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Espiritistas and Espiriteros in 1920's Puerto Rico

In the spring and summer of 1922, thousands of pilgrims and novelty seekers traveled on foot, horseback, truck-bed and hired car to a distant spot high in the mountains of the Puerto Rican town of San Lorenzo. The travelers were mostly latter-day *jíbaros*, which is to say, 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 *desahuciados*, 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.¹

The talented *médica* had been growing in her neighbors' esteem for several years without attracting media attention.² Known locally as *La Niñita* (lit. little girl), by the time the multitudes began to arrive at her doorstep, Vázquez was a single young woman in her late teens. Though it is difficult to determine precisely how her talents were interpreted at this early stage, the title *médica*, which translated literally means physician, might offer some indication. It was chosen over the generic *curander(a)* or healer, *santiguador(a)*, a specialist who cured by means of prayers, oils and abdominal rubs, or *curios(o)*, which designated self-taught medical practitioners. The word *médica* linked

Vázquez to earlier figures, giving her a lineage that made her understandable to her following and deplorable in critics' eyes. To the latter, the new healer was only the latest manifestation of Puerto Ricans' unrepentant superstition. 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.³ Seeing in Vázquez no more than a variation on a recurring folly, Dr. Armaíz, a physician from Vega Baja wondered just how badly the 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?⁴

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 sharecroppers (*agregados*). Stories of her feats made their way across the island. It was said that "La Samaritana," as she was now dubbed, 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 played in San Juan's Rialto Theater, ticket sales had to be suspended. The throng of moviegoers swelled to such proportions that it blocked trolley traffic along a main avenue.⁵ Even on film, La Samaritana was apt to disturb order.

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 famous Samaritana.⁶ Even a few *norteamericanos*, whose presence did not go unnoticed, found their way to barrio Hato, leading a critic of Puerto Rican ignorance and American frivolity to quip that if a single American were ever cured, there would not be a single millionaire with an upset stomach left behind in the United States.⁷

La Samaritana's reception was as varied as the roster of travelers and pilgrims would suggest. Her 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 confused at times.⁸ *Jibaros* had good reasons to identify La Samaritana as one of their own. Like much of the rural the population, Julia Vázquez was illiterate. She began to work at a young age in a tobacco factory and later took a job in town as a seamstress. 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 agonized.

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 studies of millennialism and prophetic activity tend to maintain, one must acknowledge that the early 1920s were hard-times indeed.⁹ 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, nineteenth-century arrangements eroded swiftly. To La Samaritana and those around her, the new economic and political order 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 more than 30,000 workers broke out throughout the island.¹⁰

But it would be too facile to suggest that La Samaritana attracted multitudes simply because she shared the plight of the majority. One need only recall that there were countless other healers with close ties to those they served who never achieved celebrity.¹¹ Several factors made the difference with the *médica* from San Lorenzo. Media attention combined with improved transportation and roadways to give her a broader sphere of influence than most healers usually experienced. But the media's and the public's interest owed a good deal to the intervention of a group of Spiritists who orchestrated a skillful propaganda campaign in La Samaritana's favor. Under the leadership of Juan Jiménez García, a civil servant from Caguas, Spiritists held press conferences, staged rallies and distributed leaflets. Enterprising companies like the National Photo Novelty Sales Agency soon joined in, selling buttons and post cards with the likeness of La Samaritana.¹² 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 future regeneration were debated. While Spiritists celebrated the utopian possibilities of the ferment that La Samaritana generated, critics decried the return to irrationality masquerading as science. 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. La Samaritana offered an alternative to official medical practices that would deny the involvement of the

otherworldly in healing. That she did this without proposing a return to “tradition,” or a pre-modern past deserves highlighting.

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 medical practices at the closing of the “century of lights.” He singled out the use of magnetized water for special disparagement, claiming that it was in the spirit of exorcism rituals that employed holy water. He also charged that like erstwhile exorcists, Spiritists were guilty of misdiagnoses, attributing spiritual causes to symptoms that hysteria could explain handily.¹³

Unlike Catholics, who regarded the springs in apparition sites as having been blessed by a divine presence, Spiritists viewed water as a vehicle for the transmission of natural, magnetic currents. They disavowed miracles and denied the involvement of any divine persons. All the same, the *medicina* dispensed in barrio Hato was redolent with meanings for Catholics and Spiritists alike. The water that La Samaritana dispensed was procured from springs (a feature found routinely at shrines in Puerto Rico’s countryside) 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.

Paraphrasing freely from Victor Turner's classic ethnography, I argue that La Samaritana understood healing as an operation within a complex economy of affliction.¹⁴ 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 harness it to morally transformative ends. 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 simultaneously an intervention in favor of moral regeneration and spiritual advancement for individuals and 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, who were self-conscious modernizers themselves, embraced La Samaritana because they saw in her

practice the ethos of self-improvement that enveloped their movement.¹⁵ In their eyes, La Samaritana stood for progress as an individual pursuit and as a collective end.

While it seems clear that the principles of the economy of affliction cut across multiple faiths and practices, La Samaritana represented more than an eclectic synthesis. 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: US health policy and Puerto Rican "traditions." The latter are often presented as a relatively homogeneous mix of *curanderismo*, Spiritism and folk-Catholicism rather than as a plural and conflict-ridden field in its own right.¹⁶

In the pages that follow, I focus on two aspects of the conflict surrounding health and affliction. It comes as no surprise that Spiritists claiming La Samaritana as their own clashed with the Catholic hierarchy as well as with physicians and positivists whose "materialism," to use the Spiritist epithet, would block the route from affliction, to healing, to progress. What is surprising is that Barrio Hato should also become the site of an internecine dispute among Spiritists themselves. In the polemic surrounding La

Samaritana, Spiritists deployed some of the very arguments that physicians and the Church employed against Kardec's science-religion. La Samaritana's opponents endeavored to distinguish true *espiritistas* or Spiritists from mere *espiriteros* or spirit-mongers. While the first were reportedly educated, rational and scientific, the others were afflicted with a syndrome called backwardness (*atraso*). The most visible symptoms included the maladies of ignorance (evident in the use of uncouth language and illiteracy), superstition (manifest in the use of candles, icons and altars), and less directly, in blackness.

My aim is not simply to call attention to the racist underpinnings of Spiritism. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones has brought those into plain view and has shown already that the Spiritist doctrine of transmigration that inspired Ortiz's transculturation concept was founded on a hierarchical understanding of progress and race.¹⁷ Allan Kardec, the systematizer of Spiritist doctrine, maintained that souls perfected themselves gradually over the course of multiple lives or incarnations. But Kardec relegated souls incarnated in black bodies to the lower rungs of the ladder of progress. This, I show, would pose a problem for La Samaritana's supporters, who had to explain how it was possible for a truly superior spirit to manifest itself through a dark-skinned *jíbara*.

Besides putting on stage the racial drama unfolding in barrio Hato, I want to examine the relationship between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* 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” v. “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 professionals—a group that included physicians—who sought to reform conditions in the island and to improve themselves. Much of the appeal of the movement had to do with the sense that Spiritism promised a scientific and experimental route to God. Spiritism also stimulated dissident attitudes without demanding immediate, radical actions. 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.”¹⁸ Although I have no difficulty accepting that the principles of what I am calling the economy of affliction could function as a bridge between various constituencies and religious practices, it seems to me that the events in Barrio Hato complicate the story: They remind us first, that Spiritist doctrine did not trickle down the social pyramid unopposed; and secondly, 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 Kardecists denounced *espiriteros* as corrupting the doctrine. But the distinction between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* should not be taken for granted. As shown below, even as some Spiritists denounced La Samaritana, others recruited her to revitalize their movement. In this context, the line between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* was blurred.

An old disorder gets a new name

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.¹⁹ The commentator did not mean to elevate the “Little Girl” 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. As readers knew, the Samaritan of the bible story was a woman of suspect virtue. She had shared her bed with several men before her encounter with Jesus.²⁰ The new name stuck, displacing Vázquez’s other titles in a short while. 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 shortly after the conclusion of a fierce and polemical anti-prostitution campaign. In the final months of 1918, more than one thousand women, many them poor and non-white like Vázquez, were arrested in police sweeps.²¹ As concern with sexually dangerous women reached its peak, working class radicals in the Federación Libre de Trabajadores, an 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 these activists, prostitutes were fellow victims of capitalist exploitation. 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 health 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 critics, La Samaritana's color lent further credence to the charges of dissoluteness. The unhealthful libidinousness of *negras* and *mulatas* was a truism of nineteenth-century artistic and intellectual production. In fact, since the 1880s Puerto Rican *letrados* like Salvador Brau and Francisco del Valle Atilas had blamed the island's backward and unsanitary condition on blacks, whom they likened to parasites, on anemic "white" peasant women, and on miscegenation. As Benigno Trigo argues, this formulation had the virtue of downplaying 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.²² Needless to say, such constructions also precluded the possibility of finding health by means of a *jíbara* of color.

Ironically, La Samaritana's race was itself the subject of disputes. It seems that the beholders colored or lightened her according to their opinions of her ministry. La

Samaritana's critics described her as black and homely.²³ 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 never claimed an identity predicated upon her color and she did not mobilize a following along racial lines.

Timing complicated matters for La Samaritana in other ways, too. As Eileen Suárez Findlay has noted, the US authorities launched the anti-prostitution campaign in an atmosphere of political turmoil. Puerto Rican women 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 these things were occurring well within sight of barrio Hato. In 1920, shortly before the general elections and only two years before the mass gatherings near La Samaritana's home, 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 workers during the strike. The electoral ballots cast in San Lorenzo show that the workers reciprocated the favor. Although the Unionist Party won the election, the five-year-old Socialist Party took the second largest block of votes.²⁴

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.²⁵ The coincidence was not

lost upon critics, who accused La Samaritana of serving the interests of an unspecified party. Some also went on to contend that socialists and Spiritists like Vázquez were responsible for retarding Puerto Rico's progress and condemned them both for preying on ignorant country folk:

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, a fanaticism, a disgraceful and ridiculous fetishism around their apostolic selves and they move the puppets of ignorance at their whim, to serve what they call their "cause" . . .²⁶

However, opposition to La Samaritana was not just a matter of timing. Journalists, physicians, health officials and many Spiritists would have found Vázquez objectionable even in the absence of socialist advance or the anti-prostitution campaign. La Samaritana's activities were disruptive enough on their own terms. In a very concrete sense, La Samaritana 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. The news report on this situation ended with a call that soon became mandatory for intervention by the authorities. The reporter

requested an investigation into the events taking place in San Lorenzo to prevent profiteering.²⁷

In May 1922, “a true rain of beggars” also struck Caguas, a town located at convenient stopping point on the route to San Lorenzo. The unwelcome travelers plagued pedestrians, interfered with commerce, and disturbed offices and all other places of industry.²⁸ The homeless presence precisely in the streets of Caguas must have appeared especially ironic. Not long before the undesirables invaded, the town had inaugurated a much-applauded shelter and enacted new anti-vagrancy regulations.

These mobilizations, disruptive though they were, posed no immediate threat 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.

When we least expect it, a Wizard of the Waters [Mago de las Aguas], a Man God [Hombre Dios], the Bewitched [Hechizado] or a Samaritan Woman appears in the city, in the valley or in the mountain. And all of them, without exception, “do us enormous harm” . . .

That tourist who comes here with his KODAC 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? What sorts of impressions will these disheartening and fetishistic scenes leave him with? . . . Ours is a tremendous misfortune! Each magician, diviner, quack and witch, whether irresponsible or superstitious, brings us down the scale of collective Civilization . . .

If we tolerate and consent to this tarnishing irresponsibility and this degrading superstition in the very heart of our country, with what authority are we going to

defend ourselves in Washington and the foreign press from the accusation that we are immersed in moral backwardness and lack culture? ²⁹

Other critics, while equally stern in their denunciations of La Samaritana, did not feel a need to defend Puerto Rico from Washington's judgment. Opposition to La Samaritana could be found among those who favored U.S. colonialism just as it could be seen among those who favored Puerto Rico's independence. Dr. Pujadas, a physician who claimed credit for the failure of a would-be Samaritana in the town of Barros (now Orocovis), saw superstition as a justification for US colonialism and argued that the American presence would give the island a boost onto the civilizational ladder. He urged citizens to "take advantage of the opportunity history offers us by uniting wholeheartedly with the United States, in the certainty that this will mean progress and culture in a not too distant future."³⁰ Some were less sanguine about US domination and dreamed of a Puerto Rican republic. But their assessments of the cultural state of the masses were grim enough as to frustrate their projects:

Unfortunately, these phenomena take place among peoples who besides being anti-patriotic (enemies of what belongs to them and friends of what belongs to others) are fanatical in the extreme and as superstitious as ours, who march at the vanguard [of this fanatical lot]. Regrettably, we must agree that we are incapacitated by ponderous reasons from being absolute masters of that for which we long.³¹

La Samaritana gave critics of all stripes the disquieting impression that history was only “repeating itself” in barrio Hato. Superstition, with its bits of a tattered and embarrassing past that modernization should have put to rest already, had found its way to the present once more. In a telling instance, *El Tiempo*’s English-language editor reported that during a trip to the western end of the island, he had seen a hundred persons board a truck for the eight-hour trip to San Lorenzo. Even though he knew nothing of La Samaritana, as he admitted, he felt that his familiarity with her predecessors provided all that was required for an editorial sentence: “Well, we do not know anything about it; but this is evident: another miracle, or many of them, is to be recorded, or the declaration attributed to P. T. Barnum—‘One is born every minute’—is again being verified.”³²

La Samaritana’s defenders were not immune from the haunting past. Meléndez Muñoz, the author of a piece that appeared in *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, the island’s most important magazine, found the origins of superstition in Puerto Rico’s genealogy. In an argument reminiscent of the early Fernando Ortiz, Meléndez argued that Spain endowed the island with its brand of Catholicism and a tradition that linked religion to all pursuits. The indigenous presence and the arrival of Africans further imbued Puerto Rico’s social life with a religious character. As the races melded, so did their myths and psychologies. This, Meléndez reasoned, “shows us that the genesis of our peoples’ education was essentially religious, and that their minds had been prepared to degenerate into the sorts of superstition that would be found later among the uncultured classes.”³³

Defining criteria: *espiritistas* and *espiriteros*

The more-or-less respectable *espiritismo* of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the “science-religion” of a reform-minded sector of the *letrado* class. The practitioners who claimed ownership of the tradition were often university graduates, subscribers to journals and readers of Allan Kardec. They declared themselves in favor of scientific reason and progress and denounced Spanish colonial policies, Catholic dogmatism, and later scientific materialism, too. They condemned them all as authoritarian, irrational and anachronistic and positioned themselves as a modernizing influence. But Spiritists’ self-perception did not always reflect the status of their practice within society. In La Samaritana’s day, Spiritism occupied a slippery spot between the official, experimental disciplines and the ill repute of superstition. While advocates could claim the support of a few intellectuals and scientists, charges that Spiritism was not a proper science and that many of its practitioners were profit-driven fakes were never out of earshot. Partly for this reason, Puerto Rican Spiritists felt the need to close ranks, lest *espiriteros* bring discredit to their doctrine.

If the effort to deny other practitioners any claim upon the science-religion had once been effective in securing Spiritism’s success, by the time of La Samaritana’s ascendance there was little evidence of it. The one hundred and fifty Spiritist organizations then registered in the island gave every sign of being past their prime.

Nothing that Francisco Ponte Jiménez could write in *El Libro de Puerto Rico* regarding the advance of Spiritism could change the basic facts.³⁴ Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón, the renowned Unionist politician, man of letters and tireless propagandist of Kardec's doctrine, had died.³⁵ *El Iris de Paz*, a leading Spiritist journal founded in 1901, and *El Buen Sentido*, the official organ of the Spiritist Federation, had both folded.³⁶ Other journals would be launched in between the mid-twenties and the mid-thirties, but they would not bring Spiritism out of its slump.³⁷ By 1934 drastic measures were required; the Federation replaced its entire board of directors, charging that the incumbents had been too "passive" in the promotion of their cause. Those who remained in the Federation also proposed a purge; the revitalization of Spiritism demanded that "black occultism" and *curanderismo* be condemned once again.³⁸

Ironically, La Samaritana, a *medium curandera* (lit. healing medium) of the sort that Federation leaders often dismissed as *espiriteras*, was one of the few visible signs of Spiritist vitality. Her popularity signaled that Spiritism was not defeated, in spite of the decline confronting its leading organizations. When the Federation celebrated its grand assembly in 1922, they made sure that the healer from San Lorenzo found the way to San Juan's Municipal Theater, where she was honored in spite of the protestations of the members of the club from Aguadilla. La Samaritana helped to rebuild Spiritism's confidence and reinvigorate its cadres. Soon after the crowds began congregating in barrio Hato, Spiritists predicted with optimism that their numbers would surpass those of every other denomination in the region.³⁹

For all of her impact, La Samaritana escaped denunciation narrowly. Had it not been for the legitimacy that Juan Jiménez García lent her, self-proclaimed *espiritistas* would have dismissed the *médica* out of hand. But Jiménez was then the Commissioner of Public Works and Services in Caguas and a well-regarded leader of the Federation.⁴⁰ He 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 Kardec's doctrines.⁴¹ Jiménez was also an important presence at the gatherings in barrio Hato. Critics charged that he had appointed himself stage director and that he attempted to control all activities. They noted that usually he addressed gatherings before Vázquez and that he used his introductory remarks to attack Catholicism and urge people to embrace Spiritism as their only religion.⁴²

As one would expect, the Church reacted with outrage. The clergy warned parishioners once again to stay away from Spiritist literature and meetings, as the Church launched a campaign to counter the Spiritist offensive. In Caguas Redemptorist priests along with the Knights of Columbus and the Damas Isabelinas organized an "oral crusade" condemning Spiritism and La Samaritana's healing practices, and chastising Catholics who visited barrio Hato. Attacks and counter-attacks caused the conflict to escalate. By the end of the summer, a low-intensity leaflet war had broken out and

anonymous flyers discrediting one doctrine or the other, listing the names of people who had been cured or disputing such claims circulated throughout the region.⁴³

Physicians and others connected to the health care business also took part in these skirmishes. A man identified only as Suárez who owned Farmacia Campo Alegre in Caguas was forced to write to the papers to defend himself from allegations that he had circulated a flyer condemning Jiménez for supporting La Samaritana.⁴⁴ Pharmacists in Guayama complained that water from San Lorenzo had become so popular that there had been dramatic drops in sales at their shops. However, even among health care professionals, there were some who realized that they were fighting a losing battle and 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.”⁴⁵ After that, sales reportedly picked up.

Although critics of Spiritism accused Jiménez of opportunism, it is just as likely that Jiménez was a follower of La Samaritana by conviction rather than interest. Of course, interest and conviction may have coincided, too. One thing is clear, however: Whether responding to principle or to mere opportunism, La Samaritana’s appeal was such that even some of the Spiritist leaders charged with safeguarding the doctrine from superstitious usurpers felt inclined to embrace the *médica*. It seems clear, then that Puerto Rican Spiritist practices were not as strictly divided into “high” and “low” as those who would distinguish between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* would have us believe.⁴⁶ When it

came to La Samaritana, the distinction had to be reiterated and policed, lest it collapse altogether and open *espiritistas* to criticism from the Church and scientific authorities.

Opportune as La Samaritana's rise may have been, not all Spiritists sided with Jiménez. *Espiritistas* were sharply divided over La Samaritana's mediumship. For them, any final determination of the veracity of the claims, 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, advanced spirit of light, or an ignorant spirit from a lowly sphere? As Spiritists understood it, all spirits were created equal. But life experiences soon made for significant differences. Those who were closer to perfection could and would assist the living in their own quests for progress. However, spirits who had yet to reach the upper echelons of the evolutionary scale, often required assistance from the very human beings whose progress they would derail if given the opportunity. Careless contact with lowly spirits posed the risk of moral contagion and degeneration; it could reduce Spiritists to *espiriteros*.

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 the distant barrio and issued a report.⁴⁷ In the much-publicized document, the commission found that although the *médica* appeared well intentioned and disinterested, and though she was under the guidance of a knowledgeable Spiritist, she was an ignorant neophyte and possibly the victim of profit

seekers.⁴⁸ 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.” The commission did not believe that the magnetization was the doing of Father Joaquín Saras, San Lorenzo’s old parish priest, as others maintained.⁴⁹ 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, always an important criteria for distinguishing between spirits and between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros*. They noted that the spirit addressed them in an uncouth way. His language was threatening; he heeded no observations and lashed out, saying only “nobody destroys the Father’s work.”⁵⁰ La Samaritana was dangerously close to being an *espiritera*.

The Club’s report was met with a flurry of responses. Dozens of Spiritists and other sympathetic commentators wrote to the papers in support of La Samaritana and called for a dispassionate, “scientific” investigation before censures were issued. Their arguments were varied and resourceful. Some suggested that the commission itself had been duped by lowly spirits. Some took a legalistic approach, attempting to discredit the report as mere “personal opinion.”⁵¹ Others sought to challenge 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. Vicente Sanabria, for instance, suggested that Puerto Rico was not the only place where these so-called spectacles had occurred. He reminded readers

that only a year earlier, a man claiming that he could cure any ailment with water had been received as a new messiah in Louisiana. And contrary to Puerto Ricans' speculations about what civilized nations did with such figures, this man had not been arrested nor had any detectives intervened.⁵² Others went further still to argue that when compared to Catholic shrines like Lourdes, where pilgrims were exploited routinely, barrio Hato and La Samaritana were superior. Flor del Valle noted pointedly that in spite of their flaws: "no Spiritist has thought to characterize the believers in St. Anthony or the waters of the fountain at Lourdes. . . as uncultured or savages."⁵³

The most successful 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, more importantly, from spirit communications. Among the first group, the most notable was Ramón Negrón Flores, a leader of the Federación, who echoed Kardec's secularizing 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."⁵⁴ But the most forceful endorsement of La Samaritana came by way of the spirits themselves, who dispensed with the finer doctrinal points to issue an authoritative statement. Dr. Ponte, the same man who later presided the Spiritist Federation, put the question of the guide's identity to a medium during a séance. A spirit known only by the initials A. A. 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.”⁵⁵

Padre Joaquín Saras, or whatever spirit spoke through La Samaritana when she addressed club members, was remarkably well informed. Rather than submitting to the examination gracefully, the spirit questioned the investigator’s authority to make judgments. Vázquez, or rather, the spirit to whom she lent her voice, reminded the commissioners of the scandal that had embarrassed their club in 1921, noting that unlike them, Vázquez did not charge for her services nor had she tricked anyone with a Judas doll.⁵⁶ The commission was forced to defend itself from the allegations, first through their medium, whose own guides stood by the club, and later through a series of letters published in the press.

The debate on these matters was more than an esoteric diversion. Although La Samaritana’s detractors were never quite explicit about the connecting line they drew between blackness and spiritual backwardness, a pronouncement on the topic was unnecessary. La Samaritana’s supporters understood 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 in various newspapers, denounced the critics, arguing that what preoccupied them was not the identity of the guide or the possibility of fraud as such, but a sense that La Samaritana had broken out of her proper place. The

question that truly plagued them, whether *espiritistas* or not, was: “What will be of science if it is superseded by the quackery of a black nobody (*negra cualquiera*)?”⁵⁷

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,” he added, “are not born inferior or subordinated except by their bodies; by their Spirits they are equal and free.”⁵⁸

However, elsewhere Kardec took pains to limit the consequences of the doctrine of reincarnation. While maintaining that race itself was contingent and in the long-term transitory, he espoused an evolutionist notion of racial difference that could also serve as an apologia for colonialism. In *The Book of the Spirits*, for instance, Kardec cited a celestial brother who explained that there was a 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, and because they have no necessities other than those of the life of the body, they only think of personal preservation and

this makes them generally cruel. 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.⁵⁹

On the basis of these pronouncements, Puerto Rican *espiritistas* nourished a vision of racial harmony long before La Samaritana began to preoccupy them. During the sixth assembly of the Federación Espiritista in 1908, several seeing mediums reported that a portentous image had appeared on the lecture stage. Prudencia Font, speaking under the influence of the spirits, said:

On center stage, in space, I see two crossed flags; one is white, the other bright red. On the upper angle formed by the two crossing flags, there are two interlocked hands; one is white, the other black. Above the two hands, Kardec's luminous portrait stands out and on top of the portrait there is a sun that sends out bright rays onto the faces of everyone in attendance.⁶⁰

Moving though it was, the vision offered an incomplete picture of Spiritist attitudes to blackness. There were important qualifications to what might at first appear to be a vision of racial equality. As early as 1902, Agustina Guffain had written an editorial for *El Iris de Paz* with the title "Color and other social differences." In her piece Guffain reminded readers that Spiritism was predicated upon the equality and brotherhood of

man. But she felt the added that “while it is true that we adopt this principle as a doctrine, we believe... that it is 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 within the environment in which we find ourselves.” After alerting readers to their responsibility to assist less fortunate souls, Guffain closed her editorial on this note:

Let worries disappear then. 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.”⁶¹

La Samaritana illustrates how Guffain’s dictum operated in practice: all souls may have been white, but dark skin remained evidence of things not seen. In spite of their aspiration to universal human fraternity, Puerto Rican Spiritists who adhered closely to Kardec’s formulations found it difficult to accept that an advanced spirit might choose a body such as La Samaritana’s as its medium of communication. As Kardec put in *The Genesis*, “broad features and thick lips... could never accommodate the delicate modulations of a distinguished Spirit.”⁶²

Besides revealing a racism that few would find surprising, the debate surrounding La Samaritana illustrates some of the uses of racial differentiation in 1920s Puerto Rico. When faced with obstacles to Puerto Rico’s progress in the form of an apparent recrudescence of superstition, many self-proclaimed *espiritistas* sought a way out of the

impasse. They proclaimed color-blindness and the universal whiteness of all souls, but they also re-asserted the distinction between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros*. That effort depended partly on a theory of racial differences that relegated black bodies and the spirits that clung to them to the lower levels of evolution. In proposing this, *espiritistas* removed obstacles to progress that appeared insurmountable. Superstition was not really reasserting itself; it only appeared that way when those at different levels of “progress” to perfection were judged against one another. The assertion of differences between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* served another important end: it helped clear *espiritistas* from the suspicion that they were partly responsible for the resurgence of superstition because they lent renewed credence to the claims of *curanderos* and other such people.

A distinction without a difference?

Those who called themselves true *espiritistas* were convinced that La Samaritana and people of her ilk knew little of science and were opposed to progress. Instead, they stood for a tradition of obscurantism. However, the events in barrio Hato suggest that when it came to science and progress, the differences between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* were hard to pinpoint. It is because *espiritistas* recognized this difficulty that men like the members of the club’s commission did what they could to collect evidence of the healer’s recalcitrant backwardness. Curiously, none of La Samaritana’s supporters ever disavowed modern medicine or science. On the contrary, Jiménez and the Spiritists who defended La Samaritana attempted to secure the prestige of scientific knowledge in the

service of their cause. Ramón Negrón Flores, the president of the Federation mentioned above, spoke for most defenders when he urged studies “by [unprejudiced] men of scientific orthodoxy, atheists and skeptics” as the surest way to safeguarding La Samaritana’s ministry.⁶³

Self-anointed *espiritistas* could certainly 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 economy of affliction were as visible in La Samaritana’s own history they were in the careers of the island’s lay preachers and prophets. Vázquez career began after an illness and a long period of unconsciousness whose causes physicians could not determine. Her recovery required the assistance of a local *curioso*, who prayed for his patient instead of prescribing medications. After fifteen minutes of prayers, the young 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 mission and brought to her home the first curious seekers.⁶⁴

The early communications were cryptic, 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. When Vázquez looked up, she saw people singing inside a small, poor house. The residents were celebrating a child’s baptism, but they were also mourning him. When she

asked why they cried, she was told: “Because we know the end of which he was born.” Soon after, Vázquez witnessed a distressing montage that she interpreted as the confirmation of her calling as a healer: Men dressed as 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.⁶⁵

The economy of affliction continued to be 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 remote location, the difficult access, the nature of the available transportation, and the demanding walk to the hills followed by long periods of waiting were an unavoidable and a meaningful part of the visit. These discomforts, however, were more than inconveniences; as Vázquez explained in an interview in 1953, they were at the heart of the experience. La Samaritana understood these trials as “necessary penance.”⁶⁶

But all this talk of affliction should not be confused with a rejection of “progress.” La Samaritana was certainly not adverse to technology, nor did she perceive a contradiction between her hydrotherapy and allopathic medicine. Commission members and physicians warned that Vázquez herself continued to take patent medications, which they put forth as evidence of her own lack of faith in the magnetized spring water and the spirits’ communications. But La Samaritana’s supporters do not appear to have considered the concurrent use of both therapeutic systems remarkable. Indeed, some

asserted that the use of patent medications and purgatives was commonplace among Spiritists and *curanderos*.⁶⁷ Although they were not exactly empiricists, La Samaritana and her followers were great 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.⁶⁸ 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. La Samaritana intervened precisely where reputable science failed to go beyond explanations to offer solutions. The reports are emphatic on this point: La Samaritana healed those that medical science had deemed incurable.⁷⁰

La Samaritana never contested the benefits of technology as a tool; instead, she challenged the totalizing claims of a positivism that would probe only what could be seen and touched. Whether they called themselves *espiritistas* or they bore the label *espiriteros*, most practitioners of Spiritism understood that official science remained at odds with the science-religion. Spiritists of all stripes challenged science's very

foundations in tangible, positive facts when they spoke of spirits, spiritual ailments, and “psychological” investigations. Spiritists argued that “parapsychological” or “metaphysical” phenomena differed from phenomena in the ordinary physical order in that they required faith to manifest themselves. For that reason, they were not susceptible to the usual methods of research. As a French scientist put it,

Mystery: that is what characterizes them [parapsychological phenomena]. Their mechanisms remain inexplicable, except for strange and vague hypotheses. It is necessary to agree immediately then, that this is not a science, but rather something contrary to it, for science consists in the rupturing of mystery and in discovering not the mysterious “why” but the “how.”⁷¹

Unlike those who adhered to official definitions of science and progress, Spiritists imposed limits on human agency. They argued that man-made medicine was incapable of healing the spirit and even asserted that there was a sphere that would always be beyond science’s reach. In short, Spiritists placed limits on the very rationality they sought to enshrine. Sitiriche, 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.”⁷²

One might be inclined to call the Spiritist approach pre-modern in its reasoning but the label does not quite fit. Thinking of the sort that La Samaritana exemplified emerged as an option in the conflict and dialogue with positivist science and its crusade to civilize Puerto Rico. In other words, *espiritistas*, *espiriteros*, physicians and scientists, helped to constitute each other's practices in the context of a modernizing society. La Samaritana was not a remnant of a by-gone era, as critics asserted.

On 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 outright 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 the critics' outcry, the government placed a help-wanted ad in the papers to recruit a municipal doctor for San Lorenzo.⁷³ 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 also the introduction of traffic regulations that banned the use of cargo vehicles for the transportation of passengers. The prohibition was aimed at restricting the access of the poor to barrio Hato, since trucks charged the lowest transport fares.⁷⁴ At the repressive end of the spectrum, one finds calls for fraud investigations, legislation criminalizing La Samaritana's practices as illegal medicine, and forced closings. There were even reports that

undercover agents had been sent to barrio Hato along with officials from the judiciary and health authorities.⁷⁵

Ultimately, La Samaritana retreated from public view for reasons that went beyond official and *espiritista* hostility. By La Samaritana's account, her ministry fell because of competition from rival economies. 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, Jiménez and La Samaritana's other defenders took great pains to emphasize that she never charged for her services or profit from what was going on around her. Though La Samaritana was careful to avoid the appearance of impropriety, in the end what she called "*comercialismo*" played a part in weakening barrio Hato's pull. In an interview in 1953 Vázquez suggested that the kiosks, the souvenir peddlers and the crowds that sought such things were responsible for the loss of fervor at the site.⁷⁶ It was not simply a matter of explanations tailored after the fact to suit the situation. Even when barrio Hato was still drawing crowds, there had been complaints about price gouging and profiteering. A man who had gone to barrio Hato seeking treatment once complained that vendors—whom he called temple merchants—charged as much as 15 cents for a loaf of bread.⁷⁷ Nor was behavior of this sort restricted to retailers. The National Photo Novelty Sales Agency advertised that its buttons and post cards were available for wholesale to distributors.⁷⁸

The domestic economy, with its gendered transactions, played a part in barrio Hato's closing. When the crowds began to dissipate, La Samaritana's spiritual guide allowed her a two-year respite from her ministry. During this sabbatical, La Samaritana married and this made her retirement all but definitive. Vázquez had declared earlier that if she ever married, she would lose her faculties and end her mission.⁷⁹ But the prediction did not prove as inflexible as that. La Samaritana retained her talents after becoming a wife, but she limited her activity to a domestic arena. For the rest of her life she treated patients only in her home and kept a low profile. These changes, she explained, had been preordained: "I came to earth not as a *misionera* but as a wife and mother."⁸⁰

The statement suggests 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 traditional gender roles. Although this was a woman whose speech carried an unusual authority, she was also a medium who spoke with a borrowed masculine voice.⁸¹ A respectable man lent her legitimacy and framed her pronouncements in their proper context. Her messages and actions, moreover, were restricted for the most part to healing and didactic moralizing: two activities often assigned to women in the traditional division of labor.

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 a particular location. The problem was that access to the new springs was relatively effortless and a mere walk offered no genuine possibility of regeneration. A measure of affliction was essential.

Conclusion

Although the crowds disappeared, the threat to order that La Samaritana represented did not. As with her predecessors, 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 continued to be mentioned for decades whenever a new campaign to wipe out superstition was launched.⁸² It is as if a class of critics haunted by the past found it necessary to conduct regular exorcisms to rid Puerto Rico’s of its backward spirits.

Among scholars, memory of La Samaritana should have a far more salutary effect. It should serve as a reminder that faiths did not simply merge producing derivative, “popular” practices alongside “true” doctrines. As La Samaritana shows, the very distinction between *espiritistas* and *espiriteros* was the result of protracted dialogue and conflict over who owned progress and who was to blame for Puerto Rico’s continued backwardness. And such distinctions were fragile. In fact, they were nearly shattered

when Vázquez left the untutored behind in barrio Hato to address her *letrado* supporters at the capital's Teatro Municipal.

¹ *La Correspondencia* reported this figure on July 22, 1922 at the peak of La Samaritana's popularity. By early September, attendance had dropped substantially. *La Correspondencia*, 7 September 1922.

² Carmen Julia Vázquez, "La Samaritana de San Lorenzo, doña Julia Vázquez," (typed manuscript), 1.

³ *La Democracia*, 22 July 1922.

⁴ *Ibid.* The original reads: "¿Qué dirán de nosotros como pueblo civilizado? ¿Hay un pueblo dónde no sólo los ignorantes, sino también los que se precian de alguna ilustración puedan ser más fácilmente engañados, en su mayor parte? ¿Puede haber un pueblo que acabando de salir de un engaño, vuelva fácilmente a ser víctima de ese mismo engaño?"

⁵ *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, 29 July 1922.

⁶ *La Correspondencia*, 3 August 1922.

⁷ *La Correspondencia* 29 July, 1922.

⁸ La Samaritana never claimed to be anything other than an ordinary human being and there are no indications that she met Elenita. But the two have been linked since the 1920s. For instance, a road engineer whom La Samaritana healed mistakenly referred to his benefactor as "the woman of Montaña Santa." But at the time of the events, Elenita had been gone for more than ten years. Interview with anonymous informant, 5 November 1997. 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, Nérida Agosto Cintrón, *Religión y cambio social en Puerto Rico, 1898-1940* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1996); 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 Jesus, 1899-1909* (Mexico: n.p., 1992); and Esteban Santaella Rivera, *Historia de los Hermanos Cheos* (Ponce: Editorial Alfa y Omega, 1979).

⁹ I have explained my objections to the crisis and response model in "Conjuring Progress and Divinity," pp. 360-397. Here suffice it to highlight that such interpretations cannot account for the fact that nearly any period in Puerto Rico's early 20th century history can be described as a crisis. If one considers that the first decade of US colonialism, the 1920s and the 1930s can be described as calamitous, one should also ponder whether crisis is the appropriate characterization. After all, that would make crises normative for more than thirty years. Moreover, between 1929 and 1936, Puerto Rico suffered two disastrous hurricanes, a market crash, and a nationalist uprising, but no figure comparable to this healer emerged.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Some of these figures resembled Vázquez closely. Although Mallita la Médica, a healer from Cabo Rojo, was described as an “exact copy” of Vázquez, she never acquired a mass following. *La Correspondencia*, 15 August 1922.

¹² *La Correspondencia*, 25 August 1992.

¹³ Guzmán’s article was first published in *El Imparcial* (Mayagüez) and was reprinted in a book that a Spiritist published as a rebuttal. See 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.

¹⁴ Victor Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes Among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford, Clarendon Press; London, International African Institute, 1968)

¹⁵ Joan D. Koss, “Religion and Science Divinely Related: A Case History of Spiritism in Puerto Rico,” *Caribbean Studies* 16 (1) (April 1976), 22-43.

¹⁶ See, among others, 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: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1983), 69-83.

¹⁷ Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, “Fernando Ortiz and Allan Kardec: Transmigration and Transculturation” in Conrad James and John Perivolaris, *The Cultures of the Hispanic Caribbean* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2000), 9-27.

¹⁸ Some scholars argue that these traditional techniques and modalities originated with African, especially Kongo, practices rather than Catholicism. Though I see Spiritism as one practice within what Palmié has called a broad and porous “religious formation”, I have found no direct evidence of Kongo influences on La Samaritana. Joan D. Koss, “El porque de los cultos religiosos: El caso del espiritismo en Puerto Rico,” *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 16 (1): 69. See also, Marta Moreno Vega, “Espiritismo in the Puerto Rican community: A new world recreation with the elements of Kongo ancestor worship,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (3), 325-353; Andres I. Pérez Mena, “Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodun, Puerto Rican Spiritualism: A Multiculturalist Inquiry into Syncretism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37 (1), 15-27; and Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁹ R. Vázquez Cabañas appears to have coined the name in *La Democracia*, 10 June 1922.

²⁰ The relevant passage, John 4.16-19, reads: “Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband and come here.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.” *La Correspondencia* reminded readers of the biblical story on July 31, 1922.

²¹ Eileen J. Suárez-Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

²² 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), pp. 104-123.

²³ See, for instance, *La Democracia*, 8 August 1992.

²⁴ According to the database of the Comisión Electoral de Puerto Rico, the *unionistas* garnered 1,978 votes, republicans 613, and socialists 678. Other sources cite a much higher figure, crediting the Socialist Party with 1,258 votes, compared to the Union's 1,974 and the Republicans 27. See Raúl Marín y Pedraza and Ana Mercedes Aponte, *La Historia de San Lorenzo* (San Juan: n.p., 1986), 53 and <http://www.EleccionesPuertoRico.org>.

²⁵ *La Correspondencia*, 29 July 1922.

²⁶ *La Democracia*, June 10, 1922.

²⁷ *El Mundo*, 11 August 1922.

²⁸ *La Democracia*, 25 May 1922.

²⁹ *La Democracia*, 27 August 1922.

³⁰ *El Tiempo*, August 14, 1922.

³¹ *La Correspondencia*, 8 August 1922.

³² *El Tiempo*, 12 July 1922.

³³ *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, 26 August 1922.

³⁴ The president of the Federación Espiritista claimed that Spiritism was still gaining ground in 1923. Francisco Ponte Jiménez, "Desarrollo del espiritismo en Puerto Rico: Federación de los Espiritistas" in *El Libro de Puerto Rico*, ed. E. Fernández García (San Juan: El Libro Azul Publishing Co., 1923), 890-894.

³⁵ Matienzo was a founding member of the Unionist Party and also of the Partido Independencia. He was also an intellectual of international stature. For an authoritative biography, see Manuel Díaz Soler, *Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón: Guardián de una cultura* (Río Piedras: Editorial de la UPR, 1967).

³⁶ The Federación was founded in early 1903. *El Buen Sentido*, 14 February 1903.

³⁷ For a complete listing of Spiritist publications, including founding dates, see Adolfo de Hostos, *Tesaurus de datos históricos* (Río Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1990), pp. 867-868.

³⁸ *El Mundo*, 12 January 1934. See also, Telesforo Andino, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico y La Reforma* (San Juan: Tipografía San Juan, 1937), cited in Koss, "Religion and Science," 38.

³⁹ *La Correspondencia*, 29 July and 15 August, 1922.

⁴⁰ Juan Jiménez García was elected president of the Federación Espiritista shortly after La Samaritana's emergence as a public figure.

⁴¹ *La Correspondencia*, 28 June 1922.

⁴² *La Correspondencia*, 1 August 1922.

⁴³ *La Correspondencia*, 8 June and 9 August 1922.

⁴⁴ *La Correspondencia*, 7 August 1922.

⁴⁵ *El Mundo*, 11 August 1922.

⁴⁶ Most scholars who have written on the subject also maintain that *jíbaro* and salon Spiritism developed as separate realms with distinct beliefs and practices. See Koss, “El porque de los cultos religiosos” and Jorge Duany, “La religiosidad popular en Puerto Rico: Reseña de la literatura desde la perspectiva antropológica,” in *Virgenes, magos, y escapularios*, ed. Angel G. Quintero Rivera (San Juan: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, 1998), 178.

⁴⁷ 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. In April 1921, officials included A. Feliciano Gerena, president; Pedro P. Valentín, vice president; Manuel Medina, treasurer; Braulia M. de Feliciano Gerena, secretary; Luisa Peña and Vicenta Badillo, first officers; and Maria Rosa and Adela Letriz, second officers. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo Dpto. de Estado, Serie Corporaciones Sin Fines de Lucro, caja 17A, Exp. 235.

⁴⁸ La Samaritana’s supporters believed that her lack of instruction was further evidence of spiritual intervention. How else could an illiterate woman display such oratorical gifts?

⁴⁹ Joaquín Saras headed the parish throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. Some of Elenita’s disciples charged that he was more enterprising when it came to amassing property than when it came to saving souls. Saras was born in Jaca Huesca, Spain in 1834. See *Boletín Eclesiástico*, 15 January 1897 and Reyes, *El Misterio de la Santa Montaña*, 16.

⁵⁰ *El Mundo*, July 25, 1922.

⁵¹ *El Mundo*, 25 and 28 July 1922 and *La Correspondencia*, 27 July 1922.

⁵² *El Mundo*, 16 August 1922.

⁵³ *La Correspondencia*, 5 August 1922.

⁵⁴ *La Correspondencia*, 13 July 1922.

⁵⁵ *El Mundo*, 27 July 1922.

⁵⁶ The Federación Espiritista later explained that they had investigated the allegations and had cleared the Club of any wrongdoing. *La Democracia*, 29 July and 1 August and *El Tiempo*, 2 August 1922.

⁵⁷ The original, printed in *La Correspondencia*, 20 June 1922, reads: “¿Qué va a ser de la ciencia si a esta se sobrepone la superchería de una negra cualquiera?” “*Negra cualquiera*” carries a scornful load in Spanish that the English does not convey. “*Negra*,” can be rendered as “black woman,” but the translation obscures the fact that the word can also be employed as an epithet. Similarly, the word “*cualquiera*” means any one, or nobody but can also be used in reference to prostitutes, as in “*una cualquiera*.”

⁵⁸ Cited in Juan José Santiago, “Allan Kardec: Una lectura crítica de sus escritos,” 30. Paper delivered at the Museo Puertorriqueño de Antropología Religiosa, San Juan, 4 October 1994. See also Allan Kardec, *El génesis: Los milagros y las predicciones según el espiritismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kier, 1994), 22-23.

⁵⁹ Santiago, "Allan Kardec," 33. See also Allan Kardec, *El libro de los espíritus*. (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1958), 307.

⁶⁰ *El Buen Sentido*, July 1908.

⁶¹ *El Iris de Paz*, 19 July 1902.

⁶² Santiago, "Allan Kardec," 34-35. See also Kardec, *El génesis*, 95.

⁶³ *La Correspondencia*, 13 July 1922.

⁶⁴ Vázquez, "La Samaritana," 7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5. See also *El Mundo*, 21 May 1953.

⁶⁶ *El Mundo*, 21 May 1953

⁶⁷ *El Mundo*, 3 August 1922.

⁶⁸ *La Correspondencia*, 14 July 1922.

⁶⁹ *El Mundo*, 25 July 1922.

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

⁷¹ *El Mundo*, 26 September 1922.

⁷² *La Correspondencia*, 27 July 1922.

⁷³ *La Democracia*, 7 July 1922.

⁷⁴ *La Correspondencia*, 26 and 27 August 1922.

⁷⁵ *La Correspondencia*, 5 and 13 September 1922.

⁷⁶ *El Mundo*, 21 May 1953.

⁷⁷ *La Correspondencia*, 29 July 1922.

⁷⁸ *La Correspondencia*, 25 August 1922.

⁷⁹ *El Mundo*, 10 November 1944.

⁸⁰ Elenita and women members of the Cheo brotherhood referred to themselves as *misioneras*; the religious gatherings they led were known as *misiones*.

⁸¹ La Samaritana occupies a space between the early trance-speakers of the US and the closeted mediums of later years. Initially, women speakers were the most public face of the Spiritualist movement in the U.S. Later, the performance of feats replaced inspired speech and women retreated from the stage into cabinets that separated the medium from the actions that the spirits carried out. The cabinets helped relieve

suspicions of human intervention. Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

⁸² In 1928, for instance, an editorial in the *Boletín de la Asociación Médica de Puerto Rico* urged physicians to “raze the legendary magnetism of the illiterate, ignorant or irresponsible healer; the Spiritist sunk in the labyrinth of his fatal mysticism and the little *jíbara* who comes down from the mountains wearing the cloak of a new Samaritan.” *Boletín de la Asociación Médica de Puerto Rico* v. 21 no. 162 (June 1928). For a similar treatment decades later, see “Práctica ilegal de la medicina” in *Boletín de la Asociación Médica de Puerto Rico* 44 (June 1944).