

# **Latino/a Thought**

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# THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINISM IN PUERTO RICO, 1870-1930

Yamilia Azize-Vargas

As indicated by Yamilia in this text, U.S. military intervention had a major impact on Puerto Riqueñas. Echoing Apodaca's analysis of the relationship between economic production and the status of women, she notes that "[w]omen's work outside the home and their access to more education contributed to creating the conditions for the emergence of feminism in Puerto Rico." Women in the United States struggled for over a century before getting the right to vote in 1919. Since Puerto Rican women had become U.S. citizens in 1917, one would think that they also would be able to vote in 1919. But this particular "truth" enters into a political game in which Puerto Rican feminists side with the Socialist Party and the U.S. Congress against the Puerto Rican legislature and the Catholic Church. This is but one of the many instances in which gender equality comes up against nationalism. An important fact left out in this excerpt is that universal suffrage was finally given to Puerto Rican women in 1935.



Without a doubt, the twentieth century can be named the Century of Feminism. Economic, political, and social transformations interacted to significantly change women's status. Puerto Rico was no exception. Here I discuss the principal factors and events that were fundamental to improving women's situation during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

First I give a brief summary of women's education in Puerto Rico during the nineteenth century and then contrast it with the historical changes brought about by the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898. U.S. military intervention had a major impact on women's work, particularly with the establishment of the tobacco and needlework industries, which employed thousands of women between 1900 and 1930 in Puerto Rico.

Women's work outside the home and their access to more education contributed to creating the conditions for the emergence of feminism in Puerto Rico. Two major groups emerged: one consisting of working class women, and the second of formally educated and more affluent women. Here I discuss their conflicts and struggles to achieve recognition for women in Puerto Rican society.

## SPANISH COLONIALISM AND EDUCATION

Education stands out as one of the most important forces that molded women's lives. There is little to be said about formal education during the first half of the

led by Yamilia Azize-Vargas) did take place during the first forty years in which Puerto Rico was a colony. The economy of the island nevertheless remained in a shambles and social conditions were little better than at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Almost one hundred years later, Puerto Rico's level of economic development was atrocious, having fallen below that of several other Caribbean countries; unemployment is between 15 and 20 percent of the United States; the high school dropout rate is 30 percent; and the homicide rate is 1.5 per 100,000 residents, as opposed to 9 percent for the mainland United States.<sup>13</sup> As in the case of the poor social conditions are the result of economic relations with the United States and, more specifically, of the restructuring of the global economy. Mass migrations to the mainland United States, a severe loss of human bodies, have resulted.

While, other than the election of Sila Calderón of the Popular Democratic Party, a woman governor, in the November 2000 elections; the demonstration in Vieques; and the rise in labor organizing, it is mostly women's work that is usual. The referendums in 1963, 1993, and 1998 indicate an increasing preference for maintaining the status quo (about 48 percent in 1998) over statehood (about 46 percent) and a decreasing percentage of support for independence (about 2 and 2.5 percent in the last two referendums). The reasons for this are discussed in Grosfoguel.

Let us conclude with a statement that points to the quest for public citizenship: "Above all, they [the Puerto Rican women] must finally learn that it is not independence per se that the masses are after, but a status that will clearly fulfill their aspirations to a better life."<sup>14</sup> From another perspective, though, the women are like the Furies, the three Greek goddesses who, regardless of the wrongdoer's motivation, relentlessly punish wrongs committed against blood relatives and that had escaped detection or public justice.

### NOTES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

1. José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World* (New York: Yale University Press, 2000).
2. Maldá Fernández, *The Disenchanted Island* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 178.
3. José Trías Monge, *Harvest of Empire* (New York: Viking, 2000), 81.
4. Ramón Grosfoguel, Frances Negión-Muntnaner, and Chloé Gearas, "Beyond Nationalist and Colonialist Discourses: Politics of the Puerto Rican Ethno-Nation" in *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*, ed., Néstor Cerón Marín and Ramón Grosfoguel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 17.
5. José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 53-66 passim.
6. Maldá Fernández, *Disenchanted Island*, 33.
7. José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 61.
8. This struggle is illustrated by J. Gómez-Quirón, "Toward a Concept of Culture," *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, 5, no. 29-47; and William V. Flores and Rita Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
9. Richard H. Adams and Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976).
10. Irene Dávila, *Sponsored Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 1.
11. Ramón Grosfoguel et al., "Beyond Nationalist and Colonialist Discourses," 26. The terms *jibba*, *choteo*, and *combinado* refer to the practice of mocking authority and power as a counterhegemonic tactic, that is, a tactic against domination.
12. José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 98.
13. José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 160.
14. Alfredo Marín-Urrutín, "The Struggle for Independence: The Long March to the Twenty-first Century," *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, 21.

and social and political associations, such as the Congreso Mexicanista, discussed in chapter 15. Present in almost every barrio in the Southwest, *mutualistas* maintained close links to other institutions, such as the Mexican consulate, and tried to use Mexican consulate services for lodging complaints against Anglo authorities. *Mutualistas* also played an economic function: in return for dues, member families received a payment upon the death of the wage earner and some unemployment benefits were also available. Members were from the working and the lower-middle classes, with new immigrants making up a large number.<sup>8</sup>

The dialectical relationship with U.S. unions is evident in the political discourse of the *mutualistas*. One of their goals was to encourage U.S. Mexican workers to organize and protest because of low wages, poor treatment, and the desire for self-improvement. They also promoted solidarity with Anglo workers, who in most cases did not want to be associated with them. Non-Mexican workers defined power in terms of ethnocentric solidarity, exclusion of minorities, and identification with the Anglo middle class. Often, white workers, not employers, persecuted nonwhite workers. U.S. Mexicans were often ineligible for union membership and, on union-dominated jobs, often no Mexicans were hired. This led to the practice of organizing separately.<sup>9</sup> These events illustrate how Mexicans struggled for inclusion in the life of the nation, only to be rejected, and the necessary retreat into an ethnic discourse and their own communities.

A further illustration underlines U.S. Mexican workers' desires to be active citizens. Since they were mostly involved in agricultural work, they did not play a major role in industrial areas. And yet many U.S. Mexicans were significant participants in labor struggles in the South and the Midwest of the United States, even where they were systematically excluded from leadership or from union membership by exclusionist unions, such as the American Federation of Labor. Indeed a major chapter in Latino/a political thought is the important and often leading role of U.S. Mexican workers through the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM), especially in the more militant sectors of the U.S. labor movement, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).<sup>10</sup> The Partido Liberal Mexicano, led by Ricardo Flores Magón, "represents an innovation in the political history of the Mexican people in the U.S. and in Mexico. It was an international, revolutionary, ideological, and clandestine party that fought for the destruction of the dictatorship in Mexico and capitalism in general."<sup>11</sup> It had significant ties to U.S. American radicals, especially the IWW. In some ways it can be compared to the Cuban Revolutionary Party, which under the leadership of José Martí operated in the United States to overthrow the Spaniards from Cuba. This active political discourse of U.S. Mexican workers was adversely affected not only by the Repatriation, but also by laws that were specifically used to deter militancy in the Mexican community. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 allowed the U.S. president to order workers to go back to their jobs, and gave states the right to eliminate union membership as a prerequisite for many jobs, and required union officials to sign affidavits pledging no Communist affiliation. The McCarran International Security Act of 1950, among other provisions, makes a distinction between naturalized and native citizens; it was used to deport citizens for political reasons—such as labor organizing.<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, the increased demand for Mexican labor from Mexico was matched by the exclusionary disregard for the well-being of those same human bodies once they were on U.S. soil, once they became U.S. Mexicans. These are political struggles for and about the human body (its categorization according to class, pigment of skin, nationality, ethnicity, and "desirability"—desirable citizen versus undesirable alien) for the purpose of the extraction of its labor and the preservation of a particular image of what constitutes the United States of America. This paradox represents a poorly understood dynamic that leads many people to believe that U.S. Mexicans prefer to have their own separate communities. On the contrary, their quest in the early part of the twentieth century illustrates a Mexican American political practice to include others in the struggle

and exploitation that elsewhere has been termed "Chicanology."<sup>13</sup> These are the power and a fragile political status for the Mexican American.

## NOTES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

1. To differentiate them from "Mexicans" from Mexico, we use here the term "U.S. Mexican."
2. Juan Gómez-Quintónez, *Roots of Chicano Politics, 1600–1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 296.
3. Romano, I. R.-V., "The Historical and Intellectual Presence of Mexican Americans," *El Grito* 1993–1994, 296.
4. For a contextualized exposition, see Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, 1930–1960* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 25–61.
5. Wilson Neate, "Allenism Unashamed," *Latino Studies Journal* 8, no. 2 (spring 1997): 6.
6. Balderama, Francisco E., and R. Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the University of New Mexico Press*, 1995), 118.
7. Gómez-Quintónez, *Roots of Chicano Politics*, 299.
8. Juan Gómez-Quintónez, *Mexican American Labor, 1790–1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 57.
9. Gómez-Quintónez, *Mexican American Labor*, 57–61.
10. Gómez-Quintónez, *Roots of Chicano Politics*, 300.
11. Gómez-Quintónez, *Roots of Chicano Politics*, 342.
12. Gómez-Quintónez, *Mexican American Labor*, 174.
13. Francisco H. Vázquez, "Chicanology: A Postmodern Analysis of Meshicano Discourse," *American Studies* 3 (1992): 116–47.

## 14 \*

### OUR FEMINIST HERITAGE

Marta Cotera

Though much work remains to be done to recognize the participation of women at all levels to write "Chicanas into history" and "decolonize the imaginary," as Emma Pérez puts it, have a map of this history. This is what Marta provides in the following piece, which was published in her anthology *The Chicana Feminist*.



Because Mexican women had participated valiantly in the 1810 Viceroyalty, they were not expressive in the 1857 Constitution. Unfortunately, they were not expressive in the 1857 Constitution. Unfortunately, they were not expressive in the 1857 Constitution. Unfortunately, they were not expressive in the 1857 Constitution.