly that it was unethical? “It will be seen that the most important reason for avoiding the Cidra experiment were those affecting external relations and it is in this respect that the danger is still present,” he explained to Howard cryptically later in February.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps Howard referred obliquely to the Rhoads affair. Initial communications from Payne to Howard arguing repeatedly against funding the Cidra study begin in early February, as the trial of Rhoads was still in progress, so this is one possible explanation for Payne’s “still-

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<sup>52</sup> Payne to Howard, February 5, 1932, F5, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>53</sup> Castle to Sawyer, February 9, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>54</sup> Payne to Howard, February 3, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>55</sup> “Outline of plans for Cidra study.” October 5, 1931. F6, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>56</sup> “Puerto Rico Anemia Study.” January 25, 1928. F13, B2, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>57</sup> Payne to Howard, February 18, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

present danger” comment. That comment also references “external relations,” and certainly the Rhoads trial was the largest issue of public relations occupying everyone at the time; it is difficult to imagine that another study could attract attention in 1932 simply for methodological details like the ones offered by Payne.<sup>58</sup> The only explicit link between the Rhoads affair and the Cidra study was that Rhoads had been visiting Núñez, ostensibly for a social engagement, when he “made a disturbance.”<sup>59</sup> This event was cited as the “moment of anger” that drove Rhoads to write his letter.

Although on paper, the Cidra study appears to have been isolated from the Rhoads scandal, “There are a few things about this affair which cannot be put into correspondence,” Payne wrote.<sup>60</sup> Núñez also appears to have withheld some kind of information, at least according to the police officer who took her statement. “Miss. Núñez can give a more ample statement than the present one; she was willing to inform something else, but it seems that somebody insinuated to her that she abstain from extending herself with other details she knows pertaining to the doctor of reference.”<sup>61</sup> Of course, these missing details could be almost anything, and are more likely to be further racism than proof of cancer experiments. The timing of a simple funding dispute could be also explained by Castle’s pending departure from Puerto Rico, and a desire to resolve a loose end and move on. Although no one has reviewed the University of Puerto Rico’s or Dr. Cook’s records in light of the Rhoads case in 1932 or since, there is no “smoking gun” hard evidence that Rhoads transplanted cancer into human subjects at

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<sup>58</sup> Payne to Howard, February 3, 1932. F6, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>59</sup> Payne to Howard, February 18, 1932, F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>60</sup> Payne to Howard, February 25, 1932. F7, B1, S243, RG1.1, RAC.

<sup>61</sup> Document No. 525, Distrito de Cidra, P. R., February 2, 1931 [should be 1932] from B’ Ventura Rosario, Sergeant, Insular Police, District Commander, to Chief, Detectives Bureau, in reference to Declaraciones Juradas Caso Vs. Dr. Cornelius P. Rhoads. Puerto Rico National Archives. Cited in Aponte-Vázquez, p.146

Cidra or otherwise. Nonetheless, this is a part of the story that is missing from the trial, as well as from other histories of the Rhoads affair.

If the cancer portion of the letter was purely a fantasy, it does make Rhoads' subsequent career in cancer a strange string of coincidences, or at least reveals the deep significance that particular fantasy had for him. "Ferdie," the addressee of the first letter, was identified as Fred W. Stewart, another Rockefeller alumnus and researcher at the New York Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital, an institution which focuses on cancer.<sup>62</sup> Rhoads would join Stewart at Sloan-Kettering and became its director in 1945. Shrugging off the scandal, Rhoads appeared in *Time* again in 1949, this time making the cover, under the heading "Cancer-Fighter."<sup>63</sup> The article did not make mention of Rhoads' previous appearance in the magazine. As director of the American Cancer Society between 1941 and 1945, Rhoads was instrumental in developing early chemotherapy techniques. In 1954 Rhoads described to the American College of Physicians an experiment involving grafting living cancer cells under a woman's skin, although it was purely consensual.<sup>64</sup> In 1979, the American Association for Cancer Research inaugurated the Cornelius P. Rhoads Memorial Award for promising young cancer researchers under age 40.<sup>65</sup>

There is also certainly some level of plausibility to the idea that Rhoads may have experimented on humans in an unethical way, perhaps one which involved the transplantation of cancer cells. Lack of evidence is not evidence of absence. Still, circumstantial evidence is not strong enough for historical proof. The lack of investigation into the Cidra study is a possible sign of undiscovered information of this nature. It is certainly within Rhoads' personality given

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.40

<sup>63</sup> "Cornelius P. Rhoads: Cancer Fighter." *Time*. June 27, 1949.

<sup>64</sup> Lederer, 2002, pp. 720-746

<sup>65</sup> Douglas Starr, "Revisiting a 1930s Scandal, AACR to Rename a Prize," *Science*, 2003. Vol. 300 no. 5619 pp. 573-574

his own career ambition and his dehumanizing views of Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, the prevailing scientific thinking of the time period rationalized an ideological basis for many atrocities. Before Nazism, American eugenicists also sought to “improve” human populations through selective breeding and compulsory sterilization.<sup>66</sup> While not always strictly genocidal, eugenic ideas often justified human medical experiments that discounted patients as “animals.” In a time before medical ethical standards were codified, social Darwinism justified experimental mistreatment of those considered suitably unfit specimens, such as prisoners and mental health patients.<sup>67</sup>

Medical researchers have historically experimented on unwitting subjects in at least several known cases that have come to light. One incident of human experimentation in the United States was a syphilis experiment carried out by Rockefeller Institute microbiologist Hideyo Noguchi. Noguchi infected a number of New York City orphans with syphilis in 1911, but was exonerated by the New York courts and newspapers in 1912.<sup>68</sup> The Noguchi incident is representative of the remarkable power that public relations had to rehabilitate and bears some resemblance to the role played by Ivy Lee in the Rhoads case. In several other cases, the details of controversial human experimentation have been kept secret for decades. U.S. government Tuskegee syphilis experiment that began in 1932 in Alabama<sup>69</sup>, or similar work that took place in Guatemala in the 1940s during its domination by American fruit conglomerates,<sup>70</sup> are two well-known examples. These studies avoided public scrutiny until 1972 and 2010 respectively,

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<sup>66</sup> Stefan Kühl. *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Lederer, *Subjected to Science: Human Experimentation in America before the Second World War*. Johns Hopkins University Press: 1997.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid pp. 82-91.

<sup>69</sup> Lederer, “The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and the Conventions and Practice of Biomedical Research.” *Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health*. Chicago: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. pp. 415-423

<sup>70</sup> “U.S. apologizes for newly revealed syphilis experiments done in Guatemala”. *Washington Post*. 1 October 2010. Retrieved 1 October 2010.

demonstrating the remarkable power of institutional secrecy or cover-ups, especially in a colony under the control of foreign capitalist interests. This also highlights the possibility that many other similar instances exist throughout history waiting to be discovered.

Historian Susan Lederer, who has written numerous histories on human experimentation, has instead explored the idea of Rhoads' letter as a joke or fantasy. As she interprets it, the reference to extermination would have been amusing in the appropriate context, such as in a personal letter sent between two white, intellectual, upper-class American doctors. This has some parallel to other examples from history of Americans abroad telling racially oriented jokes about the natives. As Warwick Anderson relates with the example of the Philippines, doctors and public health officials have in the past made similar comments in a private venue where it is appropriately appreciated among likeminded peers, such as in a country club.<sup>71</sup> Although Lederer's literary analysis of the Rhoads letter is as a form of comedy that draws upon shared meaning, it is not a dismissal of the entire confession as a joke. Even if completely innocent of murder, Rhoads is certainly guilty of discrimination, though it is a view shared by many in this time period. Lederer does not excuse Rhoads' racism or claim that the racial subtext of Rhoads' remarks is untrue; indeed, she points out that aspect of the letter. Lederer is aware of both Rhoads' later career in cancer and the irony that this creates assuming the cancer portion of the letter was a joke. However, she does not appear to be aware of the Cidra study or that there were patients unexamined by the investigation, or at least neglected to mention it.

Returning to the 1930s and Pedro Albizu Campos, the Rhoads story took on a life of its own despite his exoneration in court, and the Nationalist Party grew in power and prominence through the 1930s. The Nationalists' newfound impact was inspired by the Rhoads incident,

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<sup>71</sup> Anderson, p.142

which had given Albizu an international soapbox and a powerful jumping-off point for local activity. Although election results were consistently poor, the Nationalists were inspired to ramp up their protests, and became popular at the University of Puerto Rico. In 1933, Albizu led a strike against the local electricity and railway monopoly. Albizu continually drew upon the perceived threat of extermination, an image with horror and immediacy that is difficult to surmount. In 1935, four student protestors were killed in what the Nationalists branded the “Río Piedras massacre” after a long tradition of that term’s political and revolutionary application. In retaliation, two nationalists assassinated a Colonel from the Puerto Rican police, and were summarily executed.<sup>72</sup> The following year Albizu was arrested and indicted for sedition and conspiracy to overthrow the government of Puerto Rico. The trial took place in Boston, which holds jurisdiction over Puerto Rico, and became controversial because of a mistrial, declared after a predominantly Puerto Rican jury ruled Albizu was innocent. The second jury declared him guilty, and he was imprisoned in a Federal penitentiary in Atlanta. A pro-labor U.S. Congressman from New York, Vito Marcantonio, even delivered a speech in which he attacked the verdict as “one of the blackest pages in the history of American jurisprudence,” concluding, “Can it happen here? ... It has happened in Puerto Rico.”<sup>73</sup>

Albizu was released ten years later, now an iconic martyr in Nationalist circles called “Don Pedro.” After something of a lull in his absence, the party promptly resumed revolutionary activity. Emerging into a post-World War II world, Albizu’s Rhoadsian genocidal imagery now gained a new urgency, and the movement began to swell at an unprecedented pace. This also occurred contemporaneously with independence movements elsewhere. As the conflict escalated, the legislature passed a law forbidding the display of the Puerto Rican flag or the

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<sup>72</sup>Ramón Bosque Pérez, *Puerto Rico Under Colonial Rule*, SUNY Press, 2006 pp. 71.

<sup>73</sup> Congressional Record, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., 81:10780 Appendix

publication of nationalist sentiments, echoing anti-communist legislation in the United States at the time. In 1950 the movement reached a fever pitch when two nationalists travelled to Washington and attempted to assassinate President Truman. They explicitly referred to Rhoads and this event once again catapulted the durable narrative into the spotlight. Though he was not directly involved, this led to Albizu's second arrest. His health deteriorated and he suffered a stroke in 1956, ironically being transferred to the very same Presbyterian Hospital back home, where he died in 1965.<sup>74</sup> The story of Albizu's life demonstrates the amazing power that the Rhoads narrative created with his interpretation. That a U.S. Congressman and a would-be Presidential assassin were both influenced by this remarkable force of a story is a testament to the significance and resilience the narrative has achieved. The popularity of Albizu as a nationalist figure has also grown through the present day. He has been immortalized in five eponymous high schools in Puerto Rico, as well as one in Harlem and another in Chicago. Pedro Albizu Campos Park in Ponce, dedicated in 1991, features a full-body statue of the charismatic leader. Likely none of this lasting fame would have occurred without the original Rhoads piece; "Don Pedro"'s ascent to heroic myth could not have occurred without a villain.

More recently, Albizu has also attracted attention from some historians and authors, especially those with an interest in Puerto Rican nationalism. In 1982, Pedro Aponte-Vázquez, a Puerto Rican social scientist and writer studying in New York City, encountered the Rhoads saga and revived it from obscurity. Aponte interpreted the Rhoads story with a sympathetic eye toward the Nationalists. Alleging a cover-up, Aponte argued that the "confession" itself, and the existence of the second letter that Governor Beverley suppressed, among other signs of a cover-up, were sufficient to strongly suggest that Rhoads was a murderer and meant what he said.

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<sup>74</sup> Stephen Hunter and John Bainbridge, Jr., *American Gunfight: The Plot To Kill Harry Truman - And The Shoot-Out That Stopped It*, Simon & Schuster, 2005.

Aponte even suggested that a specific 12-year-old girl in the hospital's patient records was a victim, due to the unexplained nature of her death. However, Aponte was unable to convince the Puerto Rican Justice Department to reopen the investigation.<sup>75</sup>

Although Aponte's account is meaningful where it is well-referenced and grounded in historical events, Aponte is an either ideologically motivated nationalist, simply a conspiracy theorist, or something of both. In the speculative appendix to his book, he unfolds a theory which reveals the enduring impact of the Cornelius Rhoads story, and its remarkable power *à la* White's vampirism rumors even through the modern era. In 1950, the recently imprisoned Albizu claimed that agents of the U.S. Navy were burning him with what he described as "electronic beams of beautiful colors and great precision."<sup>76</sup> He was dismissed as a liar or mentally ill. Because of Rhoads' later involvement with radiation, Aponte claims that Rhoads was somehow irradiating Albizu as revenge or experiment. Although this claim is impossible to prove, Rhoads certainly was an expert on radiation, which became increasingly linked to cancer during his career. During World War II, he served on the US Atomic Energy Commission doing chemical and radiation-based warfare experiments. After the war he was instrumental in promoting chemotherapy research and helping make radiation-based therapy a critical part of cancer treatment, which he called "Waging the Chemical-Biological Cancer War."<sup>77</sup> In 1994, an Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments reported to President Clinton that Sloan-Kettering had a contract with the Army starting in 1950 to do radiation experiments on healthy people, although this was presumably for cancer research purposes and not as a revenge

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<sup>75</sup> Aponte-Vázquez, pp. 15-20

<sup>76</sup> Aponte-Vázquez, pp.161-168

<sup>77</sup> Ralph Moss, *The cancer industry: Unraveling the politics*, New York: Paragon House, 1989

weapon.<sup>78</sup> Aponte's belief is a testament to the enduring power of the Rhoads story as a nationalist narrative, and to Albizu's lasting impact as the beneficiary and wielder of that power. However, Aponte's theories have been relegated to the fringe, with mainstream academia branding him an ideologue or a crank, and despite his occasional attempt at its promotion since the 1980s, the Rhoads story returned to obscurity.

However, the Rhoads affair refused to die. In 2002, a Puerto Rican college biology professor named Edwin Vázquez (no relation) also stumbled on the Rhoads letter. Horrified, he demanded that the Cornelius P. Rhoads Memorial Award, given out annually by the American Association of Cancer Researchers to top young cancer scientists, be renamed. The award committee commissioned Yale professor and bioethicist Jay Katz to investigate the Rhoads affair to determine whether this claim was credible. Katz concluded that there was no evidence that Rhoads had killed patients or transplanted cancer cells into them, but that his racist comments were sufficient to remove his name from the reward, which was done.<sup>79</sup>

The Internet probably played some role in the 2002 rediscovery of the Rhoads story, and although it can be a valuable resource for accurate information and fact-checking, it also has a distortional effect that far exceeds that seen in Luise White's *Africa*. The largest compendium of human knowledge also contains statements offered as facts such as "AIDS is a government bioweapon" and "there is a Nazi UFO base in Antarctica." Like Rhoads' statements, these comments also capture the tension between irony and straight language. Rhoads also appears online in some form, though distorted. In 2011, many unreferenced websites flatly claim that Rhoads' 1931 cancer experiment killed 13, a number which does not even appear in the original

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<sup>78</sup> Moreno, Jonatahan, 2000, *Undue Risk: Secret State Experiments on Humans*, Routledge

<sup>79</sup> Eric T. Rosenthal. "The Rhoads Not Given: The Tainting of the Cornelius P. Rhoads Memorial Award." *Oncology Times*, 25:17, September 10, 2003, pp. 19-20

letter, aside from the truth of the rest of the statement. America's self-proclaimed "Best Political Newsletter" recounts that Rhoads had said "dissidents could be 'eradicated' with the judicious use of germ bombs."<sup>80</sup> If Luise White's rumor process was a large-scale game of "telephone," the Internet is an unstoppable conspiracy theory generator. However, it has also guaranteed that the Rhoads narrative has now achieved immortality usually reserved for literature or factual nonfiction. While the true story of events is difficult to locate online, the version that takes the entire letter literally is widespread, perhaps thanks to Aponte's persistence or even Albizu's original campaign. The one person who it is clear we can thank or blame is Rhoads himself.

Although Aponte and other followers of Albizu have lost the battle for credibility in the historiography of Rhoads debate, the belief in Rhoads' guilt still exists in Puerto Rican nationalist circles. The fact that a Puerto Rican nationalist movement has on some level been promoting Albizu's literalist version of the original Rhoads letter more or less continuously since it appeared in 1932 gives it an intractability which resembles few other narrative conflicts. In fact, the Puerto Rican nationalist movement in this context might be compared to other crises of nationalism, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. The idea that Palestinians and Israelis can have two mutually exclusive versions of the same history is actually an easier to resolve problem than the idea that Rhoads was either a confessed killer or a medical genius. Perhaps a more appropriate comparison for the two contradictory Rhoads narratives is the revisionist debate on Stalinism. The historiography of Stalin can portray him on a spectrum from either a despotic totalitarian who meaninglessly murdered his own people, or the heroic savior who elevated a backward country of peasant farmers to the world's preeminent technological superpower. Few can dispute the basic facts of Stalin's reign, that he framed and executed his opponents in a series

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.counterpunch.org/germwar.html>

of brutal show trials, or that he drove the Nazis all the way back to Germany.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the Rhoads story is a sequence of events that may be spun according to one's narrative leaning. The uniqueness of the Rhoads story is in the basic difference in interpretation of his authorial intent, which can range from blunt truth to completely counterfactual irony. Whatever Rhoads did medically in 1931 appears to have been lost to history, Cidra ambiguity aside, and purely textual interpretation of his original letter in the context of the events is one of the only ways to make sense of the entire situation.

The history of Rockefeller hookworm and anemia campaigns in Puerto Rico since 1898 reveals the way that doctors frequently brought their preconceptions into their research efforts, including racial prejudices and subtle support for the temperance movement. The efforts themselves were more a way of exporting American ideas of hygiene to its colonies than a purely medical campaign. When Cornelius Rhoads involved his own conceptions, he not only created an international incident, but a long-lasting and semi-mythological narrative which inspired the rise of a Puerto Rican nationalist movement under Pedro Albizu Campos. Albizu's rise and fall were strongly tied to the strength of Rhoads' original imagery. The immortality of the Rhoads narrative is a demonstration of the powerful hold that threats of extermination and disease have on the imagination, and a testament to the ambiguities inherent in both language and history. From 1932 to today, the Rhoads letter has inhabited a continually changing narrative context which has only increased in complexity with the rise of the Internet. Perhaps in the future, new information about the events of 1931-32 will be unearthed, but until then the Rhoads affair exists in an ironic space all to itself.

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<sup>81</sup> Goldman