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***My Opinion:
On the Freedoms, Rights, and Duties of the Woman as a Partner, Mother, and
Independent Being in the Home, Family, and Government by Luisa Capetillo***

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Luisa Capetillo —feminist writer, international labor leader, spiritist, and defender of universal suffrage— put forward a non-conformist premise regarding women and workers based on anarchism and Spiritism.¹ She questioned and challenged the dominant ideas of gender and sexuality of her time and skillfully responded to the political and economic conditions that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century in Puerto Rico. The period of colonial transition, between 1890 and 1920, had profound consequences that transformed Puerto Rican



Fig. 1: Photograph of Luisa Capetillo.⁵

society. These include the establishment of unions and new social actors as well as the emergence of freethinking ideologies, which competed with those established by the insular Spanish government.² In spite of belonging to the working class, Capetillo became one of the most prominent and fascinating literary and political figures of the first decades of the twentieth century. She wrote in working-class newspapers and periodicals, such as *Unión obrera* (*Workers Union*)³, and founded the labor magazine *La Mujer* (*The Woman*), of which no copies remain.⁴ Her treatise, *Mi opinión. Sobre las libertades, derechos y deberes de la mujer como compañera, madre y ser independiente en el hogar, en la familia, en el gobierno* (*My Opinion: On the Freedoms, Rights, and Duties of*

¹ Such is demonstrated in the historiography of Capetillo, including the most relevant studies by: Norma Valle, *Luisa Capetillo: Historia de una mujer proscrita*, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Cultural, 1990; Julio Ramos, Comp., *Amor y anarquía: Los escritos de Luisa Capetillo*, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1992; Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, comp., *A Nation of Women: An Early Feminist Speaks Out: Mi opinión sobre las libertades, derechos y deberes de la mujer*, Luisa Capetillo, Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, comp., Alan West-Durán, trad., Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage, Houston Texas: Arte Público, 2004, pp. vii-II; 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, pp. 177-183.

² Matos Rodríguez, *A Nation of Women*, Op. Cit. pp. viii-xix.

³ Norma Valle, *Luisa Capetillo: Historia*, Op. Cit., p. 63.

⁴ Julio Ramos, *Amor y anarquía*, Op. Cit., p. 34.

⁵ Juan Conatz, “Capetillo, Luisa - a biography,” *libcom.org*, <https://libcom.org/history/biography-luisa-capetillo>.

the Woman as a Partner, Mother, and Independent Being in the Home, Family, and Government), published in 1911 and reprinted in 1913,⁶ is considered one of the earliest feminist books in Latin America and the Caribbean and a foundational example of worker-feminist-spiritist writing.⁷ Her first book, *Ensayos libertarios: Dedicado a los trabajadores de ambos sexos* (*Libertarian Essays: Dedicated to the Workers of Both Sexes*), published in 1907,⁸ addresses themes that she develops in her later writing, including Spiritism, anticlericalism, free love, and the goals of the working-class. In *La humanidad del futuro* (*The Humanity of the Future*), published in 1910,⁹ she addresses the anarchist and syndicalist idea of a general strike to demand a society based on mutual aid and cooperation. The book also promotes modern and scientific education, as did many freethinking spiritists of her time. In her last book, *Influencias de las ideas modernas. Notas y apuntes, escenas de la vida* (*Influences on Modern Ideas: Thoughts and Notes, Life's scenes*), published in 1916, she expands her ideas on women's liberation.¹⁰ Isabel Picó considers *Mi opinión* the first manifesto of women's liberation published in Puerto Rico.¹¹

International Union Leader



Capetillo joined the Federación Libre de Trabajadores [Free Federation of Workers (FLT)] when it was first established in 1899. The FLT was the most important workers' organization in Puerto Rico during the first three decades of the twentieth century, and Capetillo was one of its most prominent leaders. As Yamila Azize points out, the colonial transition in 1898 completely transformed the Puerto Rican economy.¹² Capitalism was

Fig. 2: Puerto Rican women workers in the tobacco industry.¹³

⁶ Luisa Capetillo, *Mi opinión sobre las libertades, derechos y deberes de la mujer como compañera, madre y ser independiente en el hogar, en la familia, en el gobierno*, San Juan: Times Pub. Co., 1911; Luisa Capetillo, *Mi opinión; disertación sobre las libertades de la mujer. "Amor libre"; la mujer como compañera, madre y ser independiente en el hogar, en la familia, en el gobierno*, 2da ed., Tampa, Imprenta Joaquín Mascuñana, 1913.

⁷ Matos Rodríguez, *A Nation of Women*, *Op. Cit.*, p. xix.

⁸ Luisa Capetillo, *Ensayos libertarios: Dedicado a los trabajadores de ambos sexos*, Arecibo, P.R.: Imprenta Unión Obrera, 1907.

⁹ Luisa Capetillo, *La humanidad en el futuro*, San Juan: Tip. Real Hermano, 1910.

¹⁰ Luisa Capetillo, *Influencias de las ideas modernas. Notas y Apuntes. Escenas de la vida*, San Juan: Tipografía Negrón Flores, 1916.

¹¹ Isabel Picó, "The History of Women's Struggle for Equality in Puerto Rico," *Sexual Change in Latin America*, June Nash and Helen I. Safa, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976, 202-213, p. 209.

¹² Yamila Azize, *Luchas de la mujer en Puerto Rico: 1898-1919*, San Juan, P.R.: Litografía Metropolitana, 1979, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

imposed as the dominant mode of production, which facilitated women's entry into the tobacco industry. In fact, women did most of the tobacco de-stemming.¹⁴ Juan S. Marcano, a prominent labor writer, describes the inhumane working conditions that women faced:

Let us look for the working woman in economic life and we will find that she lives in terrible misery. She cannot, under any circumstances, in any way, with the tiny, horrible salary that she earns, satisfy the most urgent and essential needs of life in a well-educated society, unless she is a hero in her daily work. It is deeply sad to see the woman walking to the workshop, to the factory, to those dens of exploitation and robbery, leaving behind the most precious thing in her life, her youth. To contract tuberculosis in that smoky environment full of nicotine, and to sacrifice her lungs to the work that gradually extinguishes her existence.¹⁵

Women's participation in the tobacco industry changed traditional work customs; men and women shared relatively equal positions in the processes of production and exploitation.¹⁶ The solutions for working conditions, education, and women's rights proposed by the main labor organizations reflected the position of the socialist unions at the time. It was expected for working women to participate actively in the construction of a new society.¹⁷ Capetillo's position reflects the same ideology, which was also influenced by Christian maxims. In *Ensayos libertarios*, she explains:



Fig. 3: Photograph of women workers de-stemming tobacco.¹⁸

It is up to us, not God, to destroy the injustices of today. We must govern ourselves according to Christian maxims and adore God without temples, altars, prayers, or litanies. With our conscience purifying our imperfections in a reasonable way, we must work to establish equality and fraternity among all people. That is why all workers must unite under the banner of the Federación Libre, to defend our rights and enjoy a better world, more in harmony with reason and true justice.¹⁹

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Juan S. Marcano, *Páginas Rojas*, Humacao, P.R.: Tip. Conciencia Popular, 1919, pp. 45-47.

¹⁶ Ángel Quintero Rivera, *Lucha obrera en Puerto Rico*, Río Piedras, P.R.: Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña, 1973.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-34.

¹⁸ Yamila Azize, *Luchas*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁹ Luisa Capetillo, *Ensayos Libertarios*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 32.



The progressive ideas of her father, Luis Capetillo, a worker of Basque origin and defender of citizen and worker rights, and of her mother, Margarita Perón, an immigrant of French origin who had lived on the Island since the mid-nineteenth century, influenced the political trajectory of young Luisa.²⁰ She received a humanistic education from her parents, which included Víctor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy, and Emille Zola, among others, as well as a formal education at Mrs. María Sierra Soler's private school.²¹ This humanistic instruction continued when she began to work as a reader in the tobacco manufacturing and de-stemming factories in 1906. She read aloud international anarchist press, literature, philosophical essays, and local and international news of interest to tobacco factory workers.²² This experience informed Capetillo's political and theoretical belief system and helped her develop her skills as a speaker and union leader. Specifically, it influenced her prose with a particular orality and a non-essentialist tone that drew on a diversity of genres.²³

Fig. 4: Luisa Capetillo wearing pants in public.²⁴

In 1912, Capetillo began her work as an international leader of the labor movement in New York City, where she collaborated with the worker's press.²⁵ In Tampa, a region that had hosted Cuban, Spanish, and Puerto Rican tobacco workers that were active in the union movement, she revised and published the second edition of *Mi Opinión* and established relationships with international leaders of the movement who brought her to Cuba.²⁶ There, she participated in strikes and riots²⁷ and was arrested for wearing pants in public (a male privilege at

²⁰ Carmen Romeu Toro, *Luisa Capetillo Perón (1879-1922)*, pp. 1-2, https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo_capetillo/2/. Revealed in the dedication to *Mi opinión* are Margarita Perón's liberal beliefs. As Capetillo says: "to you, dear mother, who never commanded or obligated me to think in accordance with tradition. You allowed me to inquire freely, never punishing me, and only rebuking what you considered to be exaggerations."

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2, https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo_capetillo/2/; *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.

²² Carmen Romeu Toro, *Luisa Capetillo*, *Op. Cit.*, https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo_capetillo/2/; *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; Matos Rodríguez, *A Nation of Women*, *Op. Cit.*, p. xvii. According to Matos Rodríguez, among the most influential authors for Capetillo are Bakunin, Tolstoy, Malatesta, Kardec, Zola, Voltaire y Maupassant.

²³ Julio Ramos, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 43, 53.

²⁴ Luisa Capetillo Wearing Men's Clothing, *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luisa_Capetillo_wearing_Mens_Clothing.jpg

²⁵ Jaime Vidal, "Prefacio", *Mi opinión*, 1913, p. 1.

²⁶ Matos Rodríguez, *A Nation of Women*, *Op. Cit.*, p. xxi.

²⁷ Norma Valle, *Luisa Capetillo: Historia*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 84-85.

the time). However, she was released soon after, since there was no law prohibiting it.²⁸ In her writing, Capetillo had advocated for the practice of wearing pants as a sign of female progress, and she continued to wear them at public events. In 1916, the President of Cuba deported her for her anarchist and union activities.²⁹

My Opinion: On the Freedoms, Rights, and Duties of the Woman (1911)

In *Mi opinión*, feminism, literature, the history of the labor movement, and the intellectual history of early twentieth century Puerto Rico intersect. The central theme of the book is women's emancipation and the need for radical change in the social expectations and economic oppression of women, including legislation to legalize divorce and "free love." Capetillo addresses sexuality, women's mental and physical health, hygiene, spirituality, nutrition, political and economic rights, and calls for change in labor laws, education, marriage, and religion.³⁰ More importantly, she formulates a radical sexual policy that, because of its ethical quality, challenged both the country's intellectuals as well as the State.³¹ She did so by addressing two fundamental problems for women: the family structure that was inherited from the nineteenth century, and the subordinate position of women under the law and consequently their lack of rights. Since the eighteenth century, the Church and the Spanish colonial government denounced cohabitation, a campaign that harmed women in particular. Their opposition intensified in the nineteenth century. However, there were popular groups that challenged the concepts of marriage and family structure defended by the elite, the State, and the Church. As historian Félix Matos Rodríguez shows in his study on the hierarchy of urban families in nineteenth-century San Juan, there were many female heads of households, and marriage was not a central element in the lives of women from the capital city, especially for women of color and slaves.³² However, Puerto Rican women occupied a subordinate position under the law. Civil divorce was illegal. Ecclesiastical authorities only granted marriage annulment in exceptional cases. The civil court could guarantee a pension for a wife and children only if it was proven that the ecclesiastical court also deliberated on the case. Furthermore, in the case of women, sexuality was treated as a matter of honor.³³ Luisa Capetillo confronted the inequalities and injustices that the women of her time suffered as a result of an unjust sexual policy, upheld by the family structure (fathers, husbands, and traditions) and by sexist social and religious rituals, established by the Church and the colonial government.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁹ Matos Rodríguez, *A Nation of Women*, *Op. Cit.*, p. xxiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.

³¹ Eileen Suárez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 160-161, 204.

³² Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, "Estructura familiar y jefatura de familia urbanas en el San Juan decimonónico", en Laura Muñoz Mata and Johanna von Grafenstein, eds., *El Caribe: Región, frontera y relaciones internacionales*, México D.F.: Instituto Mora & Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología de México (CONACYT): 2000, vol. II, pp. 113-137.

³³ Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, "La mujer y el derecho en el siglo XIX en San Juan, Puerto Rico (1820-1862)", en Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, ed., *Familia, género y mentalidades en América Latina*, Río Piedras: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas y Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1997, 227-264.

In the “Prefacio” (“Preface”) of *Mi opinión*, the author alludes to the objective of her book: “to tell the truth; which even those of greater ability and talent refuse to do.”³⁴ Why not? Because the truth to which she refers is the possibility of achieving gender equality and human freedom; an idea deemed “utopian” by those in power because they, as Capetillo explains, feed on “a selfish belief system that begins and ends with them. They are everything.”³⁵ In the first part of the book, entitled “La mujer en el hogar, en la familia, en el gobierno” (“The Woman in the Home, Family, and Government”), she analyzes the living conditions of men and women of the upper and working classes, suggesting new models of behavior and duties for men, women, parents, and the government. In doing so, she tests her central idea: that the exploiters and the religious “have corrupted humanity, filling it with vices and miseries, in spite of Nature being so prodigal.”³⁶ This, according to Capetillo, is the origin of an unjust society that victimizes women and renders them useless for its own benefit. The author suggests the possibility to change this economic and social system, but in order to do so, it is necessary to call out its problems and transform its customs. The current system, as Capetillo argues, is driven by ignorance and women’s enslavement within marriage. For this reason, the woman “must educate herself in order to free herself from a slavery that renders her useless as a woman and as a mother.”³⁷ As a result of her analysis, she proposes an equitable sexual ethic that emancipates women and children from domestic abuse, religious custom, and ignorance.

Duties

Capetillo begins with what she considers to be the duties of women in the home. “The true mother of a family must know how to do everything: sew, cook, keep the house in order, educate her children and her husband. Her beauty must be genuine and lasting, by means of exercise, walks in the fresh air, and a healthy diet without meat or alcohol. Not a fictional beauty, like adornment.”³⁸ The husband also has his own duties: “I also say to the husbands: be patient, sweet, loving, and stay at home, or leave with your wife beside you. Otherwise, your marriage is useless.”³⁹ And later: “He must be at home with her, and share the difficult task of educating their children.”⁴⁰ Capetillo did not believe in marriage as it was practiced in her time. For this reason, she wonders: “can there be true happiness in marriage (1), if the man is the only one who has full agency and can satisfy his wishes, without noticing whether or not his wife likes this behavior?”⁴¹ She clarifies at the foot of the page that by marriage she does not mean the institution sanctioned by the judge, the priest, or any social custom, but by the will of two human beings of opposite sex, who form a relationship and constitute a home. Thus, free love is the only true option for two adults who commit to loving each other, respecting each other, and supporting each other in the development of their talents and freedoms (a natural right) and in the education of their children, future citizens of their country.

³⁴ Luisa Capetillo, *Mi opinión* (1911), *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Rights and Sexual Ethics

Naming the well-established custom of male infidelity, Capetillo declares: “the woman has the right to leave her unfaithful husband and, if she does so, she must know how to work in order to preserve her freedom.”⁴² She knows that wage labor presents women with a problem that has justified their ignorance and confinement: the early education of their children. She also knows that the first and best school is the home and that the mother has the enormous responsibility of raising happy children who are aware of other people’s rights. That is why she demands that the father would also help with child care, and challenges the expectation of patriarchal motherhood, which reproduces “religious fanaticism, a net of chains that is destined to imprison our children and grandchildren.”⁴³ Although aware of such obstacles, she argues that women must educate themselves; which it is indeed their right: “the woman must immerse herself within all the reaches of human knowledge, and present herself as the owner of her freedom and her rights.”⁴⁴ For Capetillo, the real problem lies in a false morality, based on a patriarchal vision of the sexes. That is why she proposes an equitable sexual ethic:

The woman who feels powerless in regards to her rights, freedoms, and her nature as a woman, must recover, reclaim, and change her situation, no matter the cost. Established morality, or so-called morality, is no such thing. You cannot accept a morality that goes against freedom and the rights of every human being. There is no need to fear a morality that only exists in name. We are going to establish true morality, which does not constrain or oppose the rights established by nature. The rest is fictional, it is deceitful and false and we can no longer accept it.⁴⁵

Her position not only denounces the women of her generation’s lack of rights, but also claims the ability of women to serve in government: “women have a high degree of intelligence, wisdom, and good administrative skills. Why don’t they hold any administrative position?”⁴⁶ Her answer is obvious: because they have not been given access, because they are considered intellectually and morally inferior, even though they are not. Hence her reference to “Women in the modern family,” emphasizing that modern women are just as able as men to study and obtain an academic degree, to handle the surgeon’s scalpel, the biologist’s microscope, and the engraver’s chisel, thereby rejecting the theory of the female brain’s inferiority.⁴⁷

Another necessity, for both single and married women, is to include “Marriage Hygiene” in their education. The author explains that just as men use their medical degree to witness and facilitate difficult births, women must study the vices and diseases of men in order to protect themselves and avoid acquiring obscene and impure customs and illnesses.⁴⁸ She adds:

Those who dare to believe this to be immoral are truly guilty and fear being discovered by their wives. And these men need a strong punishment, given

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

without fear. Defend women of all positions, for the enemy is great, but do not fear him, for his cowardice is just as great as his size!⁴⁹

Evidently, her intention is to expose the schemes of the powerful, which include keeping women completely unaware of the risks of irresponsible sexual behavior while protecting the sexual secrets of men. Men are not only to blame for the dissemination of this alleged morality, which is dishonest and harmful in reality. Parents force their daughters to get married when they are young and ignorant, and they oppose extramarital relationships between two lovers who are committed to making a home: “parents who influence their daughters getting married at a too young age are the cause of what happens later.”⁵⁰ Capetillo denounces this distorted morality. By naming it, she undermines it:

The modern man, who believes himself to be very courteous and decent, goes and performs sexual acts with women who do not belong to him, and thinks that he has the right to fall in love with any young virgin, or any woman whom he believes to be a virgin. What I notice is that he does not look for a woman of his same condition. No, he has to look for the virgin; and thus in this inequality, he dares to speak of his good traits. And the modern woman who has equal rights, has to deprive herself of her honesty, of belonging to her boyfriend, and then sacrifice herself to him and get sick, annihilating her body, wasting her brain, aging prematurely, suffering thousands of ailments, including dizziness, she becomes hysterical, laughs, and cries without knowing why. All this for being unaware of her rights, and of what would truly make her happy.⁵¹

For Capetillo, the immorality of the dominant sexual customs —fostered by the Church and the colonial government— is no less than perverse. That is why she calls on women of all classes and backgrounds to transform these customs. In doing so, she adopts an intersectional approach to gender that differentiates the struggles and possibilities of both upper-class and working-class women.

Intersectionality and Gender

Luisa Capetillo anticipated the theory of intersectional feminism developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.⁵² In it, Crenshaw used the law to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics intersect, creating different levels and forms of oppression. In Capetillo’s case, the author contrasts the bourgeois woman’s experience of oppression with that of the working woman and makes a feminist analysis that today we would call intersectional. She takes advantage of the contrast between the rich and the poor in order to disempower gender and the other social norms that oppress and separate them. According to Capetillo, the rich woman, who does not want to breastfeed her children or accompany her husband to the theater in order to

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵² Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8, p. 1-29.

go to church to confess, not only harms the family; in her “the lady is mistaken for a male.”⁵³ The same thing happens to the working class woman who, as the author explains ironically:

Has to go and push the wheelbarrow in the mines, mistaken for a man, who goes back and forth all by herself; she does not become a male. Not at all! If those people are made of bronze, they don’t feel anything! The unhappy wife of a factory worker or a construction worker who only earns 50 to 60 cents per day, who cannot afford to care for four or six children, who has to dress them and tie their shoes and cannot do so, and in order to support herself, offers to work other jobs and leave her children unattended, is she not harmed?⁵⁴

The denunciation of the abuse of the working woman not only serves to dismantle the male/female opposition, but also to place the problem within a broader social framework that allows Capetillo to hold the government and rich exploiters responsible for the problem: “because the home that is protected by privilege and the law benefits and protects itself and disregards the poor home.”⁵⁵ What should the government and wealthy families do for poor children who are forced to work rather than go to school because their parents cannot afford to feed them? Capetillo responds, “wealthy families, in coordination with the State, should provide them with food and education.”⁵⁶ For this reason, our author urges wealthy women to fulfill their human duty and take the first step towards equality and social justice: “wealthy woman! You can save your exploited brothers and sisters! Save them and yours will be the glory!”⁵⁷

Capetillo’s intersectional perspective allows her to see the feminist problem of upper-class women’s abuse of working women. She finds the solution to this problem in a Social Revolution that will emerge not from violence, but from “scientific study and research,” which for a self-taught person like Capetillo “is within everyone’s reach.”⁵⁸ According to Capetillo, fear of poverty has led to wrongdoings that have degenerated into crimes and social injustices, into prisons and asylums. However, Capetillo, ahead of her time, sees in her generation of libertarians the ability to deconstruct prejudices and transform consciences, understanding that an equitable education for both men and women will make it possible.

Spiritism and Anarchism

As historian Carmen Romeu Toro argues, “Luisa Capetillo, defender of women’s rights, activist and theorist of Puerto Rican anarchism and Spiritism, faced the challenge of creating a synthesis of ideas that even today seem irreconcilable.”⁵⁹ In effect, Capetillo questioned and compared the answers that spiritists and anarchists offered regarding human poverty and social

⁵³ Luisa Capetillo, *Mi opinión* (1911), *Op. Cit.*, *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁹ Carmen Romeu Toro, “Luisa Capetillo: Anarquista y espiritista puertorriqueña”, *Amor y anarquía: Los escritos de Luisa Capetillo*, Julio Ramos, comp., Editorial Educación Emergente (en prensa).

injustice in all its manifestations, in order to introduce a new dimension to Puerto Rican Spiritism:

Spiritists have no choice but to utilize exploitation in order to attend to their needs and to enjoy whatever comfort is possible. And even if these means are not violent, will they stop being perverse and artificial? No. Anarchists prefer to resort to practical, fair, and courageous means, rather than begging or exploiting by fraudulent or criminal means. Spiritists dare to say to the hungry, to the beggar: “you must be patient, we do not know what you did in other existences.” (...) Anarchists tell the hungry, you fool, you are degrading yourself, you believe that you are inferior and after a lifetime of work, you are forced to beg? Well, before you reach that point, claim your rights.⁶⁰

For Capetillo, as for the Puerto Rican anarchists of her generation, there are people living in poverty because an exploiting upper class rose onto the shoulders of the working class, which capitalism could not do without. According to Capetillo, the solution to exploitation of man by man lies in abolishing the government and substituting capitalist means of production with a cooperative system.⁶¹ Like anarchists, spiritists consider themselves rationalists, but according to Capetillo, they differ in that spiritists “would not dare to attack private property, knowing their place in society, and would rather leave people starving,”⁶² while anarchists would fight against it. Capetillo knows and agrees with the principles of spiritist philosophy, including the ideas of a plurality of existences, multiple habitable worlds, peace and harmony among enemies, the strength of thought, the law of attraction and the law of the Spirit’s perpetual progress,⁶³ but rejects and denounces the silence of the Spiritism of her time in the face of the working class’s poverty. That is why she explains:

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. Nor do I understand why it conforms to the exploitative practices of the capitalist regime.⁶⁴

The controversy that Capetillo raises between Spiritism and anarchism was made clear during her visit to the Amor y Caridad spiritist center in the city of San Germán:

The night of my arrival, I visited the Amor y Caridad center. A meeting was held [...] and after I praised Anarchy and its egalitarian intentions, they ended up telling me that I was a materialist...I, a materialist? Why? I do not know. I just know that I feel human, completely human.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Capetillo, *Mi opinión*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 95-96.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-103.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

Considering her “materialistic” was, if not an insult, a strong challenge to her spiritist position, since Spiritism, in principle, opposed the materialism of the time. Indeed, Capetillo used anarchism as an ideological tool to break down material barriers of economic and political oppression. However, that did not make her any less spiritist than the pioneering writers from the previous century. Capetillo’s mission was different from theirs. It consisted of exposing the failures of an exploitative economic system and radicalizing, by material means, the fight for a working class that, including women, lived in poverty. This mission made her a controversial public figure. She did not believe in prayer, but she did believe in the influence and practice of mental strength (another form of prayer). Although she rejected religion for secular Spiritism, she pointed to Jesus of Nazareth as an exemplary figure:

It is not that we are stupid or ridiculous when preaching ways to treat people, it is that centuries have passed and we still have not changed our ways, which shows the apathy with which we have observed the maxims of Jesus, that brave and honest brother, who traced a luminous path for us so that humanity would find no obstacles in our ascent to the peak of progress.⁶⁶

She proclaimed the law of the perpetual progress of the Spirit, but defended the anarchist idea that heaven had to be made here, on Earth. That is why she protests: “this planet belongs to everyone; it is not a privilege of a few. Why should there be so many injustices? We must help to level all of these inequalities.”⁶⁷

Capetillo’s Spiritism was formed during the first decades of the twentieth century, when Puerto Ricans realized that the United States would not bring freedom and equal rights, but rather an exploitative capitalism that would benefit the rich, not the working class. For this reason, the premise of Luisa Capetillo’s anarchist-spiritist position is complex; the historical circumstances during which she developed her beliefs heavily influenced her. In *Mi opinión*, criticism of wealth and gender go hand in hand. This critical unification succeeds in exposing power. However, as Cristina Guzzo argues, Capetillo’s perspective is both idealist and essentialist: “anarchism believes in an uncontaminated reality governed by natural law; this would be the true utopian nature of anarchism, and as poststructuralist critique has subsequently explored, it is a delusion, since resistance to power does not start from an uncontaminated place — uncontaminated places are not possible.”⁶⁸ This explains why Luisa Capetillo’s anarchist-spiritist writing culminates, in spite of the author, with a utopian vision, in which:

Fraternity as the supreme law, without borders or divisions of race, color, or language, will be the religious ideal that will be taught in schools.

Common interest as a core value, and truth as a motto, above all things.

The only religious aim: “to love one another,” will prevail in every heart.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶⁸ Cristina Guzzo, “Amor, anarquía y feminismo: el texto de Luisa Capetillo como anticipación del discurso postmoderno”, *Fragmentos de cultura: Revista do Instituto de Filosofia e Teologia de Goiás, IFITEG*, Vol. 12, No. 6: 2002, 1157-1163, p. 1162.

⁶⁹ Capetillo, *Mi opinión, Op. Cit.*, p. 178.

Regardless, Luisa Capetillo's contributions to women's emancipation and the working class are indisputable. Her criticism of the exploitative and fundamentally patriarchal power is relevant even today, since despite her works having been published more than a century ago, the living conditions of Puerto Rican women and workers have not improved as they should have. In addition, Luisa Capetillo was a champion of the cooperative movement that she promoted as a labor leader. As the contemporary Puerto Rican spiritist, Ana Troche, summarizes: "cooperativism is based on the union of effort, in a fair and organized manner, for the benefit of all." For this reason, "she [Luisa] is a teacher to all of us, in every field."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Commentary by Ana Troche, President of the Amor al Bien Center in Cabo Rojo, P.R. Email, 6 February 2021.