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FRANCISCA SUÁREZ GONZÁLEZ

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## Analysis of "A Monastery Within" by Francisca Suárez

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***A Monastery Within: Dictation from the Afterlife by the Spirit of María del Pilar***  
**by Francisca Suárez**

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In 1885, at centro Grupo Familiar de Jesús (the center Familiar Group of Jesus) in Mayagüez, Suárez received a dictation from the Spirit of María del Pilar, which she entitled *Un monasterio por dentro*.<sup>1</sup> The work was published by *La Industria* (The Industry) printing press of San Germán in 1893. The text tells the story of María del Pilar, the daughter of the marquis of Santacruz during the reign of Philip II. In 1571, her father sent María del Pilar to the Monastery of Carmelite Monks to separate her from her lover Luis, who was the son of his enemy. In the monastery, the fifteen year old young woman discovers, along with Sister Pura, Sister Carmen, Sister Margarita, Sister Inés, and the Abbess, the atrocities and abuses that occur there. Behind closed doors, Father Joseph leads a lustful life that violates and destroys the lives of the nuns. Forbidden love, illegitimate pregnancies, rape, the infamous Inquisition, and the relationship between the Catholic Church and the State all play a large role in the plot, which is made up of twenty-three very short chapters that move quickly, driven by intrigue and mystery. Women play a leading role in the story, acting as spokespeople who denounce their complete lack of rights as well as the decadence of monastic life. An anticlerical position is emphasized in the Kardecian spiritist maxims alluded to in the text: the belief in God and His laws that govern the universe, the plurality of experiences in the afterlife, communication with the Spirits, the infinite progress of the soul through reincarnation, the reparation of misdeeds, free will as the engine of cause and effect, and faith, hope, and charity as a means of achieving justice and equality among human beings.



Fig 1: *A Monastery Within: Dictation from the Afterlife by the Spirit of María del Pilar*, Francisca Suárez, 1893.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico 1860-1907*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2015, p. 394. The initials F.R.G. refer to the medium Francisco del Rosario y González. See Hernández Aponte, *Op. Cit.*, p. 393.

<sup>2</sup> I am deeply grateful for Dr. Gerardo Hernández Aponte for granting me access and use of this photograph.

Dictations from the afterlife published in Puerto Rico became more visible in the late nineteenth century. As historian Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte explains, one of the first, entitled *La lucha de un espíritu contada por sí mismo (A Spirit's Struggle as Narrated by Itself)*, was obtained at centro Fraternidad de Isabela (Isabella Fellowship Center) by a medium whose initials were F.R.G. Its first edition was published in Mayagüez in 1889 and the second in Madrid in 1896.<sup>3</sup> With an anticlerical tone, the work narrates six existences of a Spirit, whose name in its last existence is Mariano, during which we witness its progress and reparation of misdeeds. *Carmen o episodio de la historia de un espíritu (Carmen, or an Episode in the Story of a Spirit)*, by the auditory and blind medium Francisco Sánchez Hernández, was published in 1904, and *Amparo (Refuge)*, by the same medium, was published in 1907.<sup>4</sup> In 1880, Josefa Martínez Torres, a blind and auditory medium, had obtained and dictated the *Colección de novelitas y artículos de recreo (Collection of Novels and Recreational Articles)*, but it came to be known as the first novel published by a woman in Puerto Rico.<sup>5</sup> The spiritist press, for its part, had already noted that it was about the mediumistic communications that the Blind Woman From the Quarry, as she was known, obtained and dictated because she was blind.<sup>6</sup> The dictation by Francisca Suárez emerges within this context and is, without a doubt, worthy of analysis.

There is very little historical information about the life of Francisca Suárez. However, in the reader's note of *A Monastery Within*, Jovino de la Torre notes:

Was this work dictated by some unknown Spirit? This I cannot answer for certain; but given that the author lacks great education, that she is blind, that she is not a genius, nor does she possess some divine knowledge of science, we must agree that some superior agent has collaborated in these works. There is no doubt that Francisca Suárez is a medium. The fact is true with all certainty. No one can doubt the mediumistic faculties of such a lady, because the public already knows, advantageously, a part of the *Historia de un Monge (Story of a Monk)*, work by the cited medium who has not even finished yet, and soon you all will know others, which are currently unpublished.<sup>7</sup>

Jovino de la Torre confirms that, in addition to being blind, Francisca Suárez lacked “great education,” was a well-known medium, and received dictations from the afterlife that had already been published. Indeed, in 1892, Suárez published *Historia de un monje en dos existencias físicas. Dictado de ultra-tumba por el espíritu de Fernando de Castro (A Story of a Monk in Two Physical Existences: Dictation from the Spirit of Fernando de Castro)*.<sup>8</sup> That same

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 395-396.

<sup>5</sup> Josefa Martínez Torres, *Colección de novelitas y artículos de recreo*, Ponce P.R., Tipografía La Civilización, 1880; Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, compilador y estudio introductorio, *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 y Asociación Puertorriqueña de Investigación de Historias de Mujeres, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 397.

<sup>7</sup> Jovino de la Torre, “Al lector”, *Un monasterio por dentro: Dictado de ultratumba por el espíritu de María del Pilar*. San Germán, P.R.: Imprenta La Industria, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *La Cieguecita de la Cantera: Obras completas de Josefa Martínez Torres, Primera mujer novelista de Puerto Rico*, San Juan, P.R.: Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia y Asociación Puertorriqueña de Investigación de Historias de Mujeres, 2014, p. 29.

year, the Spanish spiritist press reported that the second volume was in production<sup>9</sup> and, as Hernández Aponte affirms, that “the complete work would consist of six or seven volumes the same length as the first, which was composed of 420 pages.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, as the historian has shown, in a letter from Suárez to Federico Degetau, the medium tells him that “[she] had various mediumistic communications that were unpublished due to lack of funds.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the figure of Francisca Suárez emerges in the history of Puerto Rico as a prolific semi-mechanical medium.

The phenomenon of the *semi-mechanical medium* is defined by Allan Kardec in item 181 of *The Book of Mediums* as follows:

For the purely mechanical medium, hand movement is involuntary; for the intuitive medium, the movement is voluntary and optional. The semi-mechanical medium experiences both. She feels an impulse directed to her hand despite herself, but at the same time is aware of what she writes as the words are formed. In the first, thought follows the act of writing; in the second, it precedes it; in the third it accompanies her.<sup>12</sup>

Francisca Suárez identified herself as a semi-mechanical or semi-conscious medium in *Nuestra réplica al artículo del Dr. Don Manuel Guzmán Rodríguez titulado “La Religión del Porvenir”* (*Our Response to the Article by Dr. Manuel Guzmán Rodríguez titled “The Religion of the Future”*). In this publication, she says, referring to her mediumistic faculties: “how strange is it that a modest and simple woman, when dictating the ideas or thoughts transmitted by the Spirits, interprets something the wrong way, or that due to her scarce knowledge makes grammatical errors?”<sup>13</sup> I have not found any historical records that explain how, for how long, or under what circumstances Francisca Suárez received her dictations. All we know is that *Un monasterio por dentro* was obtained by Suárez in 1885 at the center Grupo Familiar de Jesús in Mayagüez.

However, it is confirmed that witnesses from the time period were amazed at the quality and novelty of her dictations. Although Jovino de la Torre was not a spiritist, he says in his note to the reader: “I can assure you that certain paragraphs stand out as exemplary in the art of fine language.”<sup>14</sup> And later: “I am a freethinker, and I must confess that I have been perplexed by the work that I comment on, which I strongly recommend to the public.”<sup>15</sup> What does *Un monasterio por dentro* offer that captures the public’s attention? Who speaks in the text and for what purpose? How does this voice challenge dominant discourses? How do Suárez’s dictations

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<sup>9</sup> *Revista de Estudios Psicológicos. Órgano de Propaganda y Eco del Movimiento General Espiritista*, julio de 1892, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> Hernández Aponte, *El espiritismo.... Op. Cit.* p. 395.

<sup>11</sup> Hernández Aponte, *El espiritismo.... Op. Cit.* p. 395.

<sup>12</sup> Allan Kardec. *El libro de los médiums*. Traducción de autor desconocido, revisada y corregida por Salvador Gentile y Alipio González Hernández, 11a edición, Brasil, Instituto de Difusão Espírita, 2004, pp. 198-199.

<sup>13</sup> Francisca Suárez, *Nuestra réplica al artículo del Dr. Manuel Guzmán Rodríguez titulado ‘La Religión del Porvenir’ y publicado en el periódico El Imparcial de esta ciudad*. Mayagüez, P.R.: Tipografía Comercial, 1892, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Francisca Suárez, *Un monasterio por dentro: Dictado de ultratumba por el espíritu de María del Pilar*. San Germán, P.R.: Imprenta La Industria, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

change the literature of her time, which was trapped, as has been shown, within gender, race, and class hierarchies?<sup>16</sup> In the following discussion, I will attempt to answer some of these questions.

## Voice

The voice, or who we listen to when we read *Un monasterio por dentro*, is identified early on in the *Prologue* when it says:

This work is not a literary gem. It only contains the sad episodes of my life, and for that reason you will only find in it the memories that my Spirit has kept of the time when it dwelt on that Earth where you now reside; so that you can see how many stories humanity ignores because it is unaware of the events that take place within the mystery and silence of those places that the world calls *Monasteries* or houses of prayer; so that you may be persuaded by those who have not hesitated to call themselves *Ministers of Jesus*.

Here you will find the simplest emblem of truth engraved in its most genuine expression, to testify in simple words to the ideals that sustain the clergy who claim to be inspired by God; so that you can be convinced once more of what your brothers from the afterlife have told you, those Spirits that, eager to enlighten you, come to deposit knowledge into your soul that will make you transcend the triviality of your world.

In this narrative, you will see fulfilled the prophecies of the Messiah when he said: *may nothing remain hidden that was not discovered*.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, this work is about a Spirit who recounts the sad memories that it keeps of when it inhabited the Earth. Its objective is to testify to the true ideals that sustain the clergymen with the attempt to convince the reader about what other enlightened Spirits have already attested to: the corruption and delirium of the clergy. The importance of the voice is that through it we are able to understand the type of character that we encounter and thus evaluate how said character affects the story.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the protagonist tells her story in the first person; she is intimately involved in what happens (which is why she testifies to it) and tries to establish reliability through the information that she presents. The Spirit is identified as María del Pilar, daughter of the marquis of Santacruz under the reign of Felipe II, who in 1571 was admitted into the Monastery of Carmelite Nuns by her father in order to separate her from her lover Luis, son of his enemy. Thus, the narrative addresses historical figures. Of course, it is not the objective of this analysis to verify the accuracy of what is narrated. It is the work of those who analyze mediumistic communications to verify their origin and accuracy. In our case, an analysis of the narrative itself is used to determine the mechanisms that operate in its production, the style of

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<sup>16</sup> José Luis González, *Literatura y sociedad en Puerto Rico: De los cronistas a la generación del 98*, México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> Suárez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 70-71.

language that it exhibits and the ideology that underlies it, while keeping certain questions in mind, including: how are the dominant discourses of the time challenged? Which master plots come into conflict with each other? Are there identifiable differences in language and style between the narrative at hand and Francisca Suárez's essays? How did Francisca Suárez change religious and literary discourses in Puerto Rico during the late nineteenth century?

### Language and Master Plots

As Jovino de la Torre explains in his note to the reader, the work “contains treasures of truths spoken with clarity, simplicity, and beauty.”<sup>19</sup> Throughout the twenty-three chapters, the characters use sophisticated language, rich in rhetorical figures, with a vocabulary marked by class and time. This is how *Un monasterio* opens:

I walked on Earth with the speed of a meteor. My existence was a mystery because only those beings that surrounded me talked to me. I shone like the waters of a silver lake that reflects the moonlight, which is a spell that lasts for a few hours. And just as the moon darkens, wrapped in the black clouds that cross space and turn night into an ominous gloom, so I was taken by that black shadow of fanaticism, in the moments that I least expected it.<sup>20</sup>

A highly poetic language can be seen here, lyricism that is achieved by the density of the poetic figures and the images that are created through similes and linked metaphors (i.e. human existence with: meteor, mystery, water in a lake, moonlight, clouds that cross space). The vocabulary is sophisticated. For example, describing her secret and hidden life in the monastery, María del Pilar refers to it as *an arcane (a mystery)*. This vocabulary, associated with the monarchy, the church, and the educated class of the time, can be seen throughout *Un monasterio*: “*Serve yourself V.E. to follow me,*”<sup>21</sup> replies Sister Carmen to the marquis of Santacruz. “—Who are you, shadow of *Averno*, that at this hour you come to disturb the tranquility of the monastery?” the Abbess says to Father José.<sup>22</sup> “What a *heinous (nefando)* crime is committed by the one who abuses impotence, taking away from the rational being all their abilities to refuse immortal impulses! And then you *blazon (blasonas)*, saying: “I am great and powerful: everyone must surrender to me,” says the narrator, referring to Father José's abuse of power.<sup>23</sup> In these four examples, a classical vocabulary is used, decidedly sophisticated and just within the space-time framework of the Spanish sixteenth century. The language that Suárez uses in her essays and journalistic articles is very different; it is at once modest and familiar, ironic, but civil.

Another important narrative element for the purposes of the present analysis is what H. Porter Abbott calls master narratives. Master narratives are understood as recurring stories in popular culture that play a key role in questions regarding values, identity, and understanding the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12, all use of cursive is mine.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81 *Averno*, from the Latin “*avernus*,” name given to describe Hell.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82. *Nefando* from the Latin “*nefandus*,” meaning revolting. *Blasonas* from “*blasón*,” meaning coat of arms, in this case a noun converted into a verb in order to indicate the exercise of power and ostentation. The use of cursive is mine.

world. According to Abbott, they can also exert a strong influence on how new information is received, causing us to read too much or too little about it, in an unconscious effort to include them in the prominent stories circulating in society.<sup>24</sup> In the case of *Un monasterio*, not only what is said, but also the spaces assigned to individuals are influenced by the master narratives of the represented society. The interior spaces of the house and the convent are described in detail: the table, the room, the closed doors, the nurse, the nun's cell, and the garden, which is the only space in the cloister where the outdoors is visible. Outside the monastery and the house, patriarchal power is mobilized in the monarchy, the clergy, the Inquisition, and in Europe. The master narratives that circulate both in the isolated feminine space and abroad, where masculine power is ever-powerful, conflict in *Un monasterio* until reaching a catastrophic climax that overflows beyond earthly existence, into the sphere of the afterlife. Women are the ones who deal with the catastrophe, which challenges their hidden existence marked by their gender.

### Gender and Spiritism

Women play a leading role in *Un monasterio*. Each of them, María del Pilar, Pura, Carmen, Margarita, Inés, and the Abbess, denounce the gender injustice that they suffer. Imprisoned and violated by absolute patriarchal control, they explain the problem and, with impeccable rational agility, they dismantle it. In order to do so, they contrast the master narratives of the Church and the State with an alternative discourse that they authorize using Christian Kardecian Spiritism. Challenging her father's position as head of the house and primary oppressor in the social hierarchy, María del Pilar exclaims: "How much cruelty from he who should have given boundless abnegation instead."<sup>25</sup> And later referring to the abuses of the Church:

Her name was Pura, but they imposed Sister Teresa on her, because the friars have the right to change the nuns' names just as they have the immoral custom of trading in holy things, and to make Christ's Religion an industry with the deviousness that it is so typical of them.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the convent and the supposed religion that is practiced there, Sister Carmen protests: "but I will say very loudly that here religion is nothing more than a platform; that this convent is a harem where the Odalisque of Sultan Felipe II lives."<sup>27</sup> And later, denouncing the King himself:

Such cruelty! And this entity is the Monarch of Spain! And the country remains calm, nursing this monster in its bosom, without the righteous men fighting against him, but rather continuing to pay tribute to the magnates, leaving poor Spain to live oppressed under his despotic scepter! And may not the Earth open up to swallow that snake!<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Abbott, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 46-49.

<sup>25</sup> Suárez *Op. Cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

Sister Margarita similarly challenges Father José: “—If Madrid knew who the shepherd of their flock was, it would spit in his face and hang the hero of so much iniquity.”<sup>29</sup> But it is the Abbess who makes a clear distinction between the morals of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church and those of the true Christianity modeled by Jesus:

—Nothing scares me, and if one more victim is necessary, I will march to martyrdom led by the pastors of the Roman Catholic Church, who from now on I despise. I will rebel against that Religion that tortures innocent people; that wicked doctrine that despicable men have invented to hide the evangelical truth; false Prophets who wanted to honor themselves by calling themselves ministers of Jesus, He who only performed acts of charity.<sup>30</sup>

The spiritist doctrine becomes more and more explicit as the work goes on. María del Pilar even says the spiritist motto: without charity there is no salvation.<sup>31</sup> Reference is also made to the “court of consciences” where Spirits account for their misdeeds and are judged “by that inviolable righteousness that governs all the laws of the universe.”<sup>32</sup> Slander is criticized as the most despicable sentiment that the human heart can hold, since it wounds the soul, God’s own possession: “for this reason, man must never destroy what he is not given to renew again.”<sup>33</sup> This sense of divine justice, governed by the laws of the universe, is another spiritist maxim. An additional example can be seen when nuns pray to the spirits of charity before being handed over to the Inquisition:

We begged for heaven to send us one of its angels to enlighten our consciences; because those spirits of charity are messengers from heaven; companions of peace in the material world. They who are full of light shed the Father’s redemption on our heads.<sup>34</sup>

Reincarnation, as a process of soul progression and purification, is another spiritist maxim articulated by María del Pilar:

Oh those poor souls! How many lives of suffering and martyrdom will they pass through, like a crucible of purification, gradually transforming those consciences that live without realizing who they are, who they were, and who they will be in the centuries to come!<sup>35</sup>

María del Pilar, Pura, the Abbess, and Father Jacinto were sacrificed at the stake by the Inquisition, but they die with “the tranquility of the righteous who are firmly convinced that they will find their reward in the world of light, where the Father of mercy lives.”<sup>36</sup> The afterlife, a core idea of Kardecian Spiritism, becomes even more evident in the last chapter of *Un*

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

*monasterio*, when we find Father José in the inferior underworld, where the most ignorant Spirits reside. After being tortured at the stake of the “Holy Office,” we witness what spiritists call a period of bewilderment, or a sense of double consciousness, which is when a disincarnated Spirit does not yet recognize that it has died because it is fully aware of itself and its environment:

“What is this that is happening to me here?” He said to himself. “I recognize myself, I’m the same, but something has happened because they are ignoring me. What, they don’t want to get rid of me? How come they have not? Perhaps I will be a God for those who worship Pagans, or perhaps some demon, and that is why they have not been able to conclude with my existence.”

Then he heard a horrible laugh. He looked around; but saw nothing.

“Who dares laugh at me?”

“They are your companions, the children of Luzbel,” the voice replied.

“And why don’t I see you?”

They laughed uproariously at him again. This frightened Father José and so he started to run, but the mob of ignorant Spirits followed him, calling out the names of their victims.<sup>37</sup>

At this point in the narrative, María del Pilar adopts an omniscient perspective as she tells about the state of fluctuation of Spirits like Father José, explaining that the Spirit does not die, but remains in a state of drifting until it returns incarnate to reconcile its wrongdoings through the challenges that the embodied consciousness undergoes. She says: “for almost a century those Spirits remained living in a state of drifting until as punishment they were again sent to Earth to suffer all kinds of misfortunes to destroy their pride by means of atonement, which is the consequence of having disobeyed the laws of the Creator, which must always be respected and fulfilled.”<sup>38</sup> She ends by explaining the fundamental purpose of her story:

I was authorized to tell you this story so that you understand the mysteries that exist in the life of the Spirit, and so that you see yourselves in all those beings that come crawling on the dust of our Earth like miserable reptiles.

They were the tyrants of yesterday, the Torquemadas, Domingo Guzmán, and the Kings who protected the Inquisition, overseeing the *autos-da-fé*<sup>39</sup> with religious respect, then blessing the Inquisitors, and these are, in short, all those greats who wore mitres, crowns, and tiaras with diamonds.

Contemplate them well, study, meditate, think, pray, and never forget that every human being is a mystery.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>39</sup> *auto-da-fé*, which means “act of faith” in Portuguese, was a common event during the Inquisition during which supposed heretics or religious deviants would be publicly punished, at times burned alive.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

As María del Pilar's final words demonstrate, *Un monasterio por dentro* has a decidedly moral intention. On the one hand, it makes a fierce critique of the Church, the State, and patriarchal power, while on the other, it offers women a voice and a leading role, with which they challenge not only the dominant master plots, but also the time period's literary institution, to which women had hardly any access. In addition, as demonstrated, the narrative uses the fundamental maxims of spiritist doctrine to achieve its objective, such as the belief in God and His laws that govern the universe, the plurality of experiences in the afterlife, communication with the Spirits, the infinite progress of the soul through reincarnation and the reparation of misdeeds, free will as the engine of cause and effect, and faith, hope, and charity as a means of accessing justice and equality among humans. More importantly, by means of this dictation, Francisca Suárez acquired discursive agency, which, as will be seen in the analysis of her essays, allowed her to establish meaningful relationships with spiritist organizations at the local, national, and international levels; relationships that promoted her writing and the spiritist doctrine.

The first part of *Un monasterio por dentro* was analyzed here. The others have either not been published or have been lost on the shelves of bookstores or libraries. Regardless, by studying Francisca Suárez's work, we rescue an important moment in Puerto Rico's past, when literature was produced by brave women who did not have institutional or social support. Suárez's story demonstrates that Spiritism served her as an analytical instrument to understand and dismantle the structures of privilege and power that, since the founding of Western society, have subjugated women. Spiritism radicalized her, liberating her from the cultures that betrayed her and from the limitations that her blindness, sex, class, and race imposed upon her.