
LUISA CAPETILLO PERÓN

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Biography of Luisa Capetillo Perón

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Luisa Capetillo Perón (1879-1922)

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It is a challenging task to approach a woman who contributed to the development of Puerto Rican Spiritism. Even more so when it is a woman known as a labor rights leader and theoretical feminist from the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when few Puerto Rican women considered the need for social and political changes.



Luisa Capetillo Perón from Arecibo not only took the opposite position to the social structures of her time period, she also proposed a spiritist belief system and analyzed society and its events from a philosophical perspective. The researcher Norma Valle Ferrer is the prominent Puerto Rican biographer of Luisa Capetillo, and she has searched extensively for data on her life and work. Julio Ramos has also contributed to the understanding of the ideas of Luisa Capetillo with his research and reprinting of some texts.¹

Fig. 1: Photography of Luisa Capetillo.²

Luisa Capetillo made history in many ways, with her ideas and with her actions. She developed a feminist, anarchist, and unionist thought. She succeeded in integrating a liberating and egalitarian vision of the woman and of the human being with the spiritist principles of multiple existences, the plurality of inhabited worlds, and the power of mental strength.

Birth, Childhood, and Education

Luisa Capetillo was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico in October of 1879. Her father, Luis Capetillo, came from the Basque province of Spain and had been influenced by the progressive ideas of citizen's and worker's rights. Her mother, Margarita Perón, arrived on the Island from France during the mid-nineteenth century. Because Luisa was their only child, both parents

¹ Julio Ramos, Comp., *Amor y anarquía: Los escritos de Luisa Capetillo*, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1992. Norma Valle, *Luisa Capetillo: Historia de una mujer proscrita*, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Cultural, 1990.

² Juan Conatz, "Capetillo, Luisa - a biography," *libcom.org*, <https://libcom.org/history/biography-luisa-capetillo>

worked hard to provide her with a good education, which she continued throughout most of her life.

After Luisa's father taught her the rules of mathematics and how to read and write, she attended Ms. María Sierra Soler's private school. She received awards because of her academic performance. This was the type of education that women of her time could receive. However, she acquired most of her vast knowledge from the readings that she partook in throughout her life.³

During her upbringing, Spiritism was going through a moment of great growth in Puerto Rico and the world. We do not know when Luisa Capetillo discovered in Spiritism the philosophy that would orient her life. What is important is that Luisa, when she published her first book *Ensayos libertarios (Libertarian Essays)* (1907) at around age twenty, presents herself as a spiritist.

The Life of a Feminist Worker

Luisa became a mother at the end of the nineteenth century. From her relationship with Manuel Ledesma, she had Manuela (1897) and Gregorio (1899). Luisa and Manuel never got married, probably because of differences in class. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Luisa felt obligated to work in the sewing industry while her mother Margarita took care of her children.⁴



Fig. 2: Women workers in tobacco factories.⁶

Later on, she collaborated with worker publications, an activity that she continued throughout her life. In 1906, she started to work as a reader in tobacco factories, where employees would pay her to read aloud to them while they worked. According to Valle, some historical documents reveal that tobacco factory readers would read international anarchist press, romantic novels by Victor Hugo, and political treaties by Bakunin, who was considered the founder of anarchism.⁵

She did this work at various points in her life, in Puerto Rico as well as in the United States, which helped her to subsist economically and widen her extensive knowledge. This is also how she met prominent Puerto Rican labor rights leaders, like Santiago Iglesias Pantín,

³ Norma Valle Ferrer, *Luisa Capetillo: Historia de una mujer proscrita*, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Cultural, 1990, p. 46.

⁴ *Op. Cit.*, p. 56.

⁵ *Luisa Capetillo Obra Completa "Mi Patria es La Libertad"*, Introducción, notas y edición de Norma Valle Ferrer. Departamento del Trabajo y Recursos Humanos de Puerto Rico y Proyecto de Estudios de Mujeres, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2008, p. 14.

⁶ Destemmers of the Porto Rican American Tobbaco, in 1912.

among others. She also published her first book *Ensayos libertarios* (1907) during those years, and made her first public appearance as a labor rights leader herself.

Luisa advocated for female and universal suffrage, although her main concern was the organization of women into unions. In 1910, she published her book *La humanidad en el futuro* (*Humanity in the Future*). She also edited a periodical called *La mujer* (*The Woman*), of which no copy remains today. The theme of women's rights stands out in most of her writing, especially in the book *Mi opinión sobre las libertades, derechos, y deberes de la mujer* (*My opinion about the freedoms, rights and duties of the woman*) (1911). In 1913, she published a second edition of that book.⁷



In 1911, her third child Luis was born. In 1915, she was arrested in Havana for wearing pants in public.⁸ She defended herself from that accusation, demanding for the authorities to show her evidence of the written prohibition of that act; upon their failure to do so, she was freed. This incident confirms that she was the first Puerto Rican woman who wore pants in public.⁹ Upon her return to the Island, she worked as a labor rights leader in agricultural strikes in Patillas, Ceiba, and Vieques.¹⁰ In 1916, she published her final book *Influencias de las ideas modernas* (*Modern Ideas Influences*).

She died in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico on April 10, 1922 at the age of forty-three. To announce her death, the newspaper *Unión Obrera* (*Workers Union*) wrote on April 15, 1922: “Her burial was humble, as they tend to be for the apostle leaders of the great causes of humanity.”¹¹

Fig. 3: Luisa Capetillo wearing pants in public.¹²

The Dawn of Spiritism in Puerto Rico

Spiritist thought, at that time considered subversive and prohibited, first appeared in Puerto Rico at the end of the nineteenth century.¹³ In various regions of the Island, like Mayagüez and Arecibo, spiritist groups and charity centers were beginning to form, although

⁷ *Op. Cit.*, p. 35.

⁸ Valle Ferrer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 84.

⁹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁰ *Op. Cit.*, p. 92.

¹¹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 96.

¹² Luisa Capetillo Wearing Men's Clothing, *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luisa_Capetillo_wearing_Mens_Clothing.jpg

¹³ José Manuel García Leduc, *Intolerancia y Heterodoxias en Puerto Rico (Siglo XIX) Protestantes, MASONES Y ESPIRITISTAS-KARDECIANOS RECLAMAN SU ESPACIO SOCIAL*, San Juan: Isla Negra Editores, 2009, p. 132.

they received strong opposition from the Catholic Church and the Insular Spanish Government.¹⁴ A few spiritist centers and schools were monitored, and some of the country's cemeteries prohibited spiritists from burying their relatives.¹⁵ Despite that, spiritist texts continued to arrive in Puerto Rico as contraband via various routes, through people who came from different countries and introduced it secretly.

Both Teresa Yáñez Vda. De Otero in her book *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico (Spiritism in Puerto Rico)* (1963) and Néstor Rodríguez Escudero in his book *Historia del espiritismo en Puerto Rico (History of Spiritism in Puerto Rico)* (1978) mention the year 1871 as the date of the first meeting of a spiritist group from Mayagüez called “Renacer” (“Reborn”).¹⁶ In 1873, Manuel Corchado y Juarbe, Puerto Rican Representative to the Spanish Courts for Mayagüez, introduced a law for Spiritism to be studied in higher education. Some groups probably met in secret before then.¹⁷

Women were the leaders and creators of Puerto Rican Spiritism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, *El Iris de Paz (The Iris of Peace)*, a periodical written and edited by women, was published in the city of Mayagüez and circulated throughout the Island. This publication helped to build cohesion among spiritists in Puerto Rico and to disseminate spiritist ideas and projects.¹⁸ An example of feminine participation in Spiritism was the presence of the Baldoni sisters from Utuado. Dolores (Lola) Baldoni (1871-1917) was recognized as a spiritist writer, medium, and leader.¹⁹ This was the prevailing environment of Puerto Rican Spiritism during the time that Luisa Capetillo lived.

Spiritist, Anarchist, and Feminist

Education is the basis of happiness for all people. Teach under the canopy of truth: tear off the veil of ignorance, and show the true light of progress, free from all rites and dogmas. Practice fellowship in order to tighten the bonds that should unite humanity from one end to another regardless of race or belief. Ignorance is the cause of the worst crimes and injustices.²⁰

¹⁴ Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico 1860-1907*, San Juan, Puerto Rico Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2015, p. 329.

¹⁵ García Leduc, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁶ *Op. Cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁷ Néstor A. Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia del espiritismo en Puerto Rico*, Aguadilla, Puerto Rico: Imprenta del Maestro, 1978, p. 44.

¹⁸ Nancy Herzig Shannon, *El Iris de Paz: El espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900-1905*, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 2001, p. 145.

¹⁹ Sandra A. Enríquez Seiders, *El Espiritismo en Utuado. La Historia de las hermanas Baldoni*, San Juan: Biblio Services, 2011, p. 72.

²⁰ Luisa Capetillo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 45.

These words open Luisa Capetillo's first book. The belief that every human being is equal and that ignorance and dogma are the causes of society's ills are certainly two pillars of the spiritist doctrine.²¹

In the book *Ensayos libertarios*, which is "dedicated to the workers of both sexes," Capetillo addresses the themes of Spiritism and anarchism, two topics that frequently surface in her writing. She emphasizes her concern for poverty and the problems surrounding it. Luisa believed all her life in the power of social action to remedy the wrongs of society and humanity. She did not understand how some could use philosophies like Spiritism as a defense to not fight against injustice. Indeed, some spiritists justified poverty using reincarnation or diverse human existences. However, Luisa valued equality and justice above all other interpretations. Puerto Rican anarchists considered themselves people of the future, as Luisa defended. For the most part, they did not produce discourses based on revolutionary violence and they lived exemplary lives. They were laborers and defenders of universal fellowship and they dedicated themselves to an ideal.²²

Luisa suggested that Spiritism and anarchism shared identical aims. However, they differed in their interpretations of poverty and the actions needed to remedy it. Luisa would not accept any justification for injustice or deprivation; she had to fight against it. For that reason, she agreed more with anarchists than spiritists because of how they fought against oppression. For Luisa, anarchists exemplified the true Christian human being. She admired them for their social commitment, while reprimanding some spiritists for doing little or nothing to help the needy. Luisa succeeded in integrating philosophical and social concepts into an admirable synthesis.²³

Additionally, Capetillo always positioned herself against the institution of the Catholic Church and its representatives. Within the worker, anarchist, and spiritist movements, there was an anticlerical environment that questioned the Church's power and reclaimed the right to dissent.²⁴ Luisa believed that rites and dogmas kept humanity from progressing. She also proclaimed, like many spiritists at the time, that religious rites and dogmas were not part of spiritist teachings. Concerning this position, Luisa explained:

I do not understand Spiritism with residues of mysticism, or fanaticism of other so-called religious ideas. I do not accept Spiritism with compliance to criminal laws, nor to any authoritative regime. I do not understand the Spiritism that accepts customs, dogmas, and rites of outdated so-called religious institutions.²⁵

²¹ Carmen A. Romeu Toro, *Espiritismo, transformación y compromiso social. Historia de la Escuela Magnética Espiritual de la Comuna Universal en Puerto Rico (1930-1980)*, San Juan: Publicaciones Gaviota, 2015, p. 193.

²² Julio Ramos, *Op. Cit.*, p. 104.

²³ Carmen A. Romeu Toro, "Luisa Capetillo, Anarchist and Spiritualist: A Synthesis of the Irreconcilable", *Without Borders or Limits: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Anarchist Studies*, Editado por Jorell A. Meléndez Badillo y Nathan J. Jun. Gran Bretaña: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, p. 177.

²⁴ José Manuel, García Leduc, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

²⁵ Luisa Capetillo, *Mi Opinión sobre las libertades, derechos y deberes de la mujer como compañera, madre y ser independiente*, San Juan, Puerto Rico: Biblioteca Roja, 1907, p. 106.

In sum, the intellectual distance offered by Spiritism and feminism allowed Capetillo to make a critical and honest critique not only of the social institutions of the moment but also of the spiritist practices that strayed from social justice.

A Progressive Thinker

In her last book, published in 1916, Luisa included plays and stories as well as letters, notes, and poems. In the play *Influencias de las ideas modernas*, she included a character named Angelina, who is a spiritist. Angelina is a child, the daughter of a plantation owner, who throughout her education thought that workers' complaints were fair, and she fervently supported their strike. In these lines, she speaks to the workers' leader, with whom she ends up falling in love (although they do not get married). She says:

-It is easy to understand: I will explain to you how I started. I was studying Spiritism, and (as you will understand, alone, not following a routine, which my father allowed), I felt drawn to know something about the afterlife, since my mother had died when I was very little. Furthermore, when I learned about diverse existences and the plurality of inhabited worlds, I became a revolutionary, since I understood that all men are brothers, that no one had the right to hurt another, nor to impose on them their beliefs, nor to enslave them, and that as long as there was misery, luxury was a crime. Thus, in addition to understanding the magnificence of the universe, I became a humanitarian...²⁶

This character embodies the best spiritist and human values, exemplifying the fulfillment of Luisa Capetillo's ultimate goals: freedom, fellowship, love, and justice for all. The rich would give the working class what they are owed in order to welcome them into community, and everyone would love one another, regardless of class or age.

Theorist of Puerto Rican Spiritism

Luisa Capetillo was a woman of great critical capacity. She knew how to integrate different areas of knowledge in order to generate a profoundly humanitarian vision dedicated to progress and human development. She took on her social responsibility with commitment and courage. She observed and pointed out what she considered incorrect and unjust. She did not limit herself there, though, but rather worked to change and improve the entire world. She suffered rejection for her ideas and her form of living. Her life was not easy.

Luisa Capetillo was also a woman of the future in many ways. She occupies a unique place within Puerto Rican Spiritism because not only does her work contain important theory and principles, but her life exemplifies worthy values. The concerns that Luisa presents and analyzes remind us of some debates that have persisted into the present. Furthermore, her proposals

²⁶ Luisa Capetillo, *Influencias de las Ideas Modernas*, San Juan: Tipografía Negrón Flores, 1916, p. 32.

regarding social justice and women's rights are aligned with the most noble aims of Spiritism. Luisa mainly addressed her messages to poor and working women, but she did not forget to advise and transform rich women as well. Indeed, her words touched the working class as well as the land owning class. She had something to say to everyone.

Luisa Capetillo was one of the first theorists of Puerto Rican Spiritism and one of the few Latin American women who wrote about Spiritism in the region. Her contribution to the development of spiritist ideas is immeasurably valuable. Her writing and her life demonstrate the vigor and clarity of her noble and fighting spirit. One thought by this courageous and distinguished Puerto Rican woman, written in Havana in October of 1914, summarizes her spiritist vision:

Compared to the eternity of the centuries, what is human pain? Nothing... compared to the immensity of the infinite and its everlasting eternity, what is the human fight?... smoke, dust, nothing... Compared to the unending succession of planetary systems in continuous transformation, splendid and unending from century to century, what are civilizations and the continuous invention of our species?

An insignificance... But grains of sand form the ocean floor, the dikes that kiss the waves, and the beaches.²⁷

²⁷ Luisa Capetillo, *Influencias de las Ideas Modernas*, San Juan: Tipografía Negrón Flores, 1916, p. 63.