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‘Awakening’ the ‘Living Dead’:  
Rehabilitative Corrections in Puerto Rico’s Oso Blanco,  
1930s-1950s

Friday, March 15  I  2:30 pm  I  27 Macbride Hall

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Puerto Rican convicts helped materialize a dynamic culture of rehabilitative corrections. The premier site of this activity was the Insular Penitentiary at Río Piedras (popularly known as Oso Blanco, or Polar/White Bear), an institution that opened in 1933 in the shadow of U.S. colonial empire with the goal of “regenerating” wayward citizens. Behind bars, prisoners engaged mainstream forms of medicine, religiosity, and the broader humanities not only to shield themselves from the dehumanization of the prison (Oso Blanco fell short of its aspirations in more ways than one at the time), but to get by and better and to prepare for societal reincorporation. During the decades in question, island authorities and their collaborators imagined inmates as “living dead,” or rather barely animate beings marginally capable of rational thought and action. While this trope can be traced to the era of racial slavery and even antiquity, in the mid-twentieth century Puerto Rican prisoners and the leisure and professional classes deployed the concept in their writings and other mediums to stress two realities: prisons were tombs for the living, but convicts could be raised from these tombs as well. Inmates could be “awakened” and have new social and civic life. Using penitentiary records, press accounts, and other sources, this talk explores the “irresolvable dialecticality” of living death and awakening through the lens of rehabilitative corrections in a creole-diasporic corner of the modern Caribbean.

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