
LOLA BALDONI PÉREZ

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Analysis of "Impressions" by Lola Baldoni

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Impressions: A Collection of Articles by Lola Baldoni

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Distinguished writer, spiritist, and dedicated activist, Lola Baldoni belonged to the first generation of Puerto Rican spiritists, a group of educated women, active in spiritist study and



social justice work.¹ As historian Sandra Enríquez Seiders argues in her valuable book *El Espiritismo en Utuado: La historia de las hermanas Baldoni (Spiritism in Utuado: The Story of the Baldoni Sisters)*, “there is no doubt that Lola belonged to the so-called *first feminism* movement that fought for women’s rights to education and suffrage.”² Indeed, Baldoni’s work clearly and elegantly addresses the issue of women’s rights as well as Spiritism in its most abstract dimensions. Baldoni was a well-known writer in Puerto Rico and Spain for her valuable journalistic contributions to the periodicals *El Iris de Paz (The Iris of Peace)*, led by Agustina Guffain, and *La Luz del Porvenir (The Light of the Future)*, led by Amalia Domingo y Soler of Spain.³ Lola Baldoni’s most extensive work, *Impresiones: Colección de artículos (Impressions: A Collection of Articles)*, was published in 1894 in Ponce.

Impresiones offers an insightful and provocative perspective regarding the serious issues faced by the women and spiritists of her time. This

Fig. 1: Photograph of Lola Baldoni Pérez.⁴

¹ Nancy Herzig Shannon, *El Iris de Paz: El espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900-1905*, Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 2001, p. 82.

² Sandra A. Enríquez Seiders, *El espiritismo en Utuado: La historia de las hermanas Baldoni*, San Juan, P.R.: Biblio Services, 2011, p. 73; Sandra A. Enríquez Seiders. *Ricarda López de Ramos Casellas: Tizas Conciencia y Sufragio*, Colombia: Ediciones Callejón, 2006, p. 23.

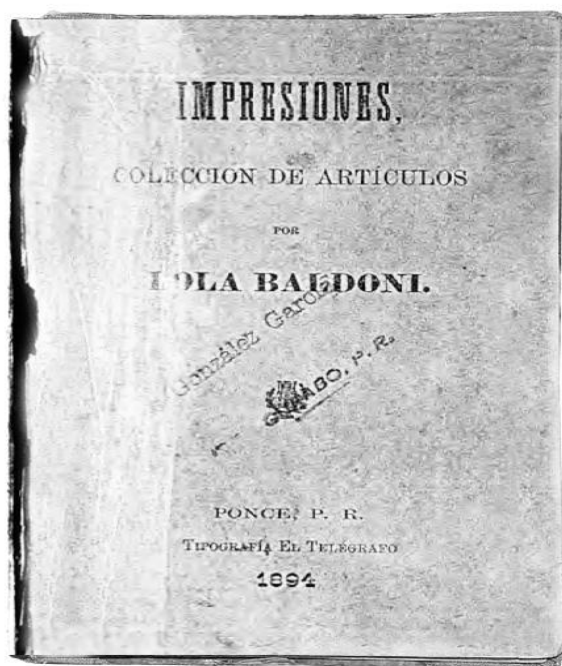
³ To access Lola Baldoni’s journalistic articles published in *El Iris de Paz* between 1901-1905, see https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo_elirisdepaz/; to access those published in *La Luz del Porvenir*, see <http://hemerotecadigital.bne.es/details.vm?q=id:0005320903&lang=en>.

⁴ I am deeply grateful to Dr. Sandra Enríquez Seiders for granting me use of and access to these photographs and other materials.

collection presents new ways of being a woman, emphasizes a deep anticlerical sentiment, demonstrates the connection between Spiritism and the figure of Jesus, and offers a detailed application of the Law of Progress as proposed in *El libro de los espíritus* (*The Book of Spirits*) by Allan Kardec. With a sophisticated and elegant style, Baldoni analyzes the dominant master plots of her time period's culture and dismantles them, offering alternative ideas regarding gender, spirituality, and history to those that were widely accepted and practiced in her country. Her perspective calls out oppression in all its forms and offers Puerto Ricans a new, hopeful vision based on Spiritism.

A Women of the Future

Impresiones begins with the article entitled “La mujer” (“The Woman”). The text contemplates the woman’s stunning, irresistible beauty and allows the other (the reader) to enjoy observing a masterpiece “of the most perfect model.”⁵ What is unusual about Baldoni’s portrait is the exaltation that her gaze produces in the reader, since it is not the typical male gaze that either adores or subjugates women, but rather a feminine gaze that delights in the awakening of desire produced by a woman’s presence. Baldoni says:



“How eloquent and profound is this thought, and how highly I regard it! The woman, whom nature has filled with gifts, the one who possesses the rare wonder of beauty, that irresistible magnet, has enough power to rule over every heart, to make all souls surrender to her. Because who does not take pleasure in imagining such a beautiful being? Who does not admire a masterpiece of the most perfect model, especially when that work is a charming, enchanting woman, radiant with grace, youth, and joy? No one; men will give their hearts to her, other women will admire her, either spontaneously or with ironic and poorly hidden envy.”⁶

Fig. 2: *Impresiones: Colección de artículos*, Lola Baldoni, 1894.⁷

What is the intention of Baldoni’s introduction to the subject of women? What is the goal of her observation of female beauty? The author’s awakening of the desire for female beauty places her

⁵ Lola Baldoni, *Impresiones: Colección de Artículos*, Ponce: Tipografía El Telégrafo: 1894, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁷ I am deeply grateful to Dr. Sandra Enríquez Seiders for granting me access to and use of these photographs and other materials.

work within a long Western literary tradition that, for centuries, has repeated the same archetype of “the beautiful and cruel woman.” What is noteworthy about Baldoni, though, is that she takes advantage of this archetype to access the Puerto Rican women’s precarious situation at the end of the nineteenth century, when they were oppressed by the ignorance of the intellectual world and condemned to uselessness.⁸ The writer explains:

... Given the education that has been offered to the woman up until now and how separated she has been from the true world, from the world of ideas, from the world of enlightenment; completely unaware of what she is worth, of what she is capable of, and of what she owes to herself; spoiled with vanity, surrounded by tributes, and blinded by that halo of beauty, pampered and flattered by men, envied by other women, proclaiming herself the queen of beauty, and listening to flattering and passionate phrases of love in every moment; she is cursed to never rise from her moral decline.⁹

In other words, without access to the intellectual world and completely unaware of her natural abilities and human potential, the upper class Puerto Rican woman of Baldoni’s time finds herself condemned to an unsatisfying marriage and unfulfilling life: temporary beauty, boredom, and superfluous routines that inevitably end in both of the spouses’ disappointment who, in Baldoni’s words, “end up hating each other, morally separated by a dreadful abyss.”¹⁰

The examination of the problem of the Puerto Rican woman is valuable in and of itself, since the country’s intellectuals at the time continued to be bewildered by gender difference and feminine beauty, which benefited them greatly. As the writer Félix Matos Bernier, who writes the prologue to *Impresiones*, eloquently (although perhaps thoughtlessly) demonstrates, for the country’s intellectuals:

The woman is called, by the delicacies of temperament and by the educational mission that she has in the home, to be a strong pillar of human progress. In her soul, superior to that of man because of her sensitivity, there is room for all earthly perfections. Her fantasy is an inexhaustible source of beauty.¹¹

Here, Matos Bernier does not allude to the severe lack of opportunities for the Puerto Rican woman, but instead to the superficial things that nourish her and the general triviality that governs her that Baldoni writes about. On the contrary, without understanding the challenge posed by the book he prefaces, Matos Bernier denigrates the woman, and the writer, by comparing her to a shy “violet,” “her life ignored by most of the country’s writers.”¹² With a paternalism that borders on absurdity, Matos Bernier adds:

⁸ For a historical account of women’s education in turn-of-the-century Puerto Rico, see the study by 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.

⁹ Baldoni, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. II.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. I.

I pity the woman and see in her an object of my adoration. I believe she is worthy of all affection and every honor. As man's companion, she is the essence of happiness, and neither wealth nor glory can rival her. As a mother, she is transformed by suffering, self-denial, and love... Blessed be the woman!

The contrast between Matos Bernier's words and Baldoni's is important because it not only reveals the general blindness of the male gaze in comparison to the author's, but also the obfuscation of Matos Bernier in comparison to the radical challenges that *Impresiones* poses. Matos Bernier's characterization of women points to the well-known gender difference nurtured by the culture (i.e. women's superiority due to their sensitivity, their delicate temperament, and their inexhaustible fantasy), which justifies (in reality) his pity for her. For this reason, Matos Bernier simultaneously pities her and exalts her; he grants her the role of man's companion and praises her as a mother because of the suffering and self-denial that motherhood entails. Baldoni, for her part, not only critically analyzes the problems that male fantasies have created for women, but also offers various alternative perspectives, which Matos Bernier simply does not acknowledge. The first is the possibility of being unmarried. The second, which is mediated by Spiritism, addresses the frequently discussed topic of social charity for the improvement of the living conditions of the poor.

In regards to the "terrible and dreadful decline" of married women, Baldoni suggests single life. She explains:

The unmarried young woman can move through the vast garden of life like a brilliant butterfly, without causing herself harm, sometimes flying into the fragrant flowers, sometimes spreading her wings in search of another and another, until she finds the flower, her one true love, full of fragrance and gentleness.

She will dedicate herself to it, she will always, always, love it forgetting about the other flowers, because she barely even looked at them.

But the wife does not have the same freedom. Her soul, her heart, virtually everything she owns belongs to a man until the day she dies, since she has to keep her husband's and children's name and honor clean and pure.¹³

Although we do not know the identity of that "flower, her one true love," Baldoni conceives of it and makes it a possibility outside of marriage. She seems to refer to her personal experience here since, as Enríquez Seiders explains, none of the five Baldoni sisters were married. They dedicated their lives instead to reading, sewing, knitting, spiritist study, and charity.¹⁴ Her proposal of an unmarried life as a valuable alternative for women is monumental given that, up until then, the Ibero-American culture only allowed women to become wives or nuns;¹⁵ a limitation that Spiritism evidently overcame, since there were just as many married women who

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ Sandra A. Enríquez Seiders, *El espiritismo en Utuado, Op. Cit.*, p. 63-64; *La Correspondencia de Puerto Rico*, 30 de septiembre, 1892, p. 3.

¹⁵ The alternative of an unmarried life was entirely subjected to a male authority. For a more detailed explanation of the topic, see Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, "La mujer y el derecho en el siglo XIX en San Juan, Puerto Rico (1820-1862), en Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Género, familia y mentalidades en América Latina*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico; Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, Recinto de Río Piedras, 1997, pp. 227-264.

occupied high positions in the dissemination of the spiritist project as there were unmarried women, including Amalia Domingo Soler of Spain,¹⁶ Francisca Suárez of Puerto Rico¹⁷ and, of course, the Baldoni sisters.

Having disproven the myth that marriage and motherhood were the only paths to women's fulfillment, Baldoni examines the concept of feminine beauty under diligent scrutiny. She does so in order to remind women of other values that could satisfy their lives. She admits that flawless physical features are uncommon and states that women "are able to create an invincible and permanent beauty that will resist time."¹⁸ It consists of "modesty, gentleness, goodness of character, and noble, charitable, and generous sentiments [that] can make an angel out of the most imperfect of beings."¹⁹ She offers the examples of "the mother next to the child's cradle," "the wife sharing the husband's sorrows," "the lady who sells her jewelry to alleviate the desperate fate of the poor," and "the sister of charity."²⁰ For Baldoni, the women who fulfill these roles, in addition to writers and activists, which she models herself, "are the most worthy of admiration and praise."²¹ The element that characterizes this group of women is not their ideals of beauty—inherited from Western culture—but rather spiritist charity, which transcends gender, race, and class because it pursues the evolution of the Spirit, which, in solidarity with others, finds in charity and love of neighbor true reason for existing. For this reason, in "La mujer" ("The Woman"), Baldoni adopts an ironic feminine gaze; a gaze that delights in the woman's ability to expose the gender prejudices that hindered the intellectual and moral development of turn-of-the-century Puerto Rican women. With the same power of persuasion, she offers the woman of her generation an alternative path, unthinkable for her time, including a productive and satisfying unmarried life. She does it with such mastery that the author of her book's prologue, lost in his own prejudices and the beauty of the prose that he examines, does not understand it. Evidently, Lola Baldoni wrote to awaken the women of her time from the feminine fantasy that their culture presented to them. Like all good writers, though, she also wrote for the women of the future, those of us who read her work today.

Jesus, the Official Religion and Spiritism

Another difficult topic that Baldoni addresses in *Impresiones* is Jesus. She does so by adopting a broad historical perspective that extends from the founding of Christianity to the spiritist Law of Progress. The article, entitled "Crepúsculo" ("Sunset"), aims to separate the

¹⁶ Regarding Amalia Domingo Soler, see Amelina Correa Ramón, *Hacia la reescritura del canon finisecular. Nuevos estudios sobre las direcciones del Modernismo*, Universidad de Granada, Granada, España, 2006, pp. 1-37; Ma. Dolores Ramos, "Heterodoxias religiosas, familias espiritistas y apóstolas laicas a finales del s. XIX: Amalia Domingo Soler y Belén Sárraga Hernández," *Historia Social*, No. 53 (2005): pp. 64-83; y Dolors Marín, *Anarquismo: Una introducción*, México D.F., Ariel, 2015.

¹⁷ Such is indicated by Francisca Suárez in a letter to Federico Degetau, in the personal collection of Dr. Ángel M. Mergal, Caja 3, Cartapacio VII, doc. # 18-A, Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras. I am deeply grateful to the historian Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte for granting me access to his historical records, thanks to which I accessed various of Francisca Suárez's letters that I have cited here.

¹⁸ Baldoni, *Op. Cit.* p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

teachings “of the martyr of Golgotha, the gentle and patient Jesus of Nazareth,”²² from the official religion. The strategy of juxtaposition and contrast that the writer employs throughout the article makes it evident that, for Baldoni, Jesus is the “perfect example of all virtues,” the first and only great revolutionary for humanity who broke the chains of slavery and proclaimed freedom and equality for all:

... You opened new horizons to the soul, you broke the yoke and the chains of the miserable people who agonized in terrible slavery and uttered the first, never before said words of equality and fraternity, of humility and mercy.

Freedom, many times mocked and insulted, rose to your magic spell to proclaim its neglected laws.

Charity, asleep, suffocating under the clenching arms of selfishness, woke up to answer your call, and for the first time, astonished and confused, the elders and the authorities, those who considered themselves owners of wisdom and masters of science, saw a handful of poor fishermen rising up, a group of rude and ignorant men, who, driven by a deceitful leader, a crazy promoter of a demoralizing and satanic sect, dared to occupy temples and synagogues, boldly and courageously proposing a doctrine and a philosophy that the authorities could never fully accept because it entailed the moral uprising of the people and the fall of tyranny.²³

Baldoni achieves masterful narrative complexity in this passage by suddenly shifting the personal pronoun from “you” [Jesus] to “them” [those who considered themselves “the owners of wisdom”]. Addressed with the familiar “you,” Jesus presents himself as intimate, close, and unique in the history of humanity. This Jesus came to proclaim messages of freedom, equality, humility, mercy, and charity that went unheard. Instead, “they,” in this case “the elders and the authorities” who considered themselves “owners of wisdom” and “masters of science,” represent the position of the official religion at the time. How do “they” perceive Jesus and his disciples? As “a crazy promoter of a demoralizing and satanic sect,” followed by “a handful of poor fishermen” who dared to propose a doctrine and a philosophy that promoted “the moral uprising of the people” and “the fall of tyranny.” The misguided perception of those in power (leaders of the official religion) serves to distance the figure of Jesus from the dominant religious context:

Because Jesus preached that all people had the same rights, shared the same duties, and were equal under the law, because he fought against tyranny and oppression, rejected man’s wrongdoings and pettiness, and called them to detach from their wealth and lead a purer life.²⁴

Baldoni continues her strategy of juxtaposition and contrast as she addresses the Apostolic Roman Catholic Church. In this case:

They feigned sincere conversion, seizing the holy dogmas of the Christian religion, erecting churches of stone, and, under the pretext of better serving God

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

and making their worship more pleasing to him, they added rites and ceremonies, rules and commandments that Jesus never instituted; thus, under the cloak of Christianity, they succeeded in restoring their pathetic and idolatrous religion.²⁵

Here, we witness the birth of the fraudulent Catholic Church that re-imposes rituals, tributes, and hierarchies, not under the direction of Jesus, but under the pretext of better worshipping God. Straightforward and anticlerical, Baldoni reminds the reader of the crimes of the “Holy Crusade:” an army of men who carried “crosses and daggers” in the name of Christianity, inciting “civil wars;” men who, in strange countries, persecuted “beings who neither knew of Jesus nor had any knowledge of his doctrine.”²⁶ She also lists renowned victims of Catholic religious intolerance: “Galileo, condemned by the council for proclaiming the movement of the Earth around itself and around the sun. Giordano Bruno, burned alive in Rome (1619). Urbano Grandier, who became a martyr as he was burned alive.”²⁷ Baldoni’s intention is not only to discredit the official religion of her time, but also to show how, in the nineteen centuries since his arrival, Jesus of Nazareth “has not found a single imitator; these [those representing the official religion] have been the first to disgrace his holy Gospel; and the stone church that appropriates his name from the true Christian religion, from that fountain of water of Life, which flowed because of his crucifixion, is at the end of its days.”²⁸

Within Baldoni’s historical context, the prediction of the Apostolic Roman Catholic Church’s demise is not surprising since, as historian Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte has documented, the century-old institution had been suffering from problems of economic and social instability even before the U.S. invasion.²⁹ What is interesting is that Baldoni ends her essay foreseeing “a new era of redemption and light for the people,”³⁰ which she relates to the figure of Jesus:

It will be the sun of freedom and love that will shine on that blessed day in which all people are governed by the same laws, in which all men are brothers and worship God only in the sacred temples of the heart and the soul, with acts of faith and charity.

And that day will arrive, it will undoubtedly arrive, sooner or later, and surely it will be a utopia of universal progress.³¹

The prediction of this new era for humanity, in which true worshippers will praise the Father in Spirit and in truth,³² “only in the temples of the heart and the soul,” alludes to the spiritist vision of the human future that arises early on in *El libro de los espíritus*:

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁹ Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *La Iglesia Católica ante la invasión de Estados Unidos de América: Lucha, sobrevivencia y estabilización (1898-1921)*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Decanato de Estudios Graduados e Investigación de la Universidad de Puerto, Recinto de Río Piedras, Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2013, pp. 25-26.

³⁰ Baldoni, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³² Gospel of John, 4:23-24.

The arrogance of some men who think they know everything and want to explain everything will inspire different opinions. However, those who keep in mind Jesus's great principles will be overwhelmed with the same feeling of love for charity and will be united by a fraternal bond that will encompass the whole world. They will put aside the petty disputes of words and will only attend to essential things. The doctrine will always be the same in terms of substance for those who receive communications from the higher Spirits.³³

Thus, although “Crepúsculo” does not explicitly discuss Spiritism as a doctrine or philosophy, Baldoni concludes her article by reiterating the spiritist vision of the future. Its central argument (that Jesus, not the official religion, is the perfect model and guide for the future of humanity), is based on the books of spiritist codification, as read in Book Three, Chapter I, Item 625 of *El libro de los espíritus*:

Who is the most perfect model that God has offered humans to serve as a guide?

*“Look to Jesus.”*³⁴

The moral laws that Baldoni alludes to (freedom, equality, justice, charity, love, and the infallible universal Law of Progress) are also laid out in Book Three of *El libro de los espíritus*.³⁵ Thus, in “Crepúsculo,” Baldoni presents Spiritism as a new Gospel based on the virtues and life of Jesus, following the spiritist proposal. This spiritist stance that Lola Baldoni develops in *Impresiones* takes hold throughout the Island. For this reason, Allan Kardec's *El Evangelio según el Espiritismo* occupied a central place in the homes of many Puerto Ricans throughout the twentieth century, as told in the oral histories of twenty-first century spiritists, collected in *El espiritismo de las mujeres puertorriqueñas: De las extraordinarias pioneras a sus herederas contemporáneas (Spiritism of Puerto Rican Women: From the Extraordinary Pioneers to their Contemporary Heirs)*.³⁶ In this sense, Lola Baldoni's feminist, anticlerical, and evangelical legacy continues today.

The Law of Progress: From the Personal to the Cosmic

As explained in *El libro de los espíritus*, progress is a universal condition of human nature. Human laws can delay it, but not extinguish it. This is why empires fall when they enact misguided laws that are incompatible with progress. Evolution will continue to happen until humanity has adapted its laws to divine justice, “which seeks well-being for all people rather than laws instituted by the powerful to make the weak suffer.”³⁷ In *Impresiones*, Lola Baldoni moves from the personal to the cosmic in order to explain the Law of Progress, which was promoted by spiritists.

³³ Allan Kardec, *El libro de los Espíritus*, 2da edición, Brasilia, Brasil, Consejo Espirita Internacional, 2011, p. 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 359-383.

³⁶ <https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo/>.

³⁷ Allan Kardec, *Op. Cit.*, Libro Tercero, Capítulo VIII, ítem [781^a], p. 425.

In the article “Ensueñosy realidad” she recalls her own personal development in order to illustrate the birth of her conscience or of the knowledge that allowed her to morally judge reality and actions, especially her own. She begins with youth, her first dream, poetry, and her contemplation of her exuberant Island:

My first dream, poetry; my only pleasure, to sing, and to sing happily; my only ambition, to see the halo of glory surround my forehead.

With such pleasure I listened to the melodic bird songs, the howling of the breeze, the whisper of the glimmering river, and the roar of the sea’s foaming waves, which soothes my Arecibo! (...) This is how I spent the first years of my youth, enjoying sweet dreams and wonderful delights. It is true that I saw a glimpse of the world, although it merged with my image of Eden.³⁸

Following her period of youth and fantasy, the writer falls into reality and asks herself the existential questions that gave rise to her moral and spiritual development. She explains:

Years have passed and I am now in reality...

What is this? Why did I come to Earth? Who am I and what do I want? (...)

Why did I come to Earth... ?

To purify my spirit, to ennoble my soul with virtuous works, and to develop my intelligence.

Who am I... ?

An atom of divine essence that searches for perfection, which I have been seeking from generation to generation, from transformation to transformation, for centuries to centuries.

What do I want... ?

Lord, oh Lord! I want to give you what I owe to you and your holy mercy: my absolute perfection for eternity, as I pass through the multiple trials where my soul will gradually become purified, strengthening itself by faith and by the glowing light of science; I also want inner peace during times of turmoil, and submission to your divine and unchanging laws, for which I owe all my happiness.³⁹

In other words, at a personal level, Baldoni describes the Law of Progress as an arduous conquest of the Spirit, in which the conscience acquires moral knowledge and intelligence in order to navigate the embodied experience and better understand the laws of God’s love and justice. Baldoni’s thesis, in this case, responds to the spiritist principle that the human being can be perfected and carries within himself the seed of self-improvement; or, as Kardec summarizes: “the natural state is humanity’s childhood, and the starting point of its intellectual and moral development.”⁴⁰ For this reason, spiritists believe that the improvement of humanity always follows a progressive path.⁴¹

³⁸ Baldoni, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 36-37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁰ Allan Kardec, *Op. Cit.*, Libro Tercero, Capítulo VIII, ítem 776 p. 423.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Libro Tercero, Capítulo VIII, ítem 783, pp. 425-426.

Applying the same principle to countries, Kardecian Spiritism proposed that countries are “collective individualities that, like individuals, pass through childhood, middle age, and decrepitude.”⁴²

Those whose selfish laws resist the progress of enlightenment and charity, die; because light triumphs over darkness; and charity, over selfishness. However, for both nations and individuals, there is the life of the soul. Those nations whose laws align with the eternal laws of the Creator, will live and serve as a beacon of light for other nations.⁴³

Baldoni applies this fundamental idea to Puerto Rico in the article “A Puerto Rico” (“To Puerto Rico”) and to the great empires of the world in “Ley de Progreso” (“Law of Progress”), the concluding article of *Impresiones*. With a strong lyricism, she addresses her homeland as she imagines it, from its Indigenous origins to Columbus’s arrival in Borinquén and its consequences. Despite the exuberance and beauty of her prose, the image that she creates of her people is idyllic, if not disturbing. The essay begins like this:

Beloved homeland, basket of fragrant flowers that swings gently between the blue waters of two seas; white dove that rests calmly, stroked by the cool breeze; let me gaze at you, inebriated with indescribable joy, and may you transport me, in the pursuit of my dreams and my history, to that joyful day that pleased the Lord, when he marked on the eternal clock the blessed hour of your arrival to this great concert of life and progress...⁴⁴

The rest of the article describes a majestic Caribbean landscape in which innocent Indigenous people live happily, emerging from their huts “to sing hymns of love to the king of the day.”⁴⁵ Baldoni blames Colón for having left the Island in the hands of violent and selfish men who “named themselves absolute rulers and managed to eradicate the entire Indigenous race, which today would have been intelligent, active, tireless, and strong, and would distinguish itself by the fullness of its vivid imagination in the fields of art and knowledge.”⁴⁶ In a kind of elegy, she laments the misfortune and loss of the Indigenous people, until she reaches the present, where her essay takes a surprising turn. Using the classic homeland/woman metaphor, she describes Puerto Rico as an Indigenous maiden, a land “prepared and eager to fertilize the seed that we generously throw into her bosom.”⁴⁷ That is, as if putting her up for sale, she invites the whole world to include the Island/woman in all the progress and advancements of her time:

... Let us adorn her forehead with the symbol of the Indian caste, our beautiful Boricua, our beloved homeland, and presenting her to the enlightened world as a timid maiden during the festivities of her birthday, let us say to them: see how beautiful and enchanting she is! Incorporate her in all the progress and advances

⁴² *Ibid.*, Libro Tercero, Capítulo VIII, ítem 788, p. 428.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Libro Tercero, Capítulo VIII, ítems 787b, 788 p. 428.

⁴⁴ Baldoni, *Op. Cit.*, p. 46.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

of today, take her by the hand to the luminous temples of arts and sciences, and present her with the richest of treasures spilled throughout the world by the goddess Freedom.⁴⁸

Evidently, Baldoni was a witness to the misery that the Island's people suffered under the Spanish Empire. The Puerto Rico of *Impresiones*, which was published in 1894, was a mostly malnourished country, without basic services, civil rights, or opportunities for advancement. In Latin America, it was the era of the wars for independence, when the song of Freedom resounded throughout Europe and the Americas. The United States emerged, therefore, as a symbol of liberty. Possibly for this very reason, Baldoni is blind in her application of the Law of Progress to her homeland. Her enthusiasm for the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which circulated in spiritist circles at the time, momentarily fogged her judgment. For this reason, she unfortunately describes her country as an Indigenous woman, placed at the service of the highest bidder. Nothing is further from the progressive arguments that the same writer raised in the essay that opens her book, "La mujer." Therefore, although Spiritism constituted a body of study for Baldoni that provided her with a deep understanding of human flaws and the need to work towards justice and social charity, it also instilled in her an optimism that, at times, as in this case, blinded her.

In "Ley del Progreso," the article that concludes *Impresiones*, Baldoni adopts a cosmic perspective. She contemplates, completely absorbed, the planets until reaching ours, the Earth. She explains her intention: "I throw myself towards it [the Earth], eager to nourish my Spirit and expand my knowledge, studying the wisdom of God in his timeless story."⁴⁹ She adjusts this ambitious intention by specifying the approach that will follow in the development of her argument:

I will not understand it [the planet Earth] in its various evolutions, which have taken place ever since a molecule detached from the rings of the sun, wandered through the depths of space, saturating itself with fluids, gases, and atoms until a globe of fire entered through the law of attraction and gravitation, to rotate on its axis and around the sun.

Nor will I understand its geological ruptures or the creation of its three mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms, which, after its surface cooled and its land masses were organized, allowed humans to appear.

I will look past those magnificent stages of earthly creation, which can be explained by contemporary science and philosophy, though I faintly conceive of them; my pen is too ignorant to explain them and my poor intelligence is undereducated; my ideas roll with the wheel of progress and thus my way of thinking differs from the world of intricate theological mysteries.

When the human species appears on Earth, I do not see a single Adam, but rather a multitude of them scattered throughout all areas of the planet; I will follow, therefore, not the ascension of the biblical Adam, but rather the primitive generation that populated the new world, and their movements toward progress.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

Let us summarize, then, that with an exquisite false modesty, Baldoni undertakes the monumental task of portraying the experience of the primitive man and his intellectual and moral development, according to the spiritist Law of Progress. She describes how primitive men learned from observing nature and animals, how they covered their bodies with hides and built dwellings. She imagined the primitive family and the nomadic people, as well as the first crime and the first act of deception; she spoke of the construction of weapons, the cruel and bloody wars, and the emergence of leaders, until reaching the topic of religious and state servitude and slavery:

... The nomadic people, before free and independent, now bow on their knees (...) They have kings and priests, powerful noblemen who crush them and despise them; they have descended into the terrible condition of slavery because of the pride of the powerful. Under the dominion of the Brahmas, tyranny has reached its peak; the nomad is no longer a man, he is nothing, an outcast that is denied everything, who is not even allowed to worship God. Everyone insults him and mistreats him; he who cannot raise his head before the Lord.⁵¹

However, in Baldoni's version, the conscience of the oppressed and the outcast is born out of the same slavery, "crawling at the feet of his master and kissing the hand that lashes him, he learns to know what he can do and what his lost freedom is worth, and he prepares to reclaim it."⁵² The emergence of new civilizations, the gradual establishment of rights and freedoms, the birth of philosophers, the magnificence and beauty of cities, embroidery, and the arts, developed throughout the many empires of the world, from India to Egypt, Greece, Spain, England, Germany and France. She summarizes:

There are no longer any shudras, helots, outcasts, or slaves; it is true that the people are ignorant, that they still do not know themselves, that they are not aware of their sovereignty, and this, because they morally and materially oppressed, cry, because the nobility crushes them with an iron foot, because they feel the power of the tyrants over them, and they are hungry and naked, while their kings wear purple and gold and sit at lavish banquets.⁵³

The European empires fell under the weight of their own grandeur and selfishness, but Baldoni foresees their rebirth, "not with the sword or under the golden scepter of their rulers, but with the pen, with science and freedom."⁵⁴ The article ends with the prophecy of a utopia led by the United States of America, "a free, happy, and sovereign people," ruled by "an intelligent and just government."⁵⁵

Oh, people of North America! You are without a doubt the first, all of America will follow your lead. The whole Earth will be shaken, your civilizing influence

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 65.

will be felt, and wise men will emerge from everywhere to enlighten, illuminate, and propel us all along the upward path of progress, to the point that God has imagined for us in his mysterious plans.⁵⁶

There is no doubt that Lola Baldoni's voice is a powerful and courageous one. Her arguments, although not always accurate, demonstrate a profound knowledge of her social and historical environment. In 1894, when Puerto Rican women had neither a voice nor a vote, Baldoni advocated for women's education and independence, clearly and harshly rejected the corruption of the Catholic Church, and demonstrated a vast knowledge of universal culture. However, her application of the spiritist Law of Progress suffers from critical distance. The Indigenous people who once populated Borinquen were not primitives living harmoniously in the Garden of Eden, nor did the United States, with all of its twentieth century advances, turn out to be the utopian country that Baldoni had hoped—excessive enthusiasm and human error.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, *Impresiones* demonstrates, with strength and elegance, Lola Baldoni's extraordinary abilities as a writer and activist.

Her effectiveness as a spiritist leader was confirmed at the assembly of the *Federación de Espiritistas de Puerto Rico (Federation of Puerto Rican Spiritists)* held in San Germán in 1909, when it was announced that the convicted prisoner Basilio Forastier López was pardoned by the then Governor of Puerto Rico. Lola Baldoni's leadership in the establishment of the *Sociedad Abolicionista de la Pena de Muerte (Society for the Abolition of the Death Penalty)* was key in this important historical event.⁵⁸ As summarized by Teresa Yáñez Vda. from Otero, Forastier read spiritist newspapers in prison and reformed his character. One hundred and seventy-six delegates of the spiritist assembly, along with some five hundred people, approached the Governor of Puerto Rico to request the grace for Forastier's pardon. Baldoni's role was so crucial in this campaign that she is the only one mentioned:

Basilio Forastier López has been awarded freedom!
 Glory to the good Spirit who supported this good action!
 Glory to Lola Baldoni, initiator of the victory!
 Glory to the Federation of Puerto Rican Spiritists!

Eternal glory to all people of good will!⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁷ For a perspective on how Puerto Ricans perceived the United States during that time, see Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *La Iglesia Católica, Op. Cit.*, p. 103.

⁵⁸ For a historical account of the establishment of the *Sociedad Abolicionista de la Pena de Muerte* in 1907, see Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico 1860-1907*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2015, p. 431 y *Memorias de las asambleas espiritistas celebradas en San Juan, Lares, Ponce y Arecibo en los días 18 y 19 de abril de los años 1904-1905-1906vy 1907*, Ponce, Puerto Rico: Tipografía "El Sol", 1907.

⁵⁹ 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, p. 82.

In sum, Lola Baldoni's work shows that Spiritism served as an instrument of education and emancipation that challenged the excessive pride of those in power on the Island and, possibly for that reason, deeply influenced the consciousnesses of women and other oppressed people of Puerto Rico.