
JOSEFA MARTÍNEZ TORRES

El Espiritismo de las mujeres puertorriqueñas:
De las extraordinarias pioneras a sus herederas
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Biography of Josefa Martínez Torres

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Josefa Martínez Torres (alias The Little Blind Woman from the Quarry) (1862 ca.-1881)

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Translated by Henry Hirschfeld

Josefa Martínez Torres was born in Ponce¹ between 1862 and 1863, approximately. Her mother's name was Carmen Torres, and her father's Román Martínez.² Since birth, she suffered from problems with her eyesight. At two years old she lost vision in one eye, at eight she became completely blind, and at ten or eleven her mother died, leaving her in the care of her sister. In September of 1879, she started visiting a spiritist center. According to the spiritist press, she was asleep for most of her time there, even during spiritist sessions. She frequently sleepwalked,³ which many understand today as being in a state of hypnotic trance.⁴ Martínez Torres often sang, laughed, and danced while sleepwalking. This behavior called the attention of Manuel de Jesús Morel y Pastor,⁵ who was from Ponce, and in 1869, became the clerk of the town of Coamo.⁶ In 1875, he lived in the Primero neighborhood of Ponce as an unmarried 38 year old man, who owned many properties.⁷ In 1883, he was the owner

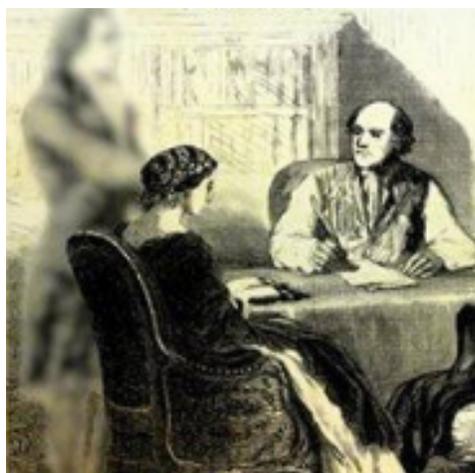


Fig. 1: Cover of Josefa's complete works compiled by Gerardo Hernández Aponte.⁸

¹ *El Iris de Paz*, 29 de noviembre de 1902, p. 8; Josefina Rivera de Álvarez, *Diccionario de literatura puertorriqueña*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones de La Torre, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1955, p. 356.

² Record of Deaths 1881-1882, fol. 29, partida 179 in Archivos Parroquiales de la Diócesis de Ponce del Genealogical Society, Utah, microfilmed and consulted at the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras (indicated from now on as CIH de la UPR-RP).

³ César Bogo, *La Cronista de los pobres: Amalia*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: CEA Edition, 1971, p. 166; *La Luz del Porvenir*, 19 de enero de 1882, p. 275.

⁴ Juan José Santiago, *Allan Kardec's Doctrine of Spiritism: "A Phenomenological Study."* Dissertatio ad Lauream in Missiologia de la Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, Facultas Missiologiae, Roma, 1983, p. 24.

⁵ Bogo, *op. cit.*, p. 166; *La Luz del Porvenir*, 19 de enero de 1882, p. 275.

⁶ The position of clerk of Coamo is given to Mr. Morel in the Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Sección: Ultramar, legajo 2070, expediente 27. Consulted in the Portal de Archivos Españoles (PARES).

⁷ Record for the formation of the general distribution that had covered up the deficit of the municipal budget of this city in the expressed fiscal year of 1881 to 1882, fol. 31v., legajo 3; Sección 3ª Riqueza Urbana, fol. 24, legajo 5, both in the Archivo Histórico Municipal de Ponce; Fondo: Ayuntamiento; Sección: Finanzas; subsección: tesorería; serie: expedientes de contribuciones; subserie: repartimiento general; años 1877-1887, Caja F-410; Padrón de Vecinos del Barrio 1ro 1875, fol. 6v., legajo 4, Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Secretaria, Subsección: Archivo, Serie: Censo; Subserie: habitantes; años: 1873-1886; Caja S-551.

⁸ Thanks to Dr. Gerardo Hernández Aponte, for granting us access and use of these photographs and other materials.

of the Typographic Establishment of M. J. Morel⁹ which, most likely, he used as his own printing press.¹⁰ According to the Spanish spiritist press, Morel y Pastor noticed that Martínez Torres was the victim of an obsessive Spirit.¹¹ According to the spiritist doctrine, obsessive Spirits may take control over a medium.¹² Morel y Pastor helped Martínez Torres to understand her situation so that she could develop auditory mediumship. It was in this way, apparently, that she dictated what the Spirits told her. Indeed, on December 4, 1879, while sleeping, she delivered her first message. On the seventh day of the same month, she dictated her third message, only this time she was awake. From then on, she did not dictate in her sleep.¹³ She only used her mediumistic faculties for a short time, and, on December 7, 1881, she passed away, surrounded by her family and by Morel y Pastor. She was sick for three months leading up to her death, although she improved during her last two days.¹⁴ According to her death certificate, Josefa Martínez Torres passed away at eighteen because of a fever. Although she was a spiritist, she received a traditional Christian burial.¹⁵ There may be various reasons for this: she may have renounced her spiritist beliefs before her death, or the priest may have been unaware that she was a follower of the spiritist doctrine. Perhaps she attended Holy Mass as well as the spiritist center, without seeing any contradiction in that. Another possibility is that the priest was sympathetic to Spiritism and wanted to protect it in the long-term. Indeed, it is documented that various Puerto Rican priests participated in Spiritism. Father José Antonio Pieretti y Marsánd, for example, liked to secretly attend spiritist gatherings at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶

In May of 1880, the *Boletín Mercantil de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Mercantile Bulletin)* published a news briefing thanking for receiving one of Martínez Torres works, *Colección de novelitas y artículos de recreo (Collection of Short Novels and Recreational Articles)*. In this collection, Martínez Torres not only verifies her authorship, but she also confirms her nickname, “La Cieguecita de la Cantera” (“The Little Blind Woman from the Quarry”).¹⁷ The spiritist press

⁹ Josefa Martínez (La Cieguecita de la Cantera), *Colección de artículos de recreo. 2.ª série (sic). Precedidos de los que le dedicó desde Barcelona (España) la distinguida escritora, Srta. Doña Amalia Domingo Soler, en el periódico “La Luz del Porvenir”*. Ponce, Puerto Rico: Establecimiento Tipográfico de M. J. Morel, s.f.; Constancia, *Revista Mensual Espiritista Bonaerense*, 29 de febrero de 1884, p. 443.

¹⁰ Roberto Ramos Perea, *Literatura puertorriqueña negra del siglo XIX escrita por negros. Obras encontradas de Eleuterio Derkes, Manuel Alonso Pizarro y José Ramos y Bravos. Antología de la literatura negra escrita por negros 1880-1920*. San Juan de Puerto Rico: Ateneo Puertorriqueño y Editorial LEA, Librería Editorial Ateneo, Archivo Nacional de Teatro y Cine, 2009, pp. 27, 31; José Géigel y Zenón y Abelardo Morales Ferrer, *Bibliografía puertorriqueña: 1492-1894*. Barcelona: Editorial Araluce, 1934, p. 114.

¹¹ Bogo, *op. cit.*, p. 166; *La Luz del Porvenir*, 19 de enero de 1882, p. 275.

¹² Allan Kardec, *El libro de los médiums. Guía de los médiums y de los evocadores conteniendo la enseñanza especial de los espíritus sobre la teoría de todos los géneros de manifestaciones. Los medios de comunicar con el mundo invisible, el desarrollo de la mediumnidad, las dificultades y los escollos que se pueden encontrar en la práctica del espiritismo, continuación de El libro de los espíritus*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial “Constancia,” 1942, segunda parte, capítulo XXIII, números 242-243, 248, 252, pp. 280, 284, 288-289.

¹³ *La Luz del Porvenir*, 19 de enero de 1882, p. 275; Bogo, *op. cit.*, p. 166; *El Iris de Paz*, 29 de noviembre de 1902, p. 8.

¹⁴ Bogo, *op. cit.*, p. 166; *El Iris de Paz*, 29 de noviembre de 1902, p. 8; *La Luz del Porvenir*, 19 de enero de 1882, pp. 275-276.

¹⁵ Record of Deaths 1881-1882, fol. 29, partida 179 in the Archivos Parroquiales de la Diócesis de Ponce from the Genealogical Society, Utah, microfilmed and consulted in the CIH of the UPR-RP.

¹⁶ Luis M. Díaz Soler, *Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón: Orientador y guardián de una cultura*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones del Instituto de Literatura Puertorriqueña, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1960, tomo I, p. 682.

¹⁷ *Boletín Mercantil de Puerto Rico*, 12 de mayo de 1880, p. 3; Josefa Martínez (La Cieguecita de la Cantera), *Colección de novelitas y artículos de recreo*. Ponce, Puerto Rico: Establecimiento Tipográfico La Civilización,

explained that this work collected the mediumistic communications that Martínez Torres received and dictated.¹⁸ The press also claimed that Spiritism allowed her to develop her intelligence as well as many other qualities that she had apparently acquired in other lives.¹⁹ Professor Félix Córdova Iturregui suggests that Martínez Torres must have been exposed to literature.²⁰ We should note, however, that Martínez Torres never received any proper education because her parents could not arrange it.²¹ According to an essay in the publication *La Luz del Porvenir* (*The Light of the Future*), she grew up in a poor household that was far from the social centers where she could have learned by listening.²² On the streets and in the shops in town, people would often read out loud. This would make knowledge more accessible for those who could not read themselves.²³ There is no historical evidence, however, that suggests that Martínez Torres had received any education this way.



On July 1, 1880, *La Luz del Porvenir* began to publish Martínez Torres's articles. For two years, she dictated very often, only interrupting her work when she felt unwell.²⁴ After Martínez Torres's death, Manuel de Jesus Morel y Pastor compiled many of her written works, some from *La Luz del Porvenir* and others that were not. He published this compilation at his printing press with the title *Colección de artículos de recreo. 2.ª serie (sic). Precedidos de los que le dedicó desde Barcelona (España) la distinguida escritora, Srta. Doña Amalia Domingo Soler, en el periódico "La Luz del Porvenir" (Collection of Recreational Articles. 2nd series. Preceded by those the distinguished writer, Ms. Amalia Domingo Soler, dedicated from Barcelona (Spain))*

Fig. 2: Colección de novelitas y artículos de recreo, Josefa Martínez, 1880.²⁵

1880; Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *La Cieguecita de la Cantera: Obras completas de Josefa Martínez Torres, primera mujer novelista de Puerto Rico*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia and the Asociación Puertorriqueña de Investigación de Historias de Mujeres, 2014.

¹⁸ *La Luz del Porvenir*, 1 de julio de 1880, pp. 42-43; 19 de enero de 1882, p. 275.

¹⁹ *Revista de Estudios Psicológicos*, septiembre de 1880, p. 277.

²⁰ Félix Córdova Iturregui, "Obras completas de Josefa Martínez Torres: La Cieguecita de la Cantera. Compilador: Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte," *Alborada. Revista interdisciplinaria de la Universidad de Puerto Rico en Utuado*. Año XI, núm. 1, junio 2015-mayo 2016, pp. 52, 54-55, 57.

²¹ Manuel María Sama, *Bibliografía puerto-riqueña*. Mayagüez, Puerto Rico: Tipografía Comercial, 1887, p. 88; Géigel y Zenón and Morales Ferrer, *op. cit.*, p. 169; *La Democracia*, 10 de noviembre de 1905, p. 4; Martínez, *Colección de novelitas...*, p. 3; *La Luz del Porvenir*, 19 de enero de 1882, p. 276; Rivera de Álvarez, *Diccionario...*, 1955, p. 356.

²² *La Luz del Porvenir*, 19 de enero de 1882, p. 276.

²³ Fernando Picó, "Libros necesarios, libros peligrosos: Los libros en la historia de Puerto Rico," *Perspectiva*, año IV, núm 1, primer semestre 1993-1994, p. 5.

²⁴ *La Luz del Porvenir*, 1 de julio de 1880, pp. 42-46; 19 de enero de 1882, p. 275.

²⁵ Thanks to Dr. Gerardo Hernández Aponte, for granting us access and use of these photographs and other materials.

in the periodical “*The Light of the Future*”).²⁶ Years later, the press continued to talk about Martínez Torres. In 1902, Jesús Calderón from Arecibo affirmed that every person who practiced Spiritism must have known about her.²⁷ He also recounted his experience of meeting her:

She was modest in temperament and in emotion, and although she lost her eyesight as a young girl, not one complaint against her fate left her lips. She was always praising the Creator and describing with admiration the works of nature that she could not appreciate except with the eyes of her soul, since as a little girl when she became blind she also lost her young memories.

She was an auditory medium when I met her in 1881 and her scarce education is owed to Mr. Manuel Morrell, man of good judgment, studious, and with quite the knowledge of the Spiritist Doctrine. He has honored me with his friendship and to him I owe not only my meeting with the Little Blind Woman, about whom I write, but also my appreciation of her mediumistic abilities, superior to her poor appearance, which is unworthy of her productions. She was humble and righteous, and because of that she reached the company of advanced and good Spirits, qualities that revealed themselves in the communications that she transmitted.²⁸

In 1905, the press mentioned her by her nickname and indicated that a man with the last name Simonpietri, who seemed to be possessed by the Spirit of Torquemada, should be taken to her in Ponce.²⁹ Sporadically, memories of her would emerge. Another example occurred during a spiritist celebration on January 1, 1907, in the Centro Unión y Progreso (Center of Union and Progress) in Caguas. During the evening, a girl named Marcela Fontáñez recited poetry that she addressed to “the Little Blind Woman from the Quarry.”³⁰

On a date still unknown today, a text by Josefa Martínez Torres was published entitled *Guía para los mediums espiritistas* (*A Guide for Spiritist Mediums, by the Auditory Medium Josefa Martínez*). In it, the author outlines some of the concerns, challenges, and successes of the practice of mediumship. She also offers some recommendations for those who have mediumistic faculties, warning about poor spiritual support when describing how it tends to present itself. This work is important because it exposes the difficulties of mediumship, the lack of knowledge in some aspects of its practice, and the need for mediums to be educated.³¹ These problems were not exclusive to Puerto Rico; they also occurred in other countries where analogous manuals were published.³²

²⁶ Martínez, *Colección de artículos...*; *Constancia, Revista Mensual Espiritista Bonaerense*, 29 de febrero de 1884, p. 443.

²⁷ *El Iris de Paz*, 29 de noviembre de 1902, pp. 8-9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁹ *La Democracia*, 10 de noviembre de 1905, p. 4.

³⁰ *La Correspondencia de Puerto Rico*, 6 de enero de 1907, p. 2.

³¹ Josefa Martínez, *Guía para los mediums espiritistas*. Ponce, Puerto Rico: “El Vapor” Establecimiento Tipográfico, s.f.

³² Florentino Barrera, *Inventario de Librería y publicaciones periódicas. Bibliografía espiritista del s. XIX. Catálogo razonado con secciones de arte e historia*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Vida Infinita, 1983, pp. 3, 24, 30, 79, 90, 115; Gabriel Delanne, *Consejo á los mediums y á los experimentadores. Seguido de una serie de comunicaciones de Ultratumba alusivas al acto*. Mayagüez, Puerto Rico: Tipografía Aurora, 1909.

Arthur Conan Doyle points out that mediums often had physical disabilities.³³ We can conclude, then, that in the cases of Puerto Rico's mediums there was a common denominator; Josefa Martínez Torres and Francisca Suárez González were both blind. Similarly, Basilia Arce Nieves was blind since she was eight, and at age twenty or twenty-one, she became a visual and auditory medium in Centro El Porvenir (Center "The Future") in Aguadilla.³⁴ Apparently, losing such an important organ allowed these three women to develop the necessary sensitivity for mediumship and/or the capacity to become writers or artists as a mechanism to channel their frustration. Josefa Martínez Torres claimed that by exercising her auditory mediumistic faculties her struggles were consoled.³⁵ As Amalia Domínguez Soler explains in her periodical *La Luz del Porvenir*: "Studying Spiritism is the great comfort of humanity. We contemplate the young, blind, and poor Josefa ... And how she can give light to humanity."³⁶

³³ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Historia del espiritismo: sus hechos y sus doctrinas*. Trans. by E. D. Retg, Madrid, España: Editorial Eyras, 1983, p. 262.

³⁴ *Revista de Estudios Psicológicos*, enero de 1890, p. 30.

³⁵ Version without a title page of a work about mediumship written by Josefa Martínez Torres that is found in Biblioteca de la Sociedad Constanca in Buenos Aires, Argentina, p. 2. I presume it to be another edition of her work entitled *Guía para los mediuns espiritistas*.

³⁶ *La Luz del Porvenir*, 1 de julio de 1880, p. 43.