



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

L. Román, Reinaldo

Spiritists versus spirit-mongers: Julia Vázquez and the struggle for progress in 1920s Puerto Rico

Centro Journal, vol. XIV, núm. 2, 2002, pp. 27-47

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37711301002>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

Spiritists versus Spirit-mongers: Julia Vázquez and the Struggle for Progress in 1920s Puerto Rico

REINALDO L. ROMÁN

ABSTRACT

In 1922 thousands found their way to a barrio in San Lorenzo, where Julia Vázquez, better known as La Samaritana, dispensed magnetized water and healed the sick. Vázquez's ascent was cause for a heated polemic regarding the state of Puerto Rican culture. Spiritist leaders claimed Vázquez as an agent for progress. Men of science and a Spiritist faction denounced her as an *espiritera* who promoted superstition. This article re-constructs the debates to show that Vázquez's hydrotherapy was neither traditionalist nor a corruption of learned Spiritism. Instead, she operated within an economy of affliction that accommodated modern medicine and appealed to multiple religious constituencies. The distinctions between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* were not self-evident; to constitute them, Vázquez's critics depended on a hierarchy of races and souls. Along route, this essay offers a critique of syncretism as usually applied to Spiritism and considers whether La Samaritana's emergence responded to crises in rural Puerto Rico. [Key words: modernity, religion, Spiritism, syncretism, healers, race]

"La animada escena que todavía se contempla en las alturas de San Lorenzo"

Como nota curiosa y pintoresca traemos hoy día a esta página una interesante fotografía que basta para dar una exacta idea del fanático fervor con que las muchedumbres acuden a las alturas de San Lorenzo, en pos del "agua maravillosa". Julia Vázquez, convertida por la exaltación popular en moderna "Samaritana", sigue, como podrá ver el lector, cautivando las multitudes que en automóviles, a caballo y a pie, marchan hipnotizadas tras del ansiado manantial que muchos juzgan, en su cándida ilusión, la mejor panacea salvadora....
Puerto Rico Ilustrado (XIII, 653, 2 de septiembre 1922).

["An animated scene that can still be witnessed in the highlands of San Lorenzo"

On a curious and picturesque note, we bring today an interesting photograph to this page, one which is enough to show exactly the fanatic fervor with which the crowds seek the "healing water" in the highlands of San Lorenzo. Julia Vázquez, who has been converted through popular exaltation into a modernday "Good Samaritan," continues, as the reader can witness, to captivate the multitudes, who, by car, horse, and on foot, hypnotically march toward the desired source, which many believe to be, in their honest delusion, the most effective of panaceas...]

Sometime in the mid-19th century, Spiritism arrived in Puerto Rico in suitcases and wrapped parcels. Students returning from European universities, travelers, and purveyors of forbidden tracts brought back to the island books, periodicals, and investigative practices that circulated first via informal circuits. Before the first centers were organized—reportedly in Mayagüez during the late 1870s or early 1880s—Spiritism found a home in a district of the island’s incipient *ciudad letrada*, which at the time offered some refuge from a Church and a state suspicious of rationalist doctrines that preached the gospel of progress.¹ This city of letters emerged as a discursive space, as possibility, before it was ever realized materially. Its architects, whose labors Silvia Alvarez Curbelo chronicles in *Un país del porvenir*, were for the most part learned and propertied men consumed with what she has called an “afán de modernidad.”² The desire to make Puerto Rico modern was manifest in the quest for integration into the world economy, in abolitionist agitation, and in the *letrados* effort to craft a new role for themselves as experts capable of re-ordering society. Spiritists, many of whom shared these *afanes*, as did Manuel Corchado y Juarbe, Puerto Rico’s representative to the Spanish Cortes who favored abolition and Spiritist instruction in schools, aimed at a wholesale “social regeneration” through individual advancement.³ Spiritism was suffused with an ethos of self-improvement that saw in the future utopian possibilities. Progress was inevitable; it was a matter of natural law.⁴

Spiritists kept company with masons, freethinkers, and liberals in the island. They also saw themselves as part of a cosmopolitan vanguard poised to bring forth a new age. Before they could attend international congresses, Spiritists bought and published journals and read treatises, most notably those of Allan Kardec (born Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, 1803-1869), a Frenchman who systematized communications from celestial brethren to offer scientific proof of life after death in an inter-planetary realm. Through these publications, Puerto Ricans kept up to date about organizational developments and experimental advances in European and American capitals. They rallied around the promise of science and a powerful anti-clerical rhetoric. The Church was to them an institutional enemy and a symbol of backwardness; it stood for the dogmatic abuse of reason and the denial of the rights of modern citizenship, most notably the individual’s freedoms of thought and expression.⁵

Most Spiritists understood their practices as a philosophy or discipline, rather than a religion as such. Instead of beliefs, Spiritists maintained that they shared a methodology for studying the spiritual world. All the same, Kardec’s *Book of the Spirits* (1856) and his subsequent volumes put forth a series of principles that Spiritists regarded both as experimental findings and as the culmination of the Christian message. The most notable among these held that (1) the soul was immortal; (2) that there were multiple, inhabited worlds, just as there were multiple lives; (3) that souls perfected themselves over a long series of incarnations; and, finally, (4) that communication between those incarnated on Earth and spirits in other worlds could be carried out through mediums. Indeed, Kardec held that spirits and the living could help each other in attaining progress. Because incarnated human beings carried with them both the lessons and the karmic debts they acquired in past lives, and because they remained susceptible to influence from high and lowly spirits, progress depended on charity, moral education, and, to a lesser extent, healing. The spirits, if unenlightened, could arrest people’s progress, but would afford human beings an opportunity to act charitably in their aid and to advance in that manner. If evolved, spirits would assist human beings by sharing their wisdom and also by availing them of their healing magnetic fluids.

Spirit-Mongers

Puerto Rican Spiritists celebrated the arrival of the twentieth century (and the inauguration of a new political regime) with expectations of unfettered technological gains, political democracy, and the secularization of religious fiefdoms. During the first decade of the century, Spiritists had reasons to feel optimistic. Their institutions—centers, hospitals, orphanages, libraries, and a federation founded in 1903—grew at a swift pace. Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón, a leading Unionist politician and a tireless propagandist of Kardec’s doctrines, scored repeated victories at the ballot box. Spiritists were confident that the struggles to reform gender relations, end the death penalty, ban alcohol, and offer lay education and medical services to all would finally usher the modern age they had awaited for decades. And they found hope in international developments, too. Though seemingly unaware of Torre de la Haya’s work in Peru, Spiritists in Puerto Rico welcomed Camille Flammarion’s widely reported experimental “discoveries,” Madero’s reforms in Mexico, and spirit communications from all corners reassuring them that the future was at hand.⁶

Nonetheless, Spiritism remained vulnerable. Even among reform-minded modernizers, Kardec’s teachings never attained full respectability. The ascent of positivism made Spiritist doctrines appear as a fanciful mysticism, since they posited the existence of a realm that could not be apprehended through the senses. Nor were Spiritist efforts to produce positive proof of their tenets entirely persuasive. Equally troubling was Spiritism’s tendency to inspire what critics and lukewarm sympathizers both regarded as religious mistakes among the untutored. As early as 1878, Francisco del Valle Atilas warned in *El Buscapié* that while Spiritism was a good doctrine, it was already becoming popular among poor and uneducated people who were distorting it to its detriment.⁷

Lest usurpers bring discredit to Kardec’s philosophy, learned adherents assayed to distinguish between true Spiritists (*espiritistas*) and those they would denounce as spirit-mongers (*espiriteros*). This distinction was built in the fashion of the *ciudad letrada*. In many respects, the difference was a fragile one, and it was conjured discursively without being fully realized materially. As Spiritist journals emphasized, true Spiritists were educated, rational, and scientific. Spirit-mongers were afflicted with backwardness (*atraso*). The most visible symptoms of this state included ignorance, evident in illiteracy and in the use of uncouth language in speech and spirit communications; superstition, manifest in the use of candles, icons, altars, and holy water; and less directly, in blackness, which many Spiritists associated with primitiveness and spiritual immaturity.⁸

Unlike their counterparts elsewhere, most notably Brazil, Puerto Rican Spiritists proved more effective as conjurers of utopias than as builders of enduring institutions.⁹ By the 1920s, the organizational momentum of Spiritism was waning, and the science-religion sat on the unstable ground between orthodox experimental disciplines and the ill repute of popular “superstition.” While advocates could still claim the support of some experts, charges that Spiritism was not a proper science and that many practitioners were profit-driven fakes were never silenced. The one hundred and fifty Spiritist organizations reportedly operating in the island in 1923 gave signs of being past their prime.¹⁰ Nothing that the president of the Federation of Spiritists of Puerto Rico, dentist Francisco Ponte Jiménez, could write in *El Libro de Puerto Rico* regarding the advance of Spiritism could change the facts. Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón had died. *El Iris de Paz* and *El Buen Sentido*, two leading Spiritist journals, had both folded. Other publications were launched in the 1920s and 1930s,

but they did not bring Spiritism out of its slump. By 1934 the Federation had so deteriorated that the entire board of directors was replaced following charges that the incumbents had been “passive” for too long. Once more, those who remained in the Federation suggested that the revitalization of Spiritism demanded that “black occultism” and *curanderismo* be condemned.¹¹

Ironically, La Samaritana, a healer of the sort that Spiritists had long dismissed as a spirit-monger, emerged as one of the few visible signs of Spiritist vitality in the early 1920s. Although the religious character of La Samaritana’s ministry was never precisely clear (and some, including the healer’s family, maintain that hers was a lay Catholic mission of the sort that became popular in the island after 1898), many Spiritist leaders claimed the healer as their own.¹² To these Spiritists, La Samaritana’s enormous popularity signaled that the movement was not defeated in spite of its institutional decline; progress was still possible.¹³ When the Federation celebrated its assembly in 1922, the organizers made sure that the healer from San Lorenzo found the way to San Juan’s Municipal Theater, where she was honored in spite of public criticism from journalists and physicians and protests from a group of dissident Spiritists, who saw in the healer a return to the irrational ways of old. Though a divisive presence, La Samaritana helped to reinvigorate the Spiritist movement. Soon after the crowds began congregating around La Samaritana, Federation leaders predicted that the number of Spiritists would surpass those of every other denomination in the eastern region of the island.¹⁴

There is nothing exceptionally unusual about the dynamics of rejection and appropriation surrounding La Samaritana. Scholars of religion have long been aware that cleavages of this sort commonly separate popular from official religiosity.¹⁵ Spiritists elsewhere have also been known to condemn and elevate exotic figures simultaneously. A Mexican healer known as Santa Teresa (Teresa de Urrea, 1873-1906) was forced to flee Mexico for the United States during the late porfiriato. She was reputed to have inspired several rebellions, notably an 1891 Tarahumara uprising in Tomochic. After moving to Arizona and Texas, Urrea continued to attract thousands of pilgrims, many of whom opposed Diaz. By the early 1900s, however, Teresa had left the border region. For a few years she continued to effect widely reported cures on stages throughout the U.S., but later desisted, saying that her promoters had exploited the public.¹⁶

During the first decades of the twentieth century, numerous healers, many of whom were also prophets and local leaders, emerged amid public controversy throughout the Caribbean, to say nothing of their famed Brazilian counterparts. In the southwestern Dominican Republic, Olivorio Mateo, better known as Dios Olivorio, suffered over a decade of persecution (1910-1922) at the hands of Dominican and American authorities and was ultimately killed along with two dozen of his followers. Journalists expressed relief that the disgraceful *olivoristas* and the obstacle to progress they represented finally had been cleared. Though he was affiliated with local *caudillos*, the suspicion that he harbored political ambitions of his own always surrounded Olivorio. Closer in spirit and practice to La Samaritana was perhaps Cuba’s Antoñica Izquierdo, a hydrotherapist from Pinar de Río who attracted multitudes of *guajiros* and who also ran afoul of the authorities when it was learned in 1936 that she had urged women not to take part in electoral politics.¹⁷ Although the particulars vary, scholars have regarded most of these healers as instances of resistance to modernization and state-building. These figures also have been thought to personify the distances separating, official, urban religious practices and rural sensibilities. While I do not disagree with those interpretations,

the account below seeks to interrogate precisely how the barriers between learned Spiritism and popular spirit-mongering were erected; Spiritists' ambivalent attitudes to race played a prominent role in this effort. Moreover, I aim to show that La Samaritana's practices implied a re-working of modernizing *afanes*, rather than a wholesale rejection of the project that the architects of the *ciudad letrada* sketched. La Samaritana's treatments were aimed at healing supplicants and Puerto Rican society at large. However, instead of seeking to eradicate all maladies, as modern reformers and physicians hoped, La Samaritana attempted to harness affliction to morally transformative ends. Paraphrasing freely from Victor Turner's classic ethnography, I argue that La Samaritana understood healing as an operation within a complex economy of affliction.¹⁸

My aim, then, is not simply to call attention to the racist underpinnings of Spiritism. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones has brought those into plain view and has shown that the Spiritist doctrine of transmigration that inspired Ortiz's transculturation concept was founded on a hierarchical understanding of progress and race.¹⁹ Kardec maintained that souls perfected themselves gradually over the course of multiple lives or incarnations. But he relegated souls incarnated in black bodies, especially those of Africans, to the lower rungs of the ladder of progress. This would pose a problem for La Samaritana's Spiritist supporters, who had to explain whether it was possible for a truly superior spirit to manifest itself through a dark-skinned *jibara*.

Besides putting on stage the racial drama staged around La Samaritana, I want to examine the relationship between Spiritists and so-called spirit-mongers as an instance that speaks to the shortcomings of the transculturation or syncretism model, as it is usually deployed to explain the development of Spiritism in its "folk" versus "scientific" or "Kardecist" variants. In her influential works on Puerto Rican Spiritism, Joan Koss has argued that the Spiritist cult emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century among anti-clerical and anti-Spanish, liberal professionals who sought reforms but who eschewed revolutionary upheavals. According to Koss, neither Kardec nor his first disciples in the island placed much emphasis on healing as such. That would come later, with the intervention of "lower class Puerto Ricans who adopted that [healing] aspect almost immediately, syncretizing Kardecist beliefs and practices with the traditional techniques of healing and Catholic modalities."²⁰ Although I concede readily that the principles of what I am calling the economy of affliction could function as a bridge between various constituencies and religious practices in the island, the events in San Lorenzo complicate the story: They remind us, first, that Spiritist doctrine did not trickle down the social pyramid unopposed; and second, that practices originating at the bottom were also taken up at the top once their origins had been obscured. Those who thought of themselves as true Spiritists denounced spirit-mongers as corrupting the doctrine. But the distinction between Spiritists and spirit-mongers should not be taken for granted.

Julia Vázquez, La Samaritana

In the spring and summer of 1922, thousands of pilgrims and novelty seekers traveled on foot, horseback, and truck-beds to a distant spot high in the mountains of the town of San Lorenzo. The travelers were mostly latter-day *jibaros*, rural people who had joined the island's expanding agro-proletariat. Most came seeking the promise of cures, bringing along their ailing relatives and carrying on hammocks those who could not walk on account of their age or afflictions. On the way, they assisted the *desabuciados*, those suffering from conditions that physicians had declared beyond

hope. Their destination was a horse ranch and farm in barrio Hato, where crowds of as many as ten thousand people waited patiently for a group meeting with Julia Vázquez (1893-1986).²¹

The talented *médica* had been growing in her neighbors' esteem for several years without attracting media attention.²² Known locally as "*La Niñita*" (lit. little girl), by the time the multitudes began to arrive at her doorstep, Vázquez was a single woman in her late twenties. Though it is difficult to determine precisely how her talents were interpreted at the earliest stages, the title *médica*, which translated literally means physician, might offer some indication. Those congregating in barrio Hato reportedly favored it over the generic *curander(a)* or healer, *santiguador(a)*, a specialist who cured by means of prayers, oils and abdominal rubs, or *curiosos*, a term which designated self-taught medical practitioners. The word *médica* linked Vázquez to earlier figures, giving her a lineage that made her recognizable to her following and deplorable in critics' eyes. To the latter, the new healer was only the latest manifestation of Puerto Ricans' unrepentant "superstition," a term they brandished as a weapon. Vázquez reminded them, for instance, of the "Médica de Puerta de Tierra," a woman who had achieved notoriety in 1914 when she performed surgeries by means of magnetic hand passes. Seeing in Vázquez no more than a variation on a recurring folly, Dr. Armaíz, a physician from Vega Baja wondered just how badly this new *médica* would tarnish Puerto Rico's reputation as a civilized country. The fact that the women's appeal was not limited to the ignorant struck the doctor as a particularly stinging indictment:

What will they say of us as a civilized people? Are there a people among whom the majority, not only of the ignorant but also of those who pride themselves on some culture, can be deceived with greater ease? Can there be a people who having just suffered deceit fall victim to the very same treachery?²³

Dr. Armaíz aside, there were differences between the two *médicas*. Vázquez did not perform spiritual surgery. Still, she achieved a prominence that far surpassed her predecessor's. By 1922 Julia Vázquez's name had begun to echo far beyond San Lorenzo, as the press took notice of the gatherings at the property where she lived with her family of tenant farmers (*agregados*).²⁴ Stories of her feats made their way across the island. It was said that "La Samaritana," as she was now dubbed in news items, communicated with spirits. It was said too that she performed miracles and healed the sick using only water.

Word of mouth and the unrelenting attention of journalists ensured that La Samaritana would become one of the most widely publicized figures of her day. Features in newspapers and magazines documented in detail the goings on in barrio Hato. Supporters and detractors debated the healer's merits in letters, editorials, and columns. Vázquez was even the subject of an early blockbuster in Puerto Rican cinema, the unimaginatively titled *La Samaritana de San Lorenzo*. The popularity of Coll and Co.'s film was such that when it premiered in San Juan's Rialto Theater in late July 1922, ticket sales had to be suspended. The throng of moviegoers swelled to such proportions that it blocked traffic along a main avenue.²⁵ Even on film, La Samaritana was apt to disturb order.

La Samaritana's reception was as varied as the roster of travelers and pilgrims making their way to barrio Hato would suggest. Crowds grew especially thick

on Thursdays and Fridays, the days that Vázquez's spirit guides had designated for her public work. Journalists and self-styled investigators; society ladies, politicians, and physicians; blacks, whites, and people of many hues; Catholics, Protestants, Spiritists, and those who, in the words of an observer, seemed to have "forgotten" their formal religious affiliations came in droves to see the young woman.²⁶

La Samaritana's first and most sympathetic audience consisted of the rural poor, who rallied around her as they had done earlier with such prophetic figures as the Cheos, members of a brotherhood of lay itinerant preachers, and Elenita, the Virgin Mary incarnate who lived in San Lorenzo between 1899-1909 and with whom Vázquez was identified at times.²⁷ *Jibaros* had good reasons to see La Samaritana as one of their own. Like much of the rural population, Julia Vázquez was illiterate. She began to work at a young age as a seamstress and later took a job in town at a tobacco factory. In these respects at least, she was emblematic of the lot of many women of her class and generation who sought wage-paying labor as the rural order of old collapsed.

Although I would not want to argue that La Samaritana owed her popularity primarily to a crisis in the rural world, as the most influential functionalist accounts of millennialism and prophetism would suggest, one must acknowledge that the early 1920s were hard times indeed.²⁸ During this period, agricultural laborers in Puerto Rico's mountains were faced with the collapse of the coffee economy and the loss of the precarious autonomy that this crop had allowed them. As investments poured into the region from the United States, tobacco also ceased to offer an alternative to industrial capital and its labor regime. In San Lorenzo, where large farms, cigar factories, and U.S. tobacco trusts were dominant, 19th-century arrangements eroded swiftly. To La Samaritana and those around her, the new economic and political orders brought some improvements, especially in infrastructure and public health, and also new forms of marginalization, proletarianization, and militancy. Between 1919 and 1921 more than one hundred strikes involving 30,000 workers broke out throughout the island.²⁹ Thousands of displaced men sought refuge in the growing cities and in the U.S. armed forces.³⁰ Recruiting stations throughout rural Puerto Rico made men in uniform a common sign of the times, a trend that may help explain the prominence of soldiers in La Samaritana's early visions.

But it would be facile to suggest that La Samaritana attracted multitudes simply because she shared the plight of the majority. One need only recall that there were numerous healers with close ties to those they served who never achieved celebrity.³¹ Several factors made the difference with the *médica* from San Lorenzo. Media attention combined with improved transportation and roadways to give her a broad sphere of influence. But the media's and the public's interest owed a good deal to the intervention of the group of Spiritists that included several Federation leaders who orchestrated a skillful propaganda campaign in La Samaritana's favor. Under the guidance of Juan Jiménez García, an ex-president of the Federation, they held press conferences, staged rallies, and distributed leaflets. Enterprising companies like the National Photo Novelty Sales Agency soon joined in, selling buttons and postcards with the healer's likeness.³² This campaign and the counter-claims it called forth made of barrio Hato a discursive battleground, where the state of civilization in Puerto Rico and the island's prospects for social regeneration were debated. Finally, La Samaritana's own understanding of illness and the therapies that derived from it help explain her remarkable popularity. She appealed to multiple constituencies, ranging from Spiritists, to so-called folk Catholics, to freethinkers of various descriptions.

For all the commotion, La Samaritana's was a minimalist kind of hydrotherapy. She treated her patients with prescriptions of *agua fluidizada*, a practice well known to Spiritists everywhere and familiar to Puerto Ricans at least since the last decade of the nineteenth century. As early as 1892, Dr. Manuel Guzmán Rodríguez, a physician from Añasco, denounced Spiritism as an attempt to restore medieval customs. The doctor claimed the use of magnetized water mimicked practices involving holy water.³³

Unlike Catholics, who regarded the springs in apparition sites as having been blessed by a divine presence, many Spiritists viewed water as a vehicle for the transmission of natural, magnetic currents. They disavowed miracles and denied the involvement of divine persons. All the same, the *medicina* dispensed in barrio Hato was redolent with meanings for Catholics, too. The water that La Samaritana dispensed was procured from springs (a feature found routinely in country shrines in Puerto Rico and elsewhere) near her home and was later "magnetized" while the *médica* was in communication with her guide, a spirit identified as none other than San Lorenzo's old parish priest. Visitors then took the water home and did what both Spiritists and Catholics had been accustomed to doing with healing water: they drank it; applied it on compresses; or rubbed it over ailing parts according to their own needs, or to the regimen the healer prescribed. Those who could not make the trip had neighbors and relatives bring back containers filled with water.

Whereas allopathic physicians and their supporters ultimately aimed to eliminate suffering, La Samaritana saw afflictions as opportunities to transcend frailty and sin and to access unearthly realms. Rather than seeking the eradication of affliction, La Samaritana's practice was an effort to re-deploy it. Those healed in barrio Hato surpassed the limits of the order that appeared natural in order to attain physical health. But the treatment implied more than that; it was also an intervention in favor of moral regeneration and spiritual advancement for society.

Though La Samaritana appealed to Catholics accustomed to offering up their suffering to the divine in the context of pilgrimages and the fulfillment of promises to the saints, her proposal did not strike supporters as traditionalist. Many Spiritists embraced La Samaritana precisely because they saw in her practice the ethos of self-improvement that enveloped their movement.³⁴ In their eyes, La Samaritana stood for progress.

While it seems clear that the principles of the economy of affliction cut across multiple faiths and practices, La Samaritana represented more than eclecticism. Rather than reconciling Catholic and Spiritist notions of health, affliction, and regeneration, La Samaritana revealed that when it came to healing there was a plurality of understandings at work. These intersecting notions could engage in dialogue as easily as they could lapse into conflict. Barrio Hato's attractiveness resided in its polysemantic practices rather than in its ability to amalgamate. The point has been made before, but it remains significant especially because scholars have written of the dynamics surrounding health, sanitation, and healing after 1898, as characterized by the confrontation of two approaches: American health policy and Puerto Rican traditions. The latter are often presented as a relatively undifferentiated mix of *curanderismo*, Spiritism, and folk-Catholicism rather than as a plural and conflict-ridden field in its own right.³⁵

La Samaritana as an Obstacle to Progress

The first to call Vázquez "La Samaritana" seems to have been a critic who likened the springs of barrio Hato to Jacob's well and compared the *médica* to the Samaritan

woman from whom Christ received a drink of water.³⁶ The commentator did not mean to elevate the *médica* to biblical stature. On the contrary, he referred to her as a “modern-day Samaritan” in an effort to insinuate that Vázquez was promiscuous and hence unworthy of the public’s trust. The Samaritan of the bible story was a woman of suspect virtue.³⁷ The new name stuck and soon displaced Vázquez’s other titles. But the smear strategy failed. Vázquez’s followers appropriated “La Samaritana,” transforming the soubriquet into an honorific.

Since there was nothing to indicate La Samaritana’s lack of chastity, one might wonder why her critic sought to discredit her in this particular way. The answer to that question has to do with the ways in which class, gender, color, and public health policies intersected to sustain the order prevailing in Puerto Rico around the time of World War I. La Samaritana was a poor woman of color who walked into the limelight only a few years after the conclusion of a fierce and controversial anti-prostitution campaign. In the final months of 1918 more than one thousand women, many them poor and non-white, were arrested in police sweeps.³⁸ As concern with sexually dangerous women reached its peak, working-class radicals in the Federación Libre de Trabajadores, a leading labor organization that included a significant number of female tobacco workers like Vázquez, took up the defense of prostitutes against what they perceived as an unconstitutional, anti-worker crackdown. To suggest that Vázquez was promiscuous was to do more than to discredit her personally: It was to associate her with a group of women that public officials regarded as a health hazard and a moral scourge. It was also to go beyond denying Vázquez’s ability to heal to say that she was responsible for the spread of the very maladies that authorities aimed to eradicate.

To many critics, La Samaritana’s color lent further credence to the charges of dissoluteness. The unhealthful libidinousness of *negras* and *mulatas* was a truism of 19th-century arts and thought. Since the 1880s *letrados* like Salvador Brau and Francisco del Valle Atilas had blamed the island’s backward and unsanitary condition on blacks, who they likened to parasites, on anemic “white” peasant women, and on miscegenation. As Benigno Trigo shows, this formulation downplayed the sanitary threat that the *letrados* themselves posed to colonial officials and secured for the first a position of indirect authority as guardians of public health.³⁹ Needless to say, such constructions also precluded the possibility of finding health through a *jíbara* of color.

Ironically, La Samaritana’s race was itself the subject of disputes. It seems that the observers colored or lightened her according to their opinions of her ministry. La Samaritana’s detractors described her as black and homely.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, her defenders insisted that photographs made La Samaritana appear darker than she truly was. Vázquez herself seems to have remained silent on the issue; she did not claim an identity predicated upon her color and never mobilized a following along racial lines.

Timing complicated matters for La Samaritana in other ways, too. These were years of political turmoil. Puerto Rican women, including noted Spiritists like Rosario Bellber, had begun to agitate for suffrage, black Puerto Ricans were making political demands through the Republican and Socialist parties, and labor was displaying an unprecedented strength. And all this was occurring well within sight of barrio Hato. In 1920, shortly before the general elections and only two years before the mass gatherings in barrio Hato, workers in San Lorenzo’s tobacco and sugar industries struck for better salaries and improved working conditions. Much to the exasperation of owners, the Socialist Party assisted the strikers. The electoral ballots cast in San Lorenzo show that the workers reciprocated the favor. Although the Unionists won the election, Socialists took the second largest block of votes. In 1924,

the Socialists consolidated their gains with a second-place showing island-wide.⁴¹

La Samaritana's emergence precisely when labor and socialism were making such strides aroused suspicions of politicking in the guise of religion. In July 1922, at the height of La Samaritana's popularity, Spiritists and socialists launched in Caguas a simultaneous series of propaganda and recruitment meetings.⁴² The coincidence was not lost upon critics, who accused La Samaritana of serving partisan interests. Some even contended that socialists and Spiritists were responsible for retarding Puerto Rico's progress and condemned them both:

Puerto Rico shows ample progress in everything, except in Socialism and Spiritism. The socialist and Spiritist tricksters walk across valleys and mountains exploiting that rural part of our country where illiteracy still reigns. They take advantage of the lack of awareness of the mindless masses and create a cult . . .[.]⁴³

But opposition to La Samaritana involved more than timing. Journalists, physicians, health officials, and many Spiritists would have found Vázquez objectionable even in the absence of socialist advances and anti-prostitution campaigns. La Samaritana's activities were disruptive enough on their own terms. Vázquez literally caused the social margins to overflow their proper channels. Residents of Barceloneta complained that an alarming number of panhandlers had come to town asking for money to go to San Lorenzo. In May 1922, "a true rain of beggars" also struck Caguas, a town located at a convenient stopping point on the route to the springs. The unwelcome travelers plagued pedestrians, interfered with commerce, and disturbed offices and places of industry. The homeless presence precisely in the streets of Caguas must have appeared especially insolent. Not long before the undesirables came, the town had inaugurated a much applauded shelter and enacted new anti-vagrancy regulations.⁴⁴

These mobilizations, disruptive though they were, posed no immediate threats to the state and its capacity to govern. More than with what they did, critics were concerned with what Julia and her followers *said* about Puerto Rico and its people. In their estimation, La Samaritana was a symptom of an ailing society that could not leave the afflictions of the past behind. Her success suggested that the goals of civilizing and modernizing the island were far from being realized. In an opinion piece titled "Irresponsibility and Superstition," Angel Archilla Cabrera voiced with unusual virulence the feelings of the learned for those they regarded as derailing progress. The text alerts us to the fact that for some, this derision was connected to the *letrados'* need to defend themselves from those who appeared civilized. It also makes clear that the frustration of the *letrados* had to do with superstition's tendency to repeat itself:

In Puerto Rico we are frequently afflicted with intense fevers of irresponsibility and superstition. It would seem as if shadows sought the gloomy abyss to produce a horrifying catastrophe, planting [the seeds of] death and desolation everywhere . . . [.]

That tourist who comes here with his KODAK to contemplate our imponderable natural beauties and to observe the collective culture of the Puerto Rican people: what does he think of us when he stumbles upon these utopian, cabalistic spectacles in the mountains, the valleys or the cities?⁴⁵

La Samaritana finds a sponsor

Had it not been for Juan Jiménez García, most Spiritists would have dismissed the *médica* out of hand. But Jiménez was a well-regarded leader who presided over the Federation in 1919-1920 and who happened to be commissioner of Public Works and Services in Caguas at the time of the mass gatherings in barrio Hato. In 1920 Jiménez also had presided “La Defensa,” a short-lived *central* that sugar growers (*colonos*) established in Caguas to “defend” themselves from the low prices paid at the region’s dominant sugar mill.⁴⁶ Jiménez was also a firm believer in La Samaritana’s talents and a skilled propagandist. He contacted the papers routinely to advise them of positive developments at the “Fountain of Health” and to spin stories in favor of Spiritism. Jiménez was also an important presence at the gatherings in barrio Hato. Critics charged that he had appointed himself stage director. They noted that he addressed pilgrims before Vázquez and that he used this opportunity to attack Catholicism and urge people to embrace Spiritism.⁴⁷

As one might expect, some sectors of the Church reacted with outrage. Clergymen, who by then must have been accustomed to the anti-clericalism of Spiritists, warned parishioners once again to stay away from Spiritist literature and meetings, and launched a campaign to counter the Spiritist offensive. In Caguas Redemptorist priests along with the Knights of Columbus and the Damas Isabelinas, two conservative lay organizations identified with the elite, initiated an “oral crusade” condemning Spiritism and La Samaritana. By the end of the summer, a low-intensity leaflet war had broken out; anonymous flyers were discrediting one faith or the other, listing the names of people who had been cured, or disputing such claims circulated throughout the region.⁴⁸

Physicians and others connected to the health care business took part in these skirmishes. A man identified only as Suárez, who owned Farmacia Campo Alegre in Caguas, wrote to the papers to defend himself from allegations that he had circulated a flyer criticizing Jiménez and La Samaritana. Pharmacists in Guayama complained that water from San Lorenzo had caused medicine sales to drop sharply. However, there were those who took more conciliatory approaches. Instead of issuing public denunciations, an unidentified druggist from Arroyo hung a sign on his shop that read: “I prepare prescriptions with water from San Lorenzo.” After that, sales reportedly picked up.⁴⁹

Protestant responses to La Samaritana appear muted by comparison. None of the leading critics identified themselves as such and there were reports that Protestants could be found in the crowds in barrio Hato alongside Catholics and those who identified as Spiritists. But this should not be mistaken for a Protestant endorsement of La Samaritana’s ministry. Protestant leaders of multiple denominations were on the record as opponents of pilgrimages, which they regarded as spiritually bankrupt, and they were vocal critics of attempts to communicate with spirits, which some condemned for spreading superstitious beliefs and demonic influences.⁵⁰

Although critics of Spiritism accused Jiménez of opportunism, it is likely that Jiménez was a convinced follower of La Samaritana. Of course, interest and conviction may have coincided, too. One thing is clear, however: Whether responding to principle or opportunism, La Samaritana’s appeal was such that many of the Spiritist leaders charged with safeguarding the doctrine from would-be usurpers felt inclined to embrace her. It seems then, that Spiritist practices were not as strictly divided into “high” and “low” as those who distinguished between Spiritists and spirit-mongers would lead scholars to believe. When it came to La Samaritana, differences had to be reiterated and policed, lest they collapse and leave Spiritists vulnerable to criticisms from the Catholic Church, Protestants, and scientific authorities.

A Club of Spiritist Detractors

Timely as La Samaritana's rise may have been, not all Spiritists sided with Jiménez. Spiritists were sharply divided over La Samaritana's mediumship. For them, any final determination of the truthfulness of the cures and of the value of the spirit communications received in barrio Hato turned on the level of progress achieved by the spirit speaking through Vázquez. Was he a superior spirit of light, or an ignorant spirit from a lowly sphere? As Spiritists understood it, careless contact with lowly spirits posed the risk of moral contagion and degeneration; it could even reduce Spiritists to mere spirit-mongers.

A few months after La Samaritana first came to public attention, a commission from Aguadilla's Club de Estudios Psicológicos Ramón Emeterio Betances took it upon itself to investigate the events taking place in San Lorenzo.⁵¹ In its much publicized report, the commission found that although the *médica* appeared well intentioned, and though she was under the guidance of a knowledgeable Spiritist, she was an ignorant neophyte and possibly the victim of profit seekers. Although Kardec denied the existence of hell, the commissioners determined that "infernal influences toyed" with La Samaritana and that her "works were dangerous to [people's] health because the character of the spirit operating in the magnetization of the water was unknown." Although a few Catholic priests had embraced Spiritism publicly, and although communications from priests were familiar to Spiritists, the commission did not believe that the magnetization was the doing of Father Joaquín Saras, San Lorenzo's old parish priest, as others maintained.⁵² Instead, the commissioners suggested that the spirit behaved in a manner consistent with the basest sorts described in Kardec's writings. The first evidence for this had to do with language. They noted that the spirit addressed them in a coarse way. He threatened and lashed out, saying only: "Nobody destroys the Father's work."⁵³

The club's report was met with a flurry of responses. Dozens of Spiritists and other sympathetic commentators wrote to the papers and called for a dispassionate, "scientific" investigation before censures were issued. Their arguments were varied and resourceful. Some suggested that lowly spirits had duped the commission itself. Some attempted to discredit the report as mere "personal opinion." Others challenged the report and those who viewed La Samaritana as a drag on the island's progress by moving the confrontation to the terrain of comparisons. In a typical anti-clerical blow, they argued that barrio Hato was superior to the Catholic complex in Lourdes, where pilgrims were exploited routinely.⁵⁴

The most persuasive of La Samaritana's advocates were not content to pick apart the club's report; they presented counter-evidence from their own readings of Kardec and from spirit communications. Among the first group, one notable was Ramón Negrón Flores, a journalist and Río Piedras politician who presided the Federation for seven years (1915-1918 and 1934-37). While Negrón never endorsed La Samaritana, he refused to dismiss her. Instead, he echoed Kardec's argument that "mediumship [was] a physiological condition of being that has nothing to do with the medium's mental preparation, moral culture, opinions, or beliefs."⁵⁵ Negrón Flores's reaction was especially damaging to the club's case because its commission had named him, along with Dr. Ponte Jiménez, among the very men who should judge La Samaritana scientifically.

Rosario Bellber, a suffragist leader and director of the Red Cross who succeeded Ponte to the Federation's top post, took issue with those who denied the effectiveness of barrio Hato's waters and those who impugned Vázquez, a "humble

medium” elected to a “sacred mission.” Besides collecting testimonies of cures, Bellber reported that her own father had taken water from barrio Hato and that it certainly had healing properties.⁵⁶

But the most forceful endorsement of La Samaritana came by way of the spirits themselves. Dr. Ponte Jiménez, famed among Spiritists as a man of experimental science, put the question of the guide’s identity to a medium. Following a series of inquiries, a spirit confirmed that La Samaritana was indeed blessed with “beautiful faculties.” During those “apparent attacks,” the spirit said, she was taken by a priest “who was a pastor of that parish and who now wants to be hers, so that he may guide with his advise and new lights, that part of humanity that he once led in the opposite direction.”⁵⁷

Father Joaquín Saras, or whatever spirit spoke through La Samaritana when she addressed club members, was remarkably well informed. Rather than submitting to the examination, he questioned the investigators’ authority to pass judgments. Vázquez, or rather, the spirit, reminded the commissioners of a scandal that had embarrassed their club in 1921, noting that unlike them, La Samaritana did not charge for her services nor did she trick people.⁵⁸ The commission was forced to defend itself in the press.

Progress and the color of the soul

The debate on these matters was more than an esoteric diversion. Although La Samaritana’s detractors were never explicit about the connecting line they drew between blackness and spiritual backwardness, a pronouncement on the topic was unnecessary. La Samaritana’s supporters suspected that there was a racist and elitist impetus behind the allegations regarding the baseness of the guiding spirit. Leandro Sitiriche, a Spiritist who wrote frequently for newspapers, censured the critics, argued that what preoccupied them was not the identity of the guide or the possibility of fraud. The question that truly plagued critics was: “What will be of science if it is superseded by the quackery of a black nobody?”⁵⁹

La Samaritana brought to the surface many of the contradictions in the Spiritists’ understanding of race. The doctrine of reincarnation, which proposed that spirits pass from one life and body to another in accordance with a law of perpetual progress, had a limited potential for destabilizing extant racial hierarchies. Reincarnation as Spiritists understood it denied the geneticist basis for racial determinism. In *The Genesis*, Kardec claimed that: “Reincarnation destroys the prejudices of race and caste, since the same Spirit may be reborn in wealth or in poverty, be a great lord or a proletariat, free or a slave, a man or a woman[.]” “Men,” Kardec added, “are not born inferior or subordinated except by their bodies; by their Spirits they are equal and free.”⁶⁰

On the basis of these pronouncements, Puerto Rican Spiritists nourished a vision of racial harmony well before La Samaritana began to preoccupy them. For instance, during the Federation’s assembly of 1908, mediums reported seeing above the stage a pair of interlocking hands, one white and the other black. Above the hands, Kardec’s portrait appeared and a sun sent out its rays onto the assembly.⁶¹

Dramatic as it was, this vision offered an incomplete picture of Spiritists’ ambivalent attitudes to blackness. After pronouncing race ephiphenomenal, Kardec took pains to limit the consequences of his doctrines. While maintaining that race itself was contingent and transitory, he espoused an evolutionist notion of racial difference that could serve as an apologia for colonialism. In *The Book of Spirits*, for instance, he cited a celestial brother who explained the peculiar bond between spirits and bodies:

In primitive peoples, as you call them, matter dominates over the Spirit; they allow brute instincts to take over. . . [.] Moreover, those peoples whose development is imperfect are generally under the rule of Spirits that are equally imperfect, which are sympathetic to them, until other more advanced peoples destroy or ameliorate that influence.⁶²

Puerto Rican Spiritists shared Kardec's ambivalence. Although Kardec's writings predisposed them to suspect certain practitioners, neither blackness nor class disadvantage led inevitably to dismissal from the ranks of Spiritism. Spiritists were sincere when they spoke of fraternal bonds with those they aimed to uplift through their programs. Occasionally, they worked alongside black leaders such as Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, a member of the board of *El Iris de Paz*.⁶³ But such conviviality operated within limits. In a 1902 editorial for the same journal, titled "Color and other social differences," Agustina Guffain reminded readers that it was "indispensable to maintain distinctions based on the better or worse fulfillment of duties and on the greater or lesser degree of dignity with which we adorn our acts." After alerting readers to their responsibility to assist less fortunate souls, Guffain proclaimed:

Let the blindfolds fall off those who hate and let the lights of love shine. Let us imitate Jesus. Pity Judas and let us never forget this sentence from the wise rationalist doctrine: "All souls are white."⁶⁴

La Samaritana illustrates how Guffain's dictum could work in practice: all souls may have been white, but dark skin remained evidence of things not seen. To heed Kardec's admonition that "broad features and thick lips... could never accommodate the delicate modulations of a distinguished Spirit," Spiritists could demand that La Samaritana place herself under the tutelage of her superiors to safeguard against spirit-mongering, or they could dismiss her.⁶⁵ Jiménez and other Federation leaders chose the first option, while club members opted for the second alternative.

The debate surrounding La Samaritana illustrates some uses of racial differentiation in 1920s Puerto Rico. When faced with an apparent recrudescence of backwardness, Spiritists proclaimed the universal whiteness of the soul, but re-asserted the distinction between proper Spiritists and spirit-mongers. That construction rested partly on a theory of racial differences that relegated black bodies and the spirits they incarnated to the lower levels of evolution. In proposing this, Spiritists removed obstacles to progress that appeared insurmountable. Superstition was not reasserting itself; it only appeared that way when those at different levels of progress to perfection were judged against one another. Distinguishing between Spiritists and so-called *espiriteros* served another purpose, too: It cleared Spiritists from the charge that they encouraged "superstition."

Everybody loves progress

Spiritist critics of La Samaritana were convinced that she knew nothing of science and was opposed to progress. However, the events in barrio Hato suggest that when it came to such things, the differences between Spiritists and spirit-mongers were far from clear-cut. Neither La Samaritana nor her supporters ever disavowed modern medicine or experimental science. On the contrary, Jiménez and the Spiritists who defended the healer attempted to secure the prestige of scientific knowledge. They

urged studies “by [unprejudiced] men of scientific orthodoxy” as the surest way to safeguard La Samaritana’s ministry.⁶⁶

Self-anointed, “scientific” Spiritists could argue that La Samaritana’s treatments shared a good deal with Catholic and popular practices that were already discredited for their reportedly inherent hostility to progress. The works of the seemingly backward economy of affliction were as visible in La Samaritana’s own history as they were in the careers of the island’s lay preachers and prophets. Vázquez ministry began after an illness and a long period of unconsciousness whose causes physicians could not determine. Her recovery required the assistance of a *curioso*, who prayed for the patient without prescribing medication. After these prayers, Vázquez regained consciousness. She sat on her bed, called for her godfather, and relayed to him a series of spirit communications. This inaugurated La Samaritana’s public work and brought to her home the first seekers.

The early communications were dream-like visions in which images of war and affliction were prominent. In one of these, Vázquez found herself on a mountain. Nearby, someone made bricks under a mango tree. Others plowed a precarious plot of land. Looking up, Vázquez saw people singing in a poor house. The residents were celebrating a child’s baptism, but they were also mourning him. When she asked why they cried, they responded: “Because we know the end of which he was born.” Soon after, Vázquez witnessed a distressing montage that she interpreted as confirmation of her calling as a healer: Soldiers marched through the hills. Angels, crowns, and a series of letters stood suspended in the sky. Meanwhile, a group of sick people waited to be healed with water from a creek in her barrio.⁶⁷

The economy of affliction remained in evidence as La Samaritana gained fame. Most visitors described the trip to barrio Hato as a true pilgrimage. Nearly all published accounts began by listing trials and difficulties. The remoteness of the location, the difficulties with transportation, and the demanding walk to the hills followed by long periods of waiting were meaningful elements of the visit. They were more than discomfort and inconvenience; as Vázquez explained in a 1953 interview, these trials were a “necessary penance.”⁶⁸

But all this should not be confused with a rejection of progress. La Samaritana was not adverse to technology, nor did she perceive a contradiction between her hydrotherapy and modern medicine. Commission members and physicians warned that Vázquez herself continued to take patent medications, which they offered as evidence of hypocrisy. But La Samaritana’s supporters did not consider the concurrent use of both therapeutic systems remarkable. Although they were not exactly empiricists, La Samaritana and her followers were pragmatists. As demand for water grew in barrio Hato, Vázquez and her supporters encased the springs in concrete and built a two thousand gallon tank that would hold enough water to meet demand. Later, when it appeared that the owner of the *finca* would prevent the crowds from gathering there, La Samaritana proposed moving to nearby land. That *finca* had springs too and easier access to the road.⁶⁹

La Samaritana’s pragmatism was also evident in her treatments. She sought spaces and mechanisms for corrective intervention rather than the determination of first principles. To Vázquez and her followers, diagnosis was not simply an effort to determine the etiology of the illness; her aim was to set things right where they had gone awry. She intervened precisely where reputable science failed to go beyond explanations to offer solutions. The reports are emphatic on this point: La Samaritana healed those who medical science had deemed incurable.⁷⁰

La Samaritana never contested the benefits of technological tools; instead, she challenged implicitly the totalizing claims of a positivism that would probe only what could be seen and touched. Whether they called themselves Spiritists or they bore the label of spirit-mongers, Spiritists of all stripes imposed limits on human agency. They asserted that because “psychological” phenomena were beyond the reach of the senses, they were not susceptible to the usual methods of research. Spiritist “philosophy” was superior because it enquired into all spheres with equal rigor. In short, Spiritists placed restrictions on the very scientific rationality they sought to enshrine. One of La Samaritana’s defenders urged the learned to “be brave enough to confess that you are before the presence of an effect whose cause you do not know.” He then added significantly: “You do not know it all, and you never shall, because science is infinite.”⁷¹

One might be inclined to call this approach non-modern, but the label does not quite fit. La Samaritana’s proposals emerged as an option in the conflict and dialogue with *letrados* and the crusade to regenerate Puerto Rico. Spiritists, spirit-mongers, and expert commentators constituted each other’s practices in the context of a modernizing society. La Samaritana was not the remnant of a by-gone era.

Competing Economies and the Closing of Barrio Hato

Detractors proposed a variety of solutions to the problems they believed La Samaritana epitomized. These ranged from the benign to the authoritarian. At one end, one finds calls for improvements in the education of the masses and the delivery of medical services and for investigations into the natural properties of San Lorenzo’s water. Some of these calls—especially those that promised short-term returns—were heeded. For instance, following critical outcries, the government moved to fill an opening for a municipal doctor for San Lorenzo. In addition, there were imaginative counter-measures. These included the circulation of a rumor of the contamination or poisoning of the spring waters in San Lorenzo and the introduction of traffic regulations that banned the use of cargo vehicles for the transportation of passengers. The prohibition restricted the access of the poor to barrio Hato, since trucks charged the lowest transport fares. At the repressive end, one finds calls for fraud investigations, the criminalizing of La Samaritana’s practice as illegal medicine and forced closings.⁷²

Ultimately, La Samaritana retreated from public view for reasons that went beyond official and Spiritists hostility. By La Samaritana’s account, her public ministry in barrio Hato fell to competition from rival economies, apparently in a few years.⁷³ Critics and supporters shared the notion that profiteering or even the conduct of an excessive level of legitimate business could discredit religious claims. For that reason, sympathizers emphasized that La Samaritana never charged for her services. Though she was careful to avoid impropriety, La Samaritana later conceded that “comercialismo” had played a part in weakening barrio Hato’s pull. In 1953, when a reporter sought out La Samaritana to ask for her opinion regarding a widely reported apparition of the Virgin in Sabana Grande, Vázquez explained that kiosks, souvenir peddlers, and the crowds that sought such things had been responsible for the loss of fervor.⁷⁴ It was not a matter of explanations tailored after the fact to suit the situation. In 1922 there had been complaints about price gouging by barrio Hato’s “temple merchants.”⁷⁵

The domestic economy, with its gendered transactions, also played a part in barrio Hato’s closing. Sometime after the crowds began to shrink, La Samaritana’s spiritual guide allowed her a two-year respite from her ministry. During this sabbatical, La Samaritana married Clara Fernández, a tobacco worker she met when she moved

to town to take a job at the General Cigar Company. This made her retirement from public life all but definitive. Before her wedding, Vázquez had warned those who sought her out that, according to her spiritual guides, she would lose her faculties and end her mission once she was a married woman.⁷⁶ But the prediction did not prove altogether inflexible. La Samaritana retained her talents after becoming a wife, but limited her activity to a domestic arena. Until close to the time of her death in the 1986, she treated patients in her home and kept a comparatively low profile. She had four children. These changes, she explained, had been preordained: “I came to earth not as a *misionera* but as a wife and mother.” “Misionera” is a resonant term. Elenita and members of the Cheo brotherhood referred to themselves in that manner.

These statements suggest that the public and domestic roles were not fully compatible for Vázquez and points at some of the limitations to the challenge that her career posed to normative gender roles. Although this was a woman whose speech carried an unusual authority, she was also a medium who spoke with a masculine voice. A respectable man lent her legitimacy and framed her pronouncements. Her messages and actions, moreover, were restricted for the most part to healing and moral instruction, two activities often assigned to women in the dominant division of labor. Vázquez’s most significant departure from customary gender roles was reminiscent of the challenges that the editors of *El Iris de Paz*, nearly all women, delivered in the first decade of the twentieth century. Like her literate predecessors, whom Shannon Herzig has recently described as “social feminists,” Vázquez broke with convention partly by taking on a public role. But like Guffain and her colleagues, Vázquez aimed to perfect herself as a mother and wife.⁷⁷

Finally, it appears that the economy of affliction was susceptible to internal contradictions. By her own account, pragmatism got the better of barrio Hato. As La Samaritana explained in 1953, when a second set of springs was found to satisfy the thirst of the crowds, something changed. The difference was not in the efficacy of the waters, or the sanctity of the location. The problem was that access to the new springs was rather effortless. A mere walk offered no genuine possibility of regeneration.

Although the crowds disappeared, the threat that La Samaritana represented did not. La Samaritana had a way of inspiring imitators and launching traditions. The memory of her ministry posed dangers of its own. Perhaps for this reason, La Samaritana’s name was mentioned for decades as new campaigns to wipe out superstition were launched.⁷⁸ It is as if critics haunted by the past found it necessary to conduct regular exorcisms to rid Puerto Rico of its backward spirits.

For scholars, memory of La Samaritana should have a more salutary effect. It should serve as a reminder that faiths did not simply split, producing derivative, popular practices alongside proper doctrine. As La Samaritana shows, the very distinction between Spiritists and spirit-mongers was the result of dialogue and conflict over the route to social regeneration. La Samaritana’s career reminds us that there were multiple discourses of progress in 1920s Puerto Rico. Politicians, Spiritists, and so-called spirit-mongers spoke of modernization using languages that obscured parallels and discrepancies in their utopian visions.

()

NOTES

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Dain Borges, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, Robert H. Hill, and *CENTRO Journal's* anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. I am also indebted to Carmen Julia Vázquez, La Samaritana's niece, and Juan José Santiago, SJ.

¹ Pérez García argues that “Centro Unión” was founded in Mayagüez in 1875. Yañez dates the inauguration of “Luz del Progreso” to 1879-1889. Rodríguez Escudero argues, for his part, that Spiritists began gathering before 1870 and opened the first center in Mayagüez in 1881, closing soon after because of official hostility. The center re-opened in 1884, taking the names “Luz del Progreso,” “Unión,” and finally “Renacimiento.” See Marvette Pérez García, “Spiritism: Historical Development in France and Puerto Rico,” *Revista/Review Interamericana* 16 (1-4) (1986), 74; Teresa Yañez Vda. de Otero, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico: Relación Histórica de la Fundación en Mayagüez de la Federación de Espiritistas de Puerto Rico* (San Juan: n.p., 1963), 5, 19-20; and Néstor Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia del espiritismo en Puerto Rico*, 2nd ed. (Quebradillas, PR: Imprenta San Rafael, 1991), 35-37.

² Silvia Alvarez Curbelo, *Un país del porvenir: El afán de modernidad en Puerto Rico, Siglo XIX* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2001). See also, Angel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1984).

³ Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia*, 23.

⁴ Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón, Spiritism's leading ideologue in Puerto Rico, argued that political change was only a pre-condition for regeneration. He saw education and will (*voluntad*) as the keys to the project. Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón, “Regeneración,” *El Iris de Paz*, 28 May 1904.

⁵ For a discussion of the modernizing impetus of Spiritism and its anti-clericalism, see Nancy Herzig Shannon, *El Iris de Paz: El espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900-1905* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 2001), 51-74.

⁶ Herzig Shannon, *El Iris*, 39, 60-72. In a typical instance, “F. I., a progress-loving spirit” reassured Spiritists telling them that the new century would bring about “transcendental” transformations of the moral and psychic orders. *El Iris de Paz*, 6 July 1901.

⁷ Cited in Marvette Pérez García, “Spiritism,” 75.

⁸ José Reyes Calderón, *¡Espiritismo!* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Tipografía El Ensayo, 1906).

⁹ David Hess, *Spirits and Scientists: Ideology, Spiritism and Brazilian Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ By 1931 decline had turned into a financial crisis from which the Federation never recovered. Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia*, 80-83.

¹¹ Ponte claimed that there were 150 centers in the island and that Spiritism was still gaining ground in 1923. Francisco Ponte Jiménez, “Desarrollo del espiritismo en Puerto Rico: Federación de los Espiritistas” in E. Fernández García, ed., *El Libro de Puerto Rico* (San Juan: El Libro Azul Publishing Co., 1923), 890-894. See also *El Mundo*, 12 January 1934 and Telesforo Andino, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico y La Reforma* (San Juan: Tipografía San Juan, 1937).

¹² La Samaritana's niece argues that her aunt saw herself as a devout Catholic. La Samaritana reportedly maintained that she cured “material” ailments without meddling in Spiritism. Interview with Carmen Julia Vázquez, December 5, 1997 and June 4, 2002.

¹³ This is not to say that Spiritism or hydrotherapy disappeared in the island; both remain common practices to this day.

¹⁴ *La Correspondencia*, 29 July and 15 August, 1922.

¹⁵ For studies deploying the concept of popular religiosity in Puerto Rico's context, see Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo and Ana María Díaz-Stevens, *An Enduring Flame: Studies on Latino Popular Religiosity* (New York: Bindner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1994); Nérida Agosto Cintrón, *Religión y cambio social en Puerto Rico, 1898-1940* (Río Piedras:

Ediciones Huracán, 1996); and Jorge Duany, “La religiosidad popular en Puerto Rico: Reseña de la literatura desde la perspectiva antropológica,” and Fernando Picó, “El catolicismo popular en el Puerto Rico del siglo 19” in Angel G. Quintero Rivera, ed. *Virgenes, magos, y escapularios* (San Juan: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, 1998), 151-162 and 163-186.

¹⁶ Paul Vanderwood, *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government: Religious Upheaval in Mexico at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Tania Tolezano García and Ernesto Chávez Alvarez, *La leyenda de Antoñica Izquierdo* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1987); Robert M. Levine, *Vale of Tears: Revisiting the Canudos Massacre in Northeastern Brazil, 1893-1897* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Jan Ludius and Mats Lundahl, *Peasants and Religion: A Socioeconomic Study of Dios Olivorio and the Palma Sola Movement in the Dominican Republic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁸ Victor Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1968).

¹⁹ Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, “Fernando Ortiz and Allan Kardec: Transmigration and Transculturation” in Conrad James and John Perivolaris, eds. *The Cultures of the Hispanic Caribbean* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2000), 9-27.

²⁰ Joan D. Koss, “El porqué de los cultos religiosos: El caso del espiritismo en Puerto Rico,” *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 16 (1) (March 1972): 69.

²¹ *La Correspondencia* reported this figure on July 22, 1922 at the peak of La Samaritana’s popularity. By 7 September 1922 attendance had dropped substantially.

²² Carmen Julia Vázquez, “La Samaritana de San Lorenzo, doña Julia Vázquez,” (unpublished paper), 1.

²³ *La Democracia*, 22 July 1922.

²⁴ Clara Vázquez was an *agregado* who lived with his wife Carmen Torres on land owned by Francisco Sánchez. Julia was their youngest child and only daughter. Interview with Carmen Julia Vázquez, 10 January 1998.

²⁵ *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, 29 July 1922.

²⁶ *La Correspondencia*, 11 May, 29 July and 3 August 1922.

²⁷ La Samaritana never claimed to be anything other than a human being and there are no indications that she met Elenita. But the two have been linked in the memory of some they healed. This blurring of identities is telling: many who sought aid in barrio Hato did so without distinguishing sharply between Catholic *escogidos* and other sorts of religious figures. For an account of Elenita and the Cheos, see my “Conjuring Progress and Divinity: Religion and Conflict in Puerto Rico and Cuba, 1899-1950s” (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA 2000), 76-139. See also, Agosto Cintrón, *Religión*; Juan José Baldrich, *Sembraron la no siembra* (Río Piedras: Huracán, 1988); Jaime M. F. Reyes, *La Santa Montaña de San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico y el misterio de Elenita de Jesús, 1899-1909* (Mexico: n.p., 1992); and Esteban Santaella Rivera, *Historia de los Hermanos Cheos* (Ponce: Editorial Alfa y Omega, 1979).

²⁸ For a critique of the crisis and response model see my “Conjuring Progress,” 360-397. Here it suffices to highlight that this dominant model (1) cannot account for the fact that long periods of Puerto Rico’s early twentieth-century history can be described as crises; and (2) does not distinguish effectively between crises and discourses about crises.

²⁹ Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles, “Subject Peoples” and Colonial Discourses: *Economic Transformation and Social Disorder in Puerto Rico, 1898-1947* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 118.

³⁰ Che Paralitici, *No quiero mi cuerpo pa’ tambor: El servicio militar obligatorio en Puerto Rico* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Puerto, 1998), 21-49.

³¹ Cabo Rojo’s Mallita la Médica was described as an “exact copy” of Vázquez, but she never acquired a mass following. *La Correspondencia*, 15 August 1922.

³² *La Correspondencia*, 25 August 1922.

³³ Guzmán’s article was reprinted in Francisca Suárez, *Nuestra réplica al artículo del Dr.*

don Manuel Guzmán Rodríguez titulado “La Religión del Porvenir” y publicado en el periódico “El Imparcial” de esta ciudad (Mayagüez: Tipografía Comercial, 1892), 9.

³⁴ Joan D. Koss, “Religion and Science Divinely Related: A Case History of Spiritism in Puerto Rico,” *Caribbean Studies* 16 (1) (April 1976): 22-43.

³⁵ See, for instance, Blanca G. Silvestrini, “El impacto de la política de salud pública de los Estados Unidos en Puerto Rico, 1898-1913,” in Blanca G. Silvestrini, ed. *Politics, Society, and Culture in the Caribbean* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1983), 69-83.

³⁶ *La Democracia*, 10 June 1922.

³⁷ *La Correspondencia* reminded readers of the story on July 31, 1922. The relevant passage is John 4.16-19.

³⁸ Eileen J. Suárez-Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

³⁹ Benigno Trigo, “Anemia and Vampires: Figures to Govern the Colony, Puerto Rico, 1880 to 1904,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41(1) (January 1999): 104-123.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, *La Democracia*, 8 August 1992.

⁴¹ In 1920 in San Lorenzo, the *unionistas* garnered 1,978 votes, Republicans 613, and Socialists 678. In the contentious balloting of 1924, an alliance of the Union Party and many of their former Republican rivals won a landslide victory with 2,198 votes. Socialists joined a new party known as Republicano Puro, composed of those dissatisfied with the alliance in a coalition that claimed 742 votes, nearly one quarter of all ballots cast in San Lorenzo. Island-wide, the Socialist Party claimed 56,103 votes, the second best performance for a single party, in spite of unfavorable balloting conditions. Fernando Bayron Toro, *Estadísticas de las elecciones municipales de Puerto Rico, 1900-1988* (Mayagüez, PR: Comisión Estatal de Elecciones, 1992), 138; and Fernando Bayron Toro, *Elecciones y partidos políticos de Puerto Rico, 1809-1976* (Mayagüez, PR: Editorial Isla, 1977), 159-163.

⁴² *La Correspondencia*, 29 July 1922.

⁴³ *La Democracia*, June 10, 1922. The critic’s assertion is misleading. Although Spiritists supported eight-hour workdays and other socialist causes. Matienzo Cintrón was a Unionist leader and the founder of a pro-independence party. José Tous Soto presided over the Republican Party and the Spiritist Federation. Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia*, 291.

⁴⁴ *El Mundo*, 11 August 1922 and *La Democracia*, 25 May 1922.

⁴⁵ *La Democracia*, 27 August 1922.

⁴⁶ Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia*, 80 and Ivonne Acosta, *Santa Juana y Mano Manca* (San Juan: Editorial Cultural, 1995), 56-58.

⁴⁷ *La Correspondencia*, 28 June and 1 August 1922.

⁴⁸ *La Correspondencia*, 8 June and 9 August 1922.

⁴⁹ *La Correspondencia*, 7 August 1922 and *El Mundo*, 11 August 1922.

⁵⁰ For a discussion, see my “Conjuring Progress,” 88-101.

⁵¹ The Club was founded in Aguadilla in March 1921 to promote the “experimental study of Spiritist science,” publicize Spiritism and offer assistance to the needy. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo Dpto. de Estado, Serie Corporaciones Sin Fines de Lucro, caja 17A, exp. 235.

⁵² In 1904 the Spiritist press published a series of communiqués from a spirit identified as Francisco Alvarado’s, Arroyo’s parish priest. See *El Iris de Paz*, March and April 1904. Matías Usero Torrente renounced the priesthood and became a practitioner of Spiritism. He then toured the island, lecturing in favor of the new doctrine. Rodolfo López Soto, “El espiritismo en Puerto Rico y sus instituciones” in Yañez, *El espiritismo*, 108. Joaquín Saras, born in Jaca Huesca, Spain in 1834, headed San Lorenzo’s parish in the 1890s and early 1900s. He baptized the young Julia on 10 February 1893. See *Boletín Eclesiástico*, 15 January 1897 and Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, Libro de Bautismos 20 (1891-1894),

Parroquia de San Lorenzo de Hato Grande, Microfilm 13889053.

53 *El Mundo*, July 25, 1922.

54 *El Mundo*, 25, 28 July and 16 August 1922 and *La Correspondencia*, 27 July and 5 August 1922.

55 *La Correspondencia*, 13 July 1922.

56 Rosario Bellber was president of the Liga Social Sufragista. She was director of the Red Cross and was involved in several charitable organizations. Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia del espiritismo*, 78-80. See also, *El Mundo*, 28 August and 5 September 1922.

57 *El Mundo*, 27 July 1922.

58 An investigation by the Federation had cleared the Club of any wrongdoing. *La Democracia*, 29 July 1922 and *El Tiempo*, 2 August 1922.

59 The original, printed in *La Correspondencia* on 20 June 1922, reads: “¿Qué va a ser de la ciencia si a ésta se sobrepone la superchería de una negra cualquiera?”

60 Allan Kardec, *El génesis: Los milagros y las predicciones según el espiritismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kier, 1994), 22-23.

61 *El Buen Sentido*, July 1908.

62 Allan Kardec, *El libro de los espíritus* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1958), 307.

63 Herzig Shannon, *El Iris*, 83, 101-103.

64 *El Iris de Paz*, 19 July 1902.

65 Allan Kardec, *El génesis: Los milagros y las predicciones según el espiritismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kier, 1994), 95.

66 *La Correspondencia*, 13 July 1922.

67 Vázquez, “La Samaritana,” 5 and *El Mundo*, 21 May 1953.

68 *El Mundo*, 21 May 1953

69 *La Correspondencia*, 14 July 1922 and *El Mundo*, 25 July and 3 August 1922.

70 *La Correspondencia*, 3 and 8 August 1922.

71 *La Correspondencia*, 27 July 1922.

72 *La Democracia*, 7 July 1922 and *La Correspondencia*, 26 and 27 August, 5 and 13 September 1922.

73 The exact dates remain uncertain. La Samaritana appears to have moved to town in San Lorenzo before marrying sometime in the 1920s. Interview with Carmen Julia Vázquez, 4 June 2002.

74 *El Mundo*, 21 May 1953.

75 *La Correspondencia*, 29 July and 25 August 1922.

76 *El Mundo*, 10 November 1944.

77 Herzig Shannon, *El Iris de Paz*, 30-39.

78 In 1928 the medical association urged physicians to “raze the legendary magnetism of the illiterate” citing “the little *jibara* who comes down from the mountains wearing the cloak of a new Samaritan.” *Boletín de la Asociación Médica de Puerto Rico* 21 (June 1928). See also, *Boletín de la Asociación Médica de Puerto Rico* 44 (June 1944).

How did Puerto Rico become a US territory? Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony for centuries until the US invaded it during the Spanish-American War in 1898. The next year, Spain ceded Puerto Rico (and Guam) to the US. [Read More](#). House lawmakers push for Puerto Rico statehood.Â Part of the problem stems from a US law back in 1920. The Jones Act requires all goods ferried between US ports to be carried on ships built, owned and operated by Americans. Those ships are much more expensive to buy and operate than ships from other countries. And that makes just about everything on the island more expensive.Â As the economy gets worse, more Puerto Ricans leave, and the government has less tax money to pay its debts.