



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (168)

TEXT: *Aponte* (1901)

AUTHOR: Francisco Calcagno

EDITOR: Francisco Morán

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

(Based on the Introduction by Francisco Morán and historical context of Cuban slavery and racial politics)

1. FRANCISCO CALCAGNO: THE AMBIVALENT ABOLITIONIST:

Complex Identity:

Francisco Calcagno (1827-1903) was a prolific Cuban intellectual whose life and work reveal a complex, often contradictory, stance on race. His potentially mixed-race origins (an unmentioned mother) hint at personal anxieties regarding racial purity.

"Historicist" Racism:

While an active abolitionist (freeing his own slaves, publishing *Poetas de color*), Calcagno's views often align with David T. Goldberg's "historicist racism," believing in the gradual progress of Black people but implicitly asserting their inferiority unless they become "white."

2. APONTE: A "POLICE NOVEL" OF RACIALIZED HISTORY:

Genre and Structure:

Aponte is a "police novel" that masterfully intertwines historical events (the 1812 Aponte Rebellion) with fictional narrative, creating a suspenseful plot centered on the mystery of decapitated heads displayed publicly.

"Heads and Other Decapitations":

The novel opens with the grotesque image of Aponte's head, serving as a symbol of colonial power and repression. However, the narrative cunningly introduces another, racially ambiguous head, which becomes the central enigma, blurring racial categories.

Blended History and Fiction:

Calcagno's narrative blurs the lines between author, narrator, and historical reality, using detailed historical allusions and even re-enacting real-life colonial figures (like the Del Monte family) in the suppression of slave revolts.

3. THE "MIEDO AL NEGRO" AND ITS REPRESSED RETURN:

Colonial Fear Mongering:

The novel vividly portrays the "miedo al negro" (fear of the Black man) that justified extreme colonial repression. It depicts enslaved and free people of color as "savages," driven by irrational hatred, a rhetoric Calcagno applies even to the Aponte rebellion.



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Symbolic Displacement:

The terror of an "Africanized Cuba" is portrayed as a symbolic displacement of deeper anxieties, including the fear of "cannibalism" and the "absorption" of white identity, leading to the dehumanization of the Black population.

Subversive Ending:

The novel's climactic revelation of the second head's identity—"that white man... was black" ("ese blanco... era negro")—is a profoundly ambiguous and subversive twist. It undermines the intended racist narrative, exposing the fluidity of racial identity and the profound terror underlying colonial society.

4. AMBIGUITY, REPETITION, AND PERCEPTION:

Circular Narrative:

The novel employs a circular narrative, beginning and ending with the image of the decapitated head, forcing a constant return to the central object of fear and fascination.

Reader's Engagement:

Calcagno's narrative strategy actively engages the reader's curiosity, mimicking the "mob's" fascination with the grotesque display, and delaying the revelation of the key "secret" to highlight the inherent ambiguity of racial perception.

Beyond the "Crime":

Ultimately, the "crime" investigated in *Aponte* is not just Aponte's rebellion but the systemic racism of colonial society itself, and the novel's final ambiguity ensures that the "repressed" fears of racial mixing and subversion continue to haunt the narrative.

PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Calcagno's Racial Ideology:

How does Calcagno, despite being an abolitionist, display racist attitudes in *Aponte*? Discuss the concept of "historicist racism" (Goldberg) in relation to his work.

The "Police Novel" Structure:

Analyze *Aponte*'s structure as a police novel. How does the central mystery of the heads and the delayed revelation build suspense and serve the novel's thematic goals?

"Miedo al Negro" and Colonial Propaganda:

How does the novel reflect and reinforce the "miedo al negro" in 19th-century Cuba? Compare this to other historical examples of racialized fear-mongering.

Blurring History and Fiction:

Discuss how Calcagno blends historical facts (e.g., the Aponte rebellion, the Del Monte family) with fictional elements. What are the implications of this blend for understanding historical truth and narrative construction?



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The Symbolism of Decapitation and Heads:

Analyze the recurring motif of decapitated heads. What do these images symbolize in terms of power, repression, racial identity, and the "return of the repressed"?

The Ending: "Ese blanco... era negro":

Interpret the novel's controversial ending. How does this final revelation challenge conventional racial categories and subvert the colonial narrative? What does it imply about the anxieties of the white elite?

Critique of Colonial Institutions: How does Aponte subtly (or not so subtly) criticize the institutions and figures of the colonial government (e.g., the legal system, the Del Monte family, the Captain-General) in their role in perpetuating slavery and repression?

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

1. Who is the author of *Aponte*?

- A) Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda
- B) Francisco Calcagno
- C) Francisco Fontanilles y Quintanilla
- D) César Nicolás Penson

Correct Answer: B

2. What historical event serves as the backdrop for the novel *Aponte*?

- A) The Cuban War of Independence
- B) The Haitian Revolution
- C) The 1812 Aponte slave rebellion
- D) The Spanish-American War

Correct Answer: C

3. What genre does the introduction categorize *Aponte* as, due to its investigative structure and suspense?

- A) Romantic comedy
- B) Police novel
- C) Historical romance
- D) Science fiction

Correct Answer: B

4. What is the shocking final revelation about the identity of the second decapitated head in the novel?

- A) It belongs to the Captain-General.
- B) It is revealed to be a woman.
- C) It is a white head that was "black."
- D) It is a symbolic representation of Cuba.

Correct Answer: C

5. The novel is said to reveal Calcagno's "amphibological" discourse, meaning it shows a tension between:

- A) Love and hatred.
- B) Urban and rural life.
- C) Abolitionist ideals and subtle racist biases.
- D) French and Spanish cultures.

Correct Answer: C

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