
AGUSTINA GUFFAIN VDA. DE DOITTAU

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Effluvioms of the Soul: Collection of Articles and Thoughts
by Agustina Guffain

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Agustina Guffain de Doittau was one of the most prominent and influential spiritist leaders of her time. In 1898, she lived in the city of Mayagüez with her husband Carlos Doittau, a well-known philanthropist, merchant, landowner, and store owner.¹ As Teresa Yáñez Vda. de Otero explains, the couple were firm advocates of the spiritist doctrine since 1898, promoting Spiritism in their home on Méndez Vigo Street in Mayagüez.² They would perform scientific and philosophical readings on a daily basis, and during mediumistic sessions they would receive instructions from the Spirits.³ Their consistent study led them to found the Grupo Esperanza center (the Hope Group center). Yáñez de Otero explains:



The Doittau Guffain household could not accommodate all the visitors because so many people came to their readings. To solve this problem, they decided to make an additional room in their family home, with enough space to accommodate more than one hundred people.⁴

Grupo Esperanza's evening readings promoted women's participation in areas of education, culture, and social reform.⁵ Once the doors of the Esperanza center were opened on December 20, 1900, Guffain

Fig. 1: Photograph of Agustina Guffain⁶

¹ Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, "Biography of Agustina Guffain Vda. de Doittau," (2020), https://digital.kenyon.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=espiritismo_agustinaguffain; Nancy *El Iris de Paz: El espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900-1905*, Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 2001, p. 84.

² Teresa Yáñez 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, P.R.: Cooperativas de Artes Gráficas Romualdo Real, 1963, pp. 36-37.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36-37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵ Herzig Shannon, *Op. Cit.*, 133.

⁶ I am deeply grateful for Dr. Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, great-granddaughter of Agustina Guffain de Doittau, for granting me access and use of these photographs and materials.

founded the spiritist periodical for psychological studies *El Iris de Paz (The Iris of Peace)*, with a monthly subscription cost of 30 cents.⁷ Until 1912, this periodical, financed and directed by Guffain, circulated within the cities and towns of Puerto Rico, and beyond.⁸ Grupo Esperanza was the main group responsible for establishing the *Federación de los Espiritistas de Puerto Rico (the Spiritist Federation of Puerto Rico)*, whose first constituent assembly was held April 18-19, 1903, at the Mayagüez Municipal Theater.⁹ For years, Agustina Guffain shared the position of honorary president of the spiritist assemblies along with lawyer, political leader, and spiritist Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón, and lawyer and educator Francisco Vincenty.¹⁰ Thus, as Néstor Rodríguez Escudero points out, “after Puerto Rican Spiritism was institutionalized in the 1903 assembly, women with full rights came to the foreground as collaborators with men on equal terms.”¹¹ Agustina Guffain played a central role in this social transformation, which Rodríguez Escudero eloquently summarizes as follows:

Mrs. Agustina Guffain de Doittau has achieved the honor of founder. Along with her husband, she financially supported her organization for many years, had the courage to risk persecution by defending a new doctrine incompatible with the official religion’s dogma, and her periodical *El Iris de Paz* widened the now vigorous field of journalism for the defense of her ideal. She was a champion of love and charity.¹²

Education, Culture, and Social Reform

How did women and other socially marginalized groups organize themselves to confront an unjust society? Rural populations had no networks of communication and the barriers of class, race, and gender, established and reinforced by the colonial state and the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church, were virtually insurmountable. The education of Puerto Rican women at that time was virtually non-existent.

As María de Fátima Barceló Miller has shown in her compilation of historical documents published in the nineteenth century press, at the beginning of the century, only a handful of young women from San Juan received reading and writing instruction and Christian indoctrination. Starting in 1880, both the colonial government and some liberal Creole intellectuals, influenced by Krausism, showed a greater interest in female education. For the Krausists, women had to be educated with three main objectives: 1) to make them assistants to their husband in their public function; 2) to make them good educators for their children, developing their abilities in order to raise good citizens; 3) to influence society through good

⁷ Francisca Suárez served as director and José Elías Levis as administrator. See Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico 1860-1907*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2015, pp. 150-160.

⁸ Yáñez Vda. de Otero, *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37-38.

¹⁰ Herzig Shannon, *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.

¹¹ Néstor Rodríguez Escudero, *Historia del Espiritismo en Puerto Rico*. 2da ed. Quebradillas, P. R.: Imprenta San Rafael, 1991, p. 232.

¹² *Ibid.*, 233.

manners and civility, so as to neutralize masculine rudeness.¹³ As Barceló Miller points out, the aim was to train women as mothers, educators, and transmitters of values, but not as “participants in the production of those values.”¹⁴ Agustina Guffain challenged these problems of isolation and lack of female education, creating indispensable networks of association that made it possible for women to support one another in turn-of-the-century Puerto Rico. The periodical

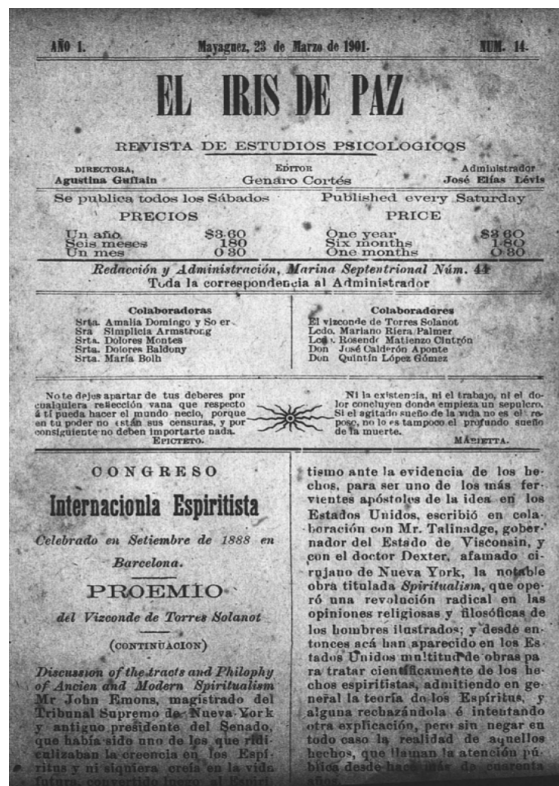


Fig. 2: A copy of *El Iris de Paz*, March 23, 1901.¹⁷

Poverty and Spiritism

Another central issue that Agustina Guffain addressed is the poverty inflicted upon her country by a colonial economic system. Using spiritist doctrine, Guffain sees and listens to what the privileged population shamelessly disregards. As we will see in the analysis of her book *Efluvios del alma. Colección de artículos y pensamientos (Effluviiums of the Soul: Collection of Articles and Thoughts)*, the laws of equality, freedom, justice, love, and charity that Allan Kardec promotes in *El Libro de los Espíritus (The Book of Spirits)* occupy a central place in her writings.

¹³ María de Fátima Barceló Miller, “Los pinceles del universo: El tema de la instrucción femenina en la prensa puertorriqueña del siglo XIX (Documento para estudio)”, Santurce, P.R.: Centro de Investigaciones Académicas, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, 1995, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Herzig Shannon, *Op. Cit.*, p. 102-103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100-101.

¹⁷ I am deeply grateful for Dr. Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, great-granddaughter of Agustina Guffain de Doittau, for granting me access and use of these photographs and materials.

El Iris de Paz brought together the voices of Puerto Rican spiritists, becoming a vehicle that promoted the ideas that many women had about themselves, including their aspirations as spiritists and as women.¹⁵ Due to its national scope, the periodical received and published letters, stories, advertisements, and even novels, all written by women.¹⁶ As a result, women were able to communicate with each other from various locations, to get to know each other, and from that encounter a freethinking, collective, and supportive feminine conscience was born.

The moral, intellectual, and autodidactic mission that *El Iris de Paz* promoted is extremely important because it mobilized the emergence of a popular culture that challenged the official culture of the State and the Church. Spiritist women actively participated in public forums. Their voices were heard. Personal issues were elevated to public debate and human rights played a key role, all of which had much feminist influences.

Spiritism proclaims that all people are equal before God, “all trend towards the same objective, and God created His laws for all.”¹⁸ For spiritists, inequality is the work of humans, not of God, and thus, society is considered the main cause of human suffering.¹⁹ Therefore, Spiritism proposes that society should, above all, ensure the moral education of its members. It does not recognize the solution to social injustice in any one ideology, but rather in the moral transformation of humanity. For this reason, Guffain proclaims: “Fight selfishness, which is your social plague, and do not go in search of magical solutions.”²⁰ She also suggests wealth as an opportunity to remedy injustice.²¹ Indeed, the spiritist doctrine establishes that equality is the first principle of justice.²² Within this notion, men and women are equal before God and have the same rights. What, then, is the origin of women’s supposed inferiority? The answer offered by Kardec in his aforementioned book is:

Regarding the unjust and cruel domination that man has exercised over her.²³ (...) Human law, to be equitable, must establish the equal rights of men and women. Any privilege granted to one over the other is contrary to justice. *The emancipation of women is consistent with the progress of civilization.*²⁴

Radical and revolutionary in principle, Spiritism became an object of study that provided alternative ways of approaching the serious problems that plagued the Island, from the extreme poverty maintained by the colonial state to sexism and female oppression propagated by the Church. Kardecian principles, themselves revolutionary in their moral stature, guided Guffain’s writing. They surface in her narratives, speeches, maxims, and journalistic essays. They are modeled in her behavior and in her roles as a citizen and a family member. The moral faculties of female intellectuals stand out within these principles, and challenge everything that contradicts equality and social justice.

Like her spiritist contemporaries, Guffain understood charity and love of neighbor as a Christian principle whose primary model was Jesus. What is charity? “Kindness towards all people, mercy for other people’s flaws, forgiveness of sins.”²⁵ It is always good and compassionate. That is why begging, a common practice in Puerto Rico at the time, was considered a moral problem:

The man reduced to begging is morally and physically degraded; he is brutalized. In a society based on God’s law and justice, we must provide for the *weak* without humiliating them.²⁶

¹⁸ Allan Kardec, *El libro de los Espíritus*, trad. Gustavo N. Martínez. Brasilia (DF), Brasil: Consejo Espírita Internacional, 2011, p. 437, ítem 803.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 439, ítem 806.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 441, ítems 812, 813.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 440, ítem 809.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 443, ítem 822.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 442-443, ítem 818.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 444, ítem 822^a.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 473-474, ítem 886.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 474-475, ítem 888.

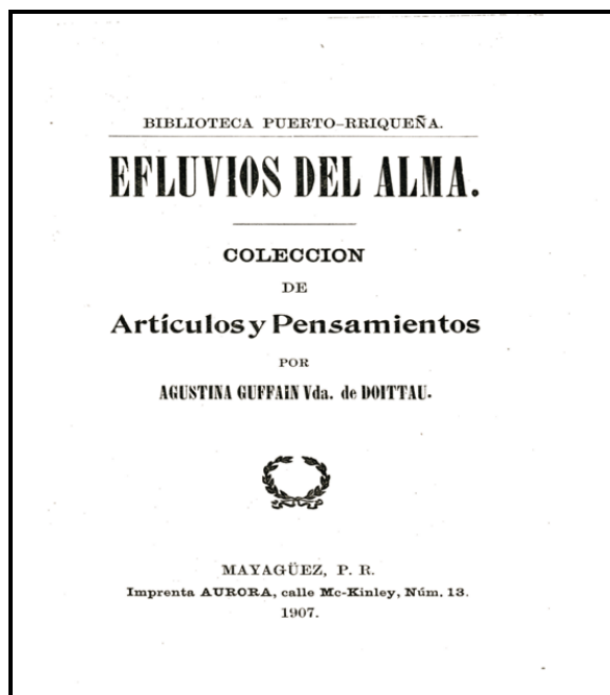
El Libro de los Espíritus also distinguishes begging from social charity in regards to internal character and human respect rather than the legal order:

The most needy do not always ask for help. Fear of humiliation stops those who are truly poor, who often suffer without complaining. The true humanitarian knows how to humbly look for those people. Love one another —this is the only law, the divine law by which God governs the worlds.²⁷

Immersed in the study of Spiritism and in the practice of charity, Agustina Guffain articulates the principles of Kardecian Spiritism into a narrative key. Although she does it without any literary aspirations, the result is a work of great literary elegance that demonstrates exemplary morals.

Effluvioms of the Soul: Collection of Articles and Thoughts

In 1907, Imprenta Aurora (Aurora Press), located in the city of Mayagüez, published *Efluvios del alma. Colección de artículos y pensamientos*.²⁸



In the book's "Advertencia" ("Warning"), the author, Agustina Guffain, describes it as "articles regarding the spiritist doctrine" published with the aim of "encouraging Puerto Rican women on the path that Spiritism has laid out for us."²⁹ However, *Efluvios* is much more than a collection of articles and thoughts. It is a mixture of texts that includes short narratives or vignettes, speeches, spiritist doctrine, open letters, and a collection of maxims. As if wanting to inscribe Puerto Rican women in the historical record, *Efluvios* focuses on female characters, some fictional (Beatriz, Delia, Herminia, Elva, Celia, and Caridad, conceited and selfish upper class Catholic ladies, and poor, marginalized women); and some historical ones (her daughter Guillermina, to whom she dedicates the book, her friends Francisca Suárez, Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, Lola Baldoni, and Lola Montes, and her deceased daughter Agustinita, among others). Beyond explicitly promoting Spiritism, Guffain also

Fig. 3: *Efluvios del Alma. Colección de artículos y pensamientos*, Agustina Guffain, 1907.³⁰

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 475, ítem 888^a.

²⁸ Agustina Guffain, *Efluvios del alma. Colección de artículos y pensamientos*, Mayagüez, P.R. Imprenta Aurora, 1907.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁰ I am deeply grateful to Dr. Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, great-granddaughter of Agustina Guffain de Doittau, for granting me access and use of these photographs and material.

intends to place the Puerto Rican woman in a general, human context, in order to emphasize her ability to think as well as to love and feel, typical characteristics of the Spirit. Her proposal is clear: to educate women so that they can contribute to the great work of human regeneration promised by Spiritism. That is why, in “Advertencia,” she points out:

Only the Spirit can love and feel, as well as the woman. Let us add to these essential powers the ability to think and think freely; let us educate our intellect without fear. In this way we will more effectively contribute to the great work of human Regeneration.³¹

In other words, women’s education and equality is the goal that Agustina Guffain aims to achieve in *Efluvios del alma*. Spiritism serves as an intellectual and moral instrument to open the topic to explanation and justification.

Modernist Style

Though free from literary techniques and intentions, Guffain’s writing style reflects modernist elements. Modernism was a Latin American poetic movement in the late nineteenth century that converged with Positivism, a school of thought that applied the scientific method to philosophy and proposed that everything could be proven with its method. Modernist writers rebelled against positivism and the cultural flatness of a society that had its faith set on material and technological progress. It opposed the materialism of the time period, searching for harmonious language that would reflect the secret beauty of the universe. Modernists wrote elegant and elusive literature. Drawing on the prestigious repertoire of classical mythology, it dressed the text in a dazzling and resonant language.³²

While Agustina Guffain’s writing resembles the beautiful modernist prose of her time, *Efluvios del alma* is not entirely elusive. In fact, contrary to modernist escapism, Guffain presents another attitude that seeks an ethical, positive solution to the inadequate living conditions of the Puerto Rican people. She describes the social conditions that inspired the text and assigns Spiritism the important mission of diagnosing and mitigating the social and moral ills that afflict the Island. Using mainly the power of narrative, she submits the social context to an inductive and deductive chain of thought from which she derives and interprets the situation of Puerto Rican women in the first decade of the twentieth century. As we will see in the following analysis, she calls out the social and moral imbalance of a classist and sexist society that disempowers the wealthy woman, reducing her to a performative identity nurtured by the aristocracy and the Church. She discovers the poor, desperate woman, who has nowhere to go to survive, and grants her dignity, welcoming her into a context of solidarity. Like her contemporaries —Francisca Suárez and Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú— Guffain infuses the art of storytelling with moral education, using narrative as an ideal instrument to imagine a more just and true society.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³² Ángel Crespo, *Antología de la poesía modernista*, Tarragona, España: Ediciones Tarraco, 1980, pp.11-45.

Narrative and Power

Although organized into twenty-two sections that include a variety of genres, the use of narration dominates *Efluvios*, an important point given the book's main objective. As H. Porter Abbott explains, narrative organizes time in a concrete way, through an accounting of events.³³ That is, narrative time is distinct from the time of a clock or a season, which are both abstract measurements. Narrative time allows for the passing of years within a sentence or two, and it can add time by accumulating micro-events. More relevant still, narrative is a universal tool for gaining and sharing knowledge. It is not static. It provokes active thinking, which often helps us solve problems as we tell them.³⁴ The power of narrative resides in its rhetoric, which makes it an instrument of power. Who exercises power? Everything in the text (characters, narrator, motifs, themes, master plots, voice, and focus) is fundamental, but especially the effects of causality, given that we often look to the cause of phenomena in order to explain the world.³⁵ As we will see below, Agustina Guffain uses strong narrative rhetoric to promote Spiritism and women's emancipation.

The vignette entitled "Miseria Humana" ("Human Misery"), for example, opens with the voice of an upper-class lady telling a young woman, a servant of the home, to get rid of a beggar who has come to ask for money:

Look, girl, tell that beggar to forgive me, I have nothing to give him! What are the beggars thinking? That I am willing to hear their crying every day!

Let them go to the Asylum! I give *thirty cents* every month to the asylum! Even after I give money to keep them there, I also have to give to everyone who shows up? ...³⁶

Following this scene, the narrator comments:

A distinguished lady, who goes to mass every Sunday as well as holy days, spoke this way; she confesses and takes communion at least... once a month. If that is how Religion educates our elders, it is better not to teach it. (...) Spiritism, on the other hand, is the luminous torch that guides those who are lost along life's arduous path. Hence, the true spiritist does not feel the heat of anger, which, like selfishness and pride, chokes every cell in the body that yearns for generous action.³⁷

Evidently, the author's intention is to contrast Spiritism with the official religion professed by the Roman Catholic Church. For Guffain, the former transforms the individual's moral code and leads them to true charity and love of neighbor, while the latter promotes ritual and charity out of obligation. Later, the narrator elaborates this point by referring to the two plagues of the upper

³³ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-48.

³⁶ Guffain, *Efluvios del alma*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

class, selfishness and pride, as “two plagues of the heart” and to the distinguished lady in the story as “*poor*” because she “adorns her body with fine clothing when she visits the Temple, yet leaves her soul untouched by the divine essence of Charity.”³⁸

Despite the vignette’s brevity, the text directly presents the thesis as follows: “For the advancement of our intellectual selves, it is necessary to unite morality with science, and science...with morality.”³⁹ Thus, the opening scene serves as a memorable image, or narrative anchor, to reflect on the reasons why the incarnated Spirit must develop its intelligence as well as its morality; because it is the only way to shed itself, little by little, of the passions that blind us.

In “La Caridad” (“Charity”), Guffain allegorically depicts the virtue stated in the title as a beautiful and lavish woman:

Look how beautiful she is! Extending her generous hand to the poor, to the beggar! Imagine her surrounded in the essence of pure love! How beautiful she is! Charity, precious name that symbolizes a world of divine good fortune! Everyone who bows to you is benevolent, because you are Kindness par excellence.⁴⁰

The key message is that he, who harbors charity in his soul, never ignores the voice of the poor. Thus, the invitation made by Guffain in this case includes witnessing the misery of the poor, the abject poverty that “could well be called loneliness, since there is nothing that isolates and oppresses some people more than poverty.”⁴¹ In search of the moral fiber of the rich and the poor, she juxtaposes “the pure, radiant soul” of the socially disinherited with the “shadow of remorse” of the wealthy “who close his heart,” refusing to love their neighbors, without taking into account “their misdeeds from the *past* and from other existences.”⁴² To understand the reference to that “*past*,” we must recall that Spiritism interprets wealth and poverty as existential states that the Spirit itself chooses on its path of advancement. Neither wealth nor poverty in themselves guarantee the progress of the soul. Only love of neighbor and charity can free the soul from any kind of subordination or dependence, leading it to the emancipation of consciousness, and from there to God. Thus, by means of an allegory, Guffain offers the reader a deeper understanding of spiritist Charity, which spiritists call “the most divine Virtue.”⁴³ The use of allegory is important for two reasons: first, because its purpose is to assign an image to an immaterial concept (charity in this case), so that the general public can better understand it; and, second, because it exalts the woman by using her image to represent the highest of virtues.⁴⁴

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Allegory, taken from the Greek *allêgoría*, meaning “metaphor,” is a literary figure or artistic theme, which seeks to represent an idea using human forms, animals, and/or everyday objects. Allegories try to assign an image to what has no image, so that it can be better understood by the public. See Joan Corominas, *Breve diccionario de la lengua castellana*, 3ra edición, muy revisada y mejorada, Madrid, Gredos, 1983, p. 39.

“Nobleza de alma” (“Soul Nobleness”) is one of the most comprehensive stories of *Efluvios*. Time is organized in a concrete way, through a detailed list of events. This is how the vignette opens:

We are all celebrating Candelaria. Waves of people invade the streets of the beautiful city. Let the deafening sound of the parish church bells be heard, announcing to the faithful devotees of the exalted Virgin that the divine services will soon begin.⁴⁵

After the parish festival, the narrator describes a luxurious home of “a young, seemingly happy, married couple.”⁴⁶ We see the elaborately furnished, spacious living room, the owner delicately dressing up “in front of the Venetian moon mirror, putting on the latest, most fashionable hat, preparing to go to the Temple to worship God, to bow down on her knees before the altar.”⁴⁷ As the young wife is about to leave, a poor woman approaches the door with a child in her arms. Hungry, she asks the lady: “Ma’am, please give me something for my daughter.” The young lady turns abruptly, answering her with marked arrogance: “I have nothing to give you.”⁴⁸ Humiliated, the poor woman descends the stairs of the luxurious home, but by divine mercy she finds “another companion of misfortune” on her way down, who asks her about her crying. The other poor woman, “decently dressed” extends her hand with two copper coins, “the widow’s denarius.”⁴⁹ The vignette ends with the moral: “How beautiful is the poor helping the destitute!”⁵⁰

This narrative texture of this vignette, or the degree to which the text creates the impression that someone is telling a story, sparks interest and adds complexity to the process of interpretation. What city does it take place in? How is the parish festival celebrated there? Who attends the divine services? A concise series of motifs allows us to analyze the story’s thematic elements. The festivities of the Virgen de la Candelaria (the Virgin of the Candle), the ringing of the parish church bells, the luxurious home, the Venetian moon mirror, the stylish hat, and the stairs, all function as minimal thematic elements or data to be interpreted. If, as H. Porter Abbott explains, narrative is a universal tool for gaining knowledge as well as for sharing it, what knowledge does this vignette produce? Guffain undoubtedly continues to address the issue of class, the cruelty of the rich and the misery of the poor. The effects of causality are fundamental, since we often look to the cause of phenomena in order to explain the world. In this case, the text invites us to ask ourselves: Who caused poverty? Who has the power to solve it? How does the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church contribute to solving the issue of poverty? Who benefits from the Virgen de la Candelaria festival? The critical thinking that the vignette inspires also leads to a possible solution and offers, through critical reflection, the possibility of fulfilling acts of charity ourselves. Therefore, in “Nobleza de alma,” Guffain addresses the moral code of the people, exposes the rich’s indifference toward the poor’s suffering, and points out an alternative path, that of the other poor woman who offers the widow’s denarius. As these examples demonstrate,

⁴⁵ Guffain, *Efluvios del alma*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Guffain employs the power of narrative to promote the moral education and high ideals professed by Spiritism.

Spiritism and Female Subjectivity

The “Discurso de apertura” (“Opening Speech”) published in *Efluvios* shows to what extent Spiritism was an agent of change for Puerto Rican spiritists; a change that enabled the development of a female subjectivity in full possession of herself. This is a speech given by Agustina Guffain in February, 1901, when the spiritist’s works began at the new el centro Esperanza (Hope center). In this speech, we hear the voice of a woman presenting herself to her audience, “HUMBLE WORKERS OF FREE THOUGHT;”⁵¹ a subordinate woman who has obtained the moral and intellectual ability necessary to negotiate a position of equality with the other. Guffain takes the floor with a very modest attitude and, nevertheless, warns, advises, summons, asks for help, and offers:

my humble task is to form a small number of spiritists with limited knowledge, who sustain and practice the highest degree of moral teachings, in order to awaken the feeling of love for charity among those who are still sleeping under the veil of pride and selfishness, which is so prevalent on Earth.⁵²

She authorizes and justifies herself by making use of spiritist knowledge and her role as a medium or, as she calls them, “mediators of the invisible:”

It is true that I do not have enough intellect to be your president, but I am convinced that the promoters of space accompany me, as they accompany whoever does good work, to help me on the thorny path on which I walk. (...) I will be beside you; not to serve as your teacher, because in reality I am not, but rather so that you can learn from the beings of the afterlife, who come to advise you through my mediation.⁵³

Here, she refers to the theories of soul survival (“the thinking quality of the human being”⁵⁴), the law of cause and effect (“there is no effect without a cause”⁵⁵), the axiom of personal redemption (“that each being must redeem itself”⁵⁶), that is, the idea that our spiritual advancement or delay depends on our actions on Earth. She continues to explain how it will work: “in the sessions I will concentrate more on the study of spiritist books and magazines than on phenomena.”⁵⁷ In short, “Discurso de apertura” is about a critical, informed, and dignified female subjectivity.

The theme of mediums and mediumship, which continues in the next two chapters, is relevant not only because it demonstrates Guffain’s knowledge and experience on the subject, but also because it connects Spiritism with a new form of education that involves inspiration, or spirit guides. She explains:

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Seeing the spirits, talking to them, and receiving their impressions constitutes a new education for us, as well as a means to delve into the unknown with the necessary tools of science. Perhaps those faculties, whose importance is disregarded, are due to the great discoveries in the scientific world and the great inventions in the industrial world.⁵⁸

If, as Guffain argues, “our relationships with Spirits are constant. They live an earthly life, they get upset, they participate directly and actively in all the problems that influence our individual and social being,”⁵⁹ then Spiritism not only rectifies gender hierarchies, in this case granting a woman direct access to said knowledge, but also class hierarchies, since knowledge itself can be given to anyone regardless of social class via the guidance of the Spirits. Under this notion of the material and spiritual world, female subjectivity can free itself from barriers of gender, class, and race and promote freedom of thought, community, and social justice.

This new evocation of a female subjectivity emancipated from social restrictions feeds on concrete coalitions among women who support one another. “Carta abierta” (“Open letter”), dedicated to Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, demonstrates how women, who were strangers in the past, become friends. Emerging out of a deep mutual respect, the discovery becomes an exciting affair, as seen in the following statement that Agustina makes to Simplicia:

I want you to know the strong feelings that encourage me to preserve, in continuous progression, the ties that unite us today. They are a glowing reflection of that life of Love that Spiritism makes us foresee for all humanity in the not too distant future, and that we feel for each other quite intensely today. Such ties are what will form *true life on Earth!* And we prepare each other, we search for each other, and we recognize each other so that we may enjoy a very small piece of the greatness of life.⁶⁰

Here, Guffain not only foresees a better world than the present, but illustrates it through her deep sisterly love for Simplicia. Just as noteworthy is how she offers her collaborator and friend an honourable and privileged place in the passing down of cultural values and assets gathered by the co-heirs of Spiritism:

Yes, yes, my friend Simplicia: women like you of renowned and refined intelligence, who handle the pen that lets a current of great teachings flow and awakens the feelings of love in those who read and study its works, which are always full of beautiful moral reasoning; women like you, who know how to express their beautiful ideas with simplicity and grace; who exalt the accomplishments of Puerto Rican women should not be left behind for fear of criticism.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

The importance of Guffain's public expression of absolute solidarity with another woman writer is, in reality, incalculable, given that, as has been established, Puerto Rican women at the time had minimal and always secondary access to the literate city. Thus, as Guffain's articles demonstrate, Spiritism offered a new space that allowed the reformulation of knowledge—historical, personal, and collective—as well as the possibility of the emancipation of the Puerto Rican woman during the colonial transition.

Spiritist Education Faces the Lettered City

In "Pensamientos" ("Thoughts"), the final section of *Efluvios*, Guffain synthesizes her ideas through the use of aphorisms. Aphorisms usually present a single, concise thought and have some sort of moral or doctrinal message, directed at a local or popular audience. Themes of love, Spiritism, forgiveness, charity, free will, pride, homeland, education, God, women, morals, and science reappear in Guffain's brief but profound thoughts. The clarity and beauty of these short literary works demonstrate the quality of Guffain's spiritist education. Regarding love, she tells us:

Love is a glimmering lake, in whose clear waters the Spirits bathe before ascending towards God.⁶²

Love blinds the one who squanders it; but it illuminates the one who embraces it.⁶³

When two beings love and understand each other, the Angel of Goodness flaps its wings above their foreheads, enveloping them in rich fragrances.⁶⁴

Here, we see three forms of love. In its most universal form, it is the path that leads to God. At the level of human interactions, it is an offering that blinds all material valuation and results in the brightening of another person's soul. In the couple's experience, it is the sweet radiation produced by intimacy.

Regarding kisses, she proclaims:

Kisses are the vibrating notes of the soul, resounding from that instrument called the heart.⁶⁵

The kisses of two beings who love each other are the balm that heal the soul's wounds.⁶⁶

The kiss of two beings who love each other is Nature caressing God.⁶⁷

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

She does not offer an analogical vision of the universe, which is romantic in origin and widely practiced by modernists, but rather a spiritual vision of the material world in which love, embodied in human beings and nature, maintains an intimate and real relationship with the Spirit world and with God.

Regarding forgiveness, she explains:

Forgiveness is not forgiveness if it does not echo a prayer of Love.

The most beautiful prayer that Christ lifted to God was: Forgive them Lord, for they know not what they do!

To forgive is to erase any remnant of pain; but forgiveness is not enough, it is also necessary to love.

Charity has a luminous result: Forgiveness!⁶⁸

Anyone who has ever had to forgive must recognize how hard it is. There is only one way, Agustina Guffain seems to tell us, which emerges through a prayer of love. What is forgiveness for Guffain? The ability to erase any remnant of pain, although this ability is not possible if it is not mediated by love. And love, in this case, is made possible by prayer. Guffain offers as an example the prayer of forgiveness that Jesus lifts for us from the cross. This reference is important because it illustrates the Christian character of Puerto Rican Spiritism at the time. Thus, Guffain's Spiritism —anti-Catholic but Christian— is aligned with that of her collaborators and her friends, Francisca Suárez and Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú.⁶⁹ Just as the prayer of love can bring about forgiveness, the result or reward of charity is also forgiveness. Seen here again is the Christian idea that, by way of sacrifice and selflessness, charity can liberate us from debt and sin.

From Autodidacticism to Emancipation

An important aspect of this last section of *Efluvios* is that, in it, Guffain makes a direct call for auto-didacticism:

With more will, more progress, and with more progress, the better one can discern good from evil.⁷⁰

And later:

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶⁹ See her article “Cadentia Sidera” (which roughly translates from Latin to “Setting Stars”), dedicated to her dear friend Francisca, in which she says: “That is why we see that Catholicism and other positive religions are slowly reaching their end; they are stars that shone yesterday with more or less bright light and that today are descending towards their twilight; making us exclaim the words of a great Latin poet: CADENTIA SIDERA!” *Ibid.*, P. 111.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

The one who shines the brightest in society and who possesses the best intellectual gifts is not necessarily the best spiritist; but rather the one who, after having learned the spiritist philosophy, makes greater efforts to combat their imperfections.⁷¹

And finally:

Form philosophical-moral groups and you will achieve laudable goals over the years.⁷²

The level of social inclusion that Guffain achieves through the autodidacticism promoted in her periodical, her spiritist meetings, and her writing shows that Spiritism offered an enormous opportunity for the individual—regardless of their intellectual level, class, gender, or race—to take part in a critical reflection regarding the production of intellectual and moral knowledge. The invisibility of Puerto Rican women in the lettered city prevented them from participating in public debates. Neither women's natural rights nor the serious issues that directly afflicted them were recognized. Facing the lettered city, protected by the Church and the patriarchal State, Agustina Guffain's work made it possible for other voices to rise up that offered alternative perspectives of the world, Puerto Rican society, and women. Through the intense dialogue that Spiritism fostered, Puerto Rican women met and organized in solidarity to make sense of the social structures that oppressed them and other marginalized groups. From here, as Agustina Guffain's case shows, a feminine subjectivity emerged and was emancipated using spiritist laws and principles. The result was a Puerto Rican woman who saw herself as an agent of change and as a bridge between the literate city and the people.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 126.