THE COLONIA NEXT DOOR:
PUERTO RICANS IN THE HARLEM COMMUNITY, 1917-1948

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the community-based political work of the pionero generation of Puerto Rican migrants to New York City from their collective naturalization under the Jones Act in 1917 to 1948, when political changes on the island changed migration flows to North America. Through discourse analysis of media narratives in black, white mainstream, and Spanish-language newspapers, as well as an examination of histories of Puerto Rican and allied activism in Harlem, I analyze how Puerto Ricans of this era utilized and articulated their own citizenship—both as a formal legal status and as a broader sense of belonging. By viewing this political work through the perspectives of a range of Harlem political actors, I offer new insights as to how the overlapping and interconnected multicultural communities in Harlem contributed to New York’s status (in the words of historian Juan Flores) as a “diaspora city.”

I argue that as Puerto Ricans came to constitute a greater social force in the city, dominant narratives within their discursive and political work shifted from a search for recognition by the rest of society to a demand for empowerment from the bottom up and emanating from the Puerto Rican community outward, leading to a diasporic consciousness which encompassed both the quotidian problems of life in the diaspora and the political and economic issues of the island. A localized process of community-building bound diaspora Puerto Ricans more closely together and re-constituted internal social connections, supported an analysis of social problems shared with other Latinx people and African Americans, and utilized ideological solidarities to encourage coalitional politics as a means for mutual empowerment.
In drawing Puerto Ricans into a broad and rich history of Harlem, I consider the insights of a range of neighborhood individuals and groups, including African American and West Indian (im)migrants, allied white populations such as progressive Italians and pacifist organizers, and Puerto Ricans themselves. The resulting analysis from the spaces between Harlem’s diverse communities in the early 20th century offers contributions to a range of disciplines and fields, including Puerto Rican and Latinx Studies, African American Studies, Urban History, Media Studies/History, and Sociology.
Dedicated to the *pioneros* of the Puerto Rican Diaspora,

especially Daniel Antonio Acosta, my unintentional namesake.

¡Pa’lante!
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CHAPTER I. ALL DIASPORAS ARE LOCAL: CONTEXTUALIZING THE RISE OF EAST HARLEM’S PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY, 1917-1948

“On my first day in New York I didn’t go out at all. There was a lot to talk about, and Ambrosio and I had lengthy conversations. I told him the latest from Puerto Rico, about our families and friends. He talked about the city, what life was like, what the chances were of finding a job… To put it mildly, an utterly dismal picture.” 1 -Bernardo Vega

During the years 1917-1948, the Puerto Rican community in New York went from a small group of cigarmakers and former revolutionaries to the politically and culturally potent force that would dominate East Harlem, the South Bronx, and a handful of other neighborhoods in the decades to come. Central to this evolution was the migration of thousands from the island to the mainland, enabled by their standing as U.S. citizens beginning in 1917. Although mobility—from the island to the mainland, from the apartments of family members who would support newcomers to apartments of their own, and so on—would define the experience of this first major generation of Puerto Ricans in New York, the historical and political specificities of place would also shape their experiences in profound ways.

During these years, Puerto Ricans worked to create a strong community for themselves in New York. In this regard, their experience bore some similarity to the migrants and immigrants of varying backgrounds who preceded them. Also crucial to the experience of Puerto Ricans in New York along with other communities such as European Jews was the fact that they came as part of a wave, which in later years would be recognized and theorized as a diaspora. Despite this similarity, there were a number of differences which directly affected the burgeoning community which was developing in East Harlem and elsewhere. First and foremost among these was the fact that Puerto Ricans arrived as U.S. citizens, which granted them the right to

vote, to enjoy protections under the Bill of Rights, and all the other privileges afforded to citizens. Thus, in forming a place in the social fabric of the city, Puerto Ricans could build upon their standing as citizens, looking to fellow Puerto Rican community members and leaders in accessing work and other resources, and developing their power as a key ethnic constituency in the political life of the city.

These realities may be seen as supporting the sustainable growth of a community of early Puerto Rican migrants. Their *citizenship* enabled participation in all aspects of civic life, which in turn supported a less-tangible sense of *belonging*, or the idea on the part of Puerto Ricans and other New Yorkers that this growing community was a full part of a broader urban social fabric. It should be noted that despite this move towards incorporation into New York society, many Puerto Ricans maintained political and personal connections to the island to an extent that many immigrants did not. Increasingly, this manifested as a *diasporic consciousness* which saw the everyday struggles of New York life and the economic and political fate of Puerto Rico as interconnected struggles. For those engaged in this sort of transnational thinking, the definition of citizenship itself had to be expanded beyond a simple matter of individual political standing. Under this analysis, the struggles of all Puerto Ricans, both on the island and in the mainland, needed to be addressed through both the formal structures of politics and informal social mechanisms, such as belonging, in order for the community to be fully supported. For some, this task would not be accomplished through recognition by the white mainstream of U.S. society. Rather, building a stronger sense of community among diaspora Puerto Ricans would lead to what I term the *empowerment* of the diaspora, which would be sustainable due to its being grown from the bottom up and from within the community outward. Though this mindset is not unconcerned with making demands upon mainstream society, this is not the primary emphasis of
empowerment-based activism. In other words, although Puerto Ricans would initially make regular use of their citizenship to seek access to the rights that status affords, increasingly they would look to each other to build power from within the community.

This project examines the process which might be termed *diasporization* among a population of people whose prospects in the United States were, to a certain degree, determined by colonization, racialization, and a newly achieved citizenship. The island of Puerto Rico was colonized by the United States in 1898, after hundreds of years of Spanish rule which had nearly been broken by resistance from *Boricuas* themselves.² For nearly two decades following this development, Puerto Ricans lacked a fully-formed citizenship of their own, and yet did not hold U.S. citizenship either. It was only in 1917, with the passage of the Jones Act, that *Boricuas* became (supposedly) full members of U.S. society.

Perhaps the most important right which this citizenship granted was the right to migrate freely to the mainland. While Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean had been in the United States for decades prior, this grant of citizenship made migration much simpler and provided a means by which those unable to obtain stable work in Puerto Rico (due to centuries of colonization, resource extraction, and externally-controlled agricultural policy, as well as overpopulation of the island’s limited land base) could find work at a more favorable wage. The results were quick and significant. Between the years 1906 and 1916, the highest number of *Boricuas* who left the island for the United States in a year was 7,394. In 1917, following the passage of the Jones Act, 10,812 Puerto Ricans left the island—nearly all of whom came to North America.³ Of these, the largest group came to New York City.

² The term “Boricua” refers to a Puerto Rican person, and is derived from the indigenous name for the island.
Dense Puerto Rican neighborhoods sprang up in various parts of the city. The background of many Boricua migrants as cigar makers, or *tabaqueros*, led to their settlement in the Lower East Side and Chelsea sections of Manhattan, where around 500 Hispanic-owned and -operated tobacco factories were located. The shipyards drew many to Brooklyn, particularly in the Navy Yard and Greenpoint neighborhoods. However, the neighborhood which would become the “largest and most significant of all the inter-wars settlements” was East Harlem, near the northeast corner of Central Park and extending northward. Of all the *colonias*, or concentrations of Puerto Rican families in the city (which would later extend into The Bronx as well), it was East Harlem that became known as “El Barrio”- the neighborhood. The Puerto Ricans who would migrate to these blocks were part of a major shift in Harlem’s population, which had previously been predominated by Italian and Jewish families. While many of these earlier residents would remain, particularly in certain sections of East Harlem, Puerto Ricans as well as Black Americans would come to predominate large swaths of the neighborhood. Thus, this was a dynamic period in Harlem’s history, when the neighborhood’s makeup would be altered significantly. Corresponding changes to the social and political landscape would be required, and these adaptations will form the focus of this study.

For me, this project begins at one specific intersection- East 117th St. and Madison Ave. It was near here that my great-grandfather, Antonio Acosta, lived in 1930. He shared an apartment with an uncle, Carlo Cruz, Carlo’s wife Eloina, Antonio’s wife Luella (Hyde), and his first son, Antonio, Jr. In many ways, their experience was representative of life in Harlem.

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during this period. Theirs was one of many households supplemented by extended family, boarders, and others who could help make the rent payment each month. The building itself, 19 E. 117th Street, also housed a cross-section of the communities that made up Harlem during these years. Downstairs were the Ferrers, fellow Puerto Ricans, and two of the neighboring apartments housed the Andersons, a black family from the British West Indies, and the Maxwells, two African American sisters from Georgia. Though my family retains little knowledge of this period in its history, I imagine that the sorts of diasporic connections which this study examines began as conversations among the residents of this building, all of whom were seeking the employment opportunities, political connections, knowledge of available benefits, and other resources necessary to build a new life in their newly-adopted city.

Antonio was to die young, in 1941 at the age of thirty-seven, setting off a second diaspora of sorts. My great-grandmother, grandfather, and his brothers would leave New York City for the western part of the state. In a sense, my family’s journey since 1941 illustrates one of the central arguments of this study- that place, culture, and ethnic identity have a mutually-reinforcing relationship to each other. Through the creation of ethnic neighborhoods in East Harlem and elsewhere, the population that would come to be known as Nuyoricans established a distinct perspective on U.S. society that arose out of the experiences of their forebears on the island, and a cultural identity that was, to some degree, neither of “here,” nor “there.” When connections to one’s community are severed, and markers of ethnic distinctiveness such as language are lost, this cultural identity may similarly fade from existence. This was the case for my family, which found itself removed from the colonia by circumstances, before the language,

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6 *Ibid.*, sheets 2A and 2B.
food, and other cultural aspects of Nuyorican life could become a part of their own identity. For the Boricuas who remained in East Harlem, there were a range of structural and social links which they, as U.S. citizens, could continue to enjoy with the island. That citizenship, which would enable their presence in New York, nevertheless carried the burden of racialization which would lead to second-class status for diaspora Boricuas.

In seeking to understand more deeply the social standing of New York’s Puerto Rican population during its early years, I intend to add to a tradition of scholarship which has increasingly considered the activism (both within and outside of the electoral process) of this migrant group. Being that the early 20th century was a period of enormous social change in Harlem, this project will also consider the perspectives of parallel migrants who migrated to Harlem during the same time period as Puerto Ricans. Most notable among these are the U.S.-born black migrants of the Great Migration. Puerto Ricans shared with this group the formal status of citizenship, though both groups saw their citizenship rights tempered by processes of racialization in the context of colonialism and Jim Crow. As highly mobile populations, both communities were, in their own ways, seeking an understanding of their place in the social fabric of their new hometown, supported by a more equitable and reliable set of civil and human rights. By exploring their interlocking histories, this study will more fully explore the early roots of the Puerto Rican diaspora’s cultural consciousness as practiced in the United States, as well as the ways in which Puerto Ricans defined themselves in their new political, social, and geographic context.

In particular, I consider the ways in which *citizenship*, broadly defined to include social belonging, was the narrative terrain on which this activism was framed. This history suggests that although Puerto Ricans utilized their citizenship as a means of securing existing rights and
gaining new ones, they did not uncritically accept the U.S. assertion of colonial control over the island and its people. They retained close ties to Puerto Rico, balancing the needs and desires of their own neighborhoods in New York with those of their relatives remaining at home and making strategic use of their standing as citizens and voters from a growing ethnic constituency in New York. Though these first pioneros (pioneers) may not have thought of themselves as part of a diaspora, their work on behalf of both North American and Caribbean Boricua communities suggests an interconnected sense of community, and a desire to uplift all members of that community. Differing narratives of citizenship were utilized in achieving this goal, some of which were implicit critiques of the racial inequalities built into the North American political structure. Whether it was U.S., Puerto Rican, or some other citizenship yet to be conceived of, Boricuas defined citizenship as advocacy for one’s people, and empowerment through community control of the social, cultural, and political structures of one’s home- wherever they might make it.

Historical Roots of New York’s Puerto Rican Community

In considering the diasporic and national-level effects of Puerto Rican migration, this project will build on the local histories of the people of El Barrio. The historical roots of the community, however, lay not only in East Harlem but elsewhere in New York where Caribbean Latinx people congregated.8 Latinx people were part of the social fabric of New York since the colonial period. In 1613, a “free mulato” from the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo (today, the Dominican Republic) by the name of Jan Rodrígues arrived to trade with local indigenous

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8 When referring to people of Spanish background broadly, I will utilize the gender-inclusive “Latinx” usage, rather than the gendered “Latina/o” construction. When referring to specific people, my usage will conform to that person’s known gender identity. Quotations will preserve the original usage.
groups, some eleven years before the formation of the New Amsterdam colony. From at least
the 1860s, Cuban and Puerto Rican independence activists lived in exile in the city. Though
migration to the city did experience notable growth during the latter part of the nineteenth
century, the 1890 U.S. Census documented a Latinx population of just under 6000, out of a total
population in Manhattan and Brooklyn of just over 2.3 million. Of these, 3448 were from Puerto
Rico, Cuba, and other islands of the Caribbean. This small group of Latinx migrants was
nonetheless sufficient to constitute recognizable ethnic enclaves downtown, in the Chelsea
section of Manhattan. By 1920, the numbers of the Spanish-speaking community in then Italian
and Jewish East Harlem had risen, though at this point Spaniards and Cubans greatly
outnumbered the Puerto Ricans in the colonia. Thus, although the Puerto Rican community in
New York had not previously existed in the same numbers, it drew on a rich historical legacy of
Spanish-speaking migrants and existing political organizations (particularly on the ideological
left). Further, Boricuas had the option to move into neighborhoods with an existing population
base of Hispanos (as people of Spanish or Latin American descent then predominantly referred
to themselves).

The thousands of Puerto Ricans who arrived in East Harlem from 1917 to 1948 would
mark the beginning of a greater public consciousness of the Puerto Rican people, as well as an
increasing prevalence of Boricuas among the city’s Latinx population. The proportion of Latinx

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9 Gabriel Haslip-Viera, “The Evolution of the Latina/o Community in New York City, Early Seventeenth Century to
10 Lorrin Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City*
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 23.
11 On the Latinx population of New York, see ibid., 19. On the total 1890 population of the city (which had not yet
https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1890_fast_facts.html.
people that hailed from Puerto Rico increased from 17.9% (7264) in 1920 to 40.7% (44,908) in 1930 and 45.8% (61,463) in 1940, according to the federal Census. On a more fundamental level, the increasing presence of Boricuas changed the issues being grappled with in this migrant, largely working-class neighborhood. Immediately before the rise of “Spanish Harlem,” the area had been predominated by people of Italian and Jewish background. German- and Irish-Americans living in the area in the late 19th century had mostly moved on by 1910, replaced by Jewish immigrants west of Third Avenue. East of Third Avenue, Italians began to move in during the 1880s. The Puerto Rican population, as of 1926, straddled these two communities in the blocks between 90th Street, 116th Street, Fifth Avenue and First Avenue. A second concentration existed between 110th St, 125th Street, Manhattan Avenue and Fifth Avenue (on the north end of Central Park). These two areas accounted for 60% of the Puerto Rican population in the city. Accordingly, the Puerto Rican experience in New York during these years arose out of a community which was relatively concentrated. This local context would be crucial to the formation of identity and to the political activism which Puerto Ricans would undertake for self-empowerment.

Although the experience of migration from Puerto Rico differed in several respects from immigration from Europe, both groups made the difficult choice to migrate largely for economic reasons. Many of the earliest-arriving Boricuas sought out jobs in industries such as

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13 Figures reproduced in Haslip-Viera, 23.
16 Sánchez Korrol, From Colonia to Community, 58-60.
cigarmaking, which in New York was dominated by Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Unlike immigrant groups such as the Italians and Jews who previously lived in the section, Boricuas were “citizens on arrival” following the passage of the Jones Act. This legal status made free migration possible and accounts for the burgeoning group of migrants arriving after 1917. The fact of their citizenship status led many Puerto Ricans to feel that they were entitled to the same rights as any other citizen, and (as we shall see below), they often pointed to their citizenship as a reason why these rights should be granted. This discursive terrain was accessible to Puerto Ricans in a way it was not accessible to immigrants from outside the United States’ sphere of control.

However, their claim of citizenship rights did not mean that Boricuas did not experience marginalization and racialization. Indeed, these experiences led to difficulties in obtaining work, as was the case for José Celso González. From his perspective, Puerto Ricans occupied the lowest position among foreign-born workers in New York, a fact he did not believe was explained by racial prejudice. If employers could be convinced that Puerto Ricans were “‘as American as they are,’” this prejudice could be overcome. It was a similar line of thinking which led the Puerto Rican government office in the city to issue identification cards to migrant Puerto Ricans which explained that they were entitled to work in North America. However, the cards themselves effectively “translated” the racial background of the bearer from the racial labels employed on the island into the North American racial hierarchy. Applicants for these cards utilized a range of phenotypically-based racial categories including “dark,” “light,” “ruddy,” and

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17 Ibid., 141. The organizations formed by and for the benefit of cigarmakers in the city would be some of the first Puerto Rican organizations in the city, other than groups formed to support Cuban and Puerto Rican independence in the late 19th century.

18 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 66-68.
“brown” in describing themselves. These descriptions were generally in line with the complex racial regime of the island, rather than the black/white binary of North American society. However, in issuing the cards, the Puerto Rican migration division frequently changed the descriptions, suggesting a darker complexion than the applicant themselves perceived. In no application examined by one study was a Puerto Rican described as “white.” This history suggests that whatever the racial order in Puerto Rico might have been, Boricuas generally were defined as non-white and subject to the racialization of the North American order, and the various sorts of discrimination that came along with it.

The numbers of these migrants reported in archival records vary greatly, due in large part to the difficulties in gaining reliable figures through a door-to-door count, the circular migration of some individuals, and the number of sources one might draw from (which may not be updated in later years). Virginia Sánchez Korrol, reporting the 1926 estimates of the Porto Rican Brotherhood of America, gives the number of Puerto Ricans in East Harlem at about 60,000 (out of a total population of about 100,000 Puerto Ricans in the New York metropolitan area). Other figures put the Puerto Rican population of the area at thirty to forty thousand in the 1920s. In 1940, the federal census provides a somewhat more modest figure: 61,463 Puerto Ricans (both island- and mainland-born) living in all five boroughs. Whatever the exact figures, it is clear that both in terms of physical presence and in terms of the imagined connections between the community and the geography, East Harlem was (and remains) a crucial space for Puerto Ricans in the United States.

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19 Ibid., 69-72.
20 Sánchez Korrol, From Colonia to Community, 59. Being that these are the estimates of a community organization representing Puerto Ricans, it is possible that there is a degree of inflation in these numbers.
21 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 24.
22 Sánchez Korrol, From Colonia to Community, 213.
Theorizing a Locally-Rooted, Racialized Citizenship

Harlem’s Puerto Rican and black communities (both U.S.-born and West Indian) are prominent in both the U.S. popular imaginary and scholarly literature in a number of fields. However, these communities have too frequently been viewed in isolation (excepting some crucial recent works discussed below), rather than as either overlapping communities or as an opportunity for comparative research. The interconnected social and cultural processes of mobility, identity-making, and community advocacy of Boricua and black American communities in Harlem shared some important characteristics. Both communities, for example, took advantage of their citizenship to seek greater economic opportunities to create a better life for themselves and their families. Despite these opportunities, it shall become clear over the course of this study that the citizenship of these two groups was viewed by the white mainstream as second-class. West Indians shared with Puerto Ricans the experience of migration from the Caribbean, and were often conceptualized as black, but lacked even second-class citizenship at the time of their arrival. Despite these differences, all three groups were subject to processes of racialization and uneven application of the law. These shared experiences stand both as opportunities for the building of solidarity, and as a lens through which to offer scholarly analysis.

Underlying all of this is one final commonality- presence in the geographic space of Harlem. In many respects, we may see Harlem as what Mary Louise Pratt terms a “contact zone.” Pratt defines these as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each

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23 It is important to note here that “black” and “Puerto Rican” are not mutually exclusive categories. A number of Puerto Ricans on the island are of African descent, and generations of co-existence in Harlem and elsewhere has led to intermarriage between Puerto Ricans of varying background and African Americans or West Indians. See below for further discussion of the distinctions and connections drawn between these communities in the existing scholarly literature, as well as the complex nature of Puerto Rican racial identity.
other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths. Harlem stands as a contact zone between Puerto Ricans, black Americans, West Indians, immigrant “ethnic whites” (including notably Italian and Jewish community members), and the mainstream white culture of New York City.

The interconnections and struggles resulting from the burgeoning Puerto Rican presence in Harlem, while local in character, were ultimately transnational in nature. Lara Putnam, in her consideration of West Indian political and literary efforts in interwar Harlem, suggests that the neighborhood eventually became the “Northern Frontier of a Connected Caribbean.” Rather than feeding the internationalist consciousness of these immigrant groups, their presence in New York resulted from an existing global mindset. Thus, “Harlem was an important point in the panorama they observed, but it was not mecca in the sense of destiny or heaven. It was one more metropolis where the hypocrisies of democracy demanded vigilant action.” This suggests that Harlem should not be viewed as an entirely exceptional case, particularly as it concerns the political work of its immigrant black residents. Nonetheless, I would submit that the potent social and political connections which were facilitated by this space merit a concerted analysis which seeks to draw black and Puerto Rican histories into a broader history of Harlem, befitting of the multicultural nature of the neighborhood.

In conducting this scholarly work, I do not wish to minimize the historical and social differences between the ethnic and racial communities in Harlem, nor to paint a portrait of political solidarity which is not supported by empirical historical realities. Indeed, the differing standing of Puerto Ricans and non-Hispanic black people, as well as the changes in Puerto

Ricans’ experiences of racialization from their Caribbean island to the island of Manhattan, led to tensions which were sometimes irresolvable. These tensions sometimes varied as they manifested between Puerto Ricans and U.S.-born black Americans on the one hand, and Puerto Ricans and black migrants from other nations (most notably the other islands of the Caribbean) on the other. This aside, community leaders did (through both discursive and political means) work to build common cause among Harlemites to achieve the full range of citizenship rights for all that called the section home. This project considers both the achieved and thwarted possibilities, as both assist in building a richer understanding of the shifting social fabric of Harlem, and how these historical specificities echoed throughout both mainstream white society and the Puerto Rican diaspora.

The broader scholarship on racial and ethnic groups in the United States has, partly as a consequence of historical factors, proceeded largely from a black-white binary. As a result, Latinx populations have been largely positioned as a third group in opposition to both black and white communities. This racial framework is reflected in the literature of race in Puerto Rico and the diaspora, which Jorge Duany sees as questioning “whether the dominant white/black dichotomy can capture the complex racial situation of the Puerto Rican diaspora.”26 The racial identity of Puerto Ricans, which on the island tends to be placed on a spectrum on the basis of physical characteristics such as skin color, hair type, etc. does not comport well to this dichotomy.27 This study proceeds from the notion that the issue of racial identity was among the fundamental issues faced by pioneros in New York’s Puerto Rican communities. How Boricuas saw and described themselves, and the ways in which this identity was “translated” into the

social, cultural, and political language of interwar New York had implications in terms of the possibility of building coalitions among Harlem’s migrant communities. This study seeks to elucidate a complex and locally rooted “history from the bottom up” wherein complex discursive connections and political coalitions were attempted and/or avoided on the part of Puerto Rican and black Harlemites, in the context of complex articulations of race by diasporic and colonial subjects. At times, these processes of racial identity-making could stand as a barrier to building common cause among Harlemites.

In examining these racial narratives, and their effects within Harlem communities, this project seeks to illuminate the discursive and political contact between Puerto Rican and non-Hispanic black communities. Research on Latinx experience too often focuses exclusively on how these subjects relate to, and call into question, mainstream articulations of whiteness within the U.S. national context. Aside from this process, which often manifests as either assimilation or a questioning of the terms of social and cultural belonging in conversation with the white mainstream, a whole range of discourses among racialized groups exists which is worthy of study. The potential for study of black-Latinx relations, and the ways in which these communities have found commonalities of identity and experience and “spoken back” to white supremacy in various ways, has been underexplored. The history of Harlem during this period presents unique opportunities to consider these counternarratives to the dominant racial formations of U.S. society.

It is important to note that in conceptualizing the place of black and Puerto Rican communities in New York, recent literature focused on afrolatinidad has called attention to the ways in which these communities have historically been overlapping in terms of their membership and in the ways in which community leaders have framed them. In New York, study
of these questions must begin from at least the late-19th century, when Cuban and Puerto Rican independence activists sowed the seeds of East Harlem’s Boricua community. Through his study of the life and work of Arturo Schomburg, advocate for the independence of his native Puerto Rico and intellectual historian of the global African Diaspora with which he identified, historian Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof sees a set of overlapping solidarities through which “[m]en and women of color from Puerto Rico and Cuba engaged with the multiracial projects of exile nationalism while integrating into multiethnic Black neighborhoods and social institutions.”28 Thus, although during the period of this study New York’s Puerto Rican communities were still situating themselves in the social fabric of the city at large, they were not doing so in a historical vacuum. Rather, they were building on the political work of Latinx people who had proceeded them. Their negotiations of the question of racial identity, undertaken in the context of North American social norms, were further complicated by the interwoven histories of the African Diaspora and Latin America. As we shall see below, Puerto Ricans sometimes made use of their ethnic identity (particularly the Spanish language) as a means to avoid being racialized along similar lines to black Americans. This likely complicated the possibility of coalitional empowerment efforts in Harlem.

Building on this historical and theoretical context, I will interrogate how Boricuas saw themselves as fitting into the community life of Harlem and the broader New York City cultural geography. Whether in the language of “citizenship” directly or through some other metric of belonging, and whether proceeding from an assimilationist narrative or a position of national/ethnic distinctiveness, I will engage with narratives of belonging among Boricuas and

thereby contribute to studies of how colonized populations re-make their lives in the colonizing nation. These issues will be considered primarily through the analytical lens of how Puerto Rican migrants in New York viewed their sense of belonging in the metropolitan community (conceptually related to, but not the same as, legal citizenship; see below) and worked from the spaces in between their own communities and those of other migrant, immigrant, and racialized groups which surrounded them. In doing so, it will build from exceptional recent works which have focused on these issues from an in-group perspective within Puerto Ricans communities, as well as focusing on how Puerto Ricans have reframed dominant conceptions of their suitability for citizenship. Shifting the emphasis of these previous works, I consider how a range of racialized and marginalized populations of Harlem, most especially black and Puerto Rican communities, advocated for empowerment in the context of migration and viewed the political work of neighboring communities.

Demands for rights in this period were made under differing perspectives on the relationship between racialized and colonized subjects and the U.S. political regime. I analyze these various engagements with the state in a comparative fashion, taking into account the subject positions of the actors involved, in order to develop a rich analysis of race, ethnicity, and citizenship (broadly construed to include belonging). On an organizational level, this manifests in the many political solutions which groups proposed. From participation in existing political structures by Puerto Ricans, to engagement in nationalist activism, behind each strategic choice looms an assumption about the extent to which the U.S. nation-state could be the source of rights for Puerto Ricans, and by extension all marginalized people of color, in the interwar period.

Each Puerto Rican’s understandings of the possibility of rights under the American flag were and are, of course, complicated by the “tensions of empire” which existed on the island
since 1898. Fundamental among these tensions, as outlined by Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, are whether the principles of “generalized citizenship and inclusive social rights” are “applicable- and to whom- in old overseas empires and in newly conquered territory.” These same tensions, albeit in modified form, existed in the New York colonia as well, and diaspora Puerto Ricans themselves negotiated these questions in their own ways. The move to New York brought with it a demonstration of the rights which Puerto Ricans had as U.S. citizens, despite the many other ways (discursive and otherwise) in which that citizenship was shown to be second-class in the eyes of mainstream America.

Despite their marginalization in interwar New York, Boricuas utilized their citizenship in all of its various forms: through electoral politics, by demanding access to public services, in advocating for decent living conditions, and so on. This project considers the extent to which they chose to conduct this fight for rights utilizing what I term narratives of citizenship. These negotiations of the questions of citizenship, as well as positions on the political status of the island, are fundamentally comments on the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. A demand for “citizenship rights,” for example, is a statement that Puerto Ricans rightfully belong in the United States and deserve the full range of entitlements of citizens. An articulation of belonging within the U.S. national framework might be undertaken alongside a program of cultural nationalism. This narrative, which Jorge Duany sees at play on the island from around the creation of the estado libre asociado (free associated state, more commonly translated as “commonwealth) status in 1952. As the leaders of Puerto Rico were legitimizing the U.S. regime

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30 The term colonia is best translated as “community,” and in this context refers to the Puerto Rican community in New York which is more specifically called El Barrio (in the case of East Harlem).
on the island, they articulated a “unique history, culture, language, and geography as the essence of the nation” but without claiming the existence of a sovereign state.\textsuperscript{31} This framework is central to many works studying Puerto Rico and its diaspora, and is fully appropriate to the post-1952 period. However, in studying earlier Boricua migration, this emphasis on cultural (rather than political) power cannot be taken for granted. The findings of this study nonetheless suggest that some elements of the cultural nationalism which Duany associates with the rise of the ELA were also present in the diaspora prior to those political developments on the island. In the context of pre-1948 New York, the cultural distinctiveness of Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking people was a more sparingly utilized (but nonetheless important) tool to build community and create the conditions for group empowerment.

An alternative framework for understanding discourses of belonging among diaspora Puerto Ricans might take cultural nationalism one step further, rejecting the formal nation-state as the rightful, or at least a useful, site to seek out rights and a sense of belonging. Pioneros of New York’s Puerto Rican community utilized the political structures of New York and narratives of citizenship and nationalism (be it political or cultural) in complex and often unexpected ways. In general, their activism suggests not a strict dichotomy between assimilationist and nationalist perspectives, but varying manifestations of a “both/and” activist approach. Describing a related phenomenon, Duany argues that “diasporic narratives of identity tended to move away from exclusive territorial and linguistic criteria to broader cultural and emotional ties to the migrants’ communities of origin.”\textsuperscript{32} Whatever these narratives sounded like, it should be noted that all proceeded out of the colonial context of Puerto Rico and its people in the diaspora, and of the

\textsuperscript{31} Duany, \textit{Puerto Rican Nation}, 123.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.}, 186.
particular tensions of being “outsiders within”- colonial citizens at the heart of a colonizing nation.

Beyond direct statements by Boricua New Yorkers, the most effective means of understanding how they saw themselves fitting into their new hometown is through the activist projects they undertook. New York Puerto Ricans in the 1920s-1940s used various means to achieve greater empowerment. Many chose to work within the context of existing Democratic machine politics, in effect positioning their communities as yet another immigrant group working for political rights (as the Irish, notably, had done in previous decades). Others, motivated in part by their personal loyalty to Congressman Vito Marcantonio, worked through the mechanism of the American Labor Party, a third party with significant power in East Harlem. Still others were a “swing” constituency, willing to support Puerto Rican candidates or those who best spoke to the community’s issues regardless of party affiliation. Some organized under the banner of leftist parties, such as the Socialist and Communist Parties.33 Still others banded together as nationalists, seeking political independence for Puerto Rico and largely rejecting the mainland political process in New York as well as the colonial political process on the island. A great many focused less on formal, electoral politics and more on community organizing, though this activism should be seen as “political” as well. Whatever their outlook, politically active Boricuas in New York were, nearly to a person, united in working for local empowerment and building a community and a power base among their community in the diaspora, as well as fighting for the welfare of those who remained on the island. This was not seen as incompatible with “living as a citizen,” despite assimilationist logics which predominated narratives relating to

33 Most notable among these was Jesús Colón, a Puerto Rican community leader based in Brooklyn, who was a prominent member of the Socialist Party. See Chapter V for further discussion of Colón’s journalistic work.
migration. The organizing work these community leaders undertook provides a historical base for understanding the prominence of Puerto Rican culture in New York life, and of the diasporic consciousness of the community, on display in the post-World War II era.

These differing strategies might otherwise be framed as expressions of the possibility of belonging (or, alternatively, substantive citizenship) as opposed to the more concrete objective of fully exercising a political and legal citizenship through the institutional structures of government. This critical examination of the experience of citizenship is in line with Suzanne Oboler’s call to interrogate whether the status of citizen “actually constitutes the fundamental, sociopolitical expression of national belonging.” Oboler’s framework highlights the possibility that citizenship may not confer a sense of belonging on racialized subjects such as Puerto Ricans. I define belonging as encompassing a number of formal and informal structures and processes. Beyond the legal structure of citizenship, this would include both social process which lead Puerto Ricans to feel that they are full members of U.S. society, and narratives which confer a sense of whether or not their membership in society is recognized by others. This might operate through a framework which moves Puerto Ricans in the direction of assimilation, as with immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century, or as a culturally distinct group retaining a broader group identity.

In evaluating belonging as practiced by Puerto Ricans themselves, a key question is the extent to which “citizenship,” either as a formal legal status or as a more nebulous sociopolitical status (what scholars have called cultural citizenship), was the narrative terrain on which these issues were explored by Puerto Ricans. This is, in many respects, a discursive exploration, a

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consideration of how frequently and in what ways Puerto Ricans used what I term narratives of citizenship to frame their status in New York. Most particularly, I analyze how central to the “Puerto Rican cause” it was to make others in New York aware of their status as U.S. citizens specifically and to work in the political sphere as citizens.

A strong and growing body of scholarship considers the efforts for empowerment that Puerto Ricans undertook during their early years in New York, largely building from the perspectives and advocacy of Boricua communities themselves. This project will extend this analysis further, into the realm of interracial spaces— the perspectives on, and manifestations of, citizenship which played out in the spaces in between the Puerto Rican and other communities. While I am still interested in how articulations of citizenship operated for the Puerto Rican community, I also analyze these narrative and discursive practices outside of the confines of El Barrio’s places and spaces. In particular, the perspectives of black American journalists working to situate the political activism of their Boricua neighbors will suggest ways in which different racialized and diasporic subjects saw the exercise of citizenship unfolding among the colonia, as well as illuminating which aspects of this activism were deemed pertinent to the experience of black Harlemites. This consideration requires a consciousness of the various dimensions of difference and shared experience as they came into play in movement-building. Through consideration of not only media narratives themselves but the context in which they emerged, I offer a broad and interconnected study of the political work of Harlemites of varying backgrounds, ideological perspectives, and experiences of physical, social, and political mobility.

The matter of how diasporic, racialized, and colonized identities influenced community organizing and joint activism is one which has been explored in the literature, albeit unevenly. A
useful starting point might be Earl Lewis’ work on identity formation within “overlapping diasporas.” Lewis calls on scholars to emphasize not just the ways in which African Americans have been implicated in social structures (specifically slavery), but also the ways in which they have served as social actors with agency and who have contended with racial regimes in various ways worthy of study for their own sake. Further, Lewis considers the importance of analyzing processes of *identity construction* and the complexities of this process which might differ considerably from *racial formation*. The former is a more local and individual process, “a complex personal and social calculus in which people simultaneously add, subtract, multiply, and divide aspects of themselves in other than a predetermined manner.”

Racial formation, as articulated by Omi and Winant in their germinal work, describes a “process of historically situated *projects*” which contribute to commonly-held understandings of race and serve to justify the distribution of resources along racial lines. The operationalization of these racialized processes fundamentally requires hegemonic conditions which “achieve and consolidate rule,” through the attainment of a social consensus that craft “common sense” understandings of racial identity. Omi and Winant’s focus is thus more fully trained on ways in which the powerful utilize the structures of society as well as narratives of race to consolidate power in a hegemonic sense. The process of identity formation, by contrast, is one in which the personal standpoint of people of color is centered. Thus, for marginalized and racialized people, identity formation stands as a potential terrain for resistance against racialization and a means of self-making. I find the distinctions between these two processes useful, though I would hasten to add that I do not

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37 Ibid, 67.
wish to allow an interest in identity construction to obscure the structural factors involved in the operation of race. However, some mechanism like identity formation is necessary as a framework to consider how racialized subjects reframe their sense of belonging. In the case of the pioneros under examination here, I am specifically interested in how identity formation was utilized towards the end of reclaiming citizenship, whether on dominant terms or through a re-definition of the terms of belonging which this legal construct implies.

Lewis also calls on scholars to broaden their work to the global African diaspora and to complicate the divisions drawn between African Americans, black immigrants of the West Indies, and others of African descent. “How do we begin to understand differences within black communities?” he asks, “How do we define and refine the practice of writing African peoples into a history of overlapping diasporas?”38 Though Lewis does not thoroughly expand on this point, we see here the beginnings of a means to study people of African descent in new ways, particularly in Latin American contexts where mestizaje, or racial mixing, is so prevalent. The Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States has historically been conceptualized as racially Other by the white mainstream, and many of its members are read as black. As we shall see below in the case of Maria Más Pozo, Boricuas of the interwar years frequently resisted this identification out of a concern for being considered “Negro” on top of being (im)migrant outsiders. In her exploration of this issue, historian Lorrin Thomas notes that categories of color as they operated in early 20th century Puerto Rico “carried with them coded information about a person’s probable class position and social status, but they did not describe an immutable social location.”39

Confronting the more thoroughly stratified U.S. racial order led some Puerto Ricans, concerned

38 Lewis, “To Turn As On a Pivot,” 786.
39 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 59-60.
with their relative measure of social belonging, to disassociate from black communities and the
ascription of blackness to themselves. A study of the Puerto Rican and black communities
framed in terms of “overlapping diasporas” must consider not only the racialization of these two
communities (which might share common characteristics), but also the extent to which these they
coidentified or disassociated from each other. These realities will be all too apparent in our
study of coalitions (both potential and achieved) among these groups in Harlem.

Though his analytical emphasis is on Cuba and the United States, and not Puerto Rico,
Frank Andre Guridy’s *Forging Diaspora* offers a model as to how Boricua-black solidarities
might develop through his study of connections between Afro-Cubans and African Americans.
Guridy suggests a means of analysis of two populations within a single diaspora which are
nonetheless divided by national lines in a colonial context. At base, Guridy’s study is interested
in “how transnational modes of belonging are created and maintained.” In complicating more
traditional models of diaspora, this analysis proceeds from a position which both does not
“discount the power of national allegiances” and which recognizes that “the intertwined
processes of imperialism and racial segregation compelled [Afro-Cubans and African
Americans] to develop survival strategies that extended beyond the boundaries of the nation.”

The tensions between strategies which emphasize the state, and those which look beyond the
state as a source of rights, will be much on display in the ways in which Puerto Ricans utilized
their citizenship. For example, the *instrumental* usages of citizenship under examination in
Chapter II, which do not necessarily proceed from an *ideological* commitment to the U.S. nation-
state, suggest that assertions of national allegiance in the short term do not necessarily impinge

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40 Frank Andre Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim
upon articulations of cultural and political distinctiveness in the medium or long term. Carrying this argument forward, this study suggests the increasing prevalence of a similar set of empowerment strategies which sought to increase the strength of the Puerto Rican community within the national imaginary of the United States through discursive practices that acknowledge the twin concerns of racism and colonialism as they were constraining the Puerto Rican community in diaspora.

Guridy argues that the linkages among people of the African diaspora were enabled by a series of economic and colonial networks which had been established in the outposts of what he terms the “U.S.-Caribbean world.”41 Beyond the expected sites such as New Orleans, Tampa, and Havana, Harlem was a key location in this U.S.-Caribbean world due in part to its role in the development of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (arising out of the large population of black migrants from the West Indies). This transcultural movement was further enabled by the movement of African Americans into Harlem and other Northern urban centers during the Great Migration.42 Guridy’s study brings together the issues of U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean and the subsequent racial regimes which were enacted both in North America and the Caribbean, and suggests a range of ways in which these structures might be put to subversive use by diasporic populations, particularly at those sites (such as Harlem) where various racial, ethnic, and national populations with related experiences met.

The history of Haitian immigration to the United States has also proven extremely fruitful in terms of considering the interaction of diaspora and notions of citizenship. While the exercise of Haitian citizenship among members of its diaspora arises from a fundamentally different

41 Ibid., 7.
42 Ibid., 9.
political relationship with the United States, I wish to consider the ways in which the Haitian experience suggests useful analytics regarding the colonial U.S. citizenship of Boricuas. Michel Laguerre’s notion of diasporic citizenship is particularly useful in understanding how culture, ethnicity, and transnationalism intersect to form notions of the Haitian citizen in diaspora. Their sense of continued connection to their homeland has led Haitians, in Laguerre’s estimation, to refuse to conform to the process of assimilation expected by mainstream American society. Regarding transnationalism, Laguerre returns to the roots of the term in the pioneering work of Randolph Bourne, which frames immigration as a process of hybridization in which subjects may exercise citizenship in new ways, in connection with the sending country. The process of diaspora-making is a fundamentally transnational process suggesting “displacement and reattachment,” but one which also often involves a continuing, active process of connection with the sending nation. Diasporic citizenship, then, takes in the subjectivity of the individual living outside the nation of former primary allegiance “who experiences through transnational migration (or the redesigning of the homeland boundaries) the subjective reality of belonging to two or more nation-states.” Though Puerto Rico lacks a nation-state of its own, it is clear from the words of many pioneros that they similarly held a complex allegiance and sense of rootedness, which arose out of their own experience of migration. Empowerment as residents of New York required engagement with the terms of U.S. citizenship, but for many this allegiance was expressed in fundamentally diasporic terms. For example, as we shall see in Chapter V, leftist Puerto Ricans articulated the need for the decolonization of the island in terms of the

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44 Ibid., 6.
46 Ibid., 12-13.
fulfillment of the United States’ founding promise. In the historical context of the global fight against fascism, decolonization would stand as evidence of the U.S. commitment to freedom, while failure to uphold this promise would be seen as a prime example of the nation’s hypocrisy and lack of commitment to its citizens of color. This narrative asserts a knowledge of the nation’s ideals, which implicitly serves as an assertion of worthiness and belonging in U.S. society. At base, though, it reflects a diasporic mindset which seeks to maintain a sense of connectedness with Puerto Rico, achieve political liberation for the island, and lift all Boricuas, regardless of the locales they call home.

Though the practice of diasporic citizenship, under Laguerre’s formulation, allows for challenges to geographic boundaries of belonging and allegiance, the same is not true of citizenship as a legal construct, which is fundamentally tied to the geographic boundaries of the state. Puerto Ricans carry U.S. citizenship as a consequence of their presence (and that of the island) within the U.S. colonial sphere. As such, their participation in diasporic citizenship comes despite their formal standing as part of the U.S. political community, rather than as part of the reality of immigration between recognized nation-states. This opens up the need for a re-interrogation of the ways in which Boricuas in the United States are living a transnational reality. Many of those Boricuas considered here, as well as the author, consider the island as a nation (regardless of its lack of a realized and recognized nation-state). This said, the more

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47 Ibid., 10.
48 The question of whether Puerto Rican migration may be considered transnational has been the topic of debate which may not be covered in full here. Recent scholarship by Edgardo Meléndez argues that although these migratory flows exhibit characteristics of transnationalism, they are better understood as a colonial migration. Examining contemporary Puerto Rican migration, Carlos Vargas-Ramos suggests that Puerto Rican generally do not exhibit the degree of engagement with the island necessary to maintain a transnational social field. Edgardo Meléndez, “Puerto Rican Migration, the Colonial State, and Transnationalism,” Centro Journal XXVIII, no. II (Fall 2015): 50-95. Carlos Vargas-Ramos, “Puerto Ricans and transnationalism: A critical empirical assessment,” Centro Journal XXVIII, no. II (Fall 2015): 4-49.
relevant issue than these differences in the political standing of the sending nations is the perspective of people of the diaspora on whether their homeland constitutes a socially and culturally distinct society. As we shall see, the belonging of Puerto Ricans to both the United States (as citizens) and to the Puerto Rican diaspora (as a culturally distinct people located in North America) allowed them to construct a sense of identity which both relied upon and critiqued the structures of citizenship.

Scholarship in the area of “Latino cultural citizenship” also speaks to the identity formation process as experienced by Latinx people in the U.S., and suggests ways in which articulations of belonging have been formulated as a critique of citizenship as a means for greater empowerment. Although Puerto Ricans are unique in that they are a large body of Latinx people who are U.S. citizens by birth, William Flores and Rina Benmayor argue that “holding U.S. citizenship is not insurance against racism.” Thus, even in an era where Latinx identity has been officially ethnicized (through structures such as the U.S. Census), in truth one cannot assert a Latinx subjectivity without being racialized. This being the case, the question then becomes how one might most effectively assure their own belonging in society or (at minimum) avoid day-to-day racism. For Flores and Benmayor, the beginnings of an answer may be found in the cultural sphere. Moving beyond the mainstream conceptions of multiculturalism and assimilation, which to them do not capture the complex cultural processes taking place in Latinx and other communities of color, the authors proceed from a definition of the citizen as “political


subject” (going beyond the legal category) and of affirmation- “the community defining its interests, its binding solidarities, its boundaries, its own space, and its membership” as critical to understanding how cultural citizenship operates.51 The cultural citizen is thus any person who is contributing to and seen as subject to the state, but who nonetheless works in community to define their interests, potentially in a subversive direction. Renato Rosaldo builds on these insights, calling for studies which recognize “vernacular notions of citizenship,” generally including respeto (respect) for Latinx people in the United States.52 The insights of both Flores and Benmayor, as well as Rosaldo, call for Latino citizenship studies to examine their subjects critically, considering the extent to which citizenship may truly encompass the needs of the community, as well as the various terrains on which resistance might be enacted. I suggest that some among the first generations of New York Boricuas achieved a balance which allowed their practice of citizenship to stand as a means of resistance to the marginalization of their communities. They insisted both on their diasporic standing as Puerto Ricans, rather than as “unadulterated Americans,” and on their full enjoyment of the rights citizenship encompassed.

Providing a different dimension of critical interrogation of Latinx belonging, Oboler challenges us to think of citizenship, and of Latinx citizenship in particular, in terms of the lived dimension of citizenship, as well as the implications of extending citizenship while not re-imagining the social fabric in corresponding ways.53 Oboler’s work is an admonition to not reduce citizenship to a formal status or to the legal rights tied to that status such as voting. We must consider the social context in which Puerto Ricans, existing as they did in this country as

citizens, were perceived and woven into the social fabric. While Oboler is more centrally concerned with the political sphere than are the scholars of the Latino Cultural Citizenship group, she still recognizes the need to think broadly about the ways in which citizenship is enacted. Though the formal acts of citizenship are of interest here, I am also centrally concerned with how discursive resistance, framed in terms of a re-defined notion of diasporic citizenship, might be enacted.

Recent Works in Harlem Political and Migration History

Spatializing the questions I will answer in this project, and doing so within the context of a colonial regime, I look to a number of works which are concerned with the local connections and global flows of empire, and in this regard there are a number of recent, critical contributions focused on New York. Of central interest here are three works: Vivek Bald’s Bengali Harlem, Sonia Lee’s Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement, and Lorrin Thomas’s Puerto Rican Citizen. All three works, in their own way, consider the social and cultural connections built between migrant communities in Harlem during the early- and mid-20th century. Of these, Lee’s contribution is the most crucial from a methodological perspective in that it specifically “analyzes the political world in which Puerto Ricans and African Americans conceptualized their racial and ethnic identities in overlapping ways to build a common civil rights agenda.”

Thus, Lee’s work shares with this project an interest in considering issues of rights and citizenship.


55 Lee, Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement, 3.
from “in-between” these two communities. The strength of analysis that Lee provides suggests the possibilities of such an “out-group” perspective on social histories. As her use of the language of civil rights suggests, Lee’s focus is later than that of this project, with particular emphasis on the 1950s and beyond. She argues that through their histories of activism, “Puerto Ricans…were as vital as African Americans in shaping New Yorkers’ notions of ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity,’ and ‘minority’ in the civil rights and Black Power eras.”56 Put another way, despite the prominence of black activism during this later period, Puerto Ricans had a strong effect on a local level in terms of forming common knowledge around race. Black and Puerto Rican leaders further “utilized their racial and ethnic identities as sites of political mobilization through mutual collaborations and contestations of power.”57 As Lee points out, this tendency towards collaboration was supported by increasing identification among Puerto Ricans with the “colored race” following World War II.58

In the years prior to the war, however, I argue that this identification was more complex, and did not support coalitional politics to the same extent as would be on display later. The physical proximity of black and Puerto Rican communities was crucial to the process of building common cause, but so too were ideological concerns. Within black communities, the elucidation of ties between the civil rights struggle in North America and the anticolonial struggle in Puerto Rico was essential.59 These discourses became more prominent during and immediately after World War II, as suggested by Chapter IV (below). In general, Lee’s work suggests that although co-identification between black and Puerto Rican communities was not necessary to build

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 4.
58 Ibid., 9.
59 Ibid., 10.
common cause, some recognition of the mutually-shared forms of oppression each community faced was of central importance in building a stronger coalition and in forming empowerment strategies which would support a Latinx movement as strong as the black civil rights movement.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Lorrin Thomas’ *Puerto Rican Citizen* has been crucial in framing this project by suggesting some of the ways in which Puerto Ricans were contending with their own standing as U.S. citizens in New York from 1917. Though the literature on this early period is relatively limited, Thomas lays the historiographical foundations for considering how Boricua articulations of citizenship evolved over time. In the first decade or so of her study, Thomas argues that Puerto Ricans did not view their identity as overdetermined, but as one of a line of migrants (including Europeans such as the Irish and Italians) seeking to gain power as a political bloc. By the 1930s, Boricuas “could see the outlines of a racial ideology that was adapting to the radically changed political terrain of New York in that decade.” Crucial to this changing consciousness were the local realities of racial identity, shaped by the black American and West Indian migrants who were taking their places alongside the colonia. Separately and (occasionally) together, these communities made demands for both tangible resources (such as access to New Deal-era programs) and respect as citizens. The 1940s brought renewed consideration of the colonial status of the island, and the extent to which it was ignored by the general North American public, including liberals. As a result, Puerto Rican political activists utilized liberal narratives of belonging and rights, working to hold U.S. society to its democratic promise, while continuing to critique the limits of liberal democracy as actually practiced. By the close of World War II, Thomas sees the failures of citizenship for Puerto

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61 Ibid., 8.
62 Ibid., 11.
Ricans laid bare in the eyes of the community, due in part to the increasing framing of Puerto Ricans as a “social problem.” This led some to take up an argument which had yet to become commonplace: “citizenship in itself was not a status worth arguing over. A broader recognition as equals, as valid social actors, was the thing to aspire to.” This notion of recognition, defined as “acknowledgement of a group or a state as a legitimate political entity,” is crucial to Thomas’ analysis, which argues that increasingly, Puerto Ricans sought recognition as a broader matter rather than working within the specific legal confines of citizenship.63

This study will cover much of this same terrain (though Thomas carries her study into the 1960s), and serves to support her arguments in several respects. Speaking broadly, the narratives of citizenship this study uncovers tend to move in a more critical direction over time. I seek to view these narratives from a range of different sites and archives outside of Puerto Rican communities not taken fully into account by Thomas, whose analysis comes almost exclusively from the perspective of Puerto Ricans themselves. While contact with black communities shaped the consciousness of Puerto Ricans around citizenship in fundamental ways, the reverse was also true. Black perspectives on Boricua political action present crucial new perspectives on the identity-making, citizenship, and political activism at play during the pionero years. The key distinction between my argument and Thomas’ has to do with the framework of recognition. The members of the colonia during the 1940s under examination here display less of a concern with recognition than with the empowerment of Puerto Ricans from within their own communities both on the island and in the diaspora. This distinction may seem minor at first glance, but I submit that it is significant in shifting the mindset of Puerto Ricans away from seeking rights from those in power and towards creating grassroots power for themselves.

63 Ibid., 12.
While Vivek Bald’s *Bengali Harlem* focuses on an entirely different migrant community in Harlem and elsewhere in North America, his unexpected analysis of South Asian migration is connected to this project both in terms of “overlapping diasporas” and in terms of the useful conceptual frames it provides. Harlem’s South Asian community is one which connected to both black and Puerto Rican communities through everyday interactions as well as through intermarriage between South Asian men and black and Puerto Rican women. Bald’s analysis illuminates some of the ways in which “Harlem fostered new forms of identification and new formations of community,” formed through similarities in experience of migration and the violence associated with colonialism (both in its internal forms as experienced by black Americans and as practiced in India and Puerto Rico). South Asians became a foundational part of Harlem’s social fabric, operating small businesses (especially food carts and restaurants) and providing spaces for cultural contact. This was particularly apparent in how restaurants operated by South Asian Muslims became meeting places for African American Muslims as well. As with the burgeoning Boricua community, South Asians worked to build a greater sense of community and belonging through mutual support and engagement with the social service mechanisms of the city. Crucially, Bald sees this increased prominence coming into being “not by creating a closed enclave of their own but rather by living in an expanding set of concentric circles of identification and association.” Though the successes of the Puerto Rican community in this direction were limited during the pre-1948 period, we may similarly observe an increasing sense of connectedness and interest directed towards neighboring communities in

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64 Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 163.
66 This is illustrated most clearly by the work of Ibrahim Choudry, who was a community leader and advocate for South Asians throughout the New York metro area. *Ibid.*, 180-88.
67 *Ibid.*, 188.
Harlem, as Puerto Ricans worked to more fully incorporate themselves into New York’s social fabric.

In positioning my work within this body of literature, I see Puerto Ricans in New York as part of a set of complex but overlapping diasporas with black migrants from both the U.S. South and the West Indies. As previously mentioned, these processes of co-identification did not develop easily, and they were frequently impeded by tension between Harlem communities. Nonetheless, the proximity and shared lived realities of these groups led to some points of convergence. For example, the citizenship of Boricuas during this period was ill-understood, and often doubted, by members of mainstream white society. Beyond this, Puerto Ricans themselves were “uncertain citizens,” granted a status that many did not want and grappling with what it meant in their daily lives. Though they were made to feel as though they were foreigners in a range of ways, Boricuas felt their own internal sense of “incomplete belonging.” Over the course of the 1930s and 40s, black communities gained increasing knowledge and respect for the empowerment work of Puerto Ricans, and sought to learn from the tactical choices these efforts represented. In this context, the grassroots leaders of the colonia undertook activism (sometimes in concert with other communities in the area, sometimes not) which had both discursive and more practical effects. From efforts to build understanding about who Puerto Ricans were, to stands taken against the economic disempowerment of El Barrio locally, to political efforts to free the island, the work done on these blocks represented a range of positions as diverse as the inhabitants of Harlem.

Key Research Questions

This historical and scholarly context lends itself well to the consideration of my research questions. Foremost among these is an interrogation of the extent to which Puerto Ricans saw
themselves as a part of the Harlem community and as part of the broader New York City citizenry. Beyond legal citizenship, which most (though not all, as we shall see later) enjoyed, I am thinking of citizenship in a broader sense which might also be termed *belonging*. This would encompass being treated like a citizen with regard to formal secondary rights such as access to a quality public education, public assistance, etc. as well as with regard to nondiscrimination, both in one’s day-to-day dealings and in broader social narratives. If one is made to feel as though they are not a citizen through public discourse, this hampers their sense of belonging as well as enabling discriminatory treatment by those in the U.S. cultural mainstream.

All of this said, one cannot assume that the language of citizenship was the narrative terrain on which Puerto Ricans sought rights. For example, the language of “human rights” was used later to frame civil rights for minority groups not as special rights, but as the basic rights of all people. Thus, I examine the extent to which, and in what specific contexts, and through what narratives, Puerto Ricans made their calls for rights in terms of citizenship rights. At this point in history, many more were concerned with the ramifications of their relatively-new citizenship status than those migrating during the later surge of Puerto Ricans to North America in the 1950s and beyond. By that point, the evidence of a generation or two suggested that citizenship would only take Puerto Ricans so far and, as Flores and Benmayor argue, would not serve to shield people from racism. But at this point, the outlook of activists was perhaps more hopeful of the likelihood that assertion of citizenship would lead to community empowerment. As Thomas suggests, this perspective was evolving among members of the colonia during the years under examination here.

The contours of Puerto Rican U.S. citizenship were (and remain) fundamentally altered by Puerto Rico’s colonial status. As diaspora Puerto Ricans worked to consider how the politics
of home would continue to affect their ideological perspective and political efforts in North America, a range of viewpoints on the colonial question emerged. These views, in turn, were central to the ways and extent to which Puerto Ricans saw themselves in relation to North American political society. In this context, we must consider how (de-)colonial politics affected the use of citizenship narratives. The relationship between Boricua’s views of the island’s status and their interest in asserting one’s U.S. citizenship was by no means straightforward. While one might assume, for example, that support for Puerto Rican independence would decrease one’s reliance on U.S. citizenship as a rhetorical tool, for some it did not. As we will see, some demanded full citizenship rights in the short- and medium-term, and independence in the long-term. Likely, this is symptomatic of the recognition that national liberation would not come overnight, and that in the meantime one should work to be as fully empowered as possible, rather than accepting second-class treatment or status. Analysis of these questions requires critical examination, and a depth of analysis not only of the political actions taken by Boricua New Yorkers, but of discourses of political belonging as well.

The greatest contributions of this project will arise from my final key question: how and why did Puerto Ricans build common cause with other racialized and migrant groups in Harlem? This solidarity could be temporary, for the purposes of accomplishing specific and relatively modest goals, or longer-lasting, such as the formalization of a connection between community organizations. In either case, the question is how Puerto Ricans went beyond their own community’s boundaries to find allies for their causes, as well as the extent to which they supported the causes of others. This large question has a number of component parts. For example, one might question whether there was less potential for coalition building in the interwar period than in the years of decolonial struggle following World War II, and why. As
Guridy suggests, when analyzing these questions the state is often de-centered as a site of protest (though it remains the subject of that protest). Indeed, multiethnic coalitions often serve as an implicit critique of the state, an acknowledgement that the political structure has marginalized both groups in the alliance, hence their standing together. This is not to say that the “lived experience of citizenship” (in Oboler’s words) becomes irrelevant, but that these experiences are contended with through a more local, coalition-based model. Various forms of disenfranchisement are a powerful “push factor” in bringing groups together, and are aided by perceived commonalities in experience and social status. When this recognition of common local experiences is combined with a global anti-colonial analysis, the conditions are ripe for the creation of coalitions for empowerment.

Summary of Chapters

The chapters which follow will present a multi-sited analysis of the Puerto Rican community in East Harlem, organized topically rather than according to strict chronology. Chapter II utilizes the cases of a number of Puerto Ricans who found that they lacked the U.S. citizenship despite believing they held that status and migrated to North America on that basis. These anomalous cases expose the ways in which the U.S colonial regime, and the body of law built around it, failed to make a place for a number of its colonial subjects in society. While some legislative and legal analysis is offered here, this chapter is more centrally interested in the varying perspectives on their own U.S. citizenship that Puerto Ricans’ self-advocacy exposed. In particular, the struggle of known advocates for Puerto Rican independence to keep their U.S. citizenship, and thus remain in North America, suggests instrumental uses of citizenship which do not necessarily contradict the ideological standpoints of individual Boricuas. This chapter
further serves to illuminate the tensions inherent in the existence of diasporic colonized populations such as Puerto Ricans in the United States.

The third chapter considers formal and informal efforts to empower the growing Puerto Rican community as viewed through the lens of one of Harlem’s best-known black newspapers, the *New York Amsterdam News*. The editorial perspective of this reporting suggests a number of themes and trends. The segment of black Harlemites represented by the newspaper’s leadership was clearly interested in the presence of their Puerto Rican neighbors, and took note of the tactics they pursued in working towards full rights and empowerment, both on an individual and community level. At times, the ways in which these tactics are discussed suggests that the *Amsterdam News* writers viewed these tactical choices as something black community leaders could learn from. Beyond their interest in the political efforts of Boricuas, the *Amsterdam News* writers express particular interest in the efforts to build a stronger economic base through community-owned and patronized businesses. As far as the possibility of building coalitions between these two communities, the editorial record is somewhat more mixed, with direct calls to action limited both in their occurrence and the degree of enthusiasm on display. This may have to do partly with the ways in which the *Amsterdam News* also exoticized their Latinx neighbors. Indeed, the language utilized by the black press in discussing the social and cultural life of El Barrio tended, at times, to differ little from dominant stereotypical narratives. In light of this trend, it may not be surprising that coalitions between Puerto Rican and black communities in Harlem were limited in these early years, despite the “overlapping diasporas” the two communities represented. However, in reading between the lines of the *Amsterdam News*’ reporting, some of the roots of coalitions which would be realized in later decades may be observed.
Chapter IV focuses on the history of an unexpected group of advocates for Puerto Rican independence, the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence (ALPRI). This ostensibly interracial (though largely white) organization grew out of the work of Harlem Ashram, a pacifist community in the non-violent tradition of Mohandas K. Gandhi. The group was among the early adopters of Gandhi’s tactics, which they applied to racial justice in the United States. Owing to their location in one of the largest black and Puerto Rican communities in New York, the members of the Ashram became aware of the political and economic issues of Puerto Rico, and came into contact with Don Pedro Albizu Campos, the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, following his imprisonment in a federal penitentiary. Though the Ashram itself would collapse after a few years, some of its leading members partnered with notable liberal and leftist figures in pressuring the U.S. Congress and other key leaders to grant the island independence. A key debate in the work of the ALPRI was whether empowering the island’s people to make a choice in their political futures, through a process of self-determination, would be sufficient to end the United States colonial project. Ultimately, the ALPRI concluded that independence was the only acceptable conclusion, and the only policy choice which would support the sovereign empowerment of the Puerto Rican people.

The fifth and final body chapter focuses on the writings of Puerto Rican leftists in two newspapers, Pueblos Hispanos and Liberación. Although these publications primarily focused on opposing the conservative Nationalist revolt against Spain’s progressive elected government, and by extension the rising tide of fascism in late 1930s and early 1940s Europe, they also considered the ongoing U.S. colonial regime in Puerto Rico. These authors, who were among the most notable Boricuas in New York, elucidated the practical and discursive ways in which these two regimes utilized similar tactics to a common end- the stifling of progressive dissent in the
Spanish-speaking world. On a local level, these writings served to create a deeper sense of connection among *Hispanos* in New York. Despite the colonial legacy that bound Spain, Puerto Rico, and the rest of Latin America, leftists saw a possibility of coalition-building on the basis of cultural commonality between these nations and their people. Though framed primarily as a class-based consciousness among the working-class people who largely comprised these political circles, *Pueblos Hispanos* and *Liberación* sought to build the broadest and strongest possible coalition to fight for Spanish-speaking people, and against reactionary politics, in the “global city” of New York and around the world.

**Scholarly Contribution**

At base, this is a study of how a colonial diaspora made sense of its unequal citizenship status in a specific local context. The implications, however, are considerably broader. Through the lens of this study, we may understand more completely the ways in which East Harlem’s Puerto Ricans built community among themselves, with other Latinx people, and with other Harlemites. We will understand more completely how Puerto Ricans were seen as members of New York society, and how Harlemites of varying background responded to this narrative positioning. We will see one version of how racialized and otherwise marginalized groups build political solidarity around shared experience or other factors. Finally, the project will serve as one means of entry into considering how internally colonized populations were involved in the anti-colonial movements which came into greater prominence in the late 1940s. Beyond the thematic contributions, the work will build the literature of a number of scholarly fields, including Puerto Rican Studies, African American Studies, American Studies, Urban Studies, U.S. History, Media Studies, and Sociology.
The early 20th century history of Harlem has been thoroughly explored by generations of historians, and a growing body of scholarship considers how some of the earliest Puerto Rican arrivals figured into that history. In elucidating this aspect of Harlem’s history further, this project aims to build new means of connecting the histories of ethnic communities both as locally-specific phenomena, and as interconnected and diasporic formations. The moments in which these diasporas first emerge are particularly fruitful sites for studying these social processes. As such, Harlem during the pre-war period presents a unique opportunity for study not only of the black and Puerto Rican diasporas in isolation, but also as communities which were increasingly viewed as overlapping, as potential political partners, and as migrants facing interconnected struggles.
Figure 1. Daniel Antonio Acosta, November 19, 1931.
This photograph was part of an application to the Puerto Rican government’s office in New York for an identification card.
CHAPTER II. COLONIAL SUBJECTS, UNCERTAIN CITIZENS: PUERTO RICAN U.S. CITIZENSHIP ANOMALIES AND DISCOURSES OF BELONGING, 1939

“How can I become an American citizen?” I asked. She replied that you just have to follow the steps she had outlined. I responded by pointing out that, unlike our Hungarian and German classmates, Puerto Ricans do not really have any citizenship. Outside of Puerto Rico our natural citizenship is not recognized. Without any citizenship to give up, it would seem pretty hard for us to become Americans.”

-Bernardo Vega

“My dear Mr. Baldassari:
I regret exceedingly to inform you that under the present law, you are not a citizen of the United States.”  Rep. Vito Marcantonio

In early July of 1939, Congressman Vito Marcantonio of East Harlem stepped before a hearing panel of the U.S. Labor Department to personally advocate on behalf of a young woman seeking to become one of the newest New Yorkers. Julia Vasquez-Cortes was then sixteen years old, and had recently come to New York from her native Puerto Rico. But rather than being welcomed to the city without hindrance, as would have been the case for a U.S. citizen, Vasquez-Cortes was detained by Customs authorities along with other members of her family. The officials claimed that Vasquez-Cortes was not a citizen, despite the fact of her birth in Puerto Rico while the island was a U.S. territory.

Marcantonio’s advocacy on Vasquez-Cortes’ behalf, and the proposed legislation it would inspire, led many Puerto Ricans to write to him to seek assistance with similar bureaucratic predicaments. Beyond illuminating an anomaly in the Jones Act citizenship Puerto

A version of this chapter has been published in a special journal issue commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Jones Act. Daniel Acosta Elkan, “‘…Acting Like an American Citizen’: Discursive and Political Resistance to Puerto Rican U.S. Citizenship Anomalies in the 1930s,” Centro Journal XXIX, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 202-223.

68 Vega, Memoirs, 27.
69 Vito Marcantonio, letter to Santos Baldassari, Jan. 25, 1940. Vito Marcantonio Papers, Manuscript and Archive Division, New York Public Library.
70 Vito Marcantonio, letter to Gilberto Concepcion, Jul. 11, 1939. Vito Marcantonio Papers, Manuscript and Archive Division, New York Public Library.
Ricans were said to enjoy, the words of these “uncertain citizens” suggest the importance they placed on their legal belonging in the United States and the stakes should it be lost. Some of Marcantonio’s correspondents were known Nationalists, who wished for Puerto Rico to become an independent state. Their self-advocacy aimed at securing membership in a society which they viewed as colonizing their homeland should not be seen as a logical inconsistency. On a basic level, these Puerto Ricans were simply seeking to secure the citizenship which they assumed they held, and on which basis they had started new lives in North America. I argue that these instrumental uses of citizenship were limited in scope and did not constitute an ideological acceptance of the island’s colonial political status.

Placing this individual bureaucratic wrangling in a broader context, the citizenship of Puerto Ricans was still very poorly understood by the general public in the 1930s. This lack of knowledge manifested in a numbers of ways, suggesting either directly or indirectly that one did not understand the issues faced by Puerto Ricans in the United States in attempting to expand and protect their rights. An example of a direct statement would be the repetition of misinformation or incomplete information about Boricuas’ citizenship (as Bernardo Vega encountered in his conversation with a social worker teaching a course on citizenship, quoted in the chapter epigraph). On an indirect level, these misunderstandings manifested as media narratives suggesting that Puerto Ricans, whether or not they held citizenship, were outsiders that did not deserve the range of rights membership in American society implied. For example, a number of articles suggested that New York’s Boricua community were poor, sickly, and likely to utilize public benefits. One example of these narratives during the 1930s may be found in the New York Times of May 22, 1930. Reporting on a city-wide welfare conference, the Times reporter devotes extensive attention to the “Porto Rican Problem,” including the high number of
Boricuas receiving welfare benefits. Puerto Ricans, the article states, represent 22% of welfare cases in Harlem, an “increasingly acute” problem beyond the capabilities of the existing charity organizations. Though Puerto Rican history and the legal status of Puerto Ricans in the United States differed considerably from that of earlier immigrant arrivals, some late 1940s defenders of the Boricua community claimed that they were “just like other immigrants,” which (according to historian Lorrin Thomas) “helped to situate anti-Puerto Rican discourse within a genealogy of American nativism dating back to the nineteenth century.” It should also be noted that this narrative framing could serve to distance Puerto Ricans from internally colonized and racialized populations such as African Americans. In the case of what would come to be known of the “Puerto Rican problem,” however, these nativist narratives had an important twist, “the insinuation that Puerto Ricans were most dangerous because they could not, like other immigrants, be excluded.” In this formulation, Puerto Ricans posed a similar threat to the white mainstream as did black Americans- as a racialized population with the absolute right to migrate within the United States.

Perhaps as the result of this perceived problem, the press became a venue for discussions of the supposedly inherent problems of the Puerto Rican community, such as poverty and crime. I term this set of discourses narratives of incomplete belonging, because they suggest the unworthiness of Puerto Ricans for the U.S. citizenship that they nonetheless held. The self-advocacy of Boricua citizens under analysis here illustrates a countervailing set of tropes, which I term narratives of citizenship. These narratives were deployed as evidence that petitioners not only held U.S. citizenship as a matter of law, but that they deserved it as a matter of justice-

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72 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 146.
73 Ibid., 147.
small recognition of the ongoing colonization of the island, and of Boricua worthiness to belonging in U.S. society.

Broadly speaking, Puerto Ricans gained U.S. citizenship through the passage of the Jones Act in 1917. The law, passed in the context of the move towards U.S. participation in World War I, was likely the primary cause for the increasing Puerto Rican migration to North America. As historian Virginia Sánchez Korrol points out, the Jones Act altered the legal nature of Puerto Rican re-location to the United States from that of immigration to that of an unimpeded migration. Moving from Puerto Rico to New York was, in theory, no more complicated from a legal standpoint than moving from one state to another. As a result of the passage of the Jones Act, annual migration from Puerto Rico to the mainland increased from a previous annual high (during the years 1909-1916) of 7,294 to 10,812 in 1917. While the benefits of the Jones Act were tangible and utilized by many Boricuas in the following twenty years, the law nonetheless had a number of complexities which were not well-understood. For example, the 1917 law provided, in Section Five, that “alien residents” of Puerto Rico- including children with at least one parent who did not hold Puerto Rican or U.S. citizenship- would have to declare their intent to take up U.S. citizenship under the Jones Act and renounce their presumed foreign citizenship. Specific provisions were also included in Section Five for Puerto Ricans residing “abroad”- that is, not on the island or the mainland U.S. In the years following the Jones Act’s passage, these and other inconsistencies in the provisions and implementation of the law were revealed, leading to a number of amendments. In 1927, Puerto Ricans who had rejected Jones Act citizenship (instead retaining a distinct Puerto Rican citizenship) were given the opportunity to naturalize

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under the same procedures as Boricuas with foreign parents. A 1934 amendment allowed Puerto Rican women who had married foreigners (in this case, non-U.S. citizens), thus forfeiting their U.S. citizenship, to re-claim it. The addition of Section 5(c) in 1938 expanded indefinitely access for retroactive naturalization for Puerto Rican children of aliens who had not yet done so through an oath of allegiance. As a sixteen-year-old, Vasquez-Cortes had likely not availed herself of this provision and claimed U.S. citizenship, and as such she was found to not be allowed free passage between the island and the mainland.

Despite changes in citizenship law put forth by the Jones Act and these subsequent amendments, the handling of the Vasquez-Cortes case bears some important similarities to an earlier precedent. In the case of Gonzalez v. Williams (1904), Isabel Gonzalez faced deportation to Puerto Rico under a policy implemented after she had already departed the island by ship in the summer of 1902. Thus, rather than landing in Lower Manhattan and disembarking from her ship freely, Gonzalez landed at Ellis Island and was subject to the same inspection as immigrants from countries over which the United States had no claim of sovereignty. Among the inspection protocols was a provision that unmarried pregnant women (such as Gonzalez) be treated as “aliens likely to become a public charge.” Gonzalez and her family launched a defense (which would ultimately reach the Supreme Court) that “touched on traits to which Puerto Ricans and mainlanders attached negative honor, class, and race connotations.” In his oral arguments in the case, attorney Frederic R. Coudert, Jr. posed a choice to the Court: either re-enact the Dred Scott decision and create a class of U.S. nationals who owed allegiance to the nation but would not

76 Ibid., 69.
enjoy full rights, or provide Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship which, in any event, had been drained of much of its content in terms of offering rights. Though Vasquez-Cortes did not herself face the stigma of unwed motherhood, the scrutiny she faced as a young, Puerto Rican woman was made possible by the Gonzalez ruling. The Court’s 1904 ruling made clear that Puerto Ricans were not included in the category of “alien” under the Immigration Act of 1891, and were thus entitled to free passage to and from the U.S., but it refused to act on the question which logically followed: whether Puerto Ricans had been collectively naturalized by the yielding of Spanish sovereignty to U.S. authority on the island, thus sidestepping the question raised by Coudert. In other words, the Court did not rule one way or another as to whether the Constitutional citizenship guarantees under the 14th Amendment “followed the flag” to Puerto Rico in 1898. As Edgardo Meléndez has ably illustrated, this precedent, along with the ruling in Balzac v. People of Porto Rico (1922), placed Puerto Ricans in a state of “alien exclusion.” The Gonzalez ruling allowed Puerto Ricans free passage to and from the United States, but without full rights of citizenship. In the Balzac ruling, which came after the Jones Act’s conferral of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans, the Court determined that the “alien nature” of the Puerto Rican people (in ethnoracial terms) made it possible for their citizenship to not equate to incorporation of the island. Further, the rights of such “alien citizens” could be curtailed in certain respects. Though the Court did not find a basis to set aside Jones Act citizenship as such, the possibility of other restrictions on Puerto Ricans’ rights left an opening for both legislative and administrative scrutiny of individual Puerto Ricans. The ambiguous, and arguably logically inconsistent

79 Ibid., 18-20.
80 Ibid., 23-24.
position on citizenship and “deportability” reached by the Court in *Gonzalez* and *Balzac*
foreshadows the inconsistent nature of the rights Puerto Ricans would receive in subsequent years, even around the most basic questions of citizenship and right of abode. As such, their citizenship, though perhaps secure as a strict matter of law, became uncertain in its operation at the nation’s ports of entry, subject to inconsistent bureaucratic application by individual members of the Customs service. Although much of this uncertainty is directly attributable to the complex and little-understood colonial status of the island, citizenship law has also been applied inconsistently due to the race of the migrant. As Beatrice McKenzie argues in her examination of the migratory histories of Asians and other “racial others” from the time of the 1898 *Wong Kim Ark* decision, “on the front lines of U.S. birthright citizenship policy…establishing credibility as a citizen has been more difficult for citizens of color.”82 The cases under examination here suggest that although Puerto Ricans are inconsistently racialized by the mechanisms of government, the bureaucratic application of citizenship law at the borders at minimum frames the citizenship and belonging of Puerto Rican U.S. citizens as uncertain.

Perhaps conscious of the broader implications wrought by the *Gonzalez* decision some thirty-five years previous, Puerto Rican community leaders took an interest in the outcome of the Vasquez-Cortes case. Among these was Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, editor of the newspaper *La Voz*, who would go on to found the Puerto Rican Independence Party. Marcantonio kept Concepción updated on the case throughout the course of his advocacy on behalf of Vasquez-Cortes.83 After reaching a preliminary ruling which would have removed her to Puerto Rico, the

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83 See Marcantonio’s letters to Concepción on Jul. 11, 1939; Jul. 24, 1939; Aug. 4, 1939, Aug. 9, 1939. Vito Marcantonio Papers, Manuscript and Archive Division, New York Public Library. For further information on the
case against Vasquez-Cortes was re-opened to consider “new evidence,” then deferred for a year after Marcantonio introduced a bill, H.R. 7119, which would have clarified the citizenship of Vasquez-Cortes and those similarly situated.84

Two points stand out in considering this unusual case. First, the fact that Vasquez-Cortes, the child of two Spanish subjects born in Puerto Rico (hardly an uncommon situation) was not considered to be a U.S. citizen despite the prevailing belief that the Jones Act granted all children of the island that status. From 1917 through 1940, these and other individuals of “foreign parentage” (i.e. with one or more parents not born in either Puerto Rico or the United States) were required to take action in order to gain U.S. citizenship, in a process which bore some similarity to naturalization, rather than enjoying citizenship on the basis of their birth on U.S.-controlled soil. The complexities of this area of the law were not well understood by either those directly affected or those charged with enforcing the law, and reflected a degree of scrutiny of Puerto Ricans as great (if not greater) than was brought to bear on immigrants from other nations.85 Second, the fact that such a noted nationalist as Concepción took such a continuing interest in the case, seeking to defend Puerto Ricans not as citizens of a sovereign island but as colonial U.S. citizens seems, at first glance, to be logically inconsistent. This was but one of

85 The challenges faced by Puerto Ricans in migrating and asserting their legal standing as Americans was not entirely unique. As historian Mae Ngai points out in her analysis of pre-World War II Filipino migrants (who were colonial subjects of the U.S., classified as “U.S. nationals” rather than citizens), this population constituted the “corporeality of contradictions that existed in American colonial policy and practice,” whose arrival “in the imperial metropole rendered visible the colonialism that Americans had tried to make invisible through the myths of historical accident and benevolence.” Mae M. Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97. More broadly, the challenges faced by Filipinos and Puerto Ricans arose partly out of the legacy of U.S. citizenship as a status which was originally available to “free white persons” only. For more on the racial contours of U.S. citizenship, see Ian Haney López, White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race, Revised and Updated (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
several similar cases, in which Boricuas found themselves lacking a legal status and right of abode they thought they had enjoyed for over twenty years. Some of these individuals are known to have had nationalist views, but their desire to exercise one of the few potentially advantageous aspects of Puerto Rico’s colonization (the legal ability to migrate to the colonizing nation to escape the economic situation in their homeland) as well as the consequences of being written out of U.S. citizenship (including most notably deportation) outweighed these political considerations and led these Puerto Ricans to vigorously advocate for their citizenship rights on instrumental, rather than ideological, grounds and to seek the assistance of Marcantonio in remedying this most urgent problem. The narratives of citizenship put forth by these individuals may be seen as a tactic to counter narratives of incomplete belonging which were reflected both in popular discourse and in the day-to-day experiences of Boricuas in North America.

Framing Citizenship

In putting forward a notion of “narratives of incomplete belonging,” I am hearkening to the arguments of Lorrin Thomas and others that the granting of U.S. citizenship under the Jones Act of 1917 did not “reverse assumptions about Puerto Ricans as ‘unfit’ for citizenship in a liberal republic.” While the citizenship of most island-born Puerto Ricans could not be called into question as a legal matter, their social status as full members of North American society could be undermined through discursive means. By degrees, Boricuas would increasingly be seen as “outsiders” in a social and cultural sense, which reinforced the notion circulated by some that whatever the law said, Puerto Ricans were not assimilable or “good” citizens.

As illustrated above, Puerto Ricans were often portrayed in the mainstream white press through narratives of incomplete belonging as a burden on the communities they moved into,

86 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 6.
through their utilization of public benefits and the disorder that the social elite saw following
them into cities such as New York. By extension, Puerto Ricans are framed, in the language of
immigration, as “likely to become a public charge” (a narrative not overcome by the tortured
logic of the Gonzalez ruling). Such a status would have barred them from immigration if they
had not already been U.S. citizens, but due to the Jones Act, no mechanism existed to exclude
them. We may reframe these narratives, in Thomas’ terms, as one fundamental way in which the
status of Puerto Ricans in 1920s New York was constrained at the level of a colonial citizenship,
leaving Boricuas lacking “a clear political identity as a group beyond that of the striving
immigrant.” By the 1930s, they had become (in Thomas’ estimation) conscious of their second-
class standing and began to demand recognition- defined as “acknowledgement of a group or a
state as a legitimate political entity.”87 Discourse was one tool utilized both by those seeking
such recognition for Puerto Ricans and by those who wished to withhold it. For their part, Puerto
Ricans worked to advance narratives of citizenship to counter tropes which suggested their
unfitness for U.S. citizenship and the full range of rights which that status offered.

A comparative consideration of Puerto Rican migration against other experiences of
immigration might also prove productive here. Positing some key differences, Ramón
Grosfoguel argues that upwardly-mobile immigrants (especially those of European descent)
“have a higher status than colonial subjects who continue to experience a negative
racialization.”88 As a result, other Latin Americans who might be confused for Puerto Ricans,
dissociate from this identity, just as immigrants of African descent might dissociate from

87 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 251, 12. An analysis of colonial citizenship is also offered by Edgardo Meléndez
(2013), building partially off of Thomas’ explication of the concept. Meléndez’s chief interest is to consider the
concept as applied to the legal realm and largely (though not entirely) to Puerto Ricans remaining on the island. As
such, I largely build off of Thomas’ sociocultural and diaspora-based notion.
88 Ramón Grosfoguel, Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 2003), 149.
African Americans subject to internal colonization. This process of making “racial/colonial subjects” requires a different paradigm for study than prevailing immigrant models, largely due to social, rather than legal, reasons. Again, these social issues have legal consequences, and vice versa- most especially when we consider the ways in which the path to legal status for Puerto Rican people, who were born under the American flag but seen by those in power as not embodying its values, differed from that of immigrants from other nations.

By the 1970s, Thomas argues, recognition narratives emanating from El Barrio “were pushing past the boundaries of a traditional liberal discourse of ‘civil rights’ to encompass a larger set of claims.” The claim of an individual and equal U.S. citizenship, in other words, was seen by Puerto Ricans on the left as “anachronistic and naïve.” However, four decades earlier, in an era when Puerto Ricans were still striving for full achievement of the rights to which they were entitled under the Jones Act, I argue that U.S. citizenship was a crucial tool on both the legal and discursive fronts. Both narratives of incomplete belonging, and the response demanding recognition, were seen by many primarily as applied to individual subjects who were framed as deserving citizenship, and only secondarily as arguments intended to empower all members of the colonia, who were citizens by right of their colonization. Through narratives of underdevelopment and dependence on welfare and related programs which tended to racialize, individual Puerto Ricans were framed by U.S. society as unfit for citizenship or as somehow suspect. These narratives led to the consolidations of a popular consensus about the lack of virtue among Puerto Ricans, and these judgements about individuals were later extended to the whole community. In this context, individual Puerto Ricans sought to demonstrate both their own

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 162.
91 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 12-14.
personal worthiness for citizenship, and the negative consequences should they be placed outside of legal and social belonging in New York.

Multiple means were available to Boricuas who were conscious of this problem of framing and who wished to convey their worthiness as citizens, including community organizing, making claims on citizenship in the press and in other public forums, and participation in the electoral process. For example, *New York Times* reporting on the 1926 formation of a Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana in response to violence against Latinx people in East Harlem quotes V. Fiol Ramos, the organization’s secretary, as saying “The source of the trouble is that people do not realize that we Porto Ricans are American citizens in the fullest sense of the word.” This reporting both presents the colonia as an organized body of citizens and puts forth narratives from its people claiming their position as citizens. These “narratives of citizenship” present a direct challenge to “narratives of incomplete belonging,” serving as one means through which Puerto Ricans might increase their relative share of membership in U.S society.

This means of activism suggests a sort of cultural dimension to activism which largely comports well with the ways that scholars of the “Latino Cultural Citizenship” tradition have analyzed the experiences of Latinx people in the U.S. While they assert that “holding U.S. citizenship is not insurance against racism,” Flores and Benmayor nevertheless suggest that Latinx people define themselves as good “political subjects” (moving beyond the restrictive legal definition of citizenship) and engage in behaviors of affirmation—“the community defining its interests, its binding solidarities, its boundaries, its own space, and its membership.” Renato Rosaldo builds on these insights, calling for studies which recognize “vernacular notions of

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citizenship” shaped by Latinx people, generally including *respeto* (respect) for Latinx people in the United States.94

Placing this argument in context, I argue that the pioneros of the pre-1940s New York colonia were seeking *respeto* (or more directly, relative equality) through a more state-focused strategy. This was a logical choice in the post-Jones Act era, enacting the legal standing and rights offered by citizenship in the discursive realm. Use of the language of citizenship in this context is a tactical choice, not an abrogation of the cultural aspects of a distinct Latinx or Puerto Rican notion of citizenship. Indeed, while the political and mutual aid activities of early Puerto Rican organizations such as the Puerto Rican Brotherhood of America are well known, Virginia Sánchez Korrol points out the importance of social gatherings (organized by the women’s auxiliary) in keeping up the cultural cohesion of the Boricua community.95 Thus, while the relative balance of Puerto Rican empowerment strategies in the 1930s emphasized formal citizenship over cultural citizenship, it was not without a cultural element. Nor, as I argue below, is this narrative an abrogation of the political goal of independence for the island.

Jorge Duany suggests the possibility that, in certain cases, “Puerto Ricans see no contradiction between asserting their Puerto Rican nationality at the same time as they defend their U.S. citizenship.”96 I argue that we may observe this trend most clearly in members of the pre-World War II diaspora, who were struggling to make a place for themselves in U.S. society as pioneros. As relatively new citizens and new residents of the mainland, the discursive terrain available for protest was constrained by the limited experience of members of the colonia. The language of citizenship was employed as an exclusionary measure, and so it was this same

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95 Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, 149.
language which was employed by pioneros to push back. Oftentimes, they did so through strategies that made them more legible to mainstream society— that is, through “narratives of citizenship.” As I suggest above, these narratives may emphasize either formal citizenship, cultural citizenship, or some hybrid of the two. The tendency up through this point in history, though, was towards an emphasis on formal citizenship claims. The cases which form the core of this chapter focus on formal claims and narratives of U.S. citizenship, though the advocacy the petitioners present on their own behalf also speak to their worthiness in terms of cultural belonging in North American society to varying degrees.

**Questioning the Terms of Puerto Rican U.S. Citizenship**

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Downes v. Bidwell* in 1901 placed the island of Puerto Rico in a situation where it was deemed “foreign in a domestic sense,” while preserving the authority of the United States over the island. This relationship would come to exist in other territories such as the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam, and would also extend to the *people* (and not merely the territory) of Puerto Rico. The 1899 Treaty of Paris, as well as the Foraker Act of 1900, created two groups of individuals which in some respects mirrored the Spanish colonial order. Before 1917, those born in Spain could retain their Spanish citizenship, their property rights, and be eligible for naturalization in the United States. Those born in Puerto Rico were restricted to a separate national citizenship which did not allow for naturalization in the U.S., and the status of wives and children of foreign citizens who were themselves born on the island remained unclear. This confused status led island-born Puerto Ricans in the years

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97 This is reflected, to give one key example, in the activism of Jesús Colón, which also emphasized citizenship in the 1930s. Later, recognition became his goal. See my discussion of Thomas, above, as well as Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 4-5.

immediately following the U.S. occupation to hold a “nationality to nowhere,” in the words of Charles Venator-Santiago, and this confusion was even greater for the children of mixed-status marriages— that is, parents of differing citizenship.99

This confusion persisted even after the passage of the Jones Act in 1917. Despite the fact that Puerto Ricans generally were assumed to have been collectively naturalized, a number of complications existed. Among these was the fact that children of foreign fathers (fathers who were not themselves citizens of either the United States or Puerto Rico) were required to elect to become U.S. citizens within six months of the passage of the law, or within one year of reaching the age of majority, whichever came first. Due to misunderstandings regarding this provision and other anomalies, several amendments to the Jones Act and related provisions were required in 1927, 1934, and 1938 (detailed above).100 The time limits for making a declaration of allegiance proved particularly problematic in ensuring the broadest possible access to U.S. citizenship. Resident Commissioner Santiago Iglesias argued before the House in 1934 that there was “no good reason why there should be a special time limitation in such cases” and raised a concern about the possibility of a group of “aliens born in Puerto Rico” who due to the complex provisions around their status had not taken action to claim citizenship.101 His proposed change, then numbered H.R. 5330, provided that “all persons born in Puerto Rico on or after April 11, 1899…and not citizens, subjects, or nationals of any foreign power, are hereby declared to be citizens of the United States.” The balance of the text protected the citizenship of those who had

already obtained it, excluded this law from effecting those who had given it up, and permitted naturalization for Puerto Rican women who had lost their citizenship due to marriage to an ineligible alien.\textsuperscript{102} The latter problem, that of expatriation of the wives of foreign nationals generally, had existed since the 1850s and progress did not begin to be made in reversing it until the passage of the Cable Act in 1922.\textsuperscript{103} These expatriations were due in part to the legal construct of \textit{coupure}, under which married women’s citizenship was determined by the status of their husbands until 1934.\textsuperscript{104} Similarly, the citizenship status of children born to a married couple would follow that of their father, and thus it was paternal citizenship which would be relevant in the application of Jones Act citizenship. H.R. 5330 passed both chambers, and was approved by the President on June 27, 1934.\textsuperscript{105}

The period to declare allegiance to the United States and thereby gain citizenship on the part of the children of Spanish fathers who had retained their loyalty to their Crown was extended indefinitely in 1938. Individuals seeking to avail themselves of this provision were required to swear an oath before a U.S. district court, and the individual had to be certified as a person “of good character.”\textsuperscript{106} As Charles Venator-Santiago points out, the number of amendments to these laws necessary to naturalize permanent residents of Puerto Rico (which would also affect Puerto Ricans who migrated) constitutes one example of an \textit{inclusive exclusion}, which arose due largely to the interaction between the citizenship provisions of the

\textsuperscript{102} Representative McDuffie, speaking on H.R. 5330, on June 4, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., \textit{Congressional Record} 78: pt. 10:10438. Accessed via ProQuest Congressional.
\textsuperscript{104} Nancy Cott, “Marriage and Women’s Citizenship in the United States, 1830-1934,” \textit{American Historical Review} 103, no. 5 (Dec. 1998).
\textsuperscript{105} U.S. Congress, House, Bills Approved Subsequent to Sine Die Adjournment, on June 18, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., \textit{Congressional Record} 78, pt. 11: 12660-12661. Accessed via ProQuest Congressional.
Jones Act as amended and the anomalous territorial status of Puerto Rico. The tangle of laws relating to Puerto Ricans’ legal status have, in his view, “consistently affirmed the inclusion of island-born Puerto Ricans within the U.S. global empire, while simultaneously excluding these citizens from the possibility of acquiring equal constitutional membership within the polity.”

As this reality manifested in the cases under examination here, it becomes clear that Puerto Ricans were viewed as a suspect class, that their standing in North American society was tenuous, and that their continuing exercise of citizenship rights was contingent on administrative determinations. Boricuas did not passively accept this reality, however. Their articulations of belonging, and their calls for assistance from elected officials, are themselves a sort of insistence on their own rights as citizens.

**Acting Like an American Citizen**

In 1939, a number of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora found that they lacked U.S. citizenship despite having been born on the island and having conducted themselves as citizens for their entire lives. Some realized this through routine, bureaucratic interactions with government, some through attempted travel, and at least one through a threat of deportation from the United States to their father’s country of origin- a country that individual had never been to before. These Boricuas on the move wrote to seek the assistance of Vito Marcantonio. Their letters are rich with details concerning the circumstances which left them without U.S. citizenship, their perspectives on lacking even this colonial second-class citizenship, and their desires to have a stable life on the mainland. Ironically, because of the recognition of citizenship as the sole means of legitimating political subjects within mainstream culture, it was only through citizenship that their demands for rights, including the right to remain, would be met. It

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was thus that the language and structures of citizenship became the means through which even some nationalists advocated for their rights on the mainland. This did not restrict their continued work towards independence, but was instead a parallel form of advocacy for personal rights.

Even with the three amendments passed by the Congress in the late 1920s and 1930s with the assistance of Santiago Iglesias and others, many who should have been U.S. citizens based on a plain reading of the law continued to be left out. Thus, letters began flowing to Vito Marcantonio’s office, and he took up their cause. Marcantonio was a well-known advocate of the island and its people, many of whom lived in his district. Though supported by Barrio residents with varying positions on the status question for the island, Marcantonio was a strong advocate for Puerto Rican independence, having introduced his first of several bills to that effect in 1936.108 He also served as co-counsel in the defense of Nationalist Party leader Pedro Albizu Campos and others accused of conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government that same year.109 As such, historian Gerald Meyer argues that Marcantonio was not only the representative of Puerto Ricans living in his East Harlem district, but “de facto Congressman for Puerto Rico.”110

The first to seek Marcantonio’s assistance with a citizenship anomaly problem was Jesús Cariel, a newlywed as of 1939. Cariel was born in Puerto Rico, and had been living in New York as a U.S. citizen for a number of years. Upon attempting to begin the naturalization process for his wife, a French citizen, Cariel was told by a customs official that he himself did not hold citizenship, due to his father’s Italian birth. The confusion about his situation extended to the island’s Resident Commissioner in Congress, Santiago Iglesias, who sent him copies of unspecified bills (likely the 1938 amendments to the Jones Act) which Cariel employed in

arguing that he was a citizen. Customs officials were operating under the impression that only
those with Spanish fathers qualified under these laws, and denied his wife papers once again.
Impressing upon Marcantonio the seriousness of the situation, Cariel estimates that there must be
half a million Puerto Ricans who were “still aliens without knowing it.” The problem was, of
course, not restricted to the island. Among the population of Spanish Harlem, Cariel estimates
that as many as half of all Boricuas were in a similar situation. Though this estimate is likely
exaggerated, the broader point— that many Puerto Ricans could not feel secure in their legal
standing and right to reside in New York- was well-founded and supported by the experience of
Cariel and others.

Cariel frames the impact of his lack (or loss) of citizenship mostly in terms of the
difficulty and inconvenience it posed to Puerto Ricans. In his particular case, he would have to
undergo naturalization, and his wife’s citizenship case would be delayed (or subsumed into his).
As a broader matter, Cariel states, forcing him to undergo the lengthy process of naturalization
would “be a shame after being born under the American flag, and acting like an American
citizen.” This same wording, repeated elsewhere in the letter, makes it clear that Cariel’s
argument is not merely that he held the status of citizen, but that he has fulfilled the promise of
what citizenship entailed. Specifically, Cariel mentions voting and paying taxes as examples of
his upstanding citizenship. This active engagement with American society is further underscored
by his plea to Marcantonio, his elected representative, made on the letterhead of the American

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and Archive Division, New York Public Library.
112 Ibid.
Labor Party. Despite these contributions, Cariel finds his status in the country to be in question, a situation which is both frustrating and seemly unjust. Beyond this, he references the fact that he and others similarly situated have been “using the rights of an American citizen.” This final remark suggests an awareness on Cariel’s part of the instrumental nature of U.S. citizenship. Citizenship is, from this perspective, a status that is affirmed by its use, which demonstrates one’s understanding of its obligations. Thus, his “acting like a citizen” entitles Cariel to its benefits. Though his right to remain in New York is not specifically mentioned, the urgent tone of the letter suggests that Cariel fears that he and his wife may not be able to remain and establish their household.

Cariel’s plea to Marcantonio seems to support those aspects of contemporary citizenship theory, which alternatively conceptualize citizenship as both a “legal status” and “desirable activity.” By signifying his adherence to prevailing norms of “acting like an American citizen,” Cariel puts forward a “narrative of citizenship” which frames him as a law-abiding, good subject. The subtext is that despite dominant narratives of incomplete belonging, the people of the island are fit to be citizens. Cariel is, in effect, speaking back to the idea that Puerto Ricans are “foreign in a domestic sense,” by holding himself up as a good example of American citizenship.

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113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
Born Under the American Flag

By the 1930s, the impact of U.S. colonialism on the everyday lives of Puerto Ricans had become a multi-generational issue. This was especially true in the context of citizenship, a question which was fundamentally concerned with parentage. With Marcantonio’s introduction of a bill to streamline Puerto Rican U.S. citizenship on July 10, 1939 (discussed below), still more constituents and others seeking regularization of their status wrote to the congressman. Among these was Maria Más Pozo, a Puerto Rican woman living on Manhattan’s West Side. Más Pozo had heard of Marcantonio’s reform bill and hoped that her experience and that of her daughter would support his argument for the amendment. Their experiences illustrate clearly the stakes Puerto Ricans faced not only in seeking to take up residence in North America, but also in terms of Boricuas being excluded from their own homeland.

Más Pozo was the Puerto Rico-born daughter of a Spanish citizen, and (presumably because she had not made a declaration claiming U.S. citizenship) she had been detained upon attempting to re-enter the island from the Dominican Republic five years earlier.\(^{116}\) The impact of this administrative decision on Más Pozo’s life were great: “I was force [sic.] to stay in Santo Domingo nearly two years with out any means of making a living there.”\(^ {117}\) Resolution of this situation required the intervention of both the U.S. counsel in Santo Domingo and the Governor of Puerto Rico. Four years hence, Más Pozo’s daughter faced a similar exclusion from the island as the daughter of an Italian father.\(^ {118}\) Through these examples, it is clear that Puerto Ricans ultimately did not have access to birthright, constitutional citizenship in the same way their


\(^{117}\) Ibid.

\(^{118}\) Ibid.
mainland-born kin would have. Rather than obtaining citizenship simply due to the fact of their birth in a U.S. territory, their birth in Puerto Rico (territory legally and discursively framed as “alien”) caused Boricuas to face greater obstacles and scrutiny in asserting U.S. citizenship and in utilizing their right to mobility within the U.S. colonial sphere.

Beyond her practical desire for mobility, Más Pozo suggests that the importance she placed on her U.S. citizenship arose out of a desire for justice. “I beg you Mr. Marcantonio,” she wrote, “to see if you can win this fight about our citizenship [sic.] as this is the most illegal of the USA laws.” Of course, Más Pozo is not necessarily referring here to the “legality” of the law in the strict sense of the word. Rather, her argument here should be interpreted as a critique of the liberal democratic values espoused by the United States generally, and with regard to Puerto Rico (an island the U.S. supposedly “liberated” from Spain) specifically, as those values were actually practiced. While Más Pozo does not specifically criticize the colonial regime in Puerto Rico, she does strongly imply that the nation owes a debt to Puerto Ricans, and that citizenship would be one means of paying that debt.

Más Pozo’s self-advocacy was a means of empowering herself and those in similar situations, albeit through means which re-inscribed a standard of “worthiness” for citizenship. The standard Más Pozo suggests, however, places Puerto Ricans squarely within the boundaries of U.S. society. While the children of (European) immigrants born on U.S.-flagged ships headed for North America would enjoy an unquestioned U.S. citizenship, many of the children of Puerto Rico “born UNDER THE AMERICAN FLAG ON AMERICAN SOIL” would not be offered the rights of a member of U.S. society. It seems that Más Pozo intends here to create a

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119 Ibid.
120 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
hierarchy of potential citizens, specifically questioning the scrutiny faced by Puerto Ricans.

Citizenship in this context can serve as a potential tool of empowerment which is not made less important or relevant due to its roots in U.S. colonialism. Indeed, for those living under U.S. rule, citizenship may serve as one means of uplifting those living under a colonial regime above the status of new immigrants. Citizenship also offers protection from scrutiny in migration, thus enabling the mobility of Puerto Ricans to the metropole and beyond. In these respects, citizenship becomes important not in spite of colonialism but because of it, and could help to bring about recognition (in Thomas’s terms) for Boricuas and their political and practical struggles.

Más Pozo’s interest in uplifting Puerto Ricans while accepting the white supremacist and nativist U.S. social hierarchy was not new to her at this point in time, though her utilization of Jones Act citizenship to this end was. This much is illustrated by her letter written to the newspaper La Prensa in January of 1931, which illustrates her skepticism of the value of U.S. citizenship and her desire to see the island become an independent nation. Regardless of the political contours of the status question for the island, Más Pozo’s rhetoric in this letter reveals a complex negotiation with race, social status, and citizenship. The letter was written in response to an article in the New York American, recounting the “wretched” living conditions in El Barrio. Más Pozo seeks to maintain the dignity of the community, specifically by resisting comparisons to black Americans in New York. “Puerto Rico needs its independence,” she declared, and its people cannot allow comparisons which positions them as “worse than the native blacks in this country.”121 In the context of the Jim Crow social order, Más Pozo argued that Puerto Ricans must not fall into this racial trap, even if it means reifying racial inequality. The injustices

experienced by Puerto Ricans in the diaspora are of primary concern for Más Pozo, with anti-black injustices ranking no better than a secondary concern. Though Más Pozo later protested that it was the North American who created racial inequality and that she was an advocate for communities of color, it is clear that her argument is based, at least in part, out of anti-black tropes and assumptions of social worthiness (or lack thereof).\footnote{Thomas, \textit{Puerto Rican Citizen}, 60-62.}

Más Pozo goes on to say that “[Puerto Ricans] do not want a North American citizenship that humiliates us, depriving us of our dignity, after having been stripped, in the name of humanity, of our blessed land.”\footnote{“Miserias al desnudo.”} Más Pozo here articulates an argument which is broadly anti-colonial, rejecting the citizenship which was the fruit of the U.S. occupation. However, her broader argument betrays a notable lack of analysis around the extent to which racialization played a part in that colonial history and the ways in which that experience of racialization was similar to that of black Americans. While she articulates the “humiliation” caused by passive acceptance of a cheapened U.S. citizenship, she does not acknowledge the ways in which views of Puerto Ricans as racial and cultural “aliens” played into this status. Nor does Más Pozo observe any degree of common experience or basis for solidarity with black Americans owing to their being placed outside of belonging in U.S. society. Instead, she laments the fact that this citizenship did not bring social esteem to Puerto Ricans in North America: “why are we so lowly-regarded, when we are American citizens?”\footnote{Ibid.} The humiliating loss of sovereignty- and by extension, dignity- on the part of Puerto Ricans had not been justified by acceptance and belonging in U.S. society. Thus, Más Pozo rejects out of hand the notion of a colonial North American citizenship.
Given this rejection of U.S. citizenship, how, then, can one make sense of Más Pozo’s vigorous defense of her citizenship and that of her daughter, a mere eight years later? Perhaps her efforts to utilize the mobility her U.S. citizenship offered, and the resulting exclusion, had shifted Más Pozo’s perception of the value of her passport. We might also view her stand as a means of what Jaqueline Font-Guzmán calls re-creation. Examining the anti-colonial efforts of Juan Mari Brás, Juan Santiago Nieves, and other more recent Puerto Rican nationalists, Font-Guzmán concludes that “Puerto Ricans re-create themselves and assert their cultural national identity” through renunciation of their U.S. citizenship.125 While Más Pozo’s efforts took her in the opposite direction—protecting her citizenship status—she shared in the desire of these activists to assert their legal and political personhood. At a time when, in the analysis of Thomas and Meléndez, Puerto Ricans were resisting narratives constructing them as ambiguous colonial citizens, Más Pozo was de-constructing this notion and asserting Boricuas’ place in the social order alongside a cultural nationalist position. Whatever their legal status must be, Puerto Ricans must be seen as worthy of membership in a democratic society. U.S. citizenship, then, might be seen as a first step (albeit flawed) in the direction of preserving the rights of all Puerto Ricans, moving in the direction of self-determination and independence.

“Highly Discriminatory” Laws Overcome?

In response to these and other cases, Congressman Marcantonio introduced H.R. 7119 on July 10, 1939. The proposal would have amended citizenship law to state that “any person born in Puerto Rico on or after April 11, 1899, is ipso facto, by birth, hereby declared to be a citizen of the United States, irrespective of the citizenship of the parents.”126 In a committee hearing for

the bill, Marcantonio framed his proposal as a clarification of the issue of individuals born in Puerto Rico and lacking citizenship by reason of their birthplace, a reality “highly discriminatory as against [sic.] Puerto Ricans.” Amplifying specific issues under the then-current law, he points out the possibility of individuals being deported to the country of their father’s birth, nations these people have never known due to their lifetime residence in Puerto Rico. In total, Marcantonio was aware in August 1939 of three previous deportations due to the inconsistencies he sought to correct, and another (likely that of Vasquez-Cortes) still pending. Though the House committee with jurisdiction over this matter expressed concern with the issues raised and promised further study of the bill at the committee level, it does not seem that any further action was taken.

Likely, the debate spurred by Marcantonio’s proposal were superseded by deliberations around the Nationality Act of 1940, President Roosevelt’s effort to clarify a number of areas of citizenship law. As passed, the law provided that all those eligible to citizenship and born in Puerto Rico after the enactment of the Treaty of Paris would acquire *jus soli*, birthright citizenship. In other words, the birth of individuals on the island (as with the cases discussed above) would be sufficient to grant them U.S. citizenship. For these purposes, the island was to function as an incorporated territory—virtually on par with a state. Despite this, the extension of the Citizenship Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which grants birthright citizenship to those born in the United States, was ambiguous. Indeed, a 1989 Congressional Research Service memo argues that the U.S. citizenship granted to Puerto Ricans was *statutory*, rather than constitutional, having been granted by the Jones Act rather than the Fourteenth Amendment, which left Puerto

128 *Ibid* 26, n.n.
Ricans lacking birthright citizenship in the sense that the 14th Amendment establishes. Further, constitutional citizenship could not be claimed by Puerto Ricans through the regular naturalization process. As a consequence, the theoretical possibility for unilateral expatriation of Boricuas existed.\textsuperscript{129} This possibility of removal from the U.S. body politic suggests that the “uncertainty” of Puerto Rican U.S. citizenship remains, and that rather than enjoying the full range of Constitutional rights, there is a theoretical possibility that the rights of Puerto Ricans could (in the future) be constrained in ways that other citizens-by-birth would not be subject to.

With the benefit of hindsight, I would argue that the liberatory power of citizenship, and particularly a colonial citizenship of the type offered to Puerto Ricans at home and in the diaspora in the 1930s, is questionable at best. This sentiment has a long historical precedent— as José Fusté has argued, the insights of Boricua ideological leaders going back to the Spanish-Cuban-American War should lead us to question the usefulness of citizenship as a tool of decolonization.\textsuperscript{130} Undoubtedly, some Puerto Rican community leaders of the 1930s held this view as well. Despite this, Puerto Ricans in New York had varied and complicated perspectives on both citizenship and independence, which sometimes do not seem entirely logically consistent. Narratives of citizenship were seen by the pioneros under examination here as a powerful tool in their struggle for a better life and a clearer sense of belonging. Though citizenship did not ultimately prove empowering for the Puerto Rican people, as of 1939 many

\textsuperscript{129} Venator-Santiago, “Extending Citizenship,” 70-71. This Federal interpretation of Puerto Ricans’ U.S. citizenship has been questioned by then-contemporary and more recent legal scholarship. For the most recent example, see Charles Venator-Santiago, “Mapping the Contours of the History of the Extension of U.S. Citizenship to Puerto Rico, 1898–Present,” Centro Journal XXIX, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 38-55. Venator-Santiago argues that the Nationality Act of 1940 extended birthright citizenship to Puerto Rico, despite the fact that the island was not incorporated into the United States. \textit{Ibid.}, 48-50.

saw it as critical ground for discursive and political work. Those who fought for their citizenship were seeking a stable home under circumstances which made Puerto Rico an ambiguous nation. We should view these tactical choices and concerns, sometimes made despite nationalist sentiments, not as bearing a direct relationship to political desires for the island. Rather, this fight for citizenship was waged to protect the individual rights that citizenship affords. Of particular importance was the right of mobility—most frequently, the movement of Puerto Ricans to North America, though not always. This was the most important right granted to Puerto Ricans under the Jones Act, and it was utilized in ways which would become more familiar once air travel made circular migration and frequent labor migration possible.

The varying positions on U.S. citizenship taken by Maria Más Pozo suggest that she viewed herself, in some respects, as an “uncertain citizen.” The position she staked out in 1931 suggests that sovereignty of the Puerto Rican people was worth more than the second-class citizenship the United States offered in exchange. Though her position seems fairly transparently to be motivated by white supremacist logics, it is also based on her assessment of the ways in which the rights of people of color were second-class. After years of movements throughout the Western Hemisphere, and a number of struggles faced by her family to secure the right not only to move freely, but to return to her home on the island, Más Pozo’s perspective shifted notably. Assurance of these rights made instrumental uses of her U.S. citizenship, and the deployment of narratives of citizenship, a necessity. Más Pozo, Cariel, and their contemporaries not only exercised their rights but fought to protect them through the political structures in a manner befitting a citizen. Lying beneath this fight for an expanded range of citizenship rights was a struggle for belonging—the most fundamental aspect of citizenship—which would permit Puerto Ricans to create a broader sense of home amidst the tensions of empire. In this function,
Boricuas were sometimes joined by their U.S.-born black neighbors. Writers in the black press, in viewing the burgeoning Puerto Rican community, utilized similar narratives of citizenship both in describing the community presence and political work of their Spanish-speaking neighbors and in encouraging their own readers to follow in that tradition of activism. Their writings suggest that some segments of the growing black communities in Harlem saw much of their own experience reflected in Puerto Ricans’ diasporic journeys. However, these analyses did not go so far as to acknowledge the Afro-Latinx roots of many Puerto Ricans, and they did at times tend to exoticize people of East Harlem and their cultural lives. Nonetheless, this reporting laid the foundation for coalitional political work in the years to come. The following chapter will elucidate these imaginative connections as they manifested in one of Harlem’s leading black newspapers, the *New York Amsterdam News*. 
Figure 2. A group of Puerto Ricans who have just arrived by plane at Newark Airport, awaiting transportation to Harlem, April 29, 1947. New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
CHAPTER III. “A HALF-MILLION PEOPLE CAN STOP HELL ITSELF IF THEY GET TOGETHER”: NARRATIVES OF POTENTIAL BLACK-PUERTO RICAN SOLIDARITY IN THE NEW YORK AMSTERDAM NEWS, 1923-1944

“Poppa’s eyes were on his hands, and one fingernail was trying to peel the broken fingernail from another finger. ‘I ain’t got one colored friend,’ he added, ‘at least not one American Negro friend. Only dark ones I got are Puerto Ricans and Cubans. I’m not a stupid man. I saw the look of white people on me when I was a young man, when I walked into a place where dark skin wasn’t supposed to be. I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance when they heard my exaggerated accent. I can remember the time when I made my accent heavier, to make me more of a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto Rican there ever was.’” 131

-Piri Thomas

“Unnecessary sub-divisions of Harlem, such as East, West, or Negro and Spanish Harlem serve no good purpose. What is needed is a united Harlem.” 132 -Randolph White

On October 3, 1923, Julio Rodriguez, a 20-year-old Puerto Rican migrant recently arrived from Mexico where he had worked as a cowboy, was out in his new home city of New York going about his daily errands, when the ubiquity of white supremacy in everyday life manifested to disastrous consequences. He entered a barber shop on Third Avenue in East Harlem and requested a shave. Joseph Viviano, a barber working in the shop, refused the request, stating that they did not serve “colored men” at this particular establishment. Rodriguez then produced a revolver and fired at least two shots. One shot stuck James Formica, another barber working at the time, who later died of his wounds.133 This reporting was among the first mentions by the leading black newspaper in Harlem, the New York Amsterdam News, of the Puerto Rican community which was growing in size and prominence in neighboring East Harlem.

133 “Man Kills Barber When Called Negro,” New York Times, Oct. 4, 1923. “Barber Makes Fatal Mistake,” New York Amsterdam News, Oct. 10, 1923. There are minor differences between the two accounts of this incident (i.e. the victim's's name being reported as either Formica or Fernica), but none that substantially change the facts of the case.
Harlem. Beyond offering basic information on the cultural life of New York Boricuas, writers for the paper expressed (explicitly and implicitly) various perspectives on the extent to which black and Puerto Rican Harlemites had shared practical, social, and political problems and pondered whether there was an opportunity for coalitional politics among these two communities. In particular, the paper emphasized the need for communities of color to own and patronize their own businesses. In viewing their Puerto Rican neighbors, *Amsterdam News* writers generally tended towards expressions of common cause in the struggle for substantive citizenship, if not outright co-identification. Further, their writings suggest the extent to which the segment of black Harlem represented by the *Amsterdam News* saw the tactics of Puerto Ricans in working for community empowerment as an example which black communities might draw on. Though the archival record suggests limited success in building coalitions between black and Puerto Rican communities in Harlem in the 1920s through the 1940s, the discursive work performed by *Amsterdam News* reporting suggested a common search for civil and human rights among black and Puerto Rican communities which would serve as a foundation for later grassroots political alliances.

In their reporting on the Rodriguez incident, clear differences emerged in the explanation of the shooter’s racial identity in the *Amsterdam News* and the *New York Times*. Beyond the barber’s characterization of the Puerto Rican as a “Negro” in both articles, each article contains one reference to race. The *New York Times* article provides a quote from Rodriguez, in which he stated “I lost my head when the barber at the chair would not shave me, *in the belief that I was a negro*.”

134 “Man Kills Barber…” Emphasis mine.
he was frustrated that others did. It also suggests that Rodriguez and other Puerto Ricans were placed within a racial system which was incompatible with their own identity and experiences on the island. While the Times offers Rodriguez the chance to self-identify in print as not-Negro, it nevertheless does not resist the impulse to call him a Negro in its own description of the incident. Thus, despite his own words to the contrary, Rodriguez is framed in terms of an ascribed black identity. By contrast, the Amsterdam News' report carries a more tentative framing of Rodriguez’s identity. While describing Rodriguez as “a dark hued Porto Rican” in referring to his appearance, the Amsterdam News remained silent on the broader question of his racial identity. Both editorial choices create space for Rodriguez’s self-identification while suggesting that however he might think of himself, black experience in the United States makes it clear that his racial identity will be assigned and acted upon by outside forces. Despite this, the Amsterdam News’ headline suggests that the “mistake” which is most relevant in understanding this tragedy is that of the barber. In refusing service to a man because of his race, he had not only committed a faux pas, but had made a “fatal” miscalculation.

The Rodriguez incident also seems to have granted the Amsterdam News another context in which to place their argument for a particular vision of racial empowerment - specifically, a call for communities of color to establish and patronize their own businesses. In their issue published one week after the reporting of the Rodriguez incident, there appeared an editorial entitled “Throw Away the Hammer.” This essay focused on economic issues, with a hint of black nationalist thinking incorporated into the argument. It begins “When a colored man wants a shave there are only two ways in which he can get it. One way is to shave himself, the other ways is to go to a tonsorial parlor and have it done- and he doesn't go to a white tonsorial parlor,

135 “Barber Makes Fatal Mistake”
either.” The editors then juxtapose black patronage of black barbers with what they observe as the widespread criticism of other black businesses on the basis of a single bad experience. “But, if this same man goes into a grocery store, market, drug store, or a bootblack parlor run by Negroes and for some reason becomes displeased, we will go upon a hilltop and devote the rest of his life telling his friend of the race's shortcomings.” Calling their readership’s attention to the power of spending their dollars in the community, they implore “[w]henever possible walk a block to the nearest colored store and spend your money. It will do you and your children good.” Though the editorial does not make explicit reference to the Rodriguez incident, it is striking that of all the goods and services which might have been referenced at the beginning of the piece, it is the need to get a shave that the editors chose. The negative outcome of Rodriguez's choice to enter the white barber shop is thus connected to the subtler, but nevertheless long-term negative impact, of patronizing businesses that take money out of the black community. The Amsterdam News' call to “throw away the hammer” of criticism against black businesses is, on one level, a black nationalist message, and is supported by the experience of the Puerto Rican community.

Reporting of this incident also took place in the context of exhortations for black Harlem to become more involved in electoral politics, looking to the example of Marcus Garvey and other Afro-West Indian immigrants and their desire to become citizens and vote. In an opinion piece published the day of the Rodriguez incident, the editors argued “[f]or a colored man, no

137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 The barber shop has long been a venue in which the color line manifests. For this reason, a distinct set of black barber shops remains notable in communities throughout the U.S. For further discussion of this, see Quincy T. Mills, Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
matter where he may be from, to make his residence permanently in the United States and not avail himself of the rights of suffrage in States where he is not denied the vote because of his color, furnishes evidence to the enemy in his contention that the Negro should never have been recognized as a citizen.”140 If all black Americans and West Indians in Harlem were to register and vote, they argue, “a colored man could be sent to Congress with ease.”141 Here, we see a message of empowerment through electoral politics as well as the economic nationalism which was expressed in the previous article. Additionally, this reinforces the notion, well-articulated in the literature, that African Americans were looking to other Afro-descended communities (both locally and internationally) for strategies to further their own empowerment.142

This chapter explores the themes of Puerto Rican cultural, economic, and political empowerment as discussed in the *Amsterdam News*. Underlying these narratives is a broader concern with the lack of *substantive citizenship* offered to Puerto Rican communities, an experience all too familiar to black Americans of the Great Migration era. *Amsterdam News* writers considered the ways in which Boricuas responded to racialization and second-class citizenship through self-directed identity formation and early manifestations of community-based empowerment. They concluded that Puerto Ricans made frequent use of narratives of citizenship in combatting their own marginalization and forming a new liberatory politics. In their framing of these debates, the *Amsterdam News* effectively re-positions the people of the East Harlem

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Barrio within New York’s racial order, moving in the direction of further racial and experiential identification between the black Harlem communities they served and their Boricua neighbors.

The Amsterdam News in Historical and Political Context

The New York Amsterdam News was a key part of a black journalistic tradition in New York extending back to the early 19th century. The city was a major population center for free people of color before the Civil War, with approximately 15,000 black residents in the 1820s.\(^{143}\) By the time of full emancipation of enslaved people in New York State in 1827, the city had become “a mecca for freed and freeborn Negroes.”\(^{144}\) As a result, New York State was the home of almost half of black newspapers and magazines published before 1866, with one-third of these coming from the city.\(^{145}\) These publications included Freedom’s Journal, which originated out of a meeting of black leaders at the home of M. Boston Crummell in 1827. This was to be the first black owned and operated newspaper in the United States.\(^{146}\)

The Amsterdam News was founded in 1909 by James H. Anderson, and remained in his family’s hands until it was sold to Drs. C.B. Powell and Philip M.H. Savory in 1936. While Anderson’s work focused primarily on his leadership of the newspaper, which he built up from “a dream in his mind, $10 in his pocket, six sheets of paper, and two pencils,” Drs. Powell and Savory presided over a minor commercial empire, of which the Amsterdam News was but a part.\(^{147}\) Their holdings, under the umbrella of the Powell-Savory Corporation, included at one time or another the Victory Mutual Life Insurance Company, the Brown Bomber Baking

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Company, and many smaller enterprises, making it (in the words of Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay) “the most ambitious development in recent Negro business in Harlem.”

Perhaps due to its status as part of one of the largest business enterprises among black leaders in Harlem, the *Amsterdam News* had a clear interest in the commercial goings-on of the neighborhood. In seeking to empower black communities, the paper looked not only to the political sphere, but to the economic sphere as well, leading *Amsterdam News* contributor Roi Ottley to write elsewhere that the chief aim of the paper, beyond campaigning for black rights and the improvement of Harlem, was “the development of a wealthy Negro business class.”

There is nonetheless evidence that the *Amsterdam News* had an interest in the economic concerns of working-class black Harlemites as well. For example, the *Amsterdam News* took a leading role in the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign of the 1920s and 1930s, which encouraged a boycott of businesses which would not employ black people in a full range of positions. This suggests that for the editors of the paper, the structures of capitalism could serve as a powerful venue for protest. Any business which wished to profit off of black communities would need to accommodate the community among its employees. As we shall see below, the paper also has a clear interest in community ownership of businesses and saw the growth of black capitalism as key to sustainable growth and empowerment in Harlem.

In the context of the Great Migration of black Americans from South to North in the early decades of the 20th century, the black press offered new arrivals information about their new urban homes. The *Amsterdam News* was among these publications which “advocated racial

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justice on a local level.”151 Such publications might be contrasted with nationally focused, and often more radical publications, such as the Messenger (a socialist publication, founded 1917) and the Negro World (founded by Marcus Garvey in 1917).152 The Amsterdam News of the Powell-Savory years also reflected the increasing presence of immigrants from the British West Indies. Indeed, Dr. Savory himself was West Indian-born, and according to Roi Ottley, Savory’s co-ownership led to an increase in the appearance of news of interest to Caribbean immigrants.153 As such, the Amsterdam News was an important institution of Harlem life for both longer-term and new residents from throughout the African Diaspora, and it provided information about the social and cultural life of the neighborhood to black readers nationwide.

The Amsterdam News had been in financial straits prior to its sale to the Powell-Savory group in 1936, and for a time local Communists considered taking it over. Under the leadership of editor Earl Brown, the circulation increased from 11,000 to 50,000, vaulting it from a largely local publication to the number three black newspaper in the country.154 Politically, it might be placed alongside the Baltimore Afro-American and the Pittsburgh Courier in being more militant than some of the Southern black publications, although historian Paul Alkebulan argues that “there were only minor differences between northern and southern papers in their advocacy of ‘full democracy’” during the World War II era.155 That call for “full democracy” was often couched during the 1940s in the language of the “Double-V” campaign, which called for victory over fascism abroad and racism in the United States. Though this campaign was “militant” in the

152 Ibid.
154 Jordan, Black Newspapers, 95.
sense of forcefully advocating for black rights, historian Lee Finkle argues that it was fundamentally conservative in that it called for victory in the war (with full black participation) first, and in that the campaign “sought to gain concessions from a reluctant administration, while trying to restrain the more militant elements within the black masses.”

The relatively moderate perspective of the *Amsterdam News* is further evidenced by the specific ways in which the paper reported on the political goings-on of black communities and advocated for black communities and other marginalized populations around the world. Richard Robbins analyzed the editorial perspective of the *Amsterdam News* and the *People’s Voice* (a progressive publication founded by preacher and congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.), and found the former publication to be generally more conservative. “While it reports material on discrimination and segregation, it does so in a relatively restrained fashion, preferring to emphasize social functions, crime stories, and Negro accomplishments in white-collar fields.”

Thus, although the *New York Amsterdam News* was a vigorous advocate for black communities, the specific contours of that advocacy emphasized less-controversial and more socially accepted aspects of black cultural life, in line with a broader respectability politics. This bias, as well as the focus observed by Ottley on the development of a black capitalist class, suggests that the vision of an empowered black community which was held by the *Amsterdam News*’ publishers and editors was one which emphasized the experience of wealthier members of black communities in Harlem. Thus, although the editorial perspective of the *Amsterdam News* offers insights regarding the connections being developed between black and Puerto Rican

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communities in Harlem, it is but one voice in the complex and heterogenous set of political perspectives represented in New York’s black communities during the interwar and immediate post-World War II years.

“An Object Lesson” in Black Capitalism

The class politics of the Amsterdam News, and the desire of its leadership to support the development of community-owned businesses, were on subtle display in its reporting of an “attempt at riot” against Puerto Ricans in late July of 1926. The motivation for the uprising was described initially as “ill-feeling…between Porto Ricans and others of Spanish blood who have been moving into Harlem in large numbers recently and the older residents of the [East Harlem] district.”158 The confrontation was stopped before it got into full swing, but it required the reserve units of four precincts.159 The Amsterdam News would subsequently provide contextualized coverage of the community’s response to this incident. By contrast, subsequent reports in the New York Times did little to explain the causes of conflict, leaving the impression that conflict between Puerto Rican newcomers and unspecified “old residents” of the area was inevitable. As Lorrin Thomas points out in her analysis of Spanish-language coverage of this incident, the Summer of 1926 “opened up a space for debate over the language of identity and place and the question of belonging, particularly as it applied to Puerto Rican members of the colonia.”160 For reporters at the Spanish-language paper La Prensa, blame for the outbreak of violence lay with “‘armed bands of Hebrews,’” and the tension between Jewish and Puerto Rican communities was no more problematic than the histories of conflict among other ethnic groups. By contrast, the New York Times reporting suggests that a menacing presence was taking root in

159 Ibid.
160 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 53.
Harlem, thereby filtering common knowledge about members of the colonia through a racializing lens.\textsuperscript{161} Thus, reporting in the Amsterdam News provides a less sensationalist perspective on the violence than does the Times, takes Puerto Rican claims of belonging and citizenship more seriously, and provides black readers the means to replicate Puerto Rican tactics for their own empowerment.

While the Amsterdam News’ initial report of the conflict seems to replicate that of the New York Times, the narrative arc of the two papers regarding this issue diverges in subsequent reports. Both papers begin with a straightforward, brief report which confines itself to the discussion of “ill feeling” on the part of “older residents” leading to an abortive rumble. The Times continues its coverage by delving into further detail on the conflict in the context of a request by Puerto Rican residents for police protection which was relayed through the Resident Commissioner from the island, resulting from the abuse of Boricua women and assaults on men. In that article, the Times reporter suggests “[t]he bad feeling is said to have been caused by the rapid influx of Latins and West Indian negroes who describe themselves as Porto Ricans. The newcomers have opened their own stores and patronize no others.”\textsuperscript{162} The violence is thus portrayed as a manifestation of ethnic conflict between “older residents” of the neighborhood (suggested to have a stronger claim to belonging) and Caribbean people of varying stripe over economic concerns rather than any racial discrimination. The Times further calls into question the identity of the new members of the Harlem community, by stating that some “describe themselves” as “Porto Rican,” despite being “West Indian negroes.” The implication is that that “negroes” and “Porto Ricans” are mutually exclusive categories, and that West Indians were

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 50.
attempting to pass themselves off as Puerto Rican, perhaps to access the rights and benefits available to U.S. citizens. This stark dichotomy of identity and experience is called into question by many of the articles appearing in the Amsterdam News.

The Amsterdam News’ follow-up reporting on this incident, rather than suggesting violence in East Harlem and a racialized threat to order, focused on the efforts undertaken by Puerto Ricans to organize and demand recognition and full citizenship rights. Under the headline “Harlem Porto Ricans United,” the report confirms that, according to attendees at an organizing meeting for the Puerto Rican Brotherhood of America on August 8, 1926, “the recent race riot in Harlem between Porto Ricans [sic.] and Jews grew out of economic rivalry.” Going beyond a rote description of the violence, the objective of this meeting is described as the establishment of a community center and the more general organization of Latin Americans living in the area for “mutual political and economic interests.” A speaker at the meeting suggests another impetus for the coming-together of the community: “If we are all Americans, we expect to enjoy all the privileges that go with American citizenship.” This language of expectation suggests that attendees at the meeting intended on receiving the full measure of rights as citizens, that interethnic strife in their neighborhood stood in the way of achievement of this goal, and therefore, that it must be ended. Their chosen tactic to overcome this prejudicial treatment was coming together as Latin Americans for mutual benefit.

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163 “Harlem Porto Ricans United,” New York Amsterdam News, Aug. 11, 1926. This report refers to the organization formed at this meeting as the Porto Rican Brotherhood of America, while the Times reports discussed below refer to the Porto Rican and Spanish-American League, in which members of the Porto Rican Brotherhood participated. Based on the dates and location of the meetings, I am confident they refer to the same meeting. Note also, the Amsterdam News utilizes the Anglicized spelling of the name of the island (“Porto Rican”), while the organization itself used the spelling more recognizable today.

164 Ibid.
By contrast, *New York Times* coverage of these community meetings and Puerto Rican demands highlights Boricuas’ willingness to assimilate and gain a sense of belonging within the larger urban community. Reporting on a later meeting of the same organization, the *Times* utilizes the headline “Harlem Porto Ricans Unite to Prove Faith- With Other Spanish-Speaking Residents, They Form League to Foster Good Feeling.”¹⁶⁵ In this article, narratives of assimilation replace the more forceful demands for respect reflected in the *Amsterdam News*. Puerto Ricans must “prove their faith,” and ensure that others living in the area understand that they are good citizens, willing to work with anyone for the betterment of the community. This is reinforced by a quote from V. Fiol Ramos, Secretary of the Porto Rican and Spanish-American League, which the article’s author has chosen to include in their report:

> The source of the trouble is that people do not realize that we Porto Ricans are American citizens in the fullest sense of the word…We believe that we have readily adapted ourselves to American standards and ideals and there is no reason why we should be looked upon with suspicion.¹⁶⁶

The selected quote is clearly an appeal to dominant narratives of the good citizen, and of assimilation on the part of Puerto Ricans. According to Ramos, the goals of the League are “to prove that the Spanish-speaking people are willing to be, and are Americans.”¹⁶⁷ Puerto Ricans, under this formulation, are willing (indeed, eager) American citizens who have met American standards of respectability, and who desire the recognition of mainstream society. Legal citizenship, it is suggested, is not the beginning and end of the discussion. Instead, Boricuas also wish to point to their assimilation into North American culture and society. This choice of

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¹⁶⁶ Ibid.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid.
quotation serves to frame the reporting of events in the direction of an assimilation narrative. In this way, Ramos presents a less thoroughly self-assertive argument for Puerto Rican rights.

The editors of the *Amsterdam News*, on the other hand, do not engage in the sort of assimilationist narratives evidenced above. Rather, they saw in the formation of the Puerto Rican Brotherhood an “object lesson” regarding community empowerment and locally-owned businesses for their readers in Central Harlem. They argued that groups such as the Brotherhood serve the goal of “protection of their community interests,” and suggest that more should be done along these lines in black communities. The editorial is grounded squarely in the economic issues which precipitated the initial uprising, most directly the formation of Puerto Rican businesses in the neighborhood. “Like Negroes in Harlem”, they argued, “these Porto Ricans have neighbors and neighborhood enterprises conducted by persons not necessarily of their own race…The Porto Ricans [sic.], believing that there was enough of this freedom to go around, began to engage in business themselves.” The language of the article suggests that the editors wish their readers to take a page out of the Puerto Rican book, in recognition of the shared reality that many local businesses in minority neighborhoods are owned by members of other racial and ethnic groups. Interestingly, this call for community organization and economic empowerment comes directly below another editorial calling for black political involvement, suggesting that a black candidate (“Republican, Socialist or Independent”) be fielded. They suggest that both the Democratic and Republican Parties court the black vote through empty rhetoric, claiming that a black congressman should be elected but never actually nominating a member of their communities to serve in Washington. Through these parallel narratives, the writers of the

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Amsterdam News suggest a particular center-right black nationalist vision, both economic and political. To a certain extent, this view is in keeping with the Garveyite strain of black nationalism then prevalent in Harlem, which called explicitly for black capitalism and enacted this vision in the form of the Black Star Line and other related enterprises. Rather than effecting black people’s physical escape from the oppression of the West, though, the Amsterdam News implicitly argues for the need to create businesses to support the everyday life of the community in Harlem.

In their coverage of the aftermath of the Summer 1926 clashes in East Harlem, two very different visions of Puerto Rican communities are portrayed in the New York Times and the New York Amsterdam News. For the Times reporters, the outbreak of violence was the result of conflict between Puerto Rican newcomers and those who had economic control of their neighborhoods. In this way, it was one of a series of similar conflicts which flowed out of the experiences of immigrant communities. In viewing the community response, the Times suggests that U.S. citizenship is a valid corrective to the resulting ill-will towards these communities, but only when it is supplemented by a demonstration that the communities in question are living according to “American standards.” In the Amsterdam News, we see a self-assertive Puerto Rican community organized for its own benefit, not for the validation and recognition of dominant society. Puerto Rican U.S. citizens, they suggest, are already deserving of the full range of rights, and their tactics could well prove instructional for black communities also struggling to become full political actors in the eyes of the party machinery in New York. In so doing, economic

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171 Rather than primarily serving the objective of keeping money within black communities, Garvey’s launching of the Black Star Line was intended to ensure the mobility of black Americans and West Indians, specifically in seeking to “return to Africa.” As such, it stood not merely as a manifestation of black nationalism, but as an internationalist consciousness. Stephens, Black Empire, 110-116.
nationalism could support political empowerment. Put another way, the barrio as seen from the pages of the *Times* is clamoring for their rights among the powerful, while the *Amsterdam News* sees a community taking their rights for themselves.

**Redefining the Black Champion**

The world of sports was another area in which race and gender collided in the early 20th century. Sporting coverage in the *Amsterdam News* thus became a site for building greater understanding of New York’s burgeoning Puerto Rican community, and a potential means for coalition-building. In early June of 1936, the sport most on the mind of many in Harlem was boxing. The big story coming out of the ring that month would be the defeat of Joe Louis by Hitler’s favored fighter, Max Schmeling, on June 19th.\(^{172}\) That bout, while particularly loaded with racialized meaning for supporters of the Third Reich and American white supremacists alike, was but one in a line of boxing matches on which the masculine character of white civilization was staked. For example, black pugilist Jack Johnson’s 1910 defense of the heavyweight title against retired white boxer (and former champion) Jim Jeffries was termed by Jeffries to be “for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a negro.”\(^{173}\) As historian Gail Bederman argues, the bodies of boxers were “so equated with male identity and power that American whites rigidly prevented all men they deemed unable to wield political and social power from asserting any claim to the heavyweight championship.”\(^{174}\) The stakes were

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\(^{172}\) Louis’ career is particularly notable in its importance to both black and white fans as a vehicle for racial pride and white supremacy. For more on this crucial figure in sports history, see Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). For specific discussion of the complex significance of the Louis-Schmeling fight in pre-World War II America, see Roberts, *Joe Louis*, 142-172.


similarly high in black communities, where each victory was seen by some as further evidence of black men’s worthiness in a range of “arenas” - athletic, political, economic, and so forth.

Just one week before the 1936 Louis-Schmeling match, Roi Ottley, one of the most prominent black journalists of his day, focused his sports column on another rising star in the pugilistic sphere, this one fighting in the lightweight class- Pedro Montañez. Ottley skipped a bout involving leading black fighter John Henry Louis in Brooklyn to see Montañez in the ring and to seek answers to what would seem to be a simple question: was Montañez black? This question, complicated as it was by the politics and history of empire, was taken up directly by Ottley. Journalists, managers, and fans all weighed in on this issue, while the perspective of Montañez himself was occasionally left aside. These debates serve as a window to considering the complex issues of racial identification for Latinx people, further complicated by the desire on the part of boxer’s managers to preserve their appeal to a range of fans.

Ottley began his consideration of Montañez’s identity by asking simply “[w]hat is a Negro?” The confusion in this instance was that while “white papers” had referred to Montañez as a “Porto Rican” [sic.], Montañez himself insisted that he identified primarily as a Negro, perhaps seeing his ethnic identity as distinct from race. Ottley asked his fellow sports writers their views ringside at a Montañez fight. “They unanimously felt that Pedro Montanez [sic.] was a ‘Negro’…and their gauge of judging was his hair, features and complexion.” Despite this, the papers they represented (and likely, these reporters personally) did not acknowledge Montañez’s identification as a black person. Ottley explains this by saying “we all know that Americans do not think anyone of light or brown complexion and speaks a foreign language is

176 Ibid.
Negro.” Further complicating matters was the fact that Montañez’s management “refer[red] to him as white, despite his protests.” In one sense, the interpretation of the managers suggests an inversion of the “one-drop” logic of racial descent prevalent in U.S. history. Rather than asserting that Montañez was black due to his apparent African roots, these promoters utilized the confusion about Puerto Ricans’ identity to assert that the boxer was white. This aside, the opinion of Montañez himself was de-centered by Ottley, crowded out by the views of sports writers, coaches, and others. This confusing jumble of opinions led reporters to place him in an anomalous, if not new, “racial” category: that of “Porto Rican.”

For the *Amsterdam News*, the implications of Montañez’s racial identification are largely related to decisions on whether and how to cover his career. “The columns of this department,” Ottley specifies, “are dedicated to carrying detailed accounts of the exploits of Negro performers in the world of sports.” He further expresses the desire to not report on “information that Negroes are not concerned about.” That said, Ottley’s personal view seems to be that black communities should pay attention to Montañez’s storied career. Indeed, Ottley speaks vividly about the boxer’s appeal to *Amsterdam News* readers: “Harlem, in most quarters, is unaware that we have a Negro contender for the lightweight crown…and a brilliant one, too.” The case of Pedro Montañez thus illustrates the importance of race in determining not just the perception of individual fighters, but the level of interest and loyalty that they inspire in various quarters. The pugilist himself is an outlier in that he identifies as “Negro,” despite the common tendency of Puerto Ricans to downplay African roots. Ottley’s actions in this instance are unusual as well, in that he is interested in bringing Montañez into the pantheon of black sports heroes. In this way,

he seems to be “seeking” more athletes to stand alongside Joe Louis and others. This could be out of a desire to acknowledge more black sports heroes, or it could be out of simple respect for Montañez’s self-identification. In any event, Ottley’s writings brought awareness to the Harlem community about a fighter in which he felt they could have pride. Though unquestionably Puerto Rican, Ottley seems keen to open his readers minds up to the idea that Montañez can simultaneously be (both in his self-identification and in how he is read by society) unambiguously black.

A variation on the Montañez narrative arose the following year involving boxer Sixto Escobar. Described as “colored” in the Daily News, his manager Lou Brix wrote to the sports editor that “Sixto Escobar is a Puerto Rican and not colored… Although your description does not particularly reflect upon his reputation as a fighter, he has nevertheless been placed in an embarrassing position.” Though Brix’s formulation does not directly set up a mutual exclusivity between the categories of “Puerto Rican” and “colored,” such a division is strongly implied. Further, Brix does uphold a racial hierarchy in which being mistaken for black is “embarrassing” for a public figure. St. Clair Bourne, writing for the Amsterdam News, calls the distinction Brix sets up “absolutely unhitched,” and argues that Puerto Ricans are not a race unto themselves. The problem, Bourne continues, is not limited to Brix; he observes many “Latins” who “aspire to be Aryans.” The perspective from “up here” (presumably, in Central Harlem) is that “if you’re a Latin, you’re also colored until proven otherwise.” Bourne thus pushes back against the strict dichotomy between black and Puerto Rican and the racial hierarchy established by Brix, while nevertheless acknowledging the operation of race in American society. From the

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180 Ibid.
perspective of the proverbial man in the Harlem street, the experience of the average Latino man would likely be substantially the same as that of a person of color, however this hypothetical Latino chose to identify.

No comment from Escobar himself is included in this article, begging the question of whether his views and self-identification were in accord with Brix’s or not. As with the Montañez case, Escobar’s management made efforts to “whiten” him, by refusing to concede that their client was black. At most, these managers are willing to admit that their fighters are of a “Puerto Rican” race, distinct from the North American black-white binary. In neither case are the managers willing to recognize the possibility of cross-identification. It seems likely that this discursive distancing of the boxer from identification as black comes out of a desire to maintain commercial viability for the fighter among white boxing enthusiasts. This was done despite the fact that black boxing fans of the 1930s were quite enthusiastic and loyal attendees of prizefights, their interest piqued by the simultaneous success of Joe Louis.

Whether the message out of the pugilist’s camp is one of accepting or rejecting blackness, though, the writers from the Amsterdam News seem eager to claim both boxers to show that there were yet more black world-class fighters, and to resist the implication by whites and some Puerto Ricans alike that Boricuas cannot qualify as black. For these writers, the implications of blackness in American society extend also to Latinx people, as does the potential for identification as both Latinx and black. Through the example of these fighters, the possibility arises for a breaking down of the racial barrier seen by many Puerto Ricans between themselves and black communities. The basis for eventual coalitions, it may have been thought, could come through rooting for the same man in the ring.
“Harlem’s most colorful corner”

The *Amsterdam News*’ reporting on New York’s Puerto Rican communities during the 1930s increasingly turned from the broader issues of politics and identity to the fine points of lived experience. For example, a number of articles compared the difficult living conditions in the Puerto Rican blocks of East Harlem with those of black neighborhoods in central Harlem. A frequent subtext suggested that these poor living conditions for Puerto Ricans, as with black Americans, had a great deal to do with the racialization of these groups. The common aspects of black and Puerto Rican cultural life were also explored, although this reporting sometimes proceeded from faulty assumptions and displayed an exoticizing lens which bore an ironic similarity to the ways in which the white mainstream press reported on the cultural and social happenings of black and Puerto Rican communities in Harlem. Despite this, there exists a clear effort to shrink the distance between black and Puerto Rican people and to suggest a set of common problems of substantive citizenship, in the minds of *Amsterdam News* readers.

Despite their physical proximity, an understanding of the cultural and everyday life of the Barrio had to be built among black Harlemites. Describing “Harlem’s most colorful corner,” the *Amsterdam News*’ Lou Layne paints a picture of a Latino community full of life. The streets of “Lower Harlem,” he describes, are teeming with activity, owing in part to the fact that “[o]ne of the most characteristic tendencies of the Latin is to spend as much time as he possibly can outdoors.”181 Whether playing cards or indulging their love of music (which Layne implies is inherent) by playing the guitar, the streets of Layne’s Barrio are never quiet. The nightclubs of the Latino community are similarly described as full of action, as well as displaying signs of synthesis across the various Latinx national communities represented in East Harlem. Though

Puerto Ricans dominated the neighborhood (at about three-quarters of residents, according to Layne), most of the Spanish-speaking nations were represented among its residents. Layne illustrates this through his description of the nightclub *El Toreador*, in which he observed a mural depicting “Argentine gauchos, Spanish toreadors, Cuban rhumba dancers, the Morro Castle [in San Juan], and tango and fandango dancers.” The tone of Layne’s virtual tour of East Harlem is at once breathless and boosterish, suggesting the liveliness of the neighborhood and its people. As Fiona I.B. Ngô argues in a study of Jazz Age New York, understandings of cultural spaces such as the jazz clubs of Harlem complicate the simplistic black-white binary through which the cultural history of the neighborhood is often framed. In fact, these spaces (for Ngô) exhibit “exotic tropes of empire” which simultaneously take in “the U.S. South, Africa, Latin America, and the islands of the Pacific and Caribbean.” As such, the power of these spaces in the minds of U.S. society “cannot be understood except in the context of the growing ambitions of modern U.S. empire.”

Layne’s perspective on Boricua social life suggest a similar tension between the exotic and that which is seen as an integral part of New York’s broader social scene.

In the music of the colonia, Layne sees an opportunity to draw cultural connections to black communities in Central Harlem. To be sure, he observes exotic differences in some of the stylistic choices of Latinx clubgoers and musicians: “In their colorful guaracheras (frilled shirts), the dancers gyrate through the tantalizing rhumba as the guiros, claves and maracas keep tempo.” This aside, Layne sees (and hears) similarities with black musical culture: “with all

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185 Layne, “Harlemites in Lower Corner Speak Spanish.”
the difference between Spanish music and American, it doesn’t take very much to put them together to produce a variation of ‘swing.’” Thus, the cultural synthesis Layne observes extends beyond the Spanish-speaking world, bringing together the Latinx and black communities of Harlem as well. This proto-multiculturalist perspective is framed as a means to connect the people of Harlem. Nonetheless, in affirming the common “sound” of black and Puerto Rican communities, Layne does seem to reinforce a sense of the exotic which white mainstream narratives notably feature in their nascent efforts towards an appreciation of jazz.

In addition to writing on the cultural life of the colonia, *Amsterdam News* writers were also interested in the practical bases for solidarity between black Americans and Puerto Ricans. Central to this task was building understanding of the common struggles and experiences of racialization among the two communities. A profile of the Puerto Rican community published by Marvel Cooke in 1940 taps strongly into these narratives of shared struggles as well as the perceived need for political solidarity. As with the black communities of Harlem, Cooke argues, “the Puerto Rican suffers from job discrimination, overcrowded housing, exploitation, etc.” By 1940, it was clear to both of these groups that “there is a great need for unity of all the darker people comprising the community.” Under this formulation, “the Puerto Rican” is a group distinct from, rather than overlapping with, black Harlem. Nevertheless, Cooke believes that the two groups are (and should be) united as racialized migrant subjects in the city.

Though Cooke believes that life in New York presents clear advantages over that of the “oppressed and exploited…colony” that is Puerto Rico, she expresses significant doubts about

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186 Ibid.
187 Cooke was a notable black writer and journalist of the era, who was deeply engaged in leftist (specifically Communist) politics. In the words of historian LaShawn Harris, Cooke “used her writings to testify about race, gender, and class inequities, and imperialism and white supremacy, and to advocate working-class liberation and international solidarity.” LaShawn Harris, “Marvel Cooke: Investigative Journalist, Communist and Black Radical Subject,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 94.
the respect Boricuas of the diaspora are receiving from white New Yorkers and the city’s political structures. “[O]n paper, at least, they have full citizenship rights,” and yet the Barrio Puerto Rican is deeply dependent on welfare relief, and their housing is in the “worst type of slums.” In light of these similar substantive problems, the question then becomes why unity between these communities was not forthcoming. Cooke seems to answer this question through the words of Assemblyman Oscar García Rivera. “The division between the Spanish-speaking people and other colored Americans,” the noted Boricua lawyer and politician argues, “is due to political propaganda, brought about by those who benefit from keeping the two apart.”

García Rivera (and by extension, reporter Cooke) argues that the perpetuation of disunity in Harlem is largely a divide and conquer strategy concocted by more powerful interests. While Cooke does not go so far as to recognize that the black and Puerto Rican diasporas are overlapping and connected in membership, she does make a clear statement in support of their commonalities of experience, and their need to stand together in common cause.

Over time, complex analyses which tied the poor living conditions in East Harlem to the colonial condition of Puerto Rico came about in the *Amsterdam News*. In the aftermath of World War II, Earl Brown journeyed into the neighborhood to see an apartment building for himself, in which lived “the world’s richest city’s poorest and most underprivileged.” Brown claims to have been in slums all over the country, yet what he saw in East Harlem is described as the worst of them all. Comparing the experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York with Great Migration black communities, he argues that “[t]he only difference is that the Puerto Ricans who come here are worse off than the Negroes were.” Mobility, he argued, is the right of both black Americans and

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Puerto Ricans as citizens, and Boricuas utilized this right to better themselves in spite of the colonization of the island and the “unfairness and excesses of capitalism” on view there.\textsuperscript{189} Both black and Puerto Rican communities, in his view, experienced racialization in similar ways, which were nonetheless historically specific due to the specific oppressive mechanisms at play in each community. The poverty resulting from Puerto Rico’s colonization, though more severe than that of black communities in the North, is a basis for solidarity, as is the need to protect the right of all citizens to live where they please with dignity. “The problems of the Puerto Ricans in New York,” he argued “are the problems of all New Yorkers.” The subtext, though, is that they are the problems of black communities in Harlem just a bit more.

As black writers in Harlem gained their own understandings of the cultural life and issues in El Barrio, they began to see a greater basis for solidarity between Harlem’s communities. Though the differences in their experiences and racialization are recognized and maintained through this strain of reporting, and descriptions of Puerto Rican life sometimes tend to exoticize, greater focus is placed upon the ways in which these problems manifest similarly for black and Boricua populations. Economic disenfranchisement and poor living conditions imposed by people outside of the community, as was suggested in earlier years by the lack of access to services such as barbershops and by the resistance of existing business leaders to the rise of new Puerto Rican businesses, must be overcome to ensure a dignified life for black and Puerto Rican people alike.

\textbf{“Negroes First”? Efforts at Black-Puerto Rican Solidarity in the Political Sphere}

Notable members of Harlem’s black political leadership were also cognizant of the plight of Puerto Ricans, both in New York and on the island, and expressed their concern on the pages

of the *Amsterdam News* in an effort to both build coalitions as well as to curry favor with the growing Boricua constituency of the neighborhood. Among the figures who recognized the importance of the Barrio residents early was Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who was to serve as a powerful and entrenched Congressman for Harlem from 1945 through 1971. Writing in 1937, Powell demonstrated an understanding of then-recent events in Puerto Rico, such as the Ponce Massacre (an attack by police on Puerto Rican Nationalist marchers in March of 1937, resulting in twenty-one deaths) and ongoing economic exploitation.\footnote{On the Ponce Massacre, see Ayala and Bernabe, 116.} In seeking empowerment for themselves and for the island, he implies, Boricuas should have a strong partner in black communities, which had been to this point “too widely separated.” Living on the same blocks, and even in the same buildings, these communities should band together lest they play into the hands of the powerful. “When upper Harlem and lower Harlem unite, speak with one voice and move together” Powell states, “both our problems and the problems of our Latin-American neighbors will be solved more completely and more quickly.”\footnote{Adam C. Powell, Jr., “Soap Box,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Apr. 10, 1937.} Responding directly to the Ponce Massacre, Powell suggests the formation of a committee representing all ethnic and racial communities of Harlem to formulate a response. The ramifications of such a direct and institutionalized coalition, he argues, could well be explosive: “[t]he hundreds of thousands in upper Harlem and the hundreds of thousands in lower Harlem together total a half-million, and a half-million people can stop hell itself if they get together.”\footnote{Ibid.} Among a segment of the Harlem leadership class that Powell represented, then, there was an awareness of the issues of the island of Puerto Rico and a desire to band together as neighbors facing similar struggles in their day-to-day lives to push back against imperialism. Though the up-and-coming preacher may well have
been motivated by a desire to grow in influence throughout Upper Manhattan, his words undoubtedly influenced black Harlemites and made them aware of the ways in which their experiences were shared with El Barrio.

The 1940s brought a complex negotiation of the structures of political power by both black and Puerto Rican communities. These racialized and mobile populations had, by this time, put down roots in sufficiently large numbers that some were able to directly take places in the halls of power. For example, Oscar García Rivera became the first Puerto Rican elected official in the mainland United States, taking his seat in the New York State Assembly in 1937. As the candidate of the Republican Party, and later the American Labor Party, Garcia Rivera served for three years before being defeated by a member of Harlem’s growing West Indian population. Hulan Jack, who was described by the *Amsterdam News* in 1940 as the “first Negro elected…from the 17th A.D.,” supplemented his part-time work as East Harlem’s representative in Albany by continuing as head of the wrapping department and cost estimator for the Peerless Paper Box Co. Jack’s early years of service in the State Legislature demonstrate a desire to work for the empowerment of West Indians in Harlem and to build common cause among residents of his district. In some cases, these efforts went so far as to discursively compare the experiences of black and Latinx communities, thereby showing a concern for Puerto Rican issues as well as bringing the two communities together as a means of avoiding ethnic divisions.

Jack built his political career on the empowerment and development of his Harlem constituency, focusing on issues such as housing conditions, jobs, and the incorporation of black communities into the social fabric of New York. Born in British Guiana, Jack sought for all

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193 For further discussion of García Rivera, see Chapter V.
voters, regardless of race, to advocate for their interests with elected officials, making clear demands for reform and improved living conditions.\(^{195}\) Ironically, his rise to elected office was due in part to the patronage of Billy Solomon, a Democratic party boss who was criticized for his racial “divide-and-conquer” tactics mere months later, particularly as it related to the black and Puerto Rican communities. In one of his first interviews as an Assemblyman, given to an unnamed *Amsterdam News* reporter, Jack stated that he would be “ever mindful of the problems of our community, which is composed of negro, Puerto Rican and white voters.”\(^{196}\) Here, Jack displays a sensible awareness of his constituents, but also does subtle discursive work to tie together the experience of Harlemites. He speaks to “the problems of our community,” suggesting a high degree of unity both in the identity of his constituents and in terms of the issues they faced.

As history ground forward towards the United States’ entry into World War II, Jack began to advocate simultaneously for the involvement of all Americans in the expanding war effort and (more centrally) against racial discrimination in American society. In so doing, he spoke to the interests of both his black and Puerto Rican constituents. “Discrimination of Negroes and Puerto Ricans,” the assemblyman argued in a June 1941 letter to the *Amsterdam News*, “is still the most burning issue of the day.” Lack of access to defense industry jobs led to a “growing wave of pessimism” in Harlem, along with a lack of ambition and a lawless environment in the neighborhood. The lack of “sufficient interest in their varied disturbing problems” could be overcome should Harlemites form “a super-organization to protest against discrimination, protect the rights of the Negro as an American citizen” and so forth. Unity among

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\(^{195}\) Jack’s birthplace in the former British Guiana is on the Caribbean coast, and was at the time part of the British colonial sphere in and around the Caribbean.  
\(^{196}\) “Harlem’s Newest Assemblyman is Militant”
Harlem residents in pursuing the community interest is necessary for progress to be made, Jack argues. While Jack’s letter is primarily addressed to the black communities of Harlem, he also speaks to the discrimination faced by Puerto Ricans. Again here, the issues faced by his various constituents are seen by Jack as fundamentally interrelated. In envisioning just who made up “Harlem,” Jack included Puerto Ricans in both the spatial and racial community of the neighborhood. While this strategy may have been strictly political, it is nonetheless significant and indicative of a growing move towards coalitional politics.

The tactics of local party bosses also gave *Amsterdam News* reporters opportunity to critique the divisions between the black American and Puerto Rican communities. In a recap of the political career of Harlem Democratic boss Billy Solomon, Bennie Butler observed that by exploiting neighborhood tensions, Solomon “successfully played the two major groups off against each other for the benefit of the infinitely small white majority who got all the jobs.” This divide-and-conquer strategy was made possible in part by Puerto Ricans’ lack of identification with Harlem’s black population. In Butler’s view, the islanders “indignantly resent being called Negroes and have not seen eye to eye with the Negro on political issues.” Despite this animosity, Butler does not view the Puerto Rican actions as the result of their own racism directly. Rather, this discursive distancing by Puerto Ricans is framed as a means of “insuring them against discrimination, segregation and the many other indignities and persecutions of which the Negro is a victim even here in New York.”

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199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
Despite this problem, Butler does see a precedent for solidarity between black and Puerto Rican communities in the political sphere, citing the formation of the New Deal Democratic Club in 1939 as one example.\textsuperscript{201} It should be noted that this Democratic organization stood outside of the mainstream Democratic machine, of which Billy Solomon was a part. Through this and other statements, it is implied that neighborhood divisions are an objective sought by mainstream white politicians and one which enables the perpetuation of the racial status quo. The fact that Puerto Ricans disidentify from blackness is not a reflection of support of this status quo, but a reaction to it. Through coalition-building, and community-based empowerment, this status quo might be overcome and Puerto Ricans may be brought into a lasting coalition with their black neighbors.

Efforts towards political solidarity in Harlem were not without their missteps. In a turn away from his earlier pronouncements in the direction of solidarity with Puerto Ricans, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. sought to rally first and foremost members of black Harlem communities in his 1944 congressional campaign. His assertion that if elected, he would represent “Negroes First” drew resistance from other Harlemites, including some of his strongest supporters. Powell was ultimately forced to reverse this position, acknowledging the importance of other groups to Harlem’s social fabric. “It is true that there are 310,000 Negroes in Harlem, but there are also 100,000 Puerto Ricans, 2,000 Chinese, 3,000 Italians, 5,000 Finns. […] I promise to represent this district first….not only the Negro people, but each and every citizen of this area irrespective of race, creed, or political affiliation.”\textsuperscript{202} Powell’s initial statements reflect a desire to consolidate his political power base, which was first and foremost built on black communities in central

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{202} “Powell Changes ‘Negroes First,’” \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, May 6, 1944.
Harlem. The later reversal suggests an understanding that the perspectives and problems of the other ethnic groups in the district (of which Puerto Ricans are the largest group) must be taken into account, and the growing political power of these communities acknowledged, if one is to succeed as a neighborhood leader.

The political power of the Puerto Rican community, a group of new migrants who unlike others new to the United States enjoyed citizenship and the right to vote, was on the rise throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Much like earlier immigrant groups, Puerto Ricans formed ethnic enclaves of which East Harlem is merely the most notable example. Harlem’s political leaders were forced to gain a greater understanding of Puerto Rican issues, both the day-to-day struggles of the diaspora and the long-term concerns associated with colonization on the island. Hulan Jack’s words in the pages of the *Amsterdam News* illustrates how one West Indian immigrant worked to gain the confidence of Puerto Ricans (despite his role in hastening the political downturn of one of their most prominent leaders, Oscar García Rivera) and speak effectively to African American, West Indian, and Puerto Rican constituents simultaneously. Adam Clayton Powell’s history with Boricua communities illustrates that his commitment to the Puerto Rican cause was not always consistent, and that major missteps could lead to major electoral problems for candidates. In this way, despite the scorn heaped on members of the colonia, it is clear that by the mid-1940s, Puerto Ricans had come into their own as members of the broader Harlem community and that their role as political subjects could not be ignored.

**New World A-Coming**

In 1943, Roi Ottley published one of the critical works about the changing social environment in Harlem, *New World A-Coming.*[^203] The following year, portions of the book were

re-printed in the *Amsterdam News*. The book broadly stood as an examination of black America focused through the prism of what many considered its center, Harlem. Naturally, the new black residents who arrived in Harlem during these years as part of the Great Migration were of central interest to Ottley. However, he saw a number of other important groups as contributing members of black diasporic society in the neighborhood. Though careful to not ascribe blackness to them, he spoke directly to the ways in which Puerto Ricans fit into the Harlem community and identified where there were fissures.

Fundamental to the commonalities Ottley saw between Puerto Rican and black American communities was the experience of migration. “The movement of Puerto Ricans to Harlem,” he argued, “may be compared to the migration of Negroes from South to North.”204 More specifically, Ottley argues that both groups migrated largely without a professional class, and so the functions of that class were performed by Harlem’s Northern-born black and Jewish populations.205 In both the black Southern and Puerto Rican diasporas, then, Ottley saw communities which were similar in experience as well as class composition. His mention that Northern-born middle-class black people were performing the professional functions required by the community suggests some degree of condescension or a sense that migrant communities required mentorship by Northern-born people such as Ottley himself. The reality was that both black Southern and Puerto Rican communities were more heterogenous than Ottley suggests. Indeed, as historian Virginia Sánchez Korrol details, the commercial and professional sectors of the colonia were well-developed a decade or more prior to Ottley’s writing. By the late 1920s, there were approximately 200 Puerto Rican-owned bodegas or markets, and about 125

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205 Ibid.
restaurants. Though professionals were somewhat less common, there were a number of Puerto Rican doctors and pharmacists serving East Harlem, both in their professional capacity and as community leaders alongside working-class Boricua leaders. Thus, although Ottley’s broader point about the ways in which migrants looked to their more-established neighbors is well-taken, Puerto Ricans also had their own leaders in the business, professional, and political spheres who assisted in empowering the community at large.

Turning to the extended treatment of the Puerto Rican community in his 1943 book, Ottley expands on his discussion of the factors affecting the possibility of building coalitions with black communities. Here, he suggests that lighter-complexioned Boricuas took steps to distance themselves from black communities. “Of necessity,” Ottley writes, “[the colored immigrant] identifies himself as a white person, hoping to escape the many discriminations that beset a black person.” This is despite the fact that in his view, “[a]ny attempt to divide them into white and Negro is extremely difficult.” In other words, Ottley sees Puerto Ricans of color engaging in efforts to “pass” as white in order to minimize the extent to which they become racialized by white society. This aside, Ottley sees a number of ways in which Puerto Rican and black communities connect socially, including intermarriage. “Within the Spanish-speaking group,” Ottley observes, “color prejudice does not exist as a social handicap.”

Observing the Puerto Rican presence in the political realm, Ottley observes a number of internal divisions within Puerto Rican communities. “Prominent Puerto Ricans, of very fair complexion, almost invariably live outside of Harlem. They make little effort to provide

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206 Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, 62.
207 Ibid.
209 Ibid., 51.
leadership.”

By contrast, U.S.-born black people were taking a greater interest in the issues of Harlem’s Boricua community, and the community was responding in kind: “More and more the Puerto Ricans are reading the Negro newspapers. For the tendency among Negroes nowadays is to include the Latin Quarter in all movements for community betterment.” Thus, although racial tensions existed within Puerto Rican communities, Ottley observes a growing interest among black and Puerto Rican working-class people in their mutual problems.

In these words, we see Ottley interrogating the common lived experiences of black Americans and Puerto Ricans on the basis of mobility, and implicitly, on the basis of shared racialization. Puerto Ricans and black Americans, in his analysis, take differing routes in their attempts to overcome their lack of substantive citizenship. Puerto Ricans, less legible in racial terms in the U.S. context, in some cases seek to overcome the potential derogatory effect of association with blackness by distancing themselves from African Americans and West Indians. This lack of understanding of Puerto Rican identity and experience is also suggested by Ottley’s perspective, which frames Puerto Ricans as lacking clear leadership or a strong professional class despite evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, shared historical experiences among black and Puerto Rican communities form, for Ottley, a fertile ground for solidarity, if only this slight discursive disconnect can be overcome.

**Postscript: “What is needed is a united Harlem.”**

Though Puerto Rican migration to New York increased following the conclusion of World War II, some in black communities were still unaware of the Boricua’s citizenship status and the issues the community faced. Thus, *Amsterdam News* reporter Randolph White published

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yet another overview of Puerto Rican life in New York in 1950. 212 This column, more than those which preceded it, called attention to the fact that black and Puerto Rican people in Harlem were neighbors and sought to create coalitions between them, putting aside all manner of divisions which they and others in New York society had created. “So here,” White argues, “the two groups are washed up together in ‘greater’ Harlem still remaining aloof, nationalistic and prejudiced and at the same time enduring identical hardships.”213 These hardships included low incomes, a lack of places for recreation, poor health care, and housing issues including the presence of vermin in East Harlem buildings. The only difference between the communities which White suggests is that “in Harlem one hears strains of jazz-music coming from record shops and in East Harlem the music has a Latin tempo.”214 Exotic tone aside, for White a united front among Harlemites is the only way that the lives of its people will be improved. To make these coalitions possible, he suggests that work needs to be done on both sides. Among black communities, greater knowledge about Puerto Ricans’ history with the United States and an end to narratives framing Boricuas as foreign is needed. For Puerto Ricans, White follows Bennie Butler and Roi Ottley’s earlier arguments in observing that some Puerto Ricans either attempt to pass as white, or loudly assert that they are “Porto Rican” or Spanish, not black, in an effort to avoid abuse from white Americans.215 White closes his article by quoting Manuel Cabranes, identified as a Puerto Rican community leader: “‘I am ready and willing to sit down with Negroes and work out our common problems. We have a joint job to do because we are the two minorities most in need of working together.’”216

213 Ibid.
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
216 Ibid.
In their reporting during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the writers of the *New York Amsterdam News* worked to create greater awareness of the Puerto Rican communities growing alongside the Great Migration-era black communities that were becoming increasingly prevalent in Harlem. They took approving note of the tactics Boricuas utilized to organize and empower themselves, and considered how these tactics might be put to use for black Harlemites as they fought to secure the full range of substantive citizenship rights. Their analysis reflected the particular emphasis of the *Amsterdam News* as a publication interested in building the community’s power through the structures of capitalism, in addition to the political structures through which generations of white migrants had utilized to become incorporated into New York society. The general tone of their coverage differed markedly from that of the *New York Times*, which framed Puerto Ricans as a threat to order, perhaps even a menace, and as yet another immigrant group undergoing a process of assimilation. While the *Amsterdam News* did not fall into these racializing traps, it did (at times) create the sense in its readers that culturally Puerto Ricans were an exotic and mysterious group. These shortcomings aside, the pages of the *New York Amsterdam News* suggest some clear strategies for using discourse to build political coalitions, and to empower migrant communities.

Through this discursive turn, we may begin to question the terms of diaspora as traditionally defined. Rather than two distinct diasporic formations randomly converging in a particular geographic space, the *Amsterdam News* begins to conceptualize the African and Puerto Rican diasporas in ways which, in several respects and to varying degrees, overlap. In framing solidarity between U.S. born black populations and Afro-Cubans, Frank Guridy argues for a vision of diaspora “not reducible to politicized forms of ‘black internationalism’ or ‘racial
solidarity.”” In other words, a diasporic framework avoided the problematic essentialism that sometimes plagued political formulations of black internationalism. In their diasporic activism, subjects of empire “often chose to use the imperial structure toward their own ends rather than forge direct challenges to it.” A similar strategy is at play, I argue, in interwar Harlem. The embrace of citizenship (broadly framed) as a status, and the discursive pushing-back against attempts to frame black and Puerto Rican Harlemites as lacking in the privileges or characteristics of citizenship is, on one level, a tacit acceptance of the imperial structure. However, this should not be seen as a passive and unconditional acceptance of U.S. colonialism and the related political structures. Rather, it is the utilization of those structures and the articulation of narratives of citizenship and belonging for greater empowerment, safety, and rights.

The terrain on which this move towards common cause was undertaken was a fundamentally local one, speaking to the everyday community issues of black and Puerto Rican people in Harlem. Despite this, in working towards a deeper understanding of why the coalitions imaginatively suggested by *Amsterdam News* writers did not materialize during these years, a consideration of the broader historical context might be productive. As historian Penny von Eschen argues, the World War II-era was a time during which “[a] new political constellation emerged as anticolonial issues acquired a new prominence and stood side by side with domestic demands in the political agendas of leading African American protest organizations.” Though the writers of the *New York Amsterdam News* did important discursive work during the 1920s,

218 Ibid., 13.
1930s, and early 1940s in seeking to bind black and Puerto Rican Harlemites together, suggesting a range of common experiences and political strategies which they might pursue, their arguments were limited to the task of building a greater degree of empowerment and community on a local level. The relatively elite writers of the *Amsterdam News* did not extend these critiques to the broader politics of empire. After the war, however, black newspapers including the *Amsterdam News* “formed a dense nexus with journalists from London to Lagos and Johannesburg, marshalling the resources of important black middle-class and entrepreneurial institutions to create an international anticolonial discourse.”

Perhaps the earlier introduction of such an analysis of the problems faced by diaspora Puerto Ricans, framed explicitly as an anti-colonial protest, would have created a more fertile ground for mutual empowerment and the basis for a truly coalitional politics.

This is not to say that consideration of the everyday problems of diaspora life in New York was not productive to the creation of strong political alliances, however. The chapter which follows will suggest some of the problematics of a thoroughly anti-colonial activism which does not take into account the local implications of colonialism. As part of a broader wave of anti-colonial activism in the 1940s, the members of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence (ALPRI) built from their local context in Harlem and created an organization which made a forceful demand for the liberation of the island. However, where the *Amsterdam News* likely overemphasized the quotidian problems which were shared in common between black and Puerto Rican Harlemites, the mostly-white members of the ALPRI did not sufficiently take into account the experience of residents of the Barrio. This analysis suggests that a more

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effective balance between these two concerns might have led to a more effective empowerment of all Harlemites.
Figure 3. A Puerto Rican family living in Spanish Harlem, April 24, 1947. The children are Dolores (5 years old), Edwin (4), and twins Naida and Maria (2). According to the photographer’s caption, their father had left the family, and they lived in their three-room apartment with another mother and her child.

On November 2, 1950, an attempted Nationalist revolution in Puerto Rico collapsed, with over 400 members and sympathizers of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party surrendering to territorial authorities. Among these was Pedro Albizu Campos, president of the Nationalist Party, who only gave in after his home was tear gassed. Albizu, who had been incarcerated at the Federal penitentiary in Atlanta for six years previously, was defiant upon his capture, speaking of the glory that the failed insurrection had brought upon him and his comrades. That Albizu, the most notable advocate for independence for the island, was among the arrested was likely no surprise to any educated observer of this corner of North American colonial politics. Others caught up in the police roundup were less expected, however. In a short piece printed immediately underneath the main article about these events, the *New York Times* relayed the following: “Among those to be questioned in the roundup of Nationalist and Communist leaders today were Ruth Reynolds, veteran member of the Nationalist party and an intimate friend of Albizu Campos; and Jane Speed, blonde American wife of Andreu Iglesias.”

Writing to her sister Helen, Reynolds described a harrowing arrest in the middle of the night.

I was asleep in my bed at 2 A.M.…. And then, more than forty policemen and National Guardsmen, armed with rifles, machine guns, and revolvers, came to the house where I was living alone I dressed and went outside to ask them what they wanted. They said they were going to search my house and I told them to show me their search warrant. They told me “afterwards” and I told them, “No, now.” However, with more machine guns pointed at me than I had ever before seen collected together in one place, I did not resist.

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Reynolds was later brought up on charges of seeking to overthrow the government by force as a leader of the Nationalist Party and faced a potential twenty-year prison sentence. After she was convicted and sentenced to between two and six years in federal prison, Reynolds appealed to the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico, which overturned her conviction.\(^{223}\) In all, about four years of Reynolds’ life was consumed by these charges, which she denied throughout her lifetime.

Among names such as Santos and Corales, Ruth Reynolds’ name stands out. Reynolds was, in fact, not Puerto Rican, but a white pacifist from Terraville, South Dakota. Her journey towards the cause of ending U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico was an unusual one which stemmed directly from her work as a member of the Harlem Ashram, an organization which advocated for racial justice achieved through non-violent means during the 1940s. Reynolds and her compatriots at the Ashram also engaged in activism around global political issues, most notably anti-colonialism and advocacy for Indian independence. Despite this interest in issues of national and international concern, Ashram members’ interaction with Puerto Ricans living in their neighborhood appears to have been limited. Though the Ashram’s location in Harlem and the contact it facilitated with Puerto Ricans would be crucial to building initial awareness of the island’s political problems, ultimately the role of the people of El Barrio in shaping Reynolds’ views on Puerto Rico’s political status appears to have been negligible. Rather, Puerto Ricans “on the run” from political repression on the island, such as Albizu and Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, were the most influential people in shaping their later work on this question. This focus on the views of island-based political elites suggests that for Reynolds and her compatriots, the

diaspora permanently residing in New York was not, in the truest sense of the word, a part of the “Puerto Rican nation.” In turn, this led the Ashram members to conceptualize a liberatory framework which did not account for the futures of diaspora Puerto Ricans, some of whom would likely have remained in New York and other North American cities even after full independence for Puerto Rico was achieved.

Also key to the shaping of Ashram-based activism in support of the Puerto Rican people was their earlier work in support of the Free India movement. Public debate on the Indian issue was part of a broader tide of public opinion during and (especially) after World War II pushing for an end to colonialism around the world. The Ashram’s work was intended to mirror that of Indian patriots, most notably Mohandas K. Gandhi, in its peaceful nature and adherence to non-cooperation with government authorities, with a focus on civil rights rather than anti-colonialism. Gandhi’s contributions were of great importance to pacifists generally during the World War II years, and nowhere more so than at Harlem Ashram, which was conceived of as a “Christian ashram.” Jay Holmes Smith, the co-founder of the Harlem Ashram, borrowed from the model of another “Christian Ashram” established in India by fellow missionary E. Stanley Jones, of which Smith was a member. Both were Christian religious centers, which followed Gandhi’s principles of nonviolent resistance. Harlem Ashram’s goal was to apply Gandhi’s nonviolent principles to the struggle for civil rights in the United States. Krishnalal Shridharani, a veteran of Gandhi’s “March to the Sea” in 1930 and a leading proponent of Gandhi’s methods in the United States, would term Smith’s application of Gandhian thought “Kristagraha,” a combination of Christianity and satyagraha. Over time, though, several members of the collective engaged

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more directly with the question of colonialism which led Gandhi to prominence. In addition to opposing the colonial regime in India, they eventually took on colonialism in Puerto Rico, in consultation with (though separately from) Albizu and his Nationalist Party.

The Ashram’s engagement with Puerto Rican Nationalists led to the formation of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence (ALPRI), an ostensibly interracial (though predominantly white) group of North Americans which pressured first the U.S. government and then world leaders at the United Nations to release Puerto Rico from its colonial status. Led by Smith, with Reynolds doing much of the day-to-day work, the ALPRI was (despite its limited numbers) perhaps the leading organization of non-Puerto Ricans interested in the cause of the island’s liberation during the six years it was active, from 1944 through about 1951. They built on post-WWII decolonization efforts, pursuing many of the same avenues as leaders from Africa and other oppressed nations of the world.

In doing so, the ALPRI contended in complex ways with the question of whether Puerto Rico should be considered a domestic or international political problem. This discursive negotiation, in some respects, critiques the logic of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), which determined that Puerto Rico was “foreign in a domestic sense, domestic in a foreign sense.”225 Put another way, Puerto Rico was held at arm’s length from the United States, with a colonial power dynamic nevertheless confirmed. Achieving independence for Puerto Rico required not only political work, but discursive work which positioned the island and its people as an “oppressed nation” and not merely an interest group jockeying for new rights under the American flag.

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225 On the impact of the “Insular Cases” on Puerto Rico’s status (legally and discursively), see Duffy Burnett and Marshall, “Between the Foreign and the Domestic.”
The location of key ALPRI leaders in Harlem also raises interesting questions about coalition building in interracial and transnational movements. It seems clear that their presence in Harlem facilitated the Ashram members’ initial encounters with Puerto Ricans who would challenge and educate the members on Puerto Rican issues, particularly in light of their work for black civil rights and Indian independence. In these early days of Puerto Rican migration to the United States, Harlem was one of the few places in North America where one could gain an understanding of the consequences of U.S. colonialism on the island directly. The Ashram was founded with interracial social justice activism as an explicit part of its mission, and its physical location in the multicultural hub of New York City further facilitated this aspect of their mission. The Ashram’s work on these blocks led to the cross-pollination of a number of causes which, in retrospect, might be seen as naturally in conversation with one another—pacifism, anti-colonialism, the black Civil Rights movement as it entered its best-known phase, and Puerto Rican nationalism. Though the League did not consult extensively with members of the Barrio community, a problematic which shall be explored below, place nevertheless defined the particular contours of the Ashram’s activism as it evolved in organizational form.

We may also observe in the League’s rhetoric regarding the tactics of the Nationalist Party a particular vision of Puerto Ricans’ citizenship which did not conform with prevailing notions of patriotism in the wartime and immediate post-war years. In this context, dominant notions U.S. citizenship required adherence to, and support of, the policy objectives of the U.S. (especially the war effort) and acceptable participation within the political system. Criticism of the nation, especially criticism that positioned the United States as oppressive and hypocritical in their pursuit of a war against fascism, would be unacceptable to proponents of this uncritical martial Americanism. In addition to critiquing U.S. intervention in Puerto Rico, members of the
ALPRI critiqued and reconceptualized citizenship. They argued that Puerto Ricans’ citizenship was a matter of identity as well as action. A “citizen” was a person who put forth full-throated advocacy for one’s own people, outside of the accepted political structures if need be.

“Nationhood” under this analysis has less to do with organization as a state and control over a territory under this conception than the idea of a clear national “body politic.” The distinctness of the Puerto Rican people made them, therefore, a nation already. Less clear is the extent to which diaspora Puerto Ricans were viewed as a part of this “nation” by ALPRI members.

The publicly stated goal of the ALPRI was to influence North American public opinion in the direction of Puerto Rican independence and to use their (often privileged) social position to lobby for this goal in the halls of power. The group’s leaders very specifically stated, conversely, that they were not working to influence the political status debate among Puerto Ricans. To say that they were not engaged in the debate among Boricuas would be disingenuous, however. Based upon their collaboration with Pedro Albizu Campos and other leaders of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, it seems clear that the Ashram members saw these as the truest leaders of the Puerto Rican people, both on the island and in the diaspora. As a result, both the viewpoints and experiences of El Barrio’s Puerto Rican residents were not a major influence on the ALPRI’s work and that work did not fully and consistently address the problems which these Harlemites faced.

**Indian Methods, Western Progressivism: The Road to Anti-Colonial Activism**

The roots of Harlem Ashram’s creation began with Jay Holmes Smith’s missionary work in India in the 1930s. As Smith established himself in the subcontinent, he became familiar with the “Christian Ashram” established by E. Stanley Jones in 1935, and became a member himself. Smith also built connections with Indian people, which led him to become better acquainted with
Indian philosophy and political praxis—particularly the independence efforts led by Gandhi. Smith’s sympathizing with the Free India cause did not go unnoticed by British colonial authorities, and he was ultimately declared persona non grata over his refusal to abide by his pledge (made upon arrival in India) to “do nothing contrary to the…power and authority of the British government.” Smith was motivated by the exhortations of Indian people to re-consider what seemed to be a patronizing and hypocritical (or perhaps uncritical) position. As he recounted years later at the “We Are Americans Too” conference in Chicago in July of 1943, “his most embarrassing moment in India was ‘when Indians asked me why do you com[e] out here to tell us about Christianity when in your country they lynch colored people.’”

It was this discussion that led Smith to branch out from the missionary work that he had traveled to India to do, and to become educated on the work and concepts advanced by Gandhi. Of course, the most notable of these is the umbrella term describing Gandhi’s political work, satyagraha, which might be defined as either non-violence as a way of life or as a reference to the “weapon” of non-violent, yet active (rather than passive) campaigns. Another Gandhian concept which would become increasingly relevant to Smith’s outlook, and which would undergird Reynolds’ pacifist activism from the beginning, was Gandhi’s conception of non-cooperation. This refusal to work with the colonial mechanisms of power, including mechanisms of so-called “self-rule” instituted by the British, led to a conflict within Gandhi’s Indian National Congress party. In the background of this internal conflict were competing definitions of one last

concept: swaraj.\textsuperscript{230} Literally translated into English as “self rule,” swaraj was a multifaceted concept for Gandhi. It implied, first, self-reliance. This desire for self-reliance, of course, extended to the social and political realms as well as the economic, although in changing ways.\textsuperscript{231} What remains consistent in Gandhi’s practice of swaraj is his desire for self-reliance in the face of a political, economic, and social subordination of the Indian people to the British, and his use of tactics of non-cooperation to achieve this end. As we shall see, the practice of self-reliance and non-cooperation would come to be of great interest to Smith and his followers at Harlem Ashram in evaluating the work of Puerto Rican nationalists such as Albizu, and in forwarding narratives supporting the work of the ALPRI. Their views on the questions of non-violence were somewhat more complex, despite their grounding in pacifist activism in both the Christian and Gandhian traditions.

Smith’s experiences in India led him to consider the applicability of satyagraha to social justice struggles in the United States. In some respects, the Gandhian method was a logical supplement to the Christian pacifism which arose out of the “peace churches”: the Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren. In addition to these power bases, many other groups worked in coalition with the “radical pacifists” of the era, who used direct action as a means of resisting war and the concentration of power which war often engenders. These allies included “mainline Protestants, self-described anarchists, and radicals of various stripes.” Indeed, the post-World War I era marked a broadening of pacifism beyond the peace churches and into the political mainstream, due to the horrors of that conflict.\textsuperscript{232} Smith’s efforts to introduce Gandhian methods

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 109-111.
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid., 23-25.
to the burgeoning pacifist coalition strengthened the movement of pacifism “into the realm of active and meaningful political resistance.” Harlem Ashram opened in the winter of 1940-1941, with an interracial group of residents (seven white, three black, and one South Asian) and quickly began its work of interracial civil rights activism.

Ruth Reynolds’ path towards pacifism took another, perhaps more familiar route—through the American university campus. In 1938 and 1939, Reynolds was a graduate student in English at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. During her time as a student, and in the years immediately following, Reynolds was exposed to a pacifist movement which arose from an awareness that although American youth would not be among decision-makers who would determine whether the U.S. would participate in World War II, they would be expected to bear the burden. Reynolds naturally fell into what might be termed the left-wing of the campus pacifist movement, made up of young people who would neither serve in uniform nor participate in war industries. Just off campus, this perspective was generally supported by the local Methodist minister, who placed pacifism in a specifically Christian context. Reynolds was also exposed to Gandhian methods for national liberation at this time, and was particularly interested in the idea that Indian activists remained nonviolent, but simultaneously “refused to cooperate with the British government.” Reynolds credited Gandhi’s activism with moving American pacifism into a new era, beyond “a movement of withdrawal from society on issues of war and peace” to a movement that took direct action. Her interest in Gandhian tactics eventually led

233 Ibid., 13.
Reynolds to travel to New York for a course on “total pacifism” offered by Smith in the spring of 1941. The workshop was held at the Harlem Ashram and was organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international pacifist organization.\(^{237}\) Subsequently, Reynolds became a resident of the Ashram and would be involved in all its work in the years to come.

Though the Gandhian methods which Smith and Reynolds learned about in the 1930s and early 1940s arose in the context of the Indian nationalist movement, the members of the Harlem Ashram worked to adapt them to questions of race in the United States. They felt that the racial justice movement was the area in which satyagraha-like tactics would be most socially productive. Through nonviolent resistance, the Ashram’s members hoped that others in American society would be moved to change the white supremacist social order.\(^{238}\) The application of Gandhian methods extended into all aspects of the lives of Ashram members, which was located near the heart of Harlem on Fifth Avenue near 125th Street.\(^{239}\) For example, members lived a fairly ascetic lifestyle, “living on the least possible and divesting oneself of practically everything…we pooled everything and we did not have many resources.”\(^{240}\) This resonated with Gandhi’s modest lifestyle, which was in part an effort to connect with poor

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\(^{238}\) Ruth Reynolds Oral History, June 26, 1985, Tape No. 7, Side A, Pages 1-2, Box 45, Folder 3, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.


\(^{240}\) Ruth Reynolds Oral History, June 26, 1985, Tape No. 7, Side A, Pages 4-5, Box 45, Folder 3, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
Indians. The pervasiveness of Gandhian philosophy also affected the naming of the Ashram, a term referring to a “religious retreat group,” as interpreted by Ruth Reynolds.²⁴¹

There was a degree of confusion, sometimes yielding to amusement, surrounding the work of the Ashram membership on the part of its black neighbors. Among the observers of this complex neighborhood negotiation was James Farmer, then a 23-year-old political organizer working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a pacifist organization with significant ties to the Ashram. Farmer was also a founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which was organized in Chicago in 1942. Farmer moved into the Ashram in 1943, as it was near to his offices at the FOR and was an inexpensive place to stay with like-minded and committed activists. The Ashram had many flaws as a residence, however. First, the presence of a group of white women living communally in central Harlem led some to think that it was a house of prostitution. As Farmer put it years later, “though this was indeed a house of love, the love was religious and not erotic.”²⁴² While finding the work of the Ashram admirable in some respects, and in particular the efforts of Smith, Reynolds, Jean Wiley and a few other permanent residents, Farmer also critiqued the lofty mindset (bordering on “idiocy”) and forced asceticism of the organization.²⁴³ Indeed, Farmer was broadly perplexed by the collection of personalities gathered at the Ashram. This aside, he was able to utilize the space for his own organizing efforts, including the weekly meetings of the New York CORE chapter. It was there that many nonviolent efforts towards desegregation were planned, including a direct action against the prohibition of black families in the swimming pool at Palisades Amusement Park in New

²⁴¹ Ruth Reynolds Oral History, June 26, 1985, Tape No. 7, Side A, Pages 5-6, Box 45, Folder 3, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
²⁴² Farmer, 149.
²⁴³ Ibid., 150-152
Jersey. The Ashram thus acted as a sort of node for the pacifist, anti-war, and civil rights organizing communities, a place where these movements and their strategies cross-pollinated and encouraged each other forward. This confluence of these movements would prove to be fertile ground for the Puerto Rican independence movement as well, and the experience gained by Ashram residents would prove crucial in shaping the work of the ALPRI.

The Ashram’s work took its racial justice mission in various directions over the course of its history. Their initial efforts included what Reynolds described as “amateur social work,” providing direct services to the community, as well as ongoing discussion regarding the applicability of Gandhian methods to civil rights activism. Over time, the focus on social work fell away, as the members of the Ashram came to the conclusion that consideration of the tactical means of social justice movements was the more necessary work in U.S. society. In Reynolds’ eyes, these efforts bore fruit not just in their work, but in the work of allied interracial organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, in contemporary civil rights leaders like Bayard Rustin, and in subsequent leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr. As scholar of non-violent resistance in the United States Sudarshan Kapur illustrates, black civil rights movements were studying Gandhi’s methods and work simultaneously with (and occasionally, in conversation with,) white pacifists. Such black luminaries as W.E.B. du Bois and Marcus Garvey called the attention of African American communities to the national liberation struggles of India and other “colored peoples,” while others such as Benjamin E. Mays (President of Morehouse

244 Ibid., 152-153
College) and Channing H. Tobias (member of the Board of the NAACP) themselves traveled to India and met with Gandhi.²⁴⁷ Thus, the relationship between black activists striving for civil rights and allied white pacifists regarding the issue of Gandhian tactics seems best described as mutually reinforcing. Through public dialogue, leaders on both sides articulated their understandings of nonviolent resistance and worked to perfect the tactics for use in the United States.

Eventual engagement with the Puerto Rican cause was facilitated by a move within pacifist circles more broadly towards civil rights, within which Jay Holmes Smith and the members of his Harlem Ashram were notable figures. This may be observed within organizations such as the War Resisters League, which was active during World War II in support of conscientious objectors but during later phases of the war also spoke out on a number of other issues, including racial justice. Members of the Ashram and other pacifists were notable early members of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), a sustained movement in concert with the proposed March on Washington for desegregation of the military and war industries. At its initial convention in July 1943, the MOWM’s leader, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters president A. Philip Randolph, announced the beginning of a national civil disobedience campaign for black civil rights.²⁴⁸ Despite the eventual cancellation of the march, Reynolds and her colleagues from the Harlem Ashram took to the road with “the nominal approval, but not the participation of the major pacifist personnel.” Their Harlem-to-Washington march consisted only of a stable core of 7 or 8 who walked the entire route, although with other allies who joined them

²⁴⁸ Scott H. Bennett, *Radical Pacifism: The War Resisters League and Gandhian Nonviolence in America, 1915-1963* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 95-96. Randolph envisioned the MOWM as “an experiment in Gandhian nonviolence,” although it should be noted that their efforts to desegregate the war effort were not in line with a total pacifist, non-violent stance. This acceptance of the premise of war led some prominent pacifists, such as A.J. Muste and Bayard Rustin, to a conflicted perspective on the MOWM. Kosek, *Acts of Conscience*, 183-184.
at various points, the group swelled to 25 or 30. Though Randolph and other leaders distanced themselves from this march, the black press—particularly in towns along the march route—did cover the action.

The move towards nonviolent resistance during this era is also illustrated through the expansion of CORE nationwide, bringing a Gandhian nonviolent resistance stance eventually termed the “CORE approach” along with them. This set of tactics arose in part from CORE’s study of Krishnalal Shridharani’s *War Without Violence*. Smith’s formation of the Nonviolent Direct Action committee (under the auspices of the Fellowship of Reconciliation), similarly drew much of its inspiration from Shridharani’s interpretation and adaptation of Gandhian thought. Smith was also a member of the Executive Board of the War Resister’s League beginning in 1942, two years after he founded Harlem Ashram. Harlem Ashram, then, served as a node connecting the seemingly disparate pacifist, civil rights, and Gandhian movements, under a broader conception of anti-colonial and racial justice both domestically and internationally.

**Bringing Anti-Colonial Activism Back “Home”**

The American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence was, in several important respects, a direct outgrowth of the work of the Harlem Ashram, and the Ashram’s roots in Gandhian nonviolent resistance are important background to understanding the development of the ALPRI. Although both the work of Gandhi in the “Free India” movement and the ALPRI’s nationalist activism are anti-colonial projects, it was by no means clear in the early 1940s that Puerto Rico

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251 Bennett, *Radical Pacifism*, 94-96. George Houser and other early leaders of CORE sought to bring a “disciplined and coordinated assault on Jim Crow,” and were the clearest precursors to the later nonviolent resistance tradition within the black civil rights movement. Mollin, *Radical Pacifism*, 31-32.
would become a topic of discussion and action on the part of the Ashram’s membership. Indeed, the Ashram’s membership was fundamentally ignorant of the issues faced by the island even a year before it became a central focus of their work. It took the efforts of concerned Puerto Ricans, most notably Rev. Hipólito Cotto Reyes and Don Pedro Albizu Campos, to educate Ashram members on these issues. Without their location within Harlem, which was a choice made out of a desire to pursue a racial justice agenda, the Ashram likely would have never encountered the Puerto Rican cause. In this way, place became a fundamental factor in shaping the work of the Ashram’s members, and led them to be one of the few North American groups dedicated to Puerto Rican issues.

Though Harlem Ashram was not fundamentally concerned with providing social services to the local community, it nevertheless engaged with its neighbors on the ground in the form of “amateur social work” which supported the Ashram’s mission of strengthening racial and ethnic communities towards social justice ends. Through these activities, members of the Ashram had their first encounters with the fast-growing Puerto Rican community in their midst. Reynolds first interacted with the Boricua community when she sustained a cut to her hand, and a Puerto Rican man invited her into his apartment to bandage it. Reynolds observed later, “we were pretty well accepted” at the time of this incident, although she also alludes to later “hostility” on the part of Barrio residents. Later, the members of the Ashram oversaw a “play street” for the community’s children on 113th Street, between 5th and Madison Avenues. The kids that showed up were largely people of color: black and Puerto Rican, as well as “a few Gypsies.” This outreach made the community aware of the Ashram’s people and work, which likely increased

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residents’ curiosity about the anti-colonial work which formed a major part of the Ashram’s political program.254

It was on this play street that Ruth Reynolds first encountered Hipólito Cotto Reyes, a Puerto Rican Baptist minister, around the Summer of 1942. Taking an interest in their work, Cotto began a conversation with Reynolds and her colleagues, who invited him up to an apartment they kept on the block to continue the discussion. The apartment was full of “Free India” posters, which Cotto eyed with interest and spoke about in an overly polite manner. The Ashram members then pressed him for his honest thoughts, which prompted the Reverend to say “Well, there is one thing that appears very strange to me. And that is how you people living in a Puerto Rican community can have such concern about what the British government is doing in India and show no similar concern about what your own government is doing in Puerto Rico.”255

This encounter with Cotto shocked the Ashram members out of their ignorance of the problems faced by Puerto Rico and its people, both on the island and in their own neighborhood. In this way, the Ashram’s presence in Harlem was crucial to building their awareness of the political and economic issues of Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Without this encounter with Cotto, the ALPRI might never have come into being. It should be noted that Cotto was not himself a nationalist, yet this and subsequent conversations with the minister led the Ashram members towards a crucial coalition with perhaps the most well-known Boricua independence leader of this period: Don Pedro Albizu Campos.256

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254 Ruth Reynolds Oral History, June 21, 1985, Tape No. 4, Sides A & B, Page 9, Box 45, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.


256 Ibid.
With Puerto Rico already in their minds, if not yet their hearts, it came to be that Julio Pinto Gandía attended a dinner at Harlem Ashram in the Summer of 1943. Pinto, recently released from Federal prison, was a former president of the Nationalist Party during one of Albizu’s numerous imprisonments. After his release, Pinto traveled to Albizu’s bedside at Columbus Hospital in Manhattan. It was Pinto who invited the members of the Ashram community to visit with Albizu and to learn more about Puerto Rico. Jay Holmes Smith began regular trips to the hospital, to the chagrin of Reynolds and others who were forced to take on additional work at the Ashram. Eventually, Albizu asked to see Reynolds, who became known to him because of her boldness during a Free India rally during which she was arrested.257 As she was being placed in a police vehicle, Reynolds was photographed with a wide grin on her face. The photo was published in the newspaper *PM*, which Albizu saw at his bedside. He requested that Reynolds visit him, and when she came, he asked her a number of questions- among them, how she became interested in Puerto Rico and why she was smiling during her arrest. Albizu commended Reynolds for her bravery in the face of her fear of being arrested. After reflecting on this in her oral history, Reynolds turned to Albizu’s practice of the non-cooperation philosophy, “refusing to recognize the United States has any right in Puerto Rico at all; and therefore, not recognizing the right to exist of any of the so-called autonomous or self-governmental entities because they are all at the command of the United States.”258 Reynolds’ recounting of her first meeting with Albizu mirrors the ways she described her initial exposure to Gandhian thought, especially in this discussion of non-cooperation. For her, Albizu was a nationalist who could be


understood in Gandhian terms, despite the lack of a concrete commitment by Albizu and the Nationalist Party to non-violence. For Reynolds, Albizu’s non-cooperation stance and desire to free his people from colonialism merited her support.

The ALPRI, which Smith and Reynolds began to build following her initial meeting with Albizu, was aided in its public relations efforts by a number of notable figures in the civil rights, pacifist, labor, and other circles who served as official or unofficial members of the organization’s leadership in its early days. For example, the celebrated black labor and civil rights organizer A. Philip Randolph was a member of the organization’s board. But other than J. Holmes Smith and Ruth Reynolds, the leading public face of the League was author Pearl S. Buck. Best known for her writings on East Asia, especially her 1931 novel *The Good Earth*, Buck was also active in anti-colonial activism from at least the 1940s.

Engaging first with the Free India movement, Buck began her work on Puerto Rican issues around January of 1944. Through mutual acquaintances, she was introduced to Albizu during his hospitalization in New York City. As a well-known writer and prominent activist, Buck had come into contact with many powerful figures, and her conversations with Albizu led her to approach one of these contacts-- First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt-- for assistance in Albizu’s case. By way of apology, Buck wrote to Roosevelt, “persons of non-American birth, particularly not of the white race do come to me in some vague hope that my long years in China will help me to see their need.” Based on information she received from Dr. Ernest Gruening (at that time Governor of the Alaska Territory), she argued that Albizu was the target of racial prejudice, and that this led him to turn away from his previous pro-American stance towards independence

259 On Buck’s position regarding Indian independence, see full text of address, Pearl S. Buck to India Independence Day Dinner, Jan. 26, 1943, Record Group 1, Series 2, Box 13, Papers of Pearl S. Buck and Richard J. Walsh, Pearl S. Buck International.
activism. Buck asked Mrs. Roosevelt for her assistance in making it possible for Albizu, who was at that time under probation following his release from the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta, to leave New York for “somewhere where he can have peace…preferably Cuba or Mexico.” Though it is suggested that his preference would be to return to Puerto Rico, Albizu (speaking through Buck) acknowledges the “embarrassment” his presence there might cause to the U.S. government. “[W]hatever his crime,” Buck advocates, “it has been expiated fully, and one cannot talk to him without knowing that he is not a criminal.” Buck seems at points very hesitant to intervene in Albizu’s case, but ultimately called on her friend out of her sense of “responsibility, as an American, to do what I can,” despite the fact that she was unsure if she could be of any help.260 Though it did not yield immediate results, this advocacy served as Buck’s entry into the Puerto Rican nationalist cause.

As perhaps the most well-known organizer of the ALPRI, it was Buck who penned the initial call to solicit members for the organization in March of 1945, once initial disputes regarding the organization’s mission (discussed further below) were resolved. “[I]n view of the state of the world and the essentials for peace,” Buck began, “we can no longer be silent about the fact of American imperialism.” This initial call for members was focused on notable members of U.S. society, “none but citizens of the United States.” Concerned though she is with the plight of Puerto Ricans, this aspect of Buck’s call seems to conceptualize “citizens” as not including Boricuas on the island and in the diaspora, despite the citizenship they had gained in 1917 under the Jones Act. Buck also hints at the debate which defined the early meetings of the ALPRI organizers regarding the question of independence vs. self-determination, but ultimately

260 Letter, Mrs. Richard J. Walsh to Eleanor Roosevelt, Jan. 7, 1944, Record Group 1, Series 2, Box 20, Papers of Pearl S. Buck and Richard J. Walsh, Pearl S. Buck International.
points to “a striking crystallization of the demand for independence in Puerto Rico itself” as supporting her advocacy for the island’s liberation.261 Again here, the demands of Puerto Ricans on the island are uplifted while simultaneously, the quotidian needs of diaspora Boricuas are rendered invisible. This omission on the part of Buck, who split her time between a New York apartment and her country home in Perkasie, Pennsylvania, is perhaps more understandable than the lack of engagement with Harlem’s Barrio by Ashram residents. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Reynolds and other residents also exhibited a lack of understanding of the lives and politics of New York-based Boricuas.

Though it was Jay Holmes Smith who would become the leader of the ALPRI, due largely to his earlier engagement with Indian colonialism and the resulting notoriety, in practice Ruth Reynolds was behind much of the group’s activities. This arrangement arose during the formation of the group. Reynolds, during one of her conversations with Pedro Albizu Campos at his bedside in Columbus Hospital, expressed frustration at Smith’s tendency towards compromise, rather than sticking to his principles. Albizu (paraphrased by Reynolds years later) responded that “‘Jay is a weak man. But he’s the only person you have who can be at the front of this organization…You have to take responsibility yourself from now on.’” While recognizing the difficulties of Reynolds taking a leading role in the organization as a woman and the need for a man of Smith’s prominence to lead the group, Albizu nevertheless persisted in stating that Reynolds had to be at the center of the League, leading its work. She would officially take up the

261 Letter, Pearl S. Buck to prospective members of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence, Mar. 22, 1945, Record Group 1, Series 2, Box 23, Papers of Pearl S. Buck and Richard J. Walsh, Pearl S. Buck International.
position of Secretary (later Executive Secretary) in the organization, but much of the on-the-ground work and travel undertaken on behalf of the ALPRI would be hers.  

The ALPRI founders also made efforts to include notable members of black communities in their ranks, which were only partly successful. In particular, they worked to secure the participation of A. Philip Randolph, with whom the Ashram had an existing (though complex) relationship. Randolph agreed to be a member of the ALPRI board, but did not attend meetings and was not personally active in the organization. Considering the reasons why black participation in the ALPRI did not materialize, Reynolds attempts to see the situation from the perspective of black communities. “They had their own battles…yes, they were concerned, yes, they believed yes, they respected the right of Puerto Rico to its freedom, but they were involved on a daily basis with crises in their own communities.” Thus, although Harlem Ashram physically served as a node where both the black civil rights and Puerto Rican independence struggles were waged, the extent to which these struggles operated in conversation with each other was limited. Although physical proximity and a similar set of community issues stood as a potential basis for coalition-building, the sheer amount of work to be done by each community led to the de-prioritization of this coalition-building function.

Harlem Ashram was a clear node of the pacifist and civil rights movements during the early 1940s, and this status allowed Smith and Reynolds to muster an experienced coalition of activists as it began its work on Puerto Rican independence. The ALPRI was rooted, if only

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262 Ruth Reynolds Oral History, July 22, 1985, Tape No. 8, Side B, Pages 19-21, Box 45, Folder 3, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
263 Ruth Reynolds Oral History, July 22, 1985, Tape No. 8, Side A, Pages 13-14, Box 45, Folder 3, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
implicitly, in the philosophical tradition that Harlem Ashram represented. As with the struggle led by Gandhi in India, Albizu’s conflict with the U.S. government was framed by the ALPRI leadership as an effort on the part of colonized people to achieve freedom, under principles of non-cooperation. Though they were not able to evenly bring members of their orbit—notably, black leaders—into their struggle, the ALPRI’s political “location” as a center of radical activism in New York and physical location within a rapidly diversifying Harlem would strengthen the ALPRI as it came into its own as an organization.

“We are for the independence of any and all peoples.”

Advocacy by members of the Harlem Ashram for Puerto Rican independence quickly became enmeshed in broader debates among those North Americans working to end colonialism in the post-war era. One early, and particularly contentious, question was on the fundamental issue of whether members of the incipient ALPRI should stand explicitly for independence as outsiders and members of the colonizing society. Some of those who took part in initial meetings of the League felt that the only proper tactical choice was to push for “self-determination” in Puerto Rico, perhaps in the form of a plebiscite, as was done for a number of other colonized nations around the world, thus leaving their personal views on the question of the island’s eventual political status aside. Others felt that their privilege as North Americans, unquestioned members of the colonizer society, should be utilized to advocate within the United States for independence, with that process led by the Puerto Rican people. Though these two positions may at times seem similar on a practical basis, rhetorically speaking they differ dramatically and led to a persistent debate among the ALPRI organizers. Through a close reading of these debates, which would not be resolved until after extended dialogue among the ALPRI board of directors, a set of distinct views on the nature of colonial power relationships and how best to reform these
relationships of domination becomes apparent. The view which would ultimately govern the ALPRI’s work stated that as people who benefitted from the colonization of the island, North Americans had a responsibility to speak up, take a position in favor of national liberation, and to educate their peers on the problems facing Puerto Rico.

The organization that was to become the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence convened its first organizing meeting in early October, 1944. The stated goal of the organization, according to a letter sent to prospective members, was to “inform and enlist our fellow Americans to press for the earliest possible resolving of the Puerto Rican issue.” Notably, this letter did not reference a clear consensus in favor of independence. This ambiguity evolved into a fully-formed debate when board member Oswald Garrison Villard read to the membership a letter from a pro-statehood organization in Puerto Rico. This unnamed group firmly opposed any efforts by North Americans towards independence. They further claimed that the majority of Puerto Ricans favor statehood. Based on these arguments, Villard puts forth a view that self-determination of the Puerto Rican question by Puerto Ricans should be the goal of the new organization. Support and opposition to this position followed various lines of argumentation. For example, Thelma Mielke spoke in opposition to Villard, stating that “there may be a tendency to dodge” the issue of liberty among some members of the group. Implicit in this position is the notion that independence is necessary for Puerto Rico if liberty is to be achieved. Morris Milgram, a notable socialist labor leader, then expressed the belief that “we can not tell the Puerto Rican people what to ask for.” Ruth Reynolds herself pursued an interesting

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264 On the time consumed by these debates, see Letter, R.J. Walsh to Oswald Garrison Villard, Dec. 2, 1944, Box 2, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
265 Letter, American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence Interim Board of Directors to prospective members, October 7, 1944, Box 18, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
line of argumentation, stating that the work of the ALPRI was not “to work on Puerto Ricans,” but to educate and convince North Americans to “do what they should” and release the island from bondage.\(^\text{266}\) It is noteworthy that the speakers in favor of independence were those with the closest ties to the Ashram. These activists, including Ashram resident Reynolds and inner-circle sympathizer Mielke, had a higher degree of contact not only with Albizu, but also with the Puerto Rican community in Harlem. Perhaps it was this more direct engagement with the diaspora which led Reynolds, Mielke, and others towards a more forceful position on independence.

In an effort to keep the members of the group together, a compromise position between the two camps would have led the ALPRI to “work for self-determination in Puerto Rico,” as well as educating Americans on the conditions on the island and advocacy for economic stabilization and relief. However, this agenda was not favored by all. Indeed, the motion passed by only a one vote margin among the eleven-member committee. J. Henry Carpenter, the committee’s chairman, expressed his view that a greater unity of purpose was necessary if the group were to function effectively.\(^\text{267}\) Unfortunately, this unity was not forthcoming, and tensions among socialist circles in particular were tense. Indeed, Morris Milgram continued his campaign for a narrow agenda of self-determination for Puerto Rico, going so far as to suggest that a group such as the ALPRI was not needed.\(^\text{268}\) This bizarre turn of events, at a meeting convened to support the cause of Puerto Rican independence, threw the group into further disarray.

\(^{266}\) Minutes, meeting on Puerto Rico, October 17, 1944, Box 18, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

\(^{267}\) Ibid.

\(^{268}\) Ruth Reynolds Oral History, July 22, 1985, Tape No. 8, Side A, Page 14, Box 45, Folder 3, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union went a step further than others skeptical of the mission of the ALPRI and worked to funnel their efforts into existing organizations which did not call the status quo into question. In a fairly Machiavellian turn, he also attempted to moderate the position of the group by isolating its more radical members-- in particular, Reynolds and other women (including Ashram residents) in the leadership. Baldwin arranged for a late 1944 meeting of the group’s organizers to be held at the Gramercy Park Hotel, knowing that the more radical members would likely not have the money to attend a meeting at such a venue. To Baldwin’s chagrin, Reynolds and her roommate Jean Wiley Zwickel, as well as Yolanda Moreno (a Puerto Rican who would later marry civil rights attorney Conrad Lynn) and Thelma Mielke (who would later become the representative of the Nationalist Party at the United Nations) all did attend. Baldwin expressed his view that any work towards independence for the island must be deferred in favor of improving economic conditions. He offered the example of a program which was then distributing milk to poor Puerto Rican children, organized by the wife of the U.S.-appointed governor, as something in which those interested in the island’s plight could involve themselves. Pearl Buck stood opposed to this, arguing that the ALPRI had been created to advocate for independence and that those who did not agree with this aim should organize separately.\(^{269}\)

Villard and the other “self-determination” proponents continued their campaign through letters sent in the final months of 1944. They sought the support of Pearl S. Buck and her husband, publisher Richard Walsh, in moving the organization away from the fight for

independence. In this, they were unsuccessful. Walsh, writing for himself and Buck, replied that “we are for the independence of any and all peoples.” Though the Puerto Rican people would have every right to negotiate for themselves a place in the United States at a future time, should they desire it, the situation at that time was entirely unacceptable to the couple. Any just negotiation of the Puerto Rican situation, in their view, would have to arise out of the recognition that Puerto Ricans already were an independent nation, if not a nation-state. As such, the entire posture of the United States was a misguided one. “[W]e can only recognize, and cannot bestow, independence.”\(^{270}\) This letter displays most fully the difference between the self-determination and independence camps. Walsh articulates a position which might be framed as an assertive self-determination. The independent authority of the Puerto Rican people, which already existed regardless of the colonial regime, must be recognized under his analysis. Any determinations as to a form of government, or potential alliances with the United States or other powerful nations, would then be negotiated on a nation-to-nation basis, rather than being “bestowed upon” the island by a benevolent Uncle Sam. With this, several of the leading members of the self-determination camp gave up their efforts to influence the ALPRI and ceased their cooperation with the group. With their exit, a clear consensus in favor of independence finally emerged.

The swing in favor of independence following the exit of Villard and other self-determination advocates from the organization was illustrated publicly in the months to come, most notably by Jay Holmes Smith, eventual President of the ALPRI. In January of 1945, he published an article in the magazine *ASIA and the Americas* advocating vigorously for independence. In so doing, he articulated a strong view in opposition to simple “self-

\(^{270}\) Letter, R.J. Walsh to Mr. [Oswald Garrison] Villard, Dec. 2, 1944, Box 2, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
determination” and in favor of full and immediate de-colonization. “Certainly,” Smith argued, “we must in no way thrust our will upon the Puerto Rican people. But we can at no time abdicate our joint responsibility to work for the solution which we believe will be best for all concerned-Puerto Rico, the United States, and the world.” If one becomes bogged down in a “self-determination” position, one’s position can devolve into “a generous-sounding slogan which tends to encourage the people of an imperialistic nation to postpone the facing of their share of this mutual responsibility.” 271 In effect, Smith sees “self-determination” as a means by which liberal-minded Americans could seem to stand up for Puerto Ricans, while not actually disturbing the status quo. A truly just position would acknowledge the constraints continuing colonialism places upon possible Puerto Rican futures, and actively disclaim the benefits of colonialism for North Americans.

Smith also speaks to the concern raised by some sympathetic parties that Puerto Rico could not sustain itself economically without the support of the United States. This argument is rooted in the dependence of the Puerto Rican commodity farmer on North American markets, supported by the tariff wall which makes selling in other nations prohibitively expensive. But ending this new mercantilism would not be enough. Indeed, Smith sees a need for economic reparations to encourage the transition from a colonial economy to an independent one “by treaty or trade agreement” between sovereign nations.272 The program outlined here includes a recognition of the effects of centuries of colonization on the Puerto Rican economy, effects which are the result of ruinous policy choices by colonizing nations rather than any scarcity on

271 Jay Holmes Smith. “Puerto Rican Independence,” reprinted from ASIA and the Americas (Jan. 1945), Box 18, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
272 Ibid.
the island itself. Overcoming this history requires concrete action on the part of the U.S. government in the form of direct economic support and reparations to a nevertheless sovereign Puerto Rico. Embedded in this argument is the implication that Puerto Ricans were capable of self-reliance, despite press narratives regarding both migrant and island-based Puerto Ricans to the contrary. 273 Should they receive just reparations to make amends for the long history of colonialism on the island, that self-reliance would be all the more assured. Rather than “appeasing the liberals” with the language of “self-determination,” a transfer of authority to Puerto Rico would “cut through all of the idealistic verbage” and lead to real liberation in line with the Four Freedoms (articulated by President Roosevelt in the midst of World War II). Puerto Rico might then be a significant player in a “West Indian Federation,” which would be better equipped to take on the problems of the modern nation-state.274 This last aspect of Smith’s argument is intriguing, though not unprecedented. In effect, he suggests the possibility of consolidating the sovereignty of a loosely connected Caribbean archipelago, in order to strengthen the islands politically and economically. This political structure is not unlike that of the United States, particularly in its earlier organization under the Articles of Confederation.

Smith’s position in this article reflected the direction of the ALPRI as they sought support (financial and otherwise) from a broader public. In doing so, their rhetorical position forefronted a liberatory vision of political independence. “We recognize,” the ALPRI’s March 1945 “Statement of Position” states, “the right of all people to be free.” In keeping with Smith’s earlier op-ed, the statement expresses a responsibility on the part of North Americans to “help decide the political relationship” between the mainland and Puerto Rico, but states a preference for

273 On narratives of Puerto Rican migrant dependency on welfare relief, see Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 92-132.
274 Smith, “Puerto Rican Independence.”
independence. More explicitly stated than in previous releases is a recognition of the right of the Puerto Rican people to advocate for their preferred solution to the status question alongside the ALPRI’s efforts to educate fellow North Americans on the continuing colonialism and the need for national empowerment on the island.\textsuperscript{275} Although this statement is a step in the direction of clarifying the two-track efforts the ALPRI would have liked to see, there is still a degree of ambiguity in their position. Over time, this problematic was overcome somewhat through efforts to differentiate the work of the organization on a “domestic” level (\textit{i.e.} advocacy for Puerto Rico directed at the Congress and executive branch of the North American Federal government) and on an international level (\textit{i.e.} in the court of world opinion generally, and within the structure of the newly-formed United Nations specifically). These parallel efforts helped to clarify the thinking of ALPRI leadership, especially around the question of what their role was relative to the Puerto Rican independence movement.

\textbf{“Within the Regime, Against the Regime” and Beyond}

The character of the Puerto Rican status debate as simultaneously “domestic” and thoroughly international in the eyes of mainstream society, as first articulated in the \textit{Downes} decision, manifested in various forms in the political work of those seeking to empower the Puerto Rican people. The ideological foundation of one’s position dictated whether their approach would be domestic and therefore a question for the territorial or federal government, on the one hand, or a international approach which began from a position of sovereignty for the Puerto Rican people. For independence activists, the tendency was of course to operate from a nation-to-nation framework, lest one concede the central point- that Puerto Rico was a sovereign

\textsuperscript{275} “Statement of Position of THE AMERICAN LEAGUE FOR PUERTO RICO’S INDEPENDENCE,” c. March 1945, Box 18, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
nation already and one which should exist as a nation-state. This is not to say that all independentistas had the same tactical view of the path to liberation, nor that their visions for a free Puerto Rico consistently line up. We may also infer some differing tactical positions from the early actions of the ALPRI, during the period in which the group was coming into its own. The League’s evolving domestic and international efforts stand as a comment on the political nature of the island, and on the question of its standing in the world.

As citizens and members of North American (and in most cases, white) society, ALPRI leaders attempted to educate both members of Congress who had the power to make changes to the colonial U.S.-Puerto Rican relationship, as well as members of the public. As it became apparent that these efforts would not yield meaningful liberatory reforms, and as the United Nations expanded its role in global decolonization efforts, increasing emphasis was placed upon lobbying efforts at the international body. Surely, this shift in tactics partly reflects practical choices by the ALPRI leadership as to the most efficient means to achieve Puerto Rican independence. Beyond this, however, the move towards pursuing the nationalist cause in the United Nations suggests a growing consciousness that Puerto Rico must be framed as an existing nation, lacking only recognition as a nation-state. Their advocacy in the United Nations sought to bring pressure to bear upon the United States to decolonize the island, and to achieve international recognition of the Puerto Rican nation.

Acting on behalf of the membership of the League, Jay Holmes Smith and Ruth Reynolds first took their case for Puerto Rican independence to the United States Congress soon after the group’s formation, giving testimony before a Senate committee on March 7, 1945. The subject under debate was a bill proposed by Senator Millard Tydings which aimed to resolve the
question of the island’s status in the direction of independence.276 Underlying the totality of their testimony is a simple proposition: “the recognition of this principle of freedom for all peoples is the only basis for a democratic world order.” While the Tydings proposal does conform with this basic proposition, the League’s leaders object to a provision which would have required that the President of the United States to approve the eventual Puerto Rican Constitution as “out of keeping with the whole principle of independence.” In place of the Tydings bill, Smith and Reynolds favored a comprehensive program to include recognition of Puerto Rico’s independence and of a provisional government, amnesty for political prisoners, and a new bilateral treaty to govern economic and military aid.277 This may be seen as an effort to avoid a situation similar to that of Cuba, which formally had independence but in fact had a number of restrictions on the power of their government imposed by the United States.278 The ALPRI also previewed their internationalist view of the Puerto Rican issue, stating that an equitable resolution to the status question is “the touchstone” of U.S. sincerity as a champion of world democracy, just as Indian independence is a gauge of Britain’s democratic bona fides. Puerto Rican involvement in the United Nations organization meetings in San Francisco would be, in their eyes, the fitting and timely outcome of this process. Echoing their earlier formation statement, Smith’s testimony also suggests that participation in an eventual “West Indies

276 Though the final draft of this ALPRI statement does not specify whether it refers to Tydings’ proposal to amend the Jones Act (S. 226) or the bill which would recognize the independence of Puerto Rico (S. 227), the context and the statement itself suggests that it refers to the latter. On the introduction of these proposals, see Senator Radcliffe (for Sen. Tydings), introducing S. 226 & S. 227, on January 10, 1945, 79th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record 159.

277 Transcript, “Testimony of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence on the Tydings Bill, U.S. Senate, March 7, 1945,” Box 18, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

278 On the continuing U.S. influence in Cuba following the resolution of the Spanish-American War, see Louis A. Pérez Jr., Cuba under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991). U.S. policy aims in Cuba were achieved through the perpetual American military presence on the island at Guantánamo Bay, through the Platt Amendment, which required that Cuban foreign policy be in line with U.S. guidance, and through periodic invasions of the island.
confederation” might be a logical way to consolidate the power of Puerto Rico and its neighbors in the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{279} Thus, although the objective of the testimony is to persuade members of Congress to move swiftly in the direction of independence, the global political implications are also within their scope.

The League additionally displays what might be referred to as a pan-Americanist political consciousness in their advocacy. The official announcement of the ALPRI’s establishment was coordinated with “Pan-American Week,” in April of 1945. In keeping with that event, the announcement references Simón Bolívar’s work for an “American fraternity of independent nations.” In the interpretation of the League, the United States, which should rightly be one among many members of this fraternity, has worked against this goal. The North American occupation of Puerto Rico is noted as the prime evidence of the United States anti-Bolivarian stance. The petitions of a number of Latin American legislative and cultural organizations, such as the Senate of Argentina and the Pan-American Women’s Peace Conference, in favor of Puerto Rican independence are referenced as well. The creations of a sovereign Puerto Rican nation-state would support the U.S. taking up a role as “a strong nation that stands for the freedom of all people everywhere” and a supporter of the “dream of Bolivar.”\textsuperscript{280} Rather than the United States determining the destiny of Latin America, the ALPRI sought to re-orient the nation in the direction of the Pan-American paradigm which had been, by this time articulated by Bolívar and generations of his Latin American ideological heirs.

\textsuperscript{279} Transcript, “Testimony of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence on the Tydings Bill, U.S. Senate, March 7, 1945.”

\textsuperscript{280} Press Release, American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence, April 14, 1945, Box 18, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
As the Congress continued to deliberate on the Tydings Bill in the days to come, Ruth Reynolds utilized a solo appearance before the Senate to introduce a line of argumentation that was new for the ALPRI, but far from unprecedented historically. Her testimony on April 26, 1945 began on familiar ground, calling for “independence for Puerto Rico, and not for statehood or mere self-determination.”

Reynolds argues against those who would impose a North American solution upon the island, but also argues against a hastily-called plebiscite which would have illustrated the popular will of the Puerto Rican people. Her reasoning for this seemingly puzzling choice: “[w]e owe independence to Puerto Rico. She came to us as a prize of a war fought by the American people, whatever may have been the motives of some of their statesmen, to free Cuba from the Spanish yoke.”

Rather than perpetuating colonialism, whether of the direct character on view in Puerto Rico or the indirect character as with the military presence and diplomatic control perpetuated in Cuba, the Congress should pass a bill calling for independence. This independence would be “subject to the approval of the [Puerto Rican] people’s chosen representatives,” utilizing whatever procedural means they deem necessary.

Rather than allowing a plebiscite under the existing colonial regime, the ALPRI’s proposal would have provided for an “up or down” vote on independence in a context where the U.S. Congress had already expressed its desire to see Puerto Rico free. However, it would be for the “people’s representatives” on the island to make the final determination on the question of independence and on the procedures through which it might be achieved. Reynolds thus calls for “self-determination” of a sort, but argues that the United States must first create the

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281 Transcript, “Additional Testimony of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence on the Tydings Bill, U.S. Senate, April 26, 1945,” Box 18, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
282 Ibid.
283 Ibid.
284 Ibid.
conditions for this independence to be feasibly achieved. This importance of Congressional involvement in the eventual resolution of Puerto Rico’s political status has been borne out by the subsequent plebiscites on the island’s status. In 2012, the island voted by a margin of 54% to end the current *estado libre asociado* status (commonly translated as “commonwealth”). In a second question regarding the voter’s preferred political arrangement, 61% of valid ballots indicated a preference for statehood. Despite this, the Republican U.S. Congress failed to take action on the vote, which would have brought a heavily Democratic and culturally-distinct state into the Union.\(^{285}\) While the result of this recent referendum was the opposite of the ALPRI’s desired outcome, it does similarly suggest that even when Puerto Ricans have the opportunity to vote on their eventual status, the colonial regime of the island does not allow for that determination to be self-enacting. Rather, the U.S. Congress must take action to ensure that the wishes of the Puerto Rican people are respected.

Speaking on the question of statehood for the island, Reynolds takes a historically more familiar, and problematic, turn. Arguing that Puerto Rico is not owed statehood, Reynolds states that the failure of Congress to admit Puerto Rico as a state was due to “their responsibility for American national development and our relationships with Latin America and the rest of the world.”\(^{286}\) Any expansions of American authority must be made with “a careful plan of expansion” and geographical and cultural continuity in mind.\(^{287}\) While this line of argumentation

\(^{285}\) Jason Koebler, “Despite Referendum, Puerto Rico Statehood Unlikely Until At Least 2015,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 7 Nov. 2012, https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/11/07/despite-referendum-puerto-rican-statehood-unlikely-until-at-least-2015. The result of this referendum is somewhat more complicated than the figures suggest, as roughly half a million voters expressed a desire for a change in the island’s status but left the second question, regarding what that status should be, blank. If these votes were counted as part of the result, the support for statehood would comprise only 45% of the total votes. Bennett L. Gershman, “Did Puerto Rico Really Vote for Statehood?,” *HuffPost*, 14 Nov. 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bennett-l-gershman/puerto-rico-statehood_b_2118727.html.

\(^{286}\) Transcript, “Additional Testimony of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence.”

\(^{287}\) *Ibid.*
comes partly out of the danger that nations in between North America and Puerto Rico (such as Cuba and Haiti) might logically be conquered to create geographic continuity, the argument that colonialism is damaging to a necessary national culture homogeneity mirrors the racialist logics and narratives of right-wing opponents of U.S. imperialism in 1898. Thus, although Reynolds’ position arises from a desire to see a sovereign and empowered Puerto Rican nation, it partially relies on racializing logic in arguing against statehood. Rather than a pure anti-colonial position, this aspect of Reynolds’ statement is a practical suggestion to the decision-makers in the Congress to encourage a culturally homogenous nation.

Missing from this argument is any mention, or proposed disposition, of the thousands of Boricuas living in the United States, including in Reynolds’ own neighborhood. Calls for cultural homogeneity logically oppose immigration as well as colonization overseas, but Reynolds does not address whether she sees a place for Puerto Ricans who might wish to remain in their new homes in the diaspora. The closest Reynolds comes to considering this aspect of a post-independence world is her general hope that the United States alter its foreign policy in the direction of a “Bolivarian conception of the proper development of this hemisphere,” including policies of mutual benefit for the nations of the Americas. This passage is perhaps the most glaring example of the ALPRI’s failure to engage with, or consider solutions for, the Puerto Rican diaspora in its own midst. While their desire to move in the direction of a harmonious “world community” is admirable, it does not allow for the full range and complexity of both political opinion and practical decisions made by Boricuas throughout the United States.

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289 Ibid.
In these words, the hemispheric context of Puerto Rican independence and the hope of a broader vision of decolonization is apparent. As this development in the ALPRI’s vision unfolded, its leaders were simultaneously growing restless with the lack of desire on the part of Congress to resolve the Puerto Rican status issue. New narratives and new venues would be required to bring about a complete and final decolonization. This vision would soon be scaled up and placed in the context of the emerging United Nations (UN) organization, a venue more appropriate for resolving a conflict among two nations. Smith and the ALPRI, through their work at the foundational meetings of the UN in San Francisco in 1946, worked to build connections between Puerto Rico’s cause and that of other “dominated nations” (including India and other Latin American nations) suggesting a vision of a global anticolonial struggle fought in the halls of power.

The ALPRI’s work in San Francisco occurred in parallel with an umbrella organization specifically set up to take the anti-colonial cause broadly to the UN. The Provisional World Council of Dominated Nations (PWCDN) advocated for the independence of all people, including through in-person lobbying at the initial meetings of the UN. 290 There, the Council was represented by R.S. Modak (an Indian independence advocate and President of the PWCDN), and Julio Pinto Gandía (Puerto Rican and PWCDN Secretary), among others. 291 The Council’s efforts, both at and following the San Francisco conference, placed particular emphasis on Africa, India, the British West Indies, Indonesia, and Puerto Rico. Other planks of the

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290 It was the PWCDN which assisted the ALPRI in printing their petition to the United Nations which would be the centerpiece of their San Francisco efforts. Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence, Sept. 25, 1946, Box 1, Folder 18, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

Council’s platform included the creation of a “world public conscience” to protect human rights, “balanced migration for all peoples” regardless of race or nationality, and other efforts to facilitate justice and peace.\textsuperscript{292} In the early efforts of both the PWCDN and the ALPRI at the United Nations, then, we may observe the beginning of connections between the various decolonial struggles worldwide. Whether fighting against the British, Dutch, or North Americans, these New York-based activists saw the potential for a coalition at the United Nations, and they worked to make this alliance a reality.

The ALPRI framed their formal 1946 appeal to UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie as a case to be prosecuted against their own government, going so far as to title their petition “The American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence \textit{vs.} The United States of America.” A cover letter, signed by J. Holmes Smith on behalf of the League, recognizes the unorthodox nature of their appeal to the incipient international body, as “perhaps the first instance of citizens of a great power appealing to the \textit{United Nations} to take action critical of the domination of their own nation over another.”\textsuperscript{293} United States colonialism on Puerto Rico was, in their view, symptomatic of a “naive self-righteousness and exercise of power over others” common in American foreign policy and dangerous to all of humanity.\textsuperscript{294} Additionally, the continuing domination of Puerto Rico violated the agreement the United States entered into as a UN member-state, which called for colonizing nations to work in the best interest of the colonized and to move steadily toward self-determination. Calling upon the United Nations to enforce the ideals of decolonization which were central to its formation, Smith charges that the U.S.

\textsuperscript{292} “New Voice” newsletter, n.d. [1946], Box 7, Folder 6, Richard B. Moore Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
\textsuperscript{293} Petition, “In the United Nations: The American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence \textit{vs.} The United States of America,” July 22, 1946, Box 1, Folder 18, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
\textsuperscript{294} \textit{Ibid.}
government has failed to act in the best interest of the Puerto Rican people, and that it unjustly
denied self-government to Puerto Rico despite its capability to meet this need independently.295

Supporting this argument, and the goal of independence for Puerto Rico, the League
offers an eight page “Brief,” approximating a legal filing in style and argumentation. Though
addressed to the United Nations membership, the argument presented here harkens back to
earlier appeals to the Congress, particularly in terms of “Our Promises and Declared Political
Ideals.” In 1898, the United States “declared that we were liberating Puerto Rico from Spain
along with Cuba.” The extension of North American presence beyond a “temporary
guardianship” made clear that this position was a façade, and brings the military and political
occupation of the island into conflict with the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and
Constitution. “In 1898,” the brief argues, “it was recognized that it would be in violation of the
interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine… for the United States to continue to hold Puerto Rico
and make a colony of her.”296 Implicitly, the brief argues for adherence by the U.S. government
to its own fundamental ideals of freedom and self-determination for all people—most relevant
here, to the Puerto Rican people.

The brief also supports a non-cooperation position in opposing U.S. rule on the island, by
calling into question the legitimacy of the occupation. Going all the way back to the Treaty of
Paris which ended the conflict in 1898, the brief argues that “Spain had no legal right to transfer
Puerto Rico to any other power,” in view of the autonomy granted to the island and its
Parliament one year earlier.297 While early independence activists such as Luis Muñoz Rivera
and José de Diego sought to change the situation “within the regime against the regime,” gaining

295 Ibid.
296 Ibid.
297 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
a great deal of popularity but minimal results, the Nationalist Party took a different but (under this analysis) equally valid approach. Albizu and the Nationalists, proceeding from the position that “the United States has no jurisdiction over Puerto Rico,” would desire nothing from the United States other than its withdrawal from the island. The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, as the ALPRI points out, also refused to hold any official positions within the colonial regime or even to vote in elections under a colonial authority. The brief also works to dismantle the colonial trope suggesting that Puerto Rico is incapable of self-government, pointing to the stated assessments of other Latin American nations as well as Franklin Roosevelt.298 Though the narratives presented here are not necessarily new to the ALPRI’s rhetoric, the internationalist bent of their advocacy gradually comes into clearer relief.

The brief also makes efforts to address any suggestion that the Puerto Rican issue is rightly a domestic matter to be determined by the U.S. political process, detailing a history of broken promises to move the island towards self-determination and of refusals to acknowledge the will of Puerto Rican leaders. The brief also chronicles the work of the ALPRI which attempted to force Congress to act, making clear that overtures were made to domestic authorities before turning to the community of nations. In view of this history, and efforts by a range of parties, the League argues that the roadblock to Puerto Rico’s independence is a lack of conscience on the part of U.S. lawmakers. “When a powerful nation thinks it can ignore its big sins against small neighbors,” the brief warns, “it has become a menace to itself and the world. No ‘Good Neighbor’ pretense can save it from being so regarded.”299 Thus, the ALPRI’s brief portrays an America which is unwilling to grant Puerto Rico its rightful sovereignty, and which

298 Ibid.
299 Ibid.
in so doing exposes its bad faith and presents a threat to peace in the Western Hemisphere.\footnote{Ibid.}

Despite the forceful argument put forward by the brief, Reynolds’ papers lack any evidence that the UN provided any substantive response or action based on this petition.

In moving their focus and appeals for Puerto Rico’s independence from the halls of the United States Congress, to the nations of Latin America, and finally to the organization dedicated to world peace and a community of nations, the ALPRI makes it increasingly clear that they view Puerto Rico as an international issue, rather than an internal matter for the United States to solve. The lack of action by members of Congress on the status question may have precipitated this, although the rhetoric of the League seems to suggest a more ideological foundation for their protestations. Particularly in turning to the United Nations, the League members seek accountability for the United States on an equal basis with other colonizing states. While the cause of nations such as India-- which the Ashram and ALPRI membership sympathized with and worked on--was better known to the world, Puerto Rican independence was for them a no less worthy goal. The advocacy of the ALPRI and its global comrades in the PWCDN prefigured the decolonization work which would define the United Nations to the world in the coming years.

“\textit{The Gandhi of Puerto Rico}”? 

The ALPRI’s support among pacifists suffered from the perception that the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and Pedro Albizu Campos (with whom the ALPRI was closely tied) were non-pacifist or even violent in their pursuit of independence for the island. While pacifists broadly supported anti-colonial movements, their non-violent ethical stance led some to limit their active support to nationalists who conformed to this position completely. Leading members of the
ALPRI rejected this condition, arguing effectively that anti-colonialism must be the governing objective of pacifist activism and that dictating the tactics of organizations struggling to liberate their own people was not the place of outside figures steeped in the culture of the colonizer. In a November 1945 publication, Jay Holmes Smith specifically objects to the reduction of Albizu to a “foot-ball of pacifist controversy,” judged by those who do not understand the conditions suffered by Albizu both on the island and during his imprisonment or the stakes of the work being done by the Nationalist Party. Though Smith concedes that he went too far in previously referring to Albizu as “the Gandhi of Puerto Rico,” the experiences of Bayard Rustin during his travels in Puerto Rico showed that for Boricuas, Albizu was a nearly godlike figure (not entirely unlike perceptions of Gandhi in India). Complementing this evidence, logical examination of the historical record would suggest that Albizu was unlikely to have encouraged group violence by his Party’s members and that even authorities who wished to condemn him could not provide sufficient evidence in court. For Smith, judging Albizu should not be the goal of pacifists of good will. Rather, investigations should be undertaken with “practical national repentance” on the part of North Americans in mind, from a foundation of “humility and atonement.”

Although Smith’s activism (including his work with the ALPRI) was clearly grounded in pacifism, his words suggest that he is unwilling to impose such an ethos on freedom fighters from other nations, such as Albizu. Smith does, however, note Albizu’s “non-cooperation movement and his great spirit” as related and laudable traits. The difference between pacifism and “non-cooperation” is a fine one, but certainly distinguishable to leading pacifists of the time.

301 Jay Holmes Smith, “Pro and Con: Puerto Rico.” Reproduced from Fellowship, November 1945. Box 41, Folder 1, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
302 Ibid.
and apparently, significant enough to merit retraction of their support. In this case, non-cooperation required that no concessions be made in the direction of legitimizing the colonial regime in Puerto Rico. Where this colonial structure exerted violent force, submission to that violence was tantamount to recognizing its legitimacy as a state action. Self-defense would be a clearer expression of the injustice of this aggression.

Reynolds expressed a similar position on Albizu and pacifism, suggesting the potential pitfalls of condemning the Nationalist Party while also supporting the end of colonialism. Reflecting on these debates in 1985, Reynolds asked the rhetorical question “how could we tolerate [the situation in Puerto Rico] and at the same time be parading around asking for the independence of India from Great Britain?” 303 Though Reynolds conceded that Puerto Rican nationalists were not pacifists in the strictest sense of the word, she argued that they were “for the most part peaceful.” Putting the question of violence aside for a moment, Reynolds suggests that she and her comrades at the Ashram could not see the oppression of Puerto Rico as an abstraction, and that as pacifists their objective must be to “oppose all imperialism and especially, that of our own government wherever it is.” 304 For Reynolds, then, the question of total pacifism as a pre-condition for support of anti-colonial pacifist groups was a misguided one. Particularly in cases where one’s own government was engaged in oppression, supporting those working for national liberation under the methods which made sense in context was a categorical imperative. As this debate developed, it would become clear that the other side of this argument was that the work of anti-colonial pacifists must focus on one’s own government. When this

304 Ibid.
work failed, efforts to expose the evils of colonialism must be focused on a broader public (both domestic and international).

Regarding the work of Puerto Rican organizations, Reynolds also came to see the appeal of “non-cooperation” as practiced by the Nationalist Party. Reflecting on this strategy years later, Reynolds defines it as “refusing to recognize the United States has any right in Puerto Rico at all; and therefore, not recognizing the right to exist of any of the so-called autonomous or self-governmental entities because they are all at the command of the United States government.” This refusal to recognize even the mechanisms of supposed self-government, such as the Puerto Rican Legislature, is rooted largely in the notion that these institutions are fundamentally corruptible and illegitimate. To support her argument, Reynolds references the shift which was taking place during the 1940s in the “Popular Party” (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD), then led by Luis Muñoz Marín, from a nationalist platform to one which favored “some form of noncolonial association” with the United States. Rather than relying on unjust and illegitimate colonial institutions, Reynolds supported the creation of new institutions, unbound to the pre-existing power structure and lacking historical roots in U.S. imperialism. These would be more likely to support the needs of the Puerto Rican people, rather than the desires of an elite class.

Despite the criticism that the Nationalist Party and Albizu endured at the hands of certain pacifist elements, in their fundamental non-cooperation with the island’s power structure they shared some tactical similarities with crucial North American pacifist campaigns of the time. The

305 Ruth Reynolds Oral History, June 21, 1985, Tape 6, Sides A&B, Page 3-4, Box 45, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. On the shifting PPD platform, see César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 156-158. This debate within the PPD was precipitated by the same bill authored by Senator Tydings (S. 227) which the ALPRI lobbied against in 1945. The debate was ultimately resolved with the rise of the estado libre asociado (commonly translated as commonwealth) in 1952.
prime example, conscientious objection to military service in World War II, is on one level a de-legitimization of the machinery of war itself. The authority of the government to force men to fight is questioned, and pacifists ultimately refuse to bend to the draft. In many cases, including those of some Puerto Ricans, these pacifists refused not only induction into the service, but even registration for the draft. This protest was both well-known and roundly supported by the majority of pacifists.\textsuperscript{306} This same degree of support should, under the ALPRI’s analysis, be given to the non-cooperation efforts of Puerto Rican nationalists.

The ALPRI’s position on non-violence centered not on the pacifist principles held by most of its active members, but on the view that it was not for members of a colonizing society to criticize the methods of national liberation movements. Rather than enforcing an ideologically pure non-violent ethic, Smith, Reynolds, and their colleagues concerned themselves with what they saw as their own role in educating the North American public. While they deeply admired the Gandhian nationalism which inspired the Harlem Ashram community, they recognized on some level that these methods were not universally transferrable. Leaders and activists on the ground would have to determine what tactics would bring about an end to colonialism.

\textbf{“Well, isn’t that free?”}

During their second demonstration in support of independence for Puerto Rico, Reynolds and Smith encountered one particularly difficult narrative to overcome. Reynolds recalls the dialogue with bystanders in this way:

I remember people on the street saying: “Free Puerto Rico! They’re free, aren’t they?” And J. Smith, or [sic.] spokesman, said “Well, they’re not free, we govern them.” “Well, isn’t that free?” And that is what our people believe. They’ve also in the last forty years, been blitzed with the conception that Puerto Rico would starve if it were free…[W]e have to go through a philosophical crisis, if you will of

\textsuperscript{306} On pacifists and draft resistance, see Bennett, \textit{Radical Pacifism}. 
relating (for most of us) our deep deep, sometimes, passionate love of this country, along with the understanding that the best way to serve out own country is not to go along with its vices but to correct them.307

Reynolds’ work with the ALPRI aimed to correct what she saw as one of the greatest “vices” in American history: U.S. colonialism around the world. The continuing occupation of Puerto Rico was, for her, a civil rights issue alongside racial segregation and the right to not serve in uniform if it defied one’s moral principles. Reynolds and her colleagues at the Harlem Ashram made strategic choices to put their efforts where they would be most needed, and to thereby shift the public’s understanding of the Puerto Rican issue. In her view, the black civil rights movement had “many people—black and white—dedicated to it…The struggle for Puerto Rican Independence was equally important and there were not plenty of people involved and therefore it became my cause.”308

Though some felt that North Americans had no place in the discussion surrounding Puerto Rico’s future, Reynolds firmly believed that she and others in her position were morally required to take a stand for freedom. The procedure by which a Puerto Rican nation-state would be built, its relationship with the United States, and the prevailing ideologies would all be for Puerto Ricans to decide alone. “I’m willing to talk to Puerto Ricans about their future…,” Reynolds argued, “but not to get on a platform and say what Puerto Rico should or should not do with independence.” Reynolds also worked to maintain a clear distinction between her work and that of organizations like the Nationalist Party.

I could not be a part of any organization that either was, or appeared to be, a branch of some Puerto Rican organization…I’ve been called

307 Ruth Reynolds Oral History, June 26, 1985, Tape 7, Side A, Page 8-9, Box 45, Folder 3, Box 45, Folder 2, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
308 Ibid., 7.
all kinds of things such as leader, member and leader of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, but it was never true. I was a friend, but never a part of it.  

Working in coalition with rather than from inside of, oppressed communities was a part of Reynolds’ thinking from the time of the March on Washington Movement, which was envisioned as a group of non-black allies to the all-black march. Framing one’s work in this way allowed the ALPRI to make it clear that North Americans were concerned with the Puerto Rican cause, and allowed them to utilize their well-established citizenship and belonging in the United States to work for an end to colonialism.

This is not to say that Reynolds and the ALPRI had all the answers. Their location at the intersection of a number of activist communities (including the anti-colonial, civil rights, and progressive Christian groups) and among the diverse communities which made up 1940s Harlem, did lead the Harlem Ashram and ALPRI towards advocacy for a range of issues. Were it not for this location, their work for Puerto Rican independence may never have taken shape. Their proximity to East Harlem’s Puerto Rican population served to build their consciousness of the island’s political and economic problems. However, once that consciousness had been raised, few efforts were made to remain in dialogue with their neighbors. Rather, the views of island-based political elites such as Albizu and Concepción were the ideological foundation of the ALPRI’s mission.

How would the history of the ALPRI differ if their work was more focused on the lives of Harlem Ashram’s neighbors? One can only speculate, but likely there would have been more attention paid to what a post-independence Puerto Rican diaspora would look like, and what

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309 Ruth Reynolds Oral History, July 22, 1985, Tape No. 8, Side B, Pages 23-24, Box 45, Folder 3, The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
options would be left to those who, for one reason or another, did not aspire to return to the island. Their work might have also served to further consolidate the efforts of nationalist Boricuas in the Barrio. With access to the resources that larger pacifist organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation could offer, and with the support of well-known individuals like Pearl S. Buck, perhaps the day-to-day concerns of working-class Puerto Ricans in the area would have been more satisfactorily addressed. This would have required a focus on the practical issues of the diaspora, which may have reduced efforts in support of independence. However, they would have been in keeping with efforts to improve the lives of Harlemites of all backgrounds.

The relative paucity of documentation of the ALPRI’s activities after approximately 1946 suggests that the organization was less active in its final years. This may be partially explained by the shutting of Harlem Ashram in 1947 and Reynolds’ travels to Puerto Rico in 1948. Around this same time, Jay Holmes Smith moved to New Hampshire, further complicating the activities of the organization. Reynolds’ arrest in November 1950 was likely the last gasp of the organization. Due seemingly to the bad press resulting from Reynolds’ arrest, A. Philip Randolph, who had been a member of the group’s board though not active in its work, threatened to publicly denounce the organization if the decision to disband were not made. As a result, the organization was unable to assist in Reynolds’ defense, and ad hoc organizations were hurriedly established to fill this gap. The political atmosphere of McCarthyism, in short, was deadly to this organization that fundamentally sought to strike a blow to U.S. control of the Caribbean.

311 Ruth Reynolds Oral History, October 1, 1985, Tape No. 53, Sides A&B, Pages 12-17, Box 46, Folder 5. The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
The history of the ALPRI offers a powerful model for how political coalition building within a colonial sphere might be accomplished. The League amplified the voices of Puerto Ricans both from their neighborhood and around the diaspora, bringing an awareness of the Puerto Rican cause to the United States and the world, making a strong argument in favor of decolonization as people who benefitted from that continued oppression. But in this history, we may also observe that complete subordination of economic problems (including the practical problems of everyday life) in the diaspora to political problems will not lead to a broader, more meaningful decolonization. Indeed, the ALPRI’s call for economic reparations for an independent Puerto Rico suggests this very point. Attention to the implications of decolonization, and the creation of an agenda which would address the potential economic problems which might arise from independence, would create the sustainable conditions necessary to support a more meaningful independence. Thus, attention to the experiences of the Puerto Rican diaspora might have led the ALPRI to more fully understand and support solutions to a range of issues which arose out of colonialism on the island, thus supporting the more complete empowerment of the Puerto Rican people, both at home and in the diaspora. The next chapter will consider histories of left-wing activism among Puerto Ricans in New York which considered both the political problems on the island and the practical concerns raised by New York’s *Hispano* community. Through the creation of both ideological and ethnic solidarities, these efforts led to a more thoroughly transnational activist framework than did the work of the ALPRI, and moved Spanish-speaking people in New York towards a broader sense of community and later pan-Latinx political efforts.
Figure 4. Crowd Hears Wallace’s Election Eve Speech, November 4, 1946.
A crowd, comprised largely of Puerto Ricans, listens as Henry A. Wallace, former Vice
President and Secretary of Commerce, speaks to them from a sound truck at the corner of
Madison Avenue and 108th Street. Wallace, supporting the Democratic ticket, addressed the
Puerto Ricans in both English and Spanish.
New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection.
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
CHAPTER V. “FANTASMA DE CIUDADANIA”: CRITIQUES OF SECOND-CLASS CITIZENSHIP AND THE CREATION OF A HISPANO COMMUNITY IN THE RADICAL SPANISH-LANGUAGE PRESS, 1943-47

“We have preferred New York’s climatic inconsistency…in order to locate ourselves in the heart of the Hispanic community where diverse fountains flow like currents in a single river, currents which are forced to blend against the hard rock of a cold reality which can dissipate as well as unite.”

- Julia de Burgos

“If the grave situation in Puerto Rico in the middle of the 1930s stirred up the Puerto Rican community in New York, so did the events in Spain around the same time. […] The cause of Republican Spain became our own”

-Bernardo Vega

On July 17, 1936, a group of senior Spanish military officers initiated a coup in their country directed against the democratically elected and relatively progressive government of the Second Spanish Republic. The civil war which resulted saw the territory of Spain divided between the Republican government and Nationalist forces, which would eventually be led by Francisco Franco. While the Republicans had minimal support from other nations (with the notable exception of the Soviet Union), the Nationalists benefitted greatly from extensive material and military aid from the two European Axis Powers- Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The final surrender of the Republicans would not come until late March of 1939, after nearly three years of bloody struggle.

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313 Vega, Memoirs, 191.
315 On Soviet aid to the Republicans and its crucial role in early defensive victories, see Graham, Spanish Civil War, 40-42. On Axis aid to the Nationalists, see Ibid., 39.
316 Ibid., 113.
The effects of the war were not confined to the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed, the conflict was the subject of a groundswell of activism among Spanish-speaking people and other interested parties (particularly on the political left) in New York City. This activism would not end with the Republican surrender. As the nations of Europe moved towards war in the early 1940s, supporters of the Republican cause continued to speak out against the Axis-supported Nationalist government in a number of Spanish-language newspapers based in New York City, including *Pueblos Hispanos* (supported by the Communist Party USA) and *Liberación* (the official newspaper of the Comité Coordinador de la República Española). This chapter will analyze selected articles from the first several months of these two publications (the first four months, in the case of *Pueblos Hispanos*; the first ten from *Liberación*), during which time the editorial perspective of the publication and its writers, as well as their targeted audience, became solidified. Whether due to their political convictions, or a desire to broaden circulation, each of these publications came to offer reporting and viewpoints on the struggle of the Republican cause as well as the ongoing efforts to achieve independence for Puerto Rico.

The effects of this dual focus were, first, the strengthening of ties between Spanish-speaking people in New York. This work built on earlier efforts in the direction of crafting a *Hispano* ethnoracial identity and cultural consciousness among the various Spanish-speaking people in New York, based upon ethnic and cultural similarities among the people of Spain and its former colonies. These efforts towards ethnic solidarity were not uniformly accessible to all regardless of racial background. For example, Edwin Padilla’s analysis of several New York-

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317 Vega, 215, 228.
318 I will utilize the untranslated term “Hispano/Hispana” in this chapter to refer to certain constructions of solidarity between Spain and its former colonies, including Puerto Rico, which will be elucidated below. Due to the particular political project surrounding the term “Hispanic” in the United States since the 1970s, I feel that preservation of the original term will be both less confusing to readers and more faithful to the intent of those using the term in historical context.
based, Spanish-language publications of the 1930s, argues that much of this diasporic writing reflected the social order arising from Spanish colonialism as it existed on the island during the late 19th century and continued into the U.S colonial period in the early 20th century. However, beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the 1940s, Padilla argues that this emphasis gave way to the construction of a new “literate city” in New York’s Hispano communities, reflecting a new, more inclusive national imaginary envisioned by working-class writers such as Jesús Colón (who wrote for the newspaper Gráfico in the 1930s as well as for the two publications discussed below).319

Secondly, the editorial perspective of these newspapers fostered the development of a transnational perspective that concerned itself with the plight of all colonized and oppressed people. On the domestic front, this perspective manifested in the form of analyses which connected the racialized and second-class citizenship of black Americans and the white supremacist acts used to maintain the U.S. racial order, with the various ways in which Hispanos were placed outside of the American mainstream. In the case of Puerto Ricans, this manifested through the continued colonization of the island and a second-class citizenship not entirely unlike that of black Americans.

Pueblos Hispanos and Liberación sought to illuminate these shared struggles, and the lack of rights they implied, to further empower Hispanos in New York and throughout the United States. In so doing, they crafted a broader sense of “citizenship” which was not wholly reliant on the granting of rights from the U.S. white mainstream. On the international front, a related line of thinking arose in the form of an internationalism which took in the political work of these

diasporic migrants as well as that of their compatriots back in their respective “home countries.” The complex political situation on the ground in Spain led these New York Hispanos and others aligned with the Republican cause to consider the connection between the fascist politics of the Nationalists and their Axis allies and colonialism in Puerto Rico as practiced by both Spain and (later) the United States.

**The Rising Tide of Fascism, and U.S. Imperialism**

The driving forces behind the 1936 Spanish coup, generally understood to include conservatism, a pervasive Catholicism, monarchism, and anti-Communism, were also fundamentally connected to the colonial past and present of the nation. With the loss of the bulk of its overseas empire (including Puerto Rico) following the Cuban-Spanish-American War in 1898, Spain suffered a blow on economic and political fronts. There was, however, an existential element to this loss as well. On a basic level, the loss of its empire took Spain out of the elite group of imperialist European nations. The loss also led Spain to consider its role in the world more generally and how it might be expanded. In the historical context following the Industrial Revolution, this required a consideration of how to most thoroughly modernize this culturally conservative, and largely agrarian, nation. For the officers of the Spanish military, there was the additional concern of retaining social and political relevance without a global empire to control. The intellectual aspect of this struggle involved, for many top military leaders, the integration of a sense that they were “the defenders of Spain’s unity and hierarchy and of its cultural and political homogeneity, as consubstantial with the country’s historic greatness.”320 This sense of the military’s importance to the fate of the nation would serve to justify the actions they would

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ultimately take against the Republican government, which replaced yet another conservative Spanish institution— the monarchy.

When the 1936 coup finally arrived, it came first to the meager remnant of Spain’s colonial sphere in North Africa. What began as an uprising among Spanish soldiers based in colonial garrisons in Morocco quickly spread to barracks in Spain proper.\footnote{Ibid, 21.} Although loyal elements of the Navy blockaded the Strait of Gibraltar, colonial regiments participating in the coup were conducted across the Mediterranean by air, courtesy of German and Italian forces.\footnote{Ibid., 24.} Of interest to this analysis, these troops included Moroccans who collaborated in the Spanish colonization of their country. Some 80,000 Moroccans would ultimately participate in the Civil War on the Nationalist side, serving as Franco’s “shock troops.” Their motivation seems to have largely arisen from their previous affiliation with the Spanish military, poor economic conditions in Morocco, depictions of the Republicans as an atheist group opposed to the “great religions,” and vague promises of increased autonomy or independence.\footnote{Andy Durgan, The Spanish Civil War (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 33.} This adds an additional layer of complexity to the political interests represented by the Nationalist cause, but many among New York’s Hispanophone community (Spanish and Puerto Rican alike) nevertheless sympathized with the Republicans on ideological and anti-colonial grounds.

Perhaps due to the early involvement of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in support of the Nationalists, the conflict evolved into a proxy conflict between the global totalitarian Right and socialists and communists on the Left. Mirroring the German and Italian support for the Nationalists, the Soviet Union intervened on behalf of the Republican side. Historian Andy Durgan argues that the Soviets were more directly motivated by their desire to secure alliances

\footnote{Ibid., 21.}
\footnote{Ibid., 24.}
\footnote{Andy Durgan, The Spanish Civil War (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 33.}
against Nazi Germany than by a desire to see a Republican victory in Spain.\textsuperscript{324} In some respects, non-state efforts to support the Republicans were of greater note. These efforts became a matter of significant debate, what Durgan describes as “a touchstone for left-wing politics and identity for decades to come.”\textsuperscript{325} Particularly prominent among these international non-state solidarities was the work of the International Brigades, foreign volunteers numbering around 32,000 who were recruited by Communist Parties around the world and who fought alongside Republican forces. Although half of the Brigades’ members were Party members, they are best understood not as a Communist organization, but as part of a global leftist Popular Front.\textsuperscript{326} Indeed, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin wished for the Brigades to be open to all who reflected “‘advanced and progressive humanity.’”\textsuperscript{327} The American contingent in the International Brigades was significant, and included black, white, and Latino volunteers. Historian Lisa Kirschenbaum details a December 1937 analysis of Anglo-American volunteers in the Brigades which identified three “nationality” groups: 2287 “U.S.” volunteers, 74 “Negro” recruits, and 110 “Latin” Brigade members. Among this American contingent, one count found that 75% were members of either the CPUSA or the Young Communist League.\textsuperscript{328} Given this Communist involvement in international solidarity with the Republican side, their involvement in supporting the creation of \textit{Pueblos Hispános} in the years immediately following the Civil War seems to be a public relations extension of the on-the-ground efforts by the International Brigades. Publications such

\textsuperscript{324} \textit{Ibid.}, 67
\textsuperscript{325} \textit{Ibid.}, 70
\textsuperscript{326} \textit{Ibid.}, 72-73. As cultural historian Michael Denning explains, the Popular Front was a political and cultural movement, a “radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching.” Michael Denning, \textit{The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century} (London: Verso, 2010), 4.
\textsuperscript{328} \textit{Ibid.}
as these served to keep a spotlight on the Spanish cause around the world, as well as recruiting those already sympathetic to the Republicans into the fold of Communist Party members and “fellow travelers.”

In the case of New York’s Hispano communities, these solidarity efforts were built partly on a sense of ethnic and cultural connection to Spain. Though these political efforts extend well beyond participation in the electoral systems of the United States, they may be seen as part of a more extensive conception of “citizenship,” through the building of strong ethnic communities. Under this understanding, “citizenship” did not mean simple fealty to one’s country, but strong advocacy and empowerment for one’s people. The writers under examination here sought to promote the cause of not just their own countrymen, but all Hispanics in the United States. Such efforts arose from both supporters of the Republicans and the Nationalists, but the Hispano Left’s role in solidarity efforts with the Republican cause was particularly apparent in 1930s New York. As historian Fraser M. Ottanelli argues, “[d]uring the Spanish Civil War no other city in the United States matched New York in the overall material and political support for the Loyalist cause,” (as the Republicans were also known) and in particular, the Left “mobilized in support of Spanish Loyalists and hardly a week went by without a benefit event, a rally, or a demonstration.”

As was the case internationally, “[t]he Communist Party (CPUSA) was the organization most actively involved,” both separately and as part of the Popular Front uniting various socialist and liberal factions. Among the other organizations actively engaged were many ethnic organizations, including those representing Italian Americans and black Americans

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330 Ibid. 64-65.
in Harlem. These groups marched at various times in the late 1930s in opposition to both the Falange in Spain and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, New York’s Spanish-speaking left was also represented among those taking a keen interest in the Republican cause, as demonstrated in the pages of *La Voz*, one of two Spanish-language daily newspapers then active in New York. This paper published advertisements and reporting on the work of a number of events and organizations that supported the Republicans including Hispanophone civic organizations, fundraisers, and other solidarity events held at vacation resorts in the Catskills region near New York. According to historian James Fernandez, these and other efforts suggest a new and powerful basis for solidarity among the linguistic and cultural community of *Hispanos* in New York. Following the end of the ground conflict in Spain, Fernandez argues that “1930s antifascism played an important and enduring- if often overlooked- role in the evolution of the Spanish-speaking communities in the city.” This chapter seeks to explore the group of evolving solidarities suggested by Fernandez, in order to better understand Hispano ethnic consciousness as it manifested among the Spanish-speaking left during the 1940s, after the end of the Spanish Civil War. While this solidarity was also ideological in nature, I argue that the cultural connection between Spain and Puerto Rico was essential in creating a sense of community that extended beyond an ad-hoc political alliance. Beyond this, their analysis of the second-class citizenship of black and Hispano people in the United States held the potential to form the basis for a coalitional politics which would empower people of color throughout their North American diasporas.

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331 Ibid. 63-64.
333 Ibid., 89-90.
334 Ibid., 91.
The end of hostilities in Spain did not bring a halt to the activism being undertaken in New York, though it did lead to a shift in focus from providing material and financial support to the Republicans and their International Brigade allies to building support through the media and discouraging any actions which would support Republican persecution under Franco’s rule. On-the-ground efforts in this direction were also supported in the Spanish-language press, including the weekly newspaper *Pueblos Hispanos*, which began its print run on February 20, 1943, edited by Puerto Rican nationalist writer Juan Antonio Corretjer. The publication was undertaken with the support of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), which was then led by Earl Browder (who was previously incarcerated alongside Corretjer in federal prison). The CPUSA had already gained a substantial foothold in the Puerto Rican colonia in New York, having established clubs and lodges throughout the 1930s in El Barrio. The party was also instrumental in the formation of the International Worker’s Order, which included a Spanish section of 10,000 members (half of them Puerto Rican). The party also financed the publication of several earlier Spanish-language newspapers. Thus, the work of *Pueblos Hispanos* should be seen as having direct precedents in the earlier work of the CPUSA in Harlem.

Regular contributors to the paper were among the luminaries of the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York, such as the poet Julia de Burgos and labor organizer Jesús Colón. De Burgos’ writings generally are associated with the *Generación del Treinta* (Generation of the Thirties), a school of Puerto Rican literary figures writing on issues of Puerto Rican identity. According to Spanish literature scholar Carmen Torres-Robles, de Burgos sought “to find a way to achieve
ethnic affirmation as well as social and political justice for all oppressed nations.” In the pages of 
*Pueblos Hispanos*, her specific goal was “raising social and political consciousness among 
Hispanics.”338 Similarly, Vanessa Pérez Rosario frames this discursive work as a means through 
which migrants could build a transnational consciousness and “remain connected to Puerto Rico 
while integrating their experiences in New York into their understanding of themselves.”339 De 
Burgos’ writings are thus both demonstrative and constitutive of an emerging sense of the 
community as a diaspora, which though divided from Spain remained culturally tied to the 
former colonial power. As we shall see below, this ethnic consciousness was on display not only 
in de Burgos’ writings, but among many *Pueblos Hispanos* writers.

Other than de Burgos and perhaps Corretjer, Jesús Colón was the most notable writer who contributed regularly to *Pueblos Hispanos*. A member of Brooklyn’s colonia hispana since 
1918 (the year after the passage of the Jones Act), by the early 1940s Colón was a leading 
member of the community.340 Soon after his arrival in New York, Colón (along with Bernardo 
Vega and others) became a founding member of the Puerto Rican committee of the New York 
Socialist Party.341 In 1933, Colón joined the Communist Party in New York.342 He was also 
actively engaged in New York labor politics, serving as the head of the Spanish section of the 
International Workers Order, an insurance cooperative which sought to support a “united, 
multicultural working class.”343 This grounding in leftist and labor politics was the unifying

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thread of Colón’s activist work. His writing for Pueblos Hispanos may be seen as a direct outgrowth of that work.

Beyond his focus on leftist labor politics, Colón was equally engaged with Puerto Rican community struggles. Following a series of violent clashes in July of 1926 between Puerto Ricans and their Jewish and Italian neighbors due to commercial disputes (discussed in Chapter III), a broad coalition of Spanish-speaking New Yorkers known as the Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana was formed, emphasizing the U.S. citizenship of Puerto Ricans in their advocacy for the community. Significantly for this analysis of New York’s Hispanic community, the Liga’s mission as of 1927 included the desire “[t]o unite all Hispanics without national distinctions.” Colón, Vega, and other working-class leaders also formed a separate organization, the Ateneo Obrero Hispano (Hispano Workers Atheneum). This group articulated a worker-oriented narrative of rights framed in terms of a broader and non-elite latinidad which was “fundamentally internationalist, or at least panregional, and suggested a class-based belonging that was situated in both the United States and Latin America,” as opposed to a Spain-centered, elite Hispanidad. As we shall see below, events in the following fifteen years would lead Colón to speak to New York’s Spanish community to a greater degree in the pages of Pueblos Hispanos and (later) Liberación, and to re-frame his rhetoric to suggest a Hispano community which included particularly Spanish supporters of the Republican cause.

344 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 49-52.
345 As quoted in Sánchez Korrol, From Colonia to Community,154.
*Pueblos Hispanos* ended its print run in 1944, and after a gap of two years, *Liberación* took up the need for a leftist paper articulating Spanish and Puerto Rican causes.\(^\text{347}\) The latter publication featured the writings of Colón, as well as tabaquero leader Bernardo Vega. Vega had been involved in the Spanish issue since at least 1940, when he participated in a picket of the French consulate in New York in protest of the deportation of Republican leaders from France to Spain.\(^\text{348}\) Vega was one of the leading members of New York’s Puerto Rican working-class and a dedicated activist in leftist circles both in the city and on the island. He was present at the founding of Puerto Rico’s Partido Socialista in 1915, and was a committed independence activist. He wrote for a number of publications and was director of the Progressive Party’s Hispanic section. As part of this latter work, he was a key figure in the Henry Wallace campaign for President in 1948.\(^\text{349}\) The involvement of such notable diaspora Boricuas as de Burgos, Colón and Vega in these two publications suggests that the Spanish cause was not merely of peripheral concern to the colonia, but a major terrain for writing and organization by both Spaniards and Puerto Ricans.

In building our understandings of this body of left-wing activism, we may look to studies of other parallel political work and the ways in which it served to bolster a subaltern internationalist consciousness. Much of this political work was performed under the banner of the Communist Party, which also sponsored the publication of *Pueblos Hispanos*. The rising prominence of internationalism, as displayed by *Pueblos Hispanos*, may be seen as an extension of organizing work which had been underway in Harlem generally since the first days of Soviet Bolshevism. By the 1930s, the CPUSA leadership had come to view Harlem as the

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\(^{349}\) Andreu Iglesias, “Introduction,” xviii-xix.
“‘concentration point’ of its strategy to win influence in Black America.” The party’s efforts paid dividends, with the high point of their influence coming in 1938, when there were about a thousand black members in the Harlem chapter. West Indian immigrants were critical members of the Harlem party in its early years- four out of the founding five members of the section were West Indian, due perhaps to the appeal of the Party’s internationalist message among the community. This internationalism was controversial in some corners of Black Harlem, however, due to the popularity of black nationalism (predominated for many of these years by Garveyite factions) and the call by CP leaders to build class-based (rather than race-based) solidarities within the Party structure. The wars between Ethiopia and Fascist Italy in 1935-36 and the Nationalist coup and subsequent Civil War in Spain were seen by Harlem CPUSA leaders as cause to unite against fascism in all its forms. This clashed with the perspective of some black nationalist street orators, who saw the Ethiopian conflict as more akin to a race war. Despite this, the CP perspective held appeal for many in Harlem, and as a result, “Communists had little difficulty in developing an enthusiastic support network in Harlem for the Spanish Loyalist cause.” In effect, the members and sympathizers of the CPUSA, both among the Spanish-speaking colonia as well as in black neighborhoods in Harlem, were a logical source of support for the Republican cause. As a result of the diversity among Harlemites generally, and its Popular Front leaders specifically, their activism and rhetoric reflected a concern with, and awareness of, the concerns of black America as well as New York’s Hispanos. These parallel narratives opened up the space for further solidarity between these two

351 Ibid., 5, 14.
353 Ibid., 196-197.
354 Ibid.
communities, within a framework that spoke to connections between the experiences of racialization among each group.

David Featherstone (building upon the early 20th century writings of George Padmore and other globally-minded black leftists) re-frames these solidarities with the Ethiopian and Spanish causes through a framework of “maps of grievance,” or spatial connections between the various injustices being committed in the name of imperialism and white supremacy. These imagined maps had real implications in terms of the level of mobility allowed state and non-state actors. Subaltern populations such as the African Diaspora had various means to counter the power of these flows of injustice, such as refusal to support military efforts through their work as maritime laborers or colonial armies, or through taking up arms as members of the International Brigades. These black Internationalists drew imaginative connections between historical and political forces, as was the case when International Brigade member Admiral Kilpatrick said of U.S. colonialism “this country carried those types of diplomacies so damn far, until they actually made slaves out of the Latin American people, that went back to the early parts of the 1900s.” Featherstone observes in the “subaltern cosmopolitanism” of Kilpatrick and his contemporaries that “it was through solidarities with other struggles that ways of refusing and challenging the racial divisions of U.S. society were envisioned and articulated.” I argue that a similar series of imaginative connections drew Puerto Rican leftists and their Republican allies (and by extension, all Spaniards) closer together, through a sort of “Hispano internationalism” supported by the parallel historical trajectories (and, to a certain extent, cultural traditions) of their two

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356 As quoted in Featherstone, 1414.
nations, as well as the promise presented by the Second Republic to move beyond the imperialism inherent to that shared history. This imperial tradition was, as discussed above, one historical legacy that the Francoist forces sought to protect and continue. In building this Hispano consciousness, the left-wing activists under examination here looked to black communities both to create potential coalitions and to draw from the tactics of those who had been seeking to empower black communities for generations. While the Spanish-speaking community had deep roots in New York, understanding of, and solidarity with, black campaigns for civil and human rights could yield fruitful coalitions as well as new tactical insights in resisting the North American racial regime.

The political project of building solidarity between Spanish-speaking people in New York had an important historical precedent in the 19th century work of the Cuban and Puerto Rican independence movement which, for much of its history, was a conjoined movement. New York stood as “one of the most important and necessary sites for Puerto Ricans and Cubans to reimagine a distinct Antillean nation and identity” within their individual understandings of their home islands as nations unto themselves as early as the 1830s.358 The city’s location outside of the island was of benefit to these political processes, in that revolutionaries could publish their views freely and “move theoretical and ideological constructions beyond the purview of their respective homelands to reconstruct the parameters of nation.”359 Of particular importance to this process was the publication of newspapers serving the exile communities from the islands. In

359 Ibid., 61.
writing on issues of concern to these twin exile communities in Spanish, a sense of solidarity and even community could emerge, emphasizing the right to speak and write their mother tongue.360

Thus, in building solidarities between the Puerto Rican and Spanish “colonies” in 1940s New York, leftists built on a historical legacy of sociocultural community building and “race writing” dating back to the 1880s, when a Spanish-language press began to develop in New York.361 The writers in these outlets were advocates for the Hispanophone community in the city, defending their rights and asserting the cultural contributions of societies throughout Latin America. The resulting editorial narratives “opposed the pressures to assimilate to bourgeois Anglo cultural norms.”362 One aspect of this sociocultural project was Hispanism, which literary scholar Vanessa Pérez Rosario defines as “a project of Hispanization through imposed language, customs, and beliefs beginning with the imperial expansion into the so-called New World.”363 Owing to this tie to the colonial past of Latin America, there are competing ideological pressures at play in the Hispanist project. In some cases, it manifested as a nostalgia for the Spanish colonial era, which by extension may be seen as supporting the culturally conservative and fascist-oriented Nationalist cause. A related strain of this activism also sought to spread Hispanic culture in the Americas, but “as a way to counter U.S. imperial modernity.”364 This latter formulation suggests a final, broader mission for Hispanism: the resistance of pressures for Hispanics living in the United States to assimilate.365 Beyond a sense of cultural commonality, the solidarity that would result among between Spanish and Puerto Rican people in New York

360 Ibid.
361 Pérez Rosario, Becoming Julia de Burgos, 70.
362 Ibid.
363 Ibid. For an examination of Hispanism in Latin America during the late 1930s and 1940s, see Sebastiaan Faber, “‘La hora ha llegado:’ Hispanism, Pan-Americanism, and the Hope of Spanish/American Glory (1938-1948),” in Ideologies of Hispanism, ed. Mabel Moraña (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 62-104.
364 Pérez Rosario, Becoming Julia de Burgos, 70.
365 Ibid, 71.
was ideological in nature, unifying leftists who were fundamentally concerned with the common mechanisms of colonialism and totalitarianism at play in each country. This narrative of a common struggle occurred, in large part, under the banner of a working-class Hispano community which had taken that term (and the cultural conservatism which it often conveyed) and “appropriated [it] for their own uses and ideological agendas.”

_Pueblos Hispanos_ and (later) _Liberación_ took up the cause of binding a Hispano community more closely together, building what Pérez terms “a sense of solidarity with the broader imagined community of Spanish speakers in both New York and Latin America.” Their parallel reporting and analysis of the injustices of the Falange and of U.S. colonialism relied in part on the sense that the Puerto Rican and Spanish people were united both in culture and in their desire for a just and democratic nation. Their efforts further explored the political possibilities of diaspora, creating the discursive and journalistic resources for New York _Hispanos_ to remain connected to their home countries and to envision a more interconnected network of Spanish-speaking people throughout the hemisphere.

_“Lo que el pueblo me dice”_368

From the time of its initial issue on February 20, 1943, _Pueblos Hispanos_ built on earlier efforts towards creating a pan-hemispheric, linguistic community among New York’s Latinx people. Indeed, the front page of this inaugural issue prominently featured a quote from José Martí’s 1891 essay “Nuestra America”: “Injértense en nuestras repúblicas el mundo, pero el

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367 Pérez Rosario, _Becoming Julia de Burgos_, 73.

368 Initial translations of the Spanish-language articles discussed below were completed by Puerto Rico-based translators, in the interest of speed. The author has reviewed these translations for accuracy, and in particular the portions of the articles which are directly quoted in English.
tronco sea el de nuestras repúblicas.”369 (“Let the world be grafted onto our republics, but the
trunk must be our own.”) This vision, articulated by Martí while he himself was working from
New York to further the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico, would prove to be a fitting
encapsulation of the internationalist vision focused on the Spanish-speaking world which
Pueblos Hispanos would represent. The coalition-building orientation of the paper is further
demonstrated by the Pueblos Hispanos mission statement from its inaugural issue. Among the
objectives of the editors, listed first and foremost is “the unification of all hispana colonies in the
United States for the defeat of Nazi-Fascism, in unity with all democratic forces.” The roots of
the unity described here are both cultural and ideological, focused on the defeat of fascist and
related political projects. The editorial vision is also both domestic (“to defend all the rights of
Hispana minorities in the United States”) and international (“the immediate independence of the
Puerto Rican nation”) in character. The newspaper also serves to pull together efforts for Puerto
Rico’s independence among the Spanish-speaking colonia and efforts against the Spanish
Nationalists, especially “the Fifth Column of the Axis operating in the Americas.”370 The
perspective represented by Pueblos Hispanos is thus twofold. First, it sought to advance the
political work of leftists seeking to defeat fascism, colonialism, and other manifestations of
reactionary and totalitarian politics, especially in the Spanish-speaking world. Second, the
writers and editors sought to use this political work to more tightly bind the Spanish-speaking
people of New York, in coalitions which could last beyond the struggles which initially served to
bring them together. New York’s Hispanos were united by the experience of cultural and
linguistic difference from the U.S white mainstream. In some respects, we may see the efforts of

369 Pueblos Hispanos, Feb. 20, 1943.
the Spanish-language press as building on this common experience of difference, moving
towards the definition of its audience as a distinct ethnic community. *Pueblos Hispanos* was an
important manifestation of this work in a time of worldwide political change, amidst a rising tide
of anti-colonial sentiment.

The task of explaining the aims of this new Spanish-language publication further and
defining its Hispano audience fell to Jesús Colón, who would publish a regular column in the
paper under the title “lo que el pueblo me dice,” or “what the people tell me.” For Colón, the
paper offered the opportunity to organize the “most sincere, pure, militant, and progressive of the
colony” through a publication “of, by, and for Hispano people.” While *Pueblos Hispanos* was
clearly oriented both in content and in language towards the Spanish-speaking world, the stated
goal of the paper’s contributors and editors (indeed, the “only goal”) was “the complete and
absolute liberation- political, economic, and social- of all people.”371 This expressly liberatory
vision sought, in effect, to build solidarity among Hispano people in New York, and to further
the independence of all colonized people. As we shall see, this perspective was supported by an
ideological foundation constructed in part from the ongoing colonization of Latin America and
other Hispano nations.

“Cuidado, Harlem”

The internationalist and Popular Front standpoint of *Pueblos Hispanos* led Colón to
vigorously support the U.S. war effort in Europe and the Pacific as an extension of the struggle
against totalitarianism and for Hispano empowerment. Writing in March of 1943, he suggests the
danger of a narrow and personally focused vision of the threat of fascism: “When the Japanese

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The first column under this title is not explicitly attributed to Colón, but based on the fact that he used this title for
his later columns, it is likely that Colón was either the lead or sole author of this piece.
annihilated the Chinese in Manchuria, many of us shrugged our shoulders and unworriedly said: ‘this has nothing to do with me’… In our suicidal carelessness, we have let the forces of international obscurantism wrap two-thirds of humanity in blood and fire.” Colón further points to the presence of an American Fifth Column which supports international fascism, not only in efforts which formally support fascist regimes, but also “[e]very time a Black man is lynched in the South, or a massacre is repeated in Ponce.” The manifestation of Southern white supremacy and of U.S. colonialism on Puerto Rico thus had important ideological similarities in Colón’s eyes. We might surmise that he saw both as violence intended to keep racialized populations under the control of U.S. interests. Rather than achieving liberation in the form of civil rights or political independence, both populations are kept within regimes of colonialism, whether in the easily recognizable form present in Puerto Rico or in the form of internal colonization experienced by black Americans.

Later in the same article, Colón summarized what he saw as the political agenda of New York’s Hispanos as follows: “Down with Nazism-Fascism of all kinds! Down with lynchings and racial discrimination! Free Albizu Campos and other political prisoners around the world! Grant independence to Puerto Rico!” In this statement we may observe the clearest articulation of an internationalism built on a struggle against both totalitarianism and fascism around the world, and white supremacist thought and action in the United States and the nations it brought under colonization. Though this platform arose in part out of the ideological commitments of Colón and his colleagues at Pueblos Hispanos, it also suggests a fundamental

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372 Jesus Colon, “Lo que el pueblo me dice: por qué lloras—, mujer?” Pueblos Hispanos, Mar. 13, 1943. Trans. Miguel Meléndez. The meaning of “obscurantism” in this context is unclear, though perhaps it speaks to the discursive division of the national struggles of nations under pressure from Nazi and Fascist forces from each other.
373 Ibid.
374 Ibid.
connection between the experiences of black Americans within the white supremacist order of
the United States and the less-developed (but equally apparent) regime of racialization as applied
to Hispanics of various national origins.

The connections Colón drew between U.S colonialism in Puerto Rico, the rising tide of
fascism in Europe, and white supremacist violence in the United States, bear rhetorical similarity
to the “Double-V” campaign being waged around the same time in the black press. Many writers
in these newspapers favored black participation in World War II in the early months of the
conflict, as did Colón. This aside, some were advocating a more complex position. Perhaps the
first articulation of this view appeared in the Pittsburgh Courier of January 31, 1942, in a letter
to the editors. James G. Thompson’s view, which was quickly adopted by the paper, was that
black Americans should fight against both “enemies from without” as well as “enemies from
within”- in other words, against fascism overseas and racism at home.375 Another early
articulation of this view appeared in the April 25, 1942 Journal and Guide, published in Norfolk,
which argued that black people ought to “get some…democracy here at home first before…[we]
jump on the free the other peoples ‘bandwagon.’”376 This position was far from unanimous
among black writers and editors, however. Less radical outlets such as the New York Amsterdam
News, New York Age, and the California Eagle argued that black participation in the war was
essential, and that perhaps a greater measure of equality would result from, or could be achieved
following, a victory for the United States and its allies.377 This is not to say that the Amsterdam
News and others who argued the necessity of the war were the only ones advocating an

376 Ibid., 108.
assimilationist position. Indeed, as historian Lee Finkle argues, the entire “Double-V” perspective is assimilationist as well in that it attempts to persuade young black men to participate fully in the war effort. However, it suggests that this participation would demonstrate the worthiness of black people as full members of American society and that it should lead to full rights as a result. This may be seen as a more qualified position in support of the war effort than Colón’s relatively unabashed support. However, Colón’s agenda is every bit as ambitious and is in some respects a broader vision in that it takes into account the struggles of those fighting fascism in Europe and racism in the United States (as in Double-V), as well as colonialism in Puerto Rico. While documentary evidence on this point is lacking, it stands to reason that the position staked out by Colón in Pueblos Hispanos in 1943 arose partly out of awareness of the arguments of these Double-V campaigners beginning the previous year.

For Colón, the importance of Harlem’s potential contribution to the war effort was suggested by the efforts then underway to sow seeds of discontent and discord among black and Hispano people both in New York and around the United States. He addressed this concern with Harlemites directly in a June 1943 column, urging them not to be taken in by the efforts of the “Fifth Column,” fascist collaborators and sympathizers who were at that time facilitating unrest throughout the U.S. war production system. “It is not by accident,” Colón argued, “that racial clashes between blacks and whites have taken place in shipyards and factories thousands of miles apart from one another, under the influence of the Ku Klux Klan.” While Colón is primarily interested in the Fifth Column’s efforts within communities of color, he sees the implications as wide-reaching and speaking to a desire by international fascism to not only slow the war

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378 Ibid., 114.
production process, but also “to sink the country into dreadful disorganization and anarchy” by exploiting ongoing racial tensions. Those among communities of color who engage in these narratives, in Colón’s view,

are not only speaking against the United States and the United Nations, but against the Puerto Rican nation which aspires to be, in a not-so-distant future, free and sovereign, equal in rights and responsibilities, among the group of democratic nations.\textsuperscript{380}

Colón thus frames the political tensions among home front communities of color in stark terms, as a battle between the anti-democratic forces exploiting U.S. racial tensions in support of the Axis on the one hand, and anti-fascist forces supporting the war effort on the other. Support for the Allied cause, under this analysis, is akin to support for a free and sovereign Puerto Rico. Missing from Colón’s analysis is a direct reckoning with the implications of generations of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico on the democratic character of the United States. While he does admit shortly after this quote that U.S. democracy is “imperfect,” he does not specifically explain the nature of this imperfection. Rather, he suggests the importance of a free press as a forum to “demand freedom.”\textsuperscript{381} Though the overall position pursued here seems difficult to unpack, it would seem that for Colón, efforts to empower communities of color should be conducted parallel to the war effort and should do nothing to undermine the fight against fascism abroad.

Colón does articulate an agenda for such parallel civil rights efforts among the Black, Italian, and Hispano people of Harlem, which includes the campaign against the Poll Tax, efforts against lynching and antisemitism, and the immediate independence of Puerto Rico. This final item was seen by Colón “not only as an act of justice toward our Puerto Rican people but also as a means to win the war against fascism by setting an example NOW of what the postwar world

\textsuperscript{380} \textit{Ibid.}.

\textsuperscript{381} \textit{Ibid.}.
will be for all oppressed nations on earth.” In this final point, we see the suggestion that independence for Puerto Rico might be framed as evidence of the Allies’ democratic bona fides. This aside, Colón seems unwilling to make support for the war effort conditional upon decolonization of the island. Further, Colón does not propose any specific measures that would achieve the social justice ends he seeks without harming the war effort. As such, it is difficult to see how this agenda might be operationalized.

As scholars César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe note, the support for the war effort displayed by Colón here and elsewhere aligns with the internationalist position of Communist parties around the world. Under this vision, activists “subordinated working-class agendas in the pursuit of the broadest possible antifascist front.” This emphasis led some on the left to, in their view, “lavish praise on Roosevelt and Tugwell and to tone down denunciations of U.S. imperialism in the context of the ‘war against fascism.’” This perspective is evident in Colón’s conflicted view of how to support the interests of working-class communities of color. As we shall see below, his post-war writings in Liberación suggest a broader critique of colonialism and capitalism, and a greater willingness to build coalitions to oppose these related forces of oppression.

**Otro Panamericanismo, Otros Estados Unidos**

Colón called not only for solidarity within a Hispano community and between black and Hispano New Yorkers, but also within the working class. This class-based coalition building was necessary to resist what he described as the “other United States:” “the Trojan [horse] of Nazi-Fascism in this country,” which stood in opposition to the progressive forces represented by men

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382 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
384 Ibid.
such as Wallace, Willkie, Roosevelt, and Browder.\textsuperscript{385} This trend had, in Colón’s view, a parallel in Puerto Rico, in the “nascent native capitalism that makes common cause with the absentee capitalism of the North.”\textsuperscript{386} Thus, for Colón, the reactionary force of both locales stood united, but the forces of progressivism in the United States and Puerto Rico did not enjoy such solidarity. Colón argued that this working-class solidarity could be forged through labor unions and other workers’ organizations such as the International Labor Defense and the International Workers Order (of which Colón himself was a leading member). “These powerful organizations,” he argued, “are the true societies that continue to live according to the great revolutionary and constructively democratic traditions of the people of the United States.”\textsuperscript{387} Beyond claiming belonging for Puerto Rican and other working people in the United States, Colón claims here that they are part of the “TRUE United States,” and bulwarks against totalitarianism and capitalism run amok. He ends with a call to arms: “Let us make common cause with the PEOPLE of the United States- we who are part of the Puerto Rican people- against the exploiters of both countries.”\textsuperscript{388} Colón distinguishes here between the people (most directly, the working people) of the U.S., who are potential allies of the Puerto Rican cause, and the power-elite who continued to exploit the island.

It could be the case that this grim vision of the powerful forces supporting U.S. exploitation also led directly to the desire for a renewed, vigorous, and progressive hemispheric political vision which the \textit{Pueblos Hispanos} editors articulated on the same page of this edition, under the title “Otro Panamericanismo” (“Another Pan-Americanism”), published in April of


\textsuperscript{386} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{387} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{388} \textit{Ibid.} Emphasis in original.
1943. After a discussion of the role of Simón Bolívar in the rise of Pan-Americanism, the editors turn to a critique of the then-contemporary practice of the Bolivarian political philosophy: “Last Wednesday, April 14, the hemisphere celebrated the ‘official’ Pan-American day. Neither spirit, nor energy, nor nerve, nor passion, shined across the sky of America.”389 The editorial goes on to articulate what would be, in the authors’ view, a more constructive vision, “[b]eyond frontiers, beyond citizenships” wherein people from throughout Latin America “all hold hands in a single thought of fraternity, for a hemisphere free from extermination through exploitation, free from personal tyrannies and oligarchies, free from imperialism.” This anti-colonial vision, the editors argue, represents “[t]he Pan-Americanism that will, inevitably, come.”390

In these words, and throughout the pages of Pueblos Hispanos, its writers sought to critique what they saw as a number of interconnected political and historical forces. First and foremost among these were the Falange in Spain and right-wing forces in the United States, which Colón in particular saw as related and allied forces. Both of these groups, acting as a Fifth Column force around the world, served to suppress progressive and left-wing Hispanics. White supremacy in the United States was another, related ideological force. The violence pursued in support of the racial status quo was directed against black Americans as well as Hispanics, and thus an understanding of their interrelated struggles and coalition-building between these groups was essential to presenting a united Popular Front. In presenting a left-wing perspective on the twin threat of imperialism and fascism in Spanish, Pueblos Hispanos sought to advance the struggle against these forces and in so doing create a more unified Hispano community working

390 Ibid.
against colonialism and reactionary politics—in New York, across the United States and throughout the Americas.

**Citizenship in the Colonial Frame**

Implicit in both the editorial perspective of *Pueblos Hispanos* and that of Double-V newspapers is a critique of the limited citizenship rights offered to people of color in the United States. Their writings are fundamentally concerned with illuminating the second-class nature of U.S. citizenship as applied to their respective communities, with an eye towards strengthening and expanding their rights. *Pueblos Hispanos* columnist A. Gonzalez Orona pursues this goal in an April 1943 column by offering a critique of citizenship as articulated within the founding documents and popular discourse of U.S. society. Gonzalez argues that the constitutional history of the United States is notable in its “almost absolute absence of the political-legal concept of citizenship.” While offering this broad critique of U.S. citizenship generally, Gonzalez observes that the Congress created a “special citizenship, precariously, for the territories and possessions.” Gonzalez further points to the variations in citizenship rights between the states, as illustrated through the oppression of people of color in the form of poll taxes and other Jim Crow provisions, as proof that citizenship is applied in uneven and arbitrary ways. The “citizenship in the colonial frame” of Puerto Ricans was even more dubious as a source of protection, granting Boricuas only “the pitying look of North Americans and the disdain of free and sensible men.” For Gonzalez, then, both racialization and colonialism serve to cheapen, or perhaps even to make meaningless, U.S. citizenship. These words open up the space for

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392 Ibid.
393 Ibid.
coalitional work between Puerto Ricans and other oppressed people of color who share this experience of second-class, precarious citizenship.

Gonzalez also calls out Puerto Ricans who do not recognize the perils of clinging too strongly to the North American state for empowerment, as evidenced in a May 22, 1943 piece condemning U.S. annexationism in Latin American history. For Gonzalez, this line of thinking is a scourge, “a fungus that has shadowed more than once the dilated diorama of our Hispano-American politics,” as was the case in Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic), Cuba, and Guatemala as well as Puerto Rico. Gonzalez further suggests that turning to the North to secure rights might be explained by adherence to American exceptionalism among “a class of men who would be confused by the revolutionary phenomenon of the thirteen colonies and dazzled by the recent surging legend of Puritan democracy.” This group, potentially afflicted by a self-centered political “degeneracy,” found its leaders in the “most palpable mediocrity of the island.”

Gonzalez saw resistance to U.S. colonialism as a matter of honor and those who collaborated in formalizing the permanent control of the island as lacking in basic decency. Beyond this, the class of “statehooders” had, in his eyes, become dupes of the narrative (North) American exceptionalism which suggested that the nation offered freedom to all under its protection and was immune from the lure of colonization. Viewing this argument in concert with his earlier column, it seems apparent that Gonzalez saw Jim Crow and the second-class status of black and Puerto Rican U.S. citizens as proof positive of the falsehood of American exceptionalism. Liberation, for Gonzalez, would not come about by seeking full citizenship rights under the American flag. Indeed, the entire premise of this citizenship was fundamentally flawed from the beginning of U.S. history.

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“Otra Vez, la Republica de Trapo”

In addition to offering a parallel analysis of the struggles of Hispano and black communities, the members of the Pueblos Hispanos editorial staff sought to inform its readers about the stateside political debates impacting Puerto Ricans. This was the primary objective of an April 1943 column condemning a bill proposed by Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland, which would have granted Puerto Rico independence.395 This position might seem surprising in view of the strong stance in favor of Puerto Rico’s independence which the paper took, as did the arguments of Maria Más Pozo discussed above. The column is not a contradiction of this stance, but rather a warning against the potential construction of a “rag republic” [republica de trapo], which enjoys independence as a legal matter but which lacks the economic means to sustain itself. In 1936, the editors reflected, Tydings had introduced a similar bill, in light of the global political context of the “inevitable crisis that Hitler’s ascent to the German chancery would bring, requiring an effective proof of good will, of ‘good neighborliness,’ in action.” 396 To prevent the charge of hypocrisy on the part of a nation which opposed Nazi expansion on the one hand, while continuing to hold Puerto Rico in bondage with the other, Tydings introduced his bill with what the writers saw as a dual aim. First, the proposal would “frighten Puerto Ricans with the prospect of a financial noose through a false independence,” which the island’s people would likely reject. Second, should they seize the possibility of independence despite the lack of a plan for economic sustainability, the ruling class in Washington “would have prepared already the necessary instrumentation to dynamite the sovereignty of the nascent republic, and even to

395 This same proposal is discussed from the perspective of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence in Chapter IV.
appear generous in the end.” In effect, Tydings’ 1936 proposal was a false offer of an ultimately meaningless independence for the island, made in the interest of political calculations rather than a desire to empower the Puerto Rican people.

Nonetheless, the editors continued, Puerto Ricans were enthusiastic about the dawn of the island republic which was seemingly all but achieved. This tide had been stemmed, however, by the 1936 coup in Spain, which captured the attention of Spanish-speaking people in the United States. “The people with a common origin-safeguards of Puerto Rico’s independence in that moment- ceded their attention to the roar of the front in Madrid. General Franco torpedoed Puerto Rico’s quickly approaching independence.” In 1943, with the war in Spain resolved in favor of the Falange, “Puerto Rico has gained once again the attention of the Hispanic-American people [los pueblos americo-hispánicos]” as well as North Americans. Not only this, but through the fight against fascism (“ennobled by the participation of many nations of our race [raza]”) there existed “the democratic potential, the capacity to liberate many oppressed people.” Standing in the way of true liberation was Tydings, “the lawyer of the sugar cane growers,” whose goal in 1943 was “to resign himself to the moral defeat of imperialism in Puerto Rico, forced to recognize the Republic of Puerto Rico, making a specter out of the Republic of Puerto Rico.” It is this last aspect which defines Tydings’ position for the Pueblos Hispanos writers, his move in the direction of creating a “rag republic,” rather than “[a] united front of the working class, a united front of progressivism in the Americas.” Thus, the struggle for the empowerment of Puerto Rico was not merely a colonial conflict, but a class conflict between the

397 Ibid.  
398 Ibid.  
399 Ibid.  
400 Ibid.  
401 Ibid.
capitalist and his political elite allies on the one hand, and working-class people striving to create a more progressive United States and an independent Puerto Rico.

The editors’ rhetoric in this column suggests a series of overlapping solidarities in support of a liberatory and progressive agenda. First and foremost among these is solidarity among Spanish-speaking people, including specifically Spaniards and Puerto Ricans. This connection is suggested by the political agenda shared among a community of pueblos americohispánicos. The column further suggests a set of ideological and class-based solidarities among progressive, working-class Hispanos. Just as these groups had unified in support of the Republican cause in Spain, they would serve as natural and strong allies in working for a free, empowered, and sovereign Puerto Rico.

Liberación: por los países oprimidos

Unfortunately, Pueblos Hispanos would prove to be a short-lived publication, shutting down in 1944 after twenty months due to reasons which as yet remain unclear. The paper’s director, Juan Antonio Corretjer, and Pueblos Hispanos columnist Consuela Lee Tapia (who he married around this time) departed New York for Cuba shortly after the paper ended publication.402 After several years, it was the weekly paper Liberación which would fill the need for a leftist, Spanish-language newspaper in New York. The publication began its print run on March 22, 1946, and was sponsored by the Comité Coordinador de la República Española. Thus, the chief focus of the paper was the struggle for democracy in Spain, as evidenced by the paper’s mission printed immediately under its nameplate in the inaugural issue—“Semanario de Lucha por la República Española” (“Weekly of the Struggle for the Spanish Republic”).403 However,

402 Ayala and Bernabe, Puerto Rico, 148.
403 Liberación, Mar. 22, 1946.
as Bernardo Vega pointed out in his later writings, this focus limited the reach of the newspaper, and as a result the editors incorporated further coverage of the Puerto Rican community. Indeed, by May 24th (the date of the publication’s tenth issue), the nameplate read “Por la Liberación de España, Puerto Rico y otros Países Oprímidos” (“for the liberation of Spain, Puerto Rico, and other oppressed countries”). As a result, “Liberación” became a mouthpiece more fully in tune with the city in which it was published,” “a front line in the defense of the Puerto Rican community and of all Hispanics living in the city.” The paper was thus an institution which served to bring Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics in New York closer together, under a liberatory and anti-colonial analytical framework.

The desired readership for Liberación is also suggested in its April 1947 analysis of the rise of Cold War-era anti-Communism and the related increase in U.S. imperialism around the world. This column was authored by International Workers Order and American Communist Party organizer Juan Emmanueli. For Emmanueli, the implications of this pre-McCarthy Era anti-Communist crusade extended well beyond Party members such as himself. Indeed, he argues, “the fight is not only against the Communist Party anymore. Now the target of the imperial reaction is democracy.” The implications of anti-Communism also extended beyond the domestic political arena, as “part of the Yankee imperialist agenda to intensify the exploitation and oppression of colonial, semi-colonial and dependent countries, all through peaceful means.” In Emmanueli’s estimation, the Spanish-speaking readers of Liberación were both particularly vulnerable to this trend and had a great deal at stake: “New York City’s

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404 Liberación, May 24, 1946.
405 Vega, Memoirs, 228.
406 On Emmanueli’s history of political activism, see Ayala and Bernabe, Puerto Rico, 114, 141.
408 Ibid.
colonia hispana is a representative mosaic of nations oppressed by Yankee imperialism. The Puerto Ricans, Spaniards, and Latin Americans who constitute our colonia have civic, economic, and political interests to defend.”409 Thus, the readers of Liberación are framed by Emmanuelli as an ethnic community with a distinct set of interests to support as they re-establish themselves socially in New York. Though he speaks specifically to Spaniards and Puerto Ricans, he also references Latin Americans broadly, suggesting that this community is delineated according to language and (perhaps) by the history which these former colonies of Spain share.

“la formidable potencia que tendrían si todos se uniesen”

Jesús Colón’s advocacy for a united front against racism and colonialism continued in his writings after World War II for Liberación. Many of his early publications in the paper were part of a series entitled “Cual debe ser nuestra posicion ante el Problema Politico de Puerto Rico” (“What our stance regarding Puerto Rico’s political problem should be”). The installment of the series published on June 19, 1946 took on the issue of racism among Puerto Ricans in New York and the ways in which these prejudices prevented solidarities among racialized populations in the city. “Many white or ‘jabao’ Puerto Ricans adopt the viewpoint of the most ignorant and backwards Yankees of the South” regarding race, Colón observes, going so far as to restrict the membership of their political clubs to exclude Puerto Ricans of African descent.410 While some of these Puerto Ricans are “spirited” racists following their own beliefs, others justify their bigotry by claiming they are merely following North American customs. Beyond being a wrong-headed and racist position, Colón argues that “for the fruitful task of building a nation in Puerto

409 Ibid.
410 Jesus Colon, “El Prejuicio y la Independencia: Cual debe ser nuestra posicion ante el Problema Política de Puerto Rico,” Liberación, Jun. 19, 1946. Trans. Antonio Hernández Matos. Jabao is a folk racial term used in Puerto Rico (sometimes in a pejorative sense) which refers to light-skinned people with curly hair, likely with some African ancestry. Duany, Puerto Rican Nation, 238. For a discussion of the Puerto Rican racial order as it manifests on the island and in the diaspora, see Ibid., 236-260.
Rico, those elements are Puerto Rican no more.”411 Indeed, these Puerto Ricans themselves have taken steps to distance themselves from their roots, trying “to pass as Mexicans, Chileans, Costa Ricans, or of any other country.”412

In taking this action, Colón suggests that these “non-Puerto Ricans” have foresworn a crucial aspect of Puerto Rican culture and identity: “One real sign that a person has stopped -in practice and in spirit- being Puerto Rican is when that person embraces the Yankee principle of judging another by the color of his skin.”413 This claim is in keeping with a long line of arguments dating back to at least 1898 which suggested that anti-black racism, and the more general trend in Puerto Rico towards a racially stratified order, was a U.S. colonial intervention.414 In taking control of the island and re-orienting its society in ways which more closely approximated the North American social order, both these “Yankees” and the Puerto Ricans most eager to curry favor with them had created a more racialized society on the island. This trend, Colón suggests, continued in the diaspora on the part of Boricuas seeking acceptance into white society in North America. Rather than buying into this discord, Colón wishes to see Puerto Ricans make racial equality of the sort he saw in operation on the island, as well as the corresponding social harmony with Latinx people of varying racial background and black Americans, more prevalent in New York. Though this vision was likely based on an overly optimistic and utopian view of the island’s racial regime, and a partial abdication of the responsibility of Puerto Ricans in anti-black racism, it represented for Colón an ideal to strive for.

411 Colon, “El Prejuicio y la Independencia…”
412 Ibid.
413 Ibid.
414 For an analysis of the “exporting” of the U.S. racial order to Puerto Rico, see Ayala and Bernabe, Puerto Rico, 30-32.
In Colón’s view, this rising tide of racism damaged not only the black Americans and others who become the subjects of racial animus, but also Puerto Ricans who thereby lost “their natural allies in this country: the national minorities, the thirteen million people of the black race, discriminated against and lynched every day, who therefore constitute a dormant massive force of democratic protest.”\footnote{Colon, “El Prejuicio y la Independencia…”} In addition, prejudice against Italians and Jews (thought of by some Puerto Ricans as comprising “all landlords, all banks and corporations’ presidents”) damages potential alliances.\footnote{Ibid.} Colón calls for solidarity among the communities of Harlem against a “common enemy…the capitalist octopus…. which uses all those publicity and propaganda tools to divide workers based on racial, religious, or political prejudices.”\footnote{Ibid.} Though Colón’s argument is primarily focused on creating solidarity regardless of ethnicity and continuing the tradition of racial harmony he sees on the island, he ultimately comes around to a class-based analysis. For him, the working class is the “fountain of all power,” and class unity among Harlemites will lead to the empowerment of these communities to the fullest extent, and to improvements in North American society at large.

“Por el honor de nuestra raza y la conquista de nuestros derechos”

In addition to efforts to rally an anti-racist coalition among Hispanos in New York, the post-war years also featured moves towards a political resurgence of the colonia. Historically, the political dialogue among New York Puerto Ricans had been, in essence, an extension of the island-based discourse. The first Boricua organizations in the city with an explicitly political mission had been created to support the cause of independence for both Puerto Rico and Cuba. These included the Puerto Rican committee of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, founded in 1895,
as well as several other organizations such as Los Dos Antillas, La Liga Artesanos, and others in both Manhattan and Brooklyn. Some of these groups were anchored by tabaqueros whose politics were generally left-leaning and class-oriented.\footnote{Sánchez Korrol, \textit{From Colonia to Community}, 167-68.} As early as 1918, Puerto Ricans began making their entry into the electoral politics of the city, through the creation of Puerto Rican political clubs affiliated (to varying degrees) with the regular party structures. This process began earlier in Brooklyn, but by 1927 such clubs were established in El Barrio.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 173-74.} The power of this ethnic constituency was recognized by Fiorello La Guardia, Republican Congressman from East Harlem (1923-33) and later Mayor of New York (1934-45) who courted the people of El Barrio as early as 1927. This was due partly to the fact that thousands of Boricuas had registered to vote in New York during the interwar years, including some 2000 in the 19\textsuperscript{th} Congressional District, which had a total of 5000 voters in the city. A second surge of Puerto Rican voter registrations would come about in the late 1940s.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 184.} Both major parties took an interest in Puerto Ricans, though Democratic clubs operating under a patronage models predominated from these early years.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 178.} Thus, in the early 1940s, the Puerto Rican vote had a significant impact in certain neighborhoods.

East Harlem first elected a Latino to office in 1937, when attorney Oscar García Rivera took a seat in the New York State Assembly. He had run for office as a Republican, and his positions (like those of Vito Marcantonio) were generally in the social reform model. This emphasis in his platform likely aided in gaining García Rivera votes from Puerto Rican Democrats, who were known to cross party lines for a candidate or issue effecting the
community. García Rivera ultimately switched to Marcantonio’s American Labor Party, running for re-election on their ballot line in 1938. He failed to achieve re-election in 1939 and left office the following year. Other Manhattan Puerto Ricans distinguished themselves in politics outside of the confines of elective office, such as Dr. José Negrón Cesteros, who was appointed in 1936 as chairperson of the Democratic National Committee’s Puerto Rican Division.\footnote{Ibid., 192.} In this activism and the issues to which it spoke, we may observe a move from a politics dominated by the island’s issues to a more diasporic conception of politics, which encompassed both the political questions of Puerto Rico and the everyday needs of New York Puerto Ricans.

By 1948, Sixto Acosta observed in the pages of Liberación, the attitude of “passive waiting” for empowerment among Hispanics had given way to efforts to claim, “by our own actions, the recognition of our rights.” However, this recognition was not forthcoming from any faction among New York’s power elite. As a result, political participation by New York’s Latinx communities had been reduced to a false choice between Republicans who would treat them like “a rubber stamp or a mechanical toy” serving reactionary interests, or Democrats who had abandoned the progressive politics of Roosevelt and who saw Latinx people as lacking meaningful political power. The Democratic position was summed up in the words of one party official: “[w]hy do you make so much noise when Puerto Ricans don’t have the strength to have any candidate elected?”\footnote{Sixto Acosta, “Un Llamamiento A Toda La Colonia Hispana,” Pueblos Hispanos, Oct. 2, 1946. Trans. Antonio Hernández Matos.} This mindset went further still, with many party leaders expressing the view that Hispanics were “‘not aware how important voting is,’” or “‘too ignorant to exercise such a right.’”\footnote{Ibid.}
Acosta’s proposed solution to the political marginalization of Puerto Ricans, which had led to deplorable living conditions in Hispano neighborhoods, was political solidarity among Spanish-speaking people in New York behind candidates from their own communities. In 1948, this meant advocacy for the election of José Ramos López to the State Assembly, which he felt should not be viewed as a “party issue separated from our wellbeing as a social group.”\footnote{Ibid.} Acosta’s argument suggests that he had given up on the two-party system as a means for the empowerment of Latinx people, in favor of community political solidarity. This is not to say that Acosta had given up entirely on political parties, however, as Ramos was yet another candidate of the American Labor Party headed by Marcantonio.\footnote{On Ramos’ candidacy, and the role of the American Labor Party and leftists generally in colonia politics during this period, see Thomas, \textit{Puerto Rican Citizen}, 146-52.} While Acosta’s support for an ALP candidate was far from unique among East Harlem’s Puerto Rican community, it seems likely that his loyalty was not first and foremost to that party, which merits no direct mention in his article. Rather, his primary concern was for solidarity among Spanish-speaking people in New York and increasing their participation in the political process.

This is in keeping with the earlier trend among diaspora Puerto Ricans to cross party lines for candidates from among the community. In so doing, and electing Ramos López, Acosta argues that Hispano citizens would demonstrate their political potency, gain recognition, and fully secure their rights. In so doing, they would further empower all members of the colonia, regardless of citizenship or national origin. But only with the strength that comes in numbers from Puerto Ricans, Spaniards, and other Spanish-speakers would such a task, in Acosta’s eyes, be achievable.
“Boricuas ‘triunfadores’ han olvidado que son borincanos”\textsuperscript{427}

Tied as it was to leftist political circles, \textit{Liberación} worked to illuminate the exploitation of poor and working-class Puerto Ricans by their better-off compatriots. In the eyes of Bernardo Vega, this dynamic was partly to blame for the fact that “[t]he Puerto Rican colonia is one of the poorest racial groups of all inhabiting the city.” While earlier-arriving migrant groups such as Italians, Germans, and Jews managed to achieve representation among the wealthier circles of the city, these professionals had not “divorced from their folks, and collaborate with them in everything that has to do with their race.” By contrast, professional Puerto Ricans had “forgotten they are Borincanos, only to remember their fellow countrymen at the time to do business.”\textsuperscript{428} In other words, professional Puerto Ricans were (in Vega’s opinion) only interested in their countrymen insofar as they provided them unique money-making opportunities, in which they could serve as intermediaries between the colonia and the commercial elite.

While Vega initially seems dedicated to an analysis of the Puerto Rican struggle as that of a migrant group seeking empowerment and a greater measure of belonging in their new surroundings, the “racial” standing of Boricuas is more fully elaborated as he continues. In his view, all the efforts of upper-class Puerto Ricans to curry favor with the power elite would not “wash away the gob of spit that the press and the Americans who reject us, who hate us and consider us scum and incapable of doing something good, throw at our colonia every day.”\textsuperscript{429} For Vega, the goals of diaspora Puerto Ricans should speak to the everyday needs of the poorest among them, the “huge dispossessed mass who has had to emigrate here forced by

\textsuperscript{427} Ibid. \textsuperscript{428} Ibid. Translation by Antonio Hernández Matos. \textsuperscript{429} Ibid.
circumstances.”^430 In this final point we see the clearest allusion Vega makes to the colonial realities of Puerto Rican life, as well as a specific distinction between the experience of immigrant populations from Europe and that of Boricuas. Puerto Ricans are unique in the extent to which their migratory patterns were “forced by circumstance.” While these circumstances were most directly economic, Vega was acutely aware of the ways in which these economic issues had roots in U.S. colonialism and the concomitant control of the island’s political structures from without.

This aside, Vega saw this exploitation within the colonia coming to an end, owing to the increasing organization of Puerto Ricans in progressive groups which “punish the treason committed by our wealthy and professional classes.”^431 On one level, this would suggest the continuation of a class-based division among Puerto Ricans, which might seem to contradict the message of ethnic solidarity articulated elsewhere in Liberación. However, this disjuncture might be better understood as reflecting a shifting and contingent set of solidarities in Harlem and elsewhere in the colonia. On issues such as political empowerment, there might be grounds for a broader, and primarily ethnic, coalition among Hispanos. On economic issues, where class conflict is more integral, wealthy Hispanos might be inherently opposed to the objectives of working-class people such as the tabaqueros that Vega represented. In these cases, coalitions among working-class Hispanos which challenged their upper-class brethren might be the more effective solution.

Liberación’s regular column “Arroz y Habichuelas” also took up the theme of the need for solidarity in the context of class divisions and the need to engage with electoral politics

^430 Ibid.
^431 Ibid.
within the colonia. Focusing on one particular community member and political leader, named only as Del Valle, the column discussed in brief how this individual “took advantage of the indifference, lack of organization and carelessness of the Boricua colonia to get rich exploiting our people.” The backgrounds of these individuals are diverse—“Boricua professionals, businessmen, Falangists, shopkeepers [bodegueros], butchers and ambitious politicians”—and yet they are united in having “made common cause with the enemies of the emancipation of the Puerto Rican people.” While all of the other named constituencies are defined by class position, the inclusion of Falange supporters here seems to be, at first glance, out of place as an ideologically-defined group. However, the conflict between the Republican and Nationalist sides in Spain (as discussed above) had become a defining aspect of the ideology of leftists worldwide, but particularly Spanish-speaking leftists. From this perspective “Falangists” might be more closely defined as any conservatives opposed to the working-class bloc, rather than merely the smaller group supporting Franco and the Nationalists specifically. In view of this orientation, it is entirely feasible that Puerto Ricans (and particularly those of progressive and/or working-class background) would view the Falange as fundamentally opposed not only to the legitimate government of Spain, but also to the further empowerment of the island and its people.

“Esta orientación unitaria de nuestra colonia es posible.”

Just as the authors of the “Arroz y Habichuelas” columns saw organization as the best means to deal with class-based discord within Hispano communities, they also saw the need to band together against external forces. This organization would be best accomplished if not only

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432 The authorship of this column is not attributed, and the placement of the column in Liberación’s pages does not suggest that it is an editorial.
434 Ibid.
Puerto Ricans, but all members of the colonia Hispana, played a part. The language used in advocating for this path suggests that beyond creating the conditions for social and political empowerment, the act of organizing would help to form a more cohesive sense of community through a unity of tactics and purpose in East Harlem and elsewhere where Hispanos congregated. Without such unity, and organized resistance to business and political choices that harmed Hispanos, the community would lack the tactical strength necessary to advance.

In November of 1946, the “Arroz y Habichuelas” column offered an additional analysis along these lines through a discussion of the problems of renters in the city. The author expresses frustration with Hispanos for their failure to recognize and respond to the problems they face as tenants, going so far as to say that they were “in la la land regarding the problem.”436 While other “nationalities” were already organizing tenants’ leagues “to defend themselves against the next rip-off,” Hispanos did not seem to even contemplate action.437 Though this problem had to do specifically with an unwillingness to take political action, the “Arroz” author suggests that the problem went deeper still, to an unwillingness “to ‘take a minute’ to visit the neighbors…to start the work of organizing.”438 This social isolation among Hispanos is not necessarily explained by national and ethnic divisions within these communities, but it is significant that the plea is addressed to Hispanos broadly, rather than to Puerto Ricans specifically. Again here, the author seeks to spell out the common problems of Spanish-speaking people in New York and to inspire them to act together.

The article further implies that organization would aid Hispanos in directing their energies more productively. “The only way the poor have to defend themselves,” they argue, “is

437 Ibid.
438 Ibid.
by the use of force and the solidarity of the organized masses.”439 The author gestures here not only to other communities in New York at the same time, but to historical evidence. Class-based conflict, they argue, must be contended with in an organized fashion, rather than through misdirected protests aimed at the “miserable men” who do the “landlord’s dirty work,” as had been done up through this time.440 What was needed was to demonstrate that “our people are ready to be as militant as the rest of the groups that make up the community of New Yorkers.”441 In these words, we hear an plea for Hispanics to learn from the experiences and organizing work of other migrant groups who have struggled to establish themselves in New York. Solidarity, organizing as an ethnic bloc, and protest against unbearable living conditions are the sorts of tactical choices that had served others well in the past. Rather than negotiating on a one-on-one basis, the colonia Hispana could learn from efforts to improve living conditions in their own apartments, thus lifting their community. This sort of participation in the lived processes of citizenship would mean that the next generation would have greater opportunities, and a higher measure of belonging, in the city.

Crafting a Hispano Empowerment Agenda

In evaluating the activism of New York’s Hispanics in the 1940s, a process of identity formation that is both profoundly local and dynamically transnational is on display. Leftist writers in Pueblos Hispanos and Liberación built from historical, cultural, linguistic, and other common roots in order to build solidarity among Puerto Ricans and Spaniards in particular, taking into account the political problems of their home countries. The rise of the Falange in Spain (which led to a minor exodus of leftists, including a number of intellectuals) and the

439 Ibid.
440 Ibid.
441 Ibid.
colonization of Puerto Rico were major factors in sending many of the daughters and sons of those countries to New York, and writers in these publications elucidated the similarities between these experiences and used them as a basis to build solidarity. While other countries in Latin America did not receive as extensive treatment in the pages of these newspapers, and their histories were not as thoroughly explored, the everyday problems they faced as Spanish-speakers and marginalized new migrants in New York were also of interest in building a greater sense of community, especially among working-class and left-wing Hispanos. In understanding and contextualizing these experiences, the writers of *Pueblos Hispanos* and *Liberación* considered the ways in which citizenship could serve to empower racialized people in the United States. Their analysis displays an acute awareness of the ways in which one’s rights could be curtailed through white supremacy and second-class citizenship, whether enforced by colonial regimes (as in the Puerto Rican case), or by the deployment of official and unofficial violence (as was the case in the Jim Crow South).

Though New York lacked the formal structures of Jim Crow and the political and economic problems arising out of colonialism in Puerto Rico, the experience of New York’s Boricua community nonetheless served to illuminate the problems of a broader community of Hispanics who were, in the words of Julia de Burgos, “forced to blend against the hard rock of a cold reality which can dissipate as well as unite.”

442 *Pueblos Hispanos* and *Liberación* served this function of uniting Hispanics in New York along ideological and class-based lines, but more fundamentally through a sense of shared culture and history among the people of the Spanish-speaking world. The writers represented in the pages of these left-wing newspapers offered a

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rich, diasporic perspective on the lives of Spanish-speaking people in New York and around the world. Though this vision was fundamentally rooted in the local histories of Latinx people in New York, the transnational character of this analysis, and its interest in the second-class citizenship of African Americans, suggests that it was also outward-looking, and sought to understand the experiences of a range of racialized and colonized populations. In this regard, it prefigures a range of solidarities (under examination in the following and final chapter) that would develop among Nuyoricans in the decades to come.
Figure 5. Masthead of *Pueblos Hispanos*, from the March 20, 1942 issue. Newspapers and Journals Division, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
CHAPTER VI. BUILDING A “DIASPORA CITY”: THE RISE OF THE NUYORICAN AND COALITIONAL POLITICS IN THE SECOND GENERATION

“The Puerto Ricans in New York are realizing that somehow there is an affinity between the phrases ‘We the people’ and ‘Arise, you workers,’ and are fast adapting themselves to the best fighting and democratic traditions of this country. So you can see why some people don’t like them to come to the United States.”

“Puerto Ricans have always considered Black people’s problems as only the Black people’s problems. Black people have considered the problems of Puerto Ricans to be only the Puerto Ricans’ problems.

It is becoming more obvious that Puerto Rican people and Black people must begin to unite in our struggle for liberation.” – Muntu, Ministry of Defense, Young Lord’s Party

The granting of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 led many to make the difficult choice to leave their homes to seek a better life in North America. In so doing, many likely hoped to overcome the political and economic stresses the island faced due to colonialism, including poverty and lack of job opportunities. In New York, many found that they faced similar problems—poor living conditions, difficulty obtaining work, and a lack of political power. These changes in circumstances (or lack thereof) are suggested by the words of Piri Thomas’ mother in his 1967 autobiographical work *Down These Mean Streets*:

“Bueno hijo, you have people everywhere who, because they have more, don’t remember those who have very little. But in Puerto Rico those around you share la pobreza with you and they love you, because only poor people can understand poor people. I like los Estados Unidos, but it’s sometimes a cold place to live—not because of the winter and the landlord not giving heat but because of the snow in the hearts of the people.”

Contributing to these problems was the new racial regime which Boricuas confronted in the city. Although many likely overstated their case in saying that Puerto Rico lacked racism, in New York...
York many found worse social conditions. Most from the island found themselves near the bottom of the social hierarchy, and had to seek a better life from this marginalized position. While many followed the example of earlier immigrants in seeking to assimilate and gain the recognition and respect of mainstream white society as citizens, utilizing narratives of *citizenship* to assert their belonging in U.S. society, over time others increasingly made different choices. The racialization of the Puerto Rican community led these community members to view the liberatory potential of “acting like an American citizen” as limited. Thus, rather than fighting back against the idea that they did not belong in North American society, these Boricuas sought to build the strength of their community from within, creating a stronger sense of community which would lead Puerto Ricans to work together to improve their lives in the city. Rather than seeking to embody the ideals of *citizenship*, these Puerto Ricans looked to each other to build their own sense of *empowerment*, from the bottom up.

This dynamic of change continued in the years immediately following World War II, both in North America and in Puerto Rico, and these changes would profoundly affect New York’s Puerto Rican community. In particular, Puerto Ricans increasingly made use of their U.S. citizenship to migrate to New York and other locations in North America. During 1945 and 1946, a short burst of migration from Puerto Rico to the United States occurred, with most migrants seeking jobs and higher pay.\(^446\) The island’s governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, who had previously supported independence for the island, abandoned that objective and in 1947 turned his focus towards a program of tax incentives, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and other efforts to industrialize the island, which would come to be known as *Operation Bootstrap*.\(^447\) In

\(^{446}\) Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico*, 179.
\(^{447}\) Ibid., 187-90.
the years which followed, the largest wave of out-migration from the island commenced. This trend was made possible partly by the advent of affordable airline service between San Juan and New York. Contemporary scholars framed this trend as owing its impetus to overpopulation on the island, though economic factors including the rise of Operation Bootstrap also played a significant role. As a result, net migration from Puerto Rico between 1950 and 1970 amounted to about 27% of the island’s 1950 population.448 Many of those departing the island did so through contract labor programs that were promoted by the island’s government. These programs arose partly due to concern that the concentration of Puerto Ricans in New York would lead to ill-will on the part of the North American public. As a result, many contract laborers during the late 1940s and 1950s were destined for other parts of the country. Many Boricua women were sent to serve as domestic labor in Scarsdale, NY (as part of a pilot program), and later to Philadelphia. Men took up positions in industrial manufacturing (notably in Lorain, Ohio) and agriculture (in Vineland, New Jersey and various locales throughout the Midwest).449

Puerto Rican colonias thus grew up in unexpected places, and they often drew social connections with other Latinx communities in the area. This was the case in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the burgeoning Puerto Rican and Mexican communities created a “Spanish-speaking” community united by their experiences of work, culture and faith. In locales such as this, Puerto Ricans turned up for the Mexican Independence Day parade as a means of showing common cause- and, not infrequently, because their families had come to include Mexican members.450 New York’s annual parade calendar by this time also featured a prominent Latinx

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448 Ibid., 197.
celebration, though its history was, in some respects, the inverse of the process which had taken place in Grand Rapids. In 1955, members of the Federación de Sociedades Hispanas assembled to plan the first Hispanic parade in New York’s history. Two years later, members of the city’s Puerto Rican community successfully sought to change the event to a Puerto Rican parade. Despite support for the pan-Latinx event, even among some prominent Puerto Ricans, 1957 saw the first Puerto Rican Parade in New York’s history, an event which continues each June to this day. These events, despite their differing histories and the different communities they serve to highlight, each stand as prime examples of the “Latino cultural citizenship” and cultural nationalism emphasized in the literature of recent Latinx history. Through their visibility in the cultural life of their home cities in the diaspora, Puerto Ricans made their presence known, and emphasized the extent to which they were a part of the urban social fabric. However, these manifestations of cultural citizenship would not have been possible without an earlier process of community building. Once the Puerto Rican community in New York had developed a certain degree of internal interconnectedness, they were in a position to make demands on the political and cultural structures of the city, and to grow in prominence through events such as the parade. In this way, the political power of the community grew over the years, supporting the exercise of citizenship rights by diaspora Puerto Ricans.

The post-war period also saw fundamental changes in the flows of migration northward, due in part to political changes on the island. When Luis Muñoz Marín and his Partido Popular Democrático came to power in 1948, they sought to create a new constitution for Puerto Rico. As part of this process, Muñoz Marín crafted the political regime which would come to define Puerto Rico’s political structures: the estado libre asociado (ELA, or “commonwealth” as it is

451 Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen, 161-62.
commonly translated). In 1950, the U.S. Congress enacted Public Law 600, which allowed for a plebiscite by the Puerto Rican people which (if successful) would initiate a constituent assembly. That body, in turn, would re-constitute the structures of the Puerto Rican government, presumably in the direction of the ELA. Crucially, the substance of the proposal to be voted on by the Puerto Rican people could not (under PL 600) include matters such as citizenship and the supremacy of the federal government over the island. These matters would remain as they were in the years prior, absent Congressional action.452 These processes were completed successfully, and the ELA was proclaimed on July 25, 1952- the 54th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico during the Cuban-Spanish-American War. With this, the colonial regime on the island was declared to have ended, as the people had ostensibly had the opportunity for self-determination.453

Although the adoption of the ELA provided the U.S. government the justification it needed to proclaim Puerto Rico’s political status as noncolonial, the constraints placed on the island’s political power make it clear that the political structures adopted in the early 1950s do not constitute “self-determination” in the strictest sense of the word. On the economic front, the ELA similarly did not bring a great deal of positive change, though the continuing action of Operation Bootstrap did lead to decreased employment opportunities on the island. Thus, economic conditions on the island continued in much the same way as before, although now the slow flow of migrants from the island northward had, by the early 1950s, become more of a torrent. The white mainstream press and other opinion makers responded in their now-practiced

452 Ayala and Bernabe, Puerto Rico, 162-63.  
453 Ibid., 168.
alarmist tones, suggesting a renewed “Puerto Rican problem” in New York.\textsuperscript{454} This discursive marginalization may well have enabled the urban renewal programs which placed black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods squarely in the crosshairs. According to a 1953 report commissioned by New York State, more than 55\% of people displaced by Title I development projects (which largely created middle-class housing) were black or Puerto Rican. The neighborhoods in which these communities re-settled, including East Harlem, were increasingly dominated by public housing projects which “became physical embodiments of black and Puerto Rican poverty,” and often reflected the very sorts of “overcrowding” which had been the basis for anti-Puerto Rican narratives.\textsuperscript{455}

Young people of El Barrio, who had either largely grown up in Manhattan or who had been born there, increasingly made themselves heard in the political realm. Through both discursive and political efforts, the Nuyorican second-generation sought to “gain a foothold in the city’s social landscape and to demand their individual rights as aspiring members of the mainstream.”\textsuperscript{456} Over time, this emphasis on individual rights and on mainstreaming Puerto Rican youth was partially displaced, in favor of demands for empowerment as a group. These greater demands were framed in terms of “self-determination” and “liberation” for Puerto Ricans on the island and throughout the diaspora.\textsuperscript{457} As was the case for many young people in the 1960s, these demands culminated in a vigorous and radical protest movement. Perhaps the best-known example of this trend as it manifested among Boricua youth was the Young Lords organization, which was founded in Chicago in 1968 but quickly established a New York branch.

\textsuperscript{454} These discourses, and the response from Puerto Ricans and their liberal and leftist allies, are discussed in Thomas, \textit{Puerto Rican Citizen}, 141-52.
\textsuperscript{455} Lee, \textit{Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement}, 45-51, 47.
\textsuperscript{456} Thomas, \textit{Puerto Rican Citizen}, 200.
\textsuperscript{457} \textit{Ibid.}, 202-3.
According to rhetorician Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, the New York Young Lords established themselves as an organization focused on both community empowerment and national liberation for Puerto Ricans, which “operated through coalitional politics with other self-described Third World radical organizations,” such as the Black Panthers.458 This coalition-building process was supported by efforts to link the struggles of racialized communities, especially black and Puerto Rican people, as illustrated by the quote from the Young Lords’ newspaper Palante found in the chapter epigraph. Wanzer-Serrano sees much of the work of the Young Lords as fundamentally epistemic, through their creation of a *rhetoric of revolutionary nationalism* which “advanced a decolonial critique that delinked their political program from modernity/coloniality.”459 In other words, although the Young Lords became well-known for direct actions such as the “Garbage Offensive” in June and July of 1969, their work was fundamentally concerned with shifting the popular narratives surrounding the Puerto Rican people.460 On another level, actions such as the Garbage Offensive are a statement that communities such as El Barrio are owed the full range of municipal services, as befits their standing as citizens and New Yorkers. Through their demands on city government, second-generation Nuyoricans sought to create the conditions which would enable further empowerment of diasporic communities. A stronger Puerto Rican diaspora would be in a better position to improve the lives of their countrywomen and men, and perhaps to achieve an independent future for Puerto Rico.

459 Ibid., 17.
460 The “Garbage Offensive” was a response to New York City’s failure to provide adequate sanitation services to El Barrio. After their requests for services was rejected by the city, members of the Young Lords began cleaning the streets of the neighborhood themselves. When the Sanitation Department refused to provide brooms and other supplies to facilitate this work, members of the organization moved trash into key intersections, blocking traffic into Manhattan. Ibid., 122-124.
This discursive work did not arise without a precedent. While the diaspora’s second

generation fundamentally shifted the Boricua empowerment agenda in New York, they spoke

from the foundations laid by their pionero parents and grandparents. The pre-1948 Puerto Rican
diaspora sought to influence popular knowledge about their communities, both through strictly
discursive efforts and through the example of their formal and informal political activism. These
efforts often utilized the rights and language of the community’s then-newly attained citizenship,
which would be perceived by the white mainstream as a respectable means of gaining

recognition (in Lorrin Thomas’ words). While the tangible successes of this work were limited,
they did serve the function of creating a greater sense of belonging for Boricuas arriving in the

city. By 1948, few New Yorkers could claim ignorance of the community’s existence, of their
standing as U.S. citizens, and of the growing political power of Latinx communities in Harlem
and throughout the city.

Assessing Community-Building Efforts in Pre-1948 Harlem

One of the key (if unspoken) tasks of the pionero generation was to create a sense of

community for the Boricuas who would follow them. This task had both an internal and an

external dimension. Internally, Puerto Ricans required the creation of ties (both institutional and

otherwise) which would bind them closer together. The tangible results of these efforts would be

the many community organizations and political accomplishments which have been ably
documented elsewhere in the literature. The less-tangible results of this work were the

proliferation of narratives of citizenship which circulated both directly through efforts to make
Puerto Ricans heard in the press and indirectly through the work of community organizations,
political clubs, and so forth. For this work to be performed effectively, the status of Puerto
Ricans as U.S. citizens had to be protected, and access to citizenship rights had to be expanded.
This work was performed by (among others) Puerto Ricans throughout the diaspora who sought to have their U.S. citizenship confirmed through Vito Marcantonio’s proposed 1939 amendment to the Jones Act. Although those petitioners did not all call New York home, Marcantonio’s role as the representative of the diaspora’s largest community was crucial to his involvement in this and other efforts for the benefit of the Puerto Rican people. Thus, although narratives of citizenship often were fundamentally “grounded” in particular communities, they had implications for all Puerto Ricans.

The internal community-building process was complemented by efforts to expand the boundaries of the community itself, creating a broader and stronger political bloc to advocate for the rights of people bound by similarities in experience, culture, or ideological grounding. For example, leftist Puerto Ricans during the 1940s did important work in building towards a Hispano community and coalition which was opposed to fascism, colonialism, and other forms of reactionary politics throughout the world. Though these efforts demonstrate a concern for all manifestations of hard-right politics, they were most directly concerned with the ways in which the political Right was working to the detriment of Spanish-speaking people specifically. This work was in line with the broader focus of the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s to create an internationalist politics which drew connections and created coalitions among various populations seeking progressive change. In this regard, the New York-based leftist writers under examination here were the local manifestation of global political trends.

Efforts to build common cause among Puerto Ricans and groups viewed as external to their culture and experience faced additional challenges. Although many in Harlem during the interwar years shared the experience of racialization and migration, as well as a range of practical problems in their new neighborhoods, crafting political coalitions first required that
these communities gain further knowledge of each other. This often happened in quotidian ways: through contact on the streets, in the commercial and cultural spaces of the city, and so on, with neighbors of differing backgrounds. These commonplace connections were also reflected in the press, which sought to make the city and its people legible to their readers. In viewing the *New York Amsterdam News*, a major black newspaper, alongside the reporting of the *New York Times*, we may observe a greater desire to understand the experience of Puerto Rican communities, and an analysis of the political efforts of Boricuas on their own terms, rather than as part of a racial threat to the city’s social order, as was the case in some white mainstream publications. This is not to say that these efforts were without flaws, however. The *Amsterdam News*’ reporting on Puerto Ricans suggests a degree of “Othering” not dissimilar to that on display in the white mainstream press. This exoticization, along with the anti-black racism among Puerto Ricans which Jesús Colón discusses in his writings, may well be responsible for the limited extent of black-Puerto Rican coalitions during these years. Further scholarship will be required to illuminate whether these problematic narratives were reflected in the Spanish-language press broadly as it viewed black American and West Indian communities.

While common experiences of racialization are one potential basis for community-building efforts, shared political concerns might be an additional terrain for building connections between diasporic communities and others. In their increasing efforts to work for the benefit of Puerto Rican people, pacifist activists of the Harlem Ashram built on their foundation in anti-colonial non-violent politics. Though the Ashram itself was short-lived, its members constituted the core of the American League for Puerto Rico’s Independence (ALPRI) which would continue their work into the early 1950s. Although their commitment to anti-colonial politics makes the work of Ashram members to achieve independence for Puerto Rico logical, their
coalition with the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and its leader, Pedro Albizu Campos, is not a natural one at first glance. The Nationalist Party did not share the Ashram’s commitment to Gandhian principles of non-violence, which was fundamental to their place in the broader pacifist movement. However, the desire of Ashram members to achieve independence for Puerto Rico as the only just outcome of the centuries of colonization there seems to have overpowered their potential ideological objections. Likely also at play was the proximity, both socially and geographically, of the Ashram to many notable Nationalist leaders, including Albizu. The everyday interactions and political work of these and other Harlemites of varying backgrounds were fundamentally rooted in their social context in Harlem.

The Overlapping Rhetorics of Empowerment and Citizenship

Some fifty years after the first Puerto Rican Parade in New York’s history, that event’s importance in the political, social, and cultural life of the Barrio was once again illustrated. About one month before the 2017 parade, Puerto Rican nationalist Oscar López Rivera was released from federal prison after serving about 35 years on charges of aiding in several bombings as part of the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN), a revolutionary Marxist group dedicated to Puerto Rican independence. López Rivera was to be honored at the New York parade as a “National Freedom Hero,” the first in the parade’s history. Following backlash from New York political leaders and the withdrawal of several corporate sponsorships, he withdrew and participated in the parade only “as a humble Puerto Rican and a grandfather.”

Speaking about his decision to reduce his role in the parade, López Rivera spoke of the honor he was to have been granted less in terms of how it impacted upon him, but as a matter of the

diaspora’s self-determination: “Let’s let the Puerto Rican community, let the Puerto Rican committee, make its decision, not to be imposed by anyone, not to be accepted, because if we accept impositions, we will never move. We will never feel empowered to do the things that we need to do for our communities and for our people. It’s a question of empowerment.”462

On the same day that the parade was going forward in New York, on the island Boricuas were once again voting on the relationship of the island to the United States. As with previous referenda, the results were inconclusive, though not because of the numbers themselves. Some 97% of the ballots cast were in favor of Puerto Rico becoming the 51st state. However, turnout for the Sunday vote was only about 23%, while 80% participation is not uncommon for other elections on the island. Critics of the referendum claimed that only statehood supporters turned out, while independentistas and others boycotted the election.463 The refusal of many Puerto Ricans to participate in the 2017 referendum is, somewhat ironically, a profound statement on the citizenship (broadly defined) of Boricuas. Their choice to not participate in or legitimize the referendum is a political choice no more or less serious than any option presented on the ballot that day. Indeed, the results suggest that for those who boycotted the vote, remaining home was a critique of the liberatory power of U.S. citizenship, and a move in the direction of an empowerment which no outcome of the vote could provide.

In the cultural spaces of the city just as much as in the halls of power, Nuyoricans have sought to maximize the empowerment of their communities both on the island and in the diaspora. Though the language of citizenship did not always factor into recent Boricua activism, I feel that the community empowerment sought by López Rivera, those who boycotted the 2017

462 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
referendum, and others constitutes an alternate conception of citizenship which is neither a simple matter of political status (either as U.S. citizens or a sovereign people) or a straightforward articulation of multiculturalism. It is, in Laguerre’s formulation, a *diasporic citizenship* which insists on the full range of rights as U.S. citizens while also criticizing the legacies of colonialism and racism which have constrained those rights. The seeds of this critique were, by 1948, beginning to bloom in the discourse and political struggles of the colonia.

**“Diaspora City?”**

In his germinal essay on Latinx New York, Juan Flores argues that the city itself is best characterized as a *diaspora city*, “an urban setting saturated by interacting and interlocking diasporic communities, including those among Latino populations from all over Latin America and the Caribbean.”

Flores cautions that studies of New York as diaspora city not resort to oversimplifying analyses which take for granted the equivalence of Latinx, black, and other “minorities.” However, Flores sees an opportunity for considerations of the ways in which the relationship between (im)migrant people and their places of origin impacts upon their social experience. “The more elaborated notion of ‘overlapping’ or ‘multiple’ diasporas,” he argues, “accounts for the rich bridging between and among diasporic groupings and the frequent sense of an individual or community belonging to more than one diasporic configuration at the same time, for example, Dominican, Caribbean, Latino, and African.”

Flores’ call to consider the role of diaspora in identity formation, community building, and social power comports well with the findings of this study. The impact of the diasporic

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465 Ibid., 441-2.

466 Ibid., 448.
experiences of black and Puerto Rican migrants on their perceptions of each other, and on the ways in which they presented themselves as belonging to/in New York society, are apparent in all aspects of the history presented here. In a somewhat ironic sense, this is also reflected in the limited extent to which these communities banded together for mutual empowerment as their numbers grew throughout the interwar years. The social and cultural disruption inherent in migration was an issue which black and Puerto Rican Harlemites were working to overcome during these years. In a sense, they required time to re-contextualize themselves, both in terms of their internal social organization and their external (re)presentation and political activity. As time ground on, this obstacle to external community-building had less of an impact. Further, both communities were increasingly radicalized, and willing to articulate the problems their community faced and the solutions they demanded with greater and greater force. These problems were both local (sanitation, clean and affordable housing, representation among political leadership) and global (U.S. militarism, Third World solidarity, the neoliberal order).

While black and Puerto Rican protest in New York during these communities’ early years tended to be presented in the language of citizenship, it increasingly betrayed a more complex and diasporically-focused consciousness.

During the years in which these critical narratives were being put forward by the Young Lords and other Nuyorican advocates for empowerment, my own family was taking its own small, and ultimately abortive, step towards a diasporic consciousness. My grandfather, who had left New York after his father’s death in 1941, connected with relatives remaining on the island including his grandmother, Inocencia Cruz. Senca, as she was known, was in her nineties by this time. She had remained in our family’s hometown of Cabo Rojo, a fairly rural community on the western coast of the island, which is where my grandfather and mother visited her around 1972.
According to my mother, Senca did not speak English, and mostly communicated with her by forcing her to eat plate after plate of homemade food. Though my grandfather visited a second time a few years later, my family in the U.S. and on the island did not remain in touch.

Nonetheless, these experiences were of central importance in building even the small measure of consciousness that my mother and I have of this family history. Disconnected as we have been from diaspora communities, these roots and the culture that came with it which figure only passingly into our family’s life would likely not be present at all were it not for this trip, a brief return migration fifty or so years after Antonio Acosta left the island. In this way, the importance of place and community in the formation of diasporic identity re-asserts itself, suggesting that only through continued on-the-ground, quotidian engagement can those scattered by diaspora retain their transnational connections, cultural ties, and sense of rootedness in ancestral places.

This study does not seek to paint an overly-harmonious portrait of interethnic and interracial relations in interwar Harlem, nor to romanticize the significant problems Harlemites faced as their neighborhoods moved increasingly in the direction of a “diaspora city.” However, it is implicitly a call to consider how discourse may be utilized to empower racialized, colonized, and diasporic subjects. Even in the case of fundamentally hegemonic structures such as citizenship, the potential for subversion exists. Citizenship, as with other structures of belonging, is a tool at base, with the possibility of being used in different ways. Although this analysis suggests that its liberatory potential is limited, we should not view Harlemites who utilized discourses of citizenship as misguided. Rather, they were working through the tensions of race, place, and empire to create a deeper, more meaningful sense of home.
ARCHIVAL AND MANUSCRIPT SOURCES


PERIODICALS

Liberación (New York, NY)

New York Amsterdam News

New York Times

Palante (New York, NY)

Pueblos Latinos (New York, NY)
La Prensa (New York, NY)

ELECTRONIC SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


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