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Who Wears the Pants? A Puerto Rican Feminist Story

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the life and achievements of Luisa Capetillo, pioneer Puerto Rican feminist. It goes over all aspects of her life; her family, her education, her relationships, her activism, her beliefs, and her eventual death. It analyzes the importance of the woman and her impact of her thoughts in a world that was not ready for them. Her life, through modern lenses, was exciting and tragic all at the same time, and the changes she made for both women and laborers inspired others wherever she went, even when she was considered taboo and controversial. Her story is of a radical in a time of practicality, and in this paper it is being reviewed practically in a radical time.

When I decided to study history, the first thing my high school history teacher told me was that “history was written by the winners”. Now I knew that there was a huge lack of minority figures in American textbooks; after all, minorities haven’t won many battles (according to textbooks, their only successes came from ending slavery and fighting in the Civil Rights movement). I was raised in Puerto Rico until I was seven years old, before my formal education truly began. When I came to the United States, I was dropped into a rigorous course load to teach me history. Having lived in Atlanta, the home of the civil rights movement, my knowledge about minority struggles mainly revolved around exactly that. I was obsessed with Martin Luther King, Jr., and this obsession let me to search for more and more revolutionary leaders. The more I found, the more I realized how white they were, and it always irked me that there was no role model for Puerto Ricans, no rights leaders. It wasn’t until I got involved in the feminist movement a couple of years ago that my mom confronted me about how colorless my posters were. I told her that it was harder to find minority leaders in feminism than anything else, and she set out to prove me wrong. That, is how I was introduced to Luisa Capetillo: a Puerto Rican woman whose thoughts and beliefs were beyond her time and who was forgotten and shamed by her American contemporaries in the movement. When I read her story, the connections between our lives were like nothing I had ever found in the middle class white women of the early nineteenth century. I found a woman, born under the same circumstances, and fighting for the same things I believed in.

Luisa Capetillo was born on October 28th, 1879 to unwed, immigrant parents. Her mother, Louise Marguerite Perone, was a french nanny who had come to the island with a rich family, only to fall in love with a Spanish man who claimed to be related to the royal French line

of Capets (Berson 1995, p. 58). She was also Luisa's inspiration in everything. Her mother had lived through romanticized French Revolution of 1848, and had educated herself on the romanticist novels of the era, George Sand being the greatest influence in her and her daughter's beliefs. Though education for women in Puerto Rico was rare, her parents did not follow the social standard in the first place: they were not married, they lived together and raised their child together, and Louise refused to allow her father to support her as well. While he worked as a day laborer, she worked as a laundress, and in the afternoons they would both go to the salon to talk about their revolutionary ideals. Louise was the only woman in her town to go to the salon, which she would frequent until the end of her life. Luisa was raised reading humanist authors like Victor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Emile Zola (Berson 1995, p. 58). Her revolutionary beliefs came from her exposure to Russian anarchists that her mother loved. Though poor, she was well educated and intelligent and like many Puerto Rican women, she did not know how to keep her mouth shut.

Luisa's struggle for her feminist theory began when she fell in love with the son of an aristocratic landowner, Manuel Ledesma. By this point in her life, her father had abandoned his family and Luisa and her mother were supporting themselves (Berson 1995, p. 58). She worked for his family, washing their clothes, and Ledesma fell in love with the 'Frenchwoman's daughter'. A friend of his was in love with her as well, and they constantly fought over her (almost dueling each other at one point). Luisa found herself not in love with his friend, a doctor, but with him. They became lovers, and she had her first child by him the next year, and another one the year afterwards. Luisa had expected a relationship like her parents at the beginning, loyal but not attached. She was proved wrong. Ledesma was jealous, and refused to allow her to

mingle with other men. He expected her to simply raise the children and to be ready for whenever he visited. Luisa loved him her entire life and she later wrote a publicized letter to him about her experience waiting for him ““...Remembering the one I waited for on endless nights, with an unbelievable loneliness that I wrapped myself in so that I could be comfortable, waiting to hear the sound of the small bronze door knocker that would end my eternal longing”” (Valle Ferrer 1990, p. 28). Luisa suffered under his control, and refused to remain under it. Though he provided for his other family for the rest of his life, her relationship with Ledesma formally ended when she began to work with laborers and she began her relationship with feminism and labor unions.

Her life as an activist began when she got a job as a reader in a factory. The laborers would pay these readers to read newspapers, pamphlets, and books, seeing as most of them were illiterate. During the long hours they would have to work, it was a method of entertainment, even though they paid for it themselves. Luisa saw their struggles and began writing propaganda for the laborers, attempting to inspire them to unionize and protest against their mistreatment. It worked, and soon enough Capetillo was writing essays for newspapers that inspired strikes for the labor movements around the island. She organized the farmer’s strike of 1905 and joined the American Federation of Labor, concentrating on women’s labor rights in Puerto Rico. She traveled the island educating women and advocating for more female rights on the island. In the 1908 meeting of the American Federation of Labor, she defended female suffrage for *all* women, not just those who could read and write (Valle Ferrer 1990, p. 38). She is considered to be one of the first Puerto Rican suffragists and the most extreme in her beliefs. She was an anarchist and a socialist, who fought for equality for everyone, not just elite women. She was a representative of

the lower class women, like her mother and like herself, and fought for the notion of free love: like her parents, she thought that people should be together for love and nothing else. Though she loved Ledesma, Capetillo held him in spite. His betrayal, in her eyes, was the worst of all. Her beliefs were so radical and taboo that when her daughter married young, her husband did not allow her mother to visit them as he feared her mother would corrupt her.

Because of her life as a labor activist, Ledesma kept their children away from her to be raised by her mother. Manuela and Gregorio were raised in Catholic schools and were officially recognized as Ledesma's children, something that domestic partners usually didn't do. Ledesma's only conditions in order to pay for their full care was that they did not live with their mother. and Capetillo complied, no matter how much it broke her heart. She would visit her children whenever she could, but she could not live with them. She wrote of motherhood, "I feel I would not be a complete woman if I weren't a mother. A complete woman should be a mother...a woman will always be a mother, even if she doesn't have children" (Valle-Ferrer 1990, p. 52). In 1911, Capetillo had a relationship with a pharmacist from her hometown, without naming him. The relationship produced a child that was not legitimized by his father; he was already married. Capetillo raised this child herself, fueling him with her ideals. He stayed with her until her death and continued to fight for her beliefs in her honor.

While pregnant with her third child, she released her first on feminism simply titled *Mi Opinión* (My Opinion) via her own publishing company, *Biblioteca Roja* (Red Library). In it, she exposed her ideals on what a woman's life should be like in Puerto Rico. She covered all ranges of topics, from household chores to free love and prostitution. Her main concern was, "how it was possible that on the one hand, women were given the responsibility of bringing up children,

and yet on the other, were denied access to a liberal education”(Valle-Ferrer 1990, p. 45). She believed that education should not be concerned with the stereotypes of each gender; that both boys *and* girls deserved the same education. Her communist beliefs were grounded throughout the entire dissertation; she believed that for her ideals to work, a communist nation had to be founded in order to reorganize a family structure that did not depend on what she called the ‘enslavement of women’. Prostitution was a big deal for her, as the women who turned to it were ostracized by society for their sexual heresy. Capetillo championed for these women, as the romanticist authors of the 19th century did (de Onis 2013, p. 94). She asserted that women who turned to prostitution were doing it out of necessity, a last chance, and that the *real* prostitution came in marrying a young woman to an older man in order to gain land/titles/contracts, etc. The things she wrote in her manifesto marked her as a sexual heretic in both Puerto Rican society and among her comrades in the Socialist Party; her beliefs were far too progressive for either of them and were, in fact, are far more accepted and supported a century after she originally believed them.

From 1912 to 1915, Capetillo traveled the states organizing Cuban and Puerto Rican labor workers for strikes. Her success in New York City led her to open a vegetarian restaurant dedicated to creating a meeting place for anarchists and socialists; she did not care for profit, only that they could create conversation. At times, she didn’t charge her customers for meals, and laborers in the city saw her as not only a leader, but a benefactor (Ruiz 2005, p. 125). She was a major success, and eventually found herself in Havana, Cuba, a city that she loved dearly. While living there, she made a radical and political decision: she wore pants. As an anarchist in this era, Capetillo believed that she had to not only advocate her ideals, but embody them as

well. Every action made by anarchists was a political one; Capetillo's was calculated to bring attention. It was a big scandal in Havana and she was arrested very quickly. When brought to the municipal court, she was asked why she chose to wear them. She told them that it was more hygienic and suite women's new role in society, and that she had always worn pants either way. In court she lifted up her skirt and revealed that at that very moment, she was wearing white pants underneath her clothes, and told them that "...on the night in question, instead of wearing them underneath, I wore them just like men do, based on my perfect civil right to do on the OUTSIDE" (Valle-Ferrer 1990, p. 52). When she returned to Puerto Rico, she again showed up in public wearing slacks, a suit jacket, and a men's hat. Charges weren't pressed on her, but she drew attention from the public. At the socialist rallies she attended around the island, people didn't so much come for the speeches: they came to see the first woman to wear the pants in Puerto Rico. She became not only an icon for feminists, but an icon for progressive movement on the island. Her anarchist beliefs were, though taboo the reason she was most recognized.

Though a member of the socialist party, she was largely neglected by it. At the time, it was run by males -- and at the time, they did not see women's issues as socialist issues. Capetillo continuously advocated for them to accept feminist ideals as their own, but they were completely against it. Even the comrades who agreed with her labor ideals used her ideal of free love to their advantage; they continuously tried to proposition her for sex, to the point where she felt so uncomfortable she had to speak out about it. "Capetillo explains to him that she understands his desires but cannot reciprocate since she has other goals to achieve and doesn't want to 'disturb [her] spiritual peace, in other words I would rather channel my sexual energy to strengthen my mental prowess'" (Valle-Ferrer 1990, p. 48). She was not one to simply fall into the arms of a

man; Capetillo would never make the same mistake she made with Ledesma and the unknown scientist again. She understood that her work with the Socialist Worker's Party was a direct contradiction to her anarchist beliefs but she held the laborers she worked so hard for above herself. Among her fellow activists during the campaign was Luis Muñoz Marín, the future governor of Puerto Rico. While she participated in the election, as an anarchist, she believed that change could only occur through a 'general strike', rather than a vote. Still, she did her duty as a citizen.

In 1922, Capetillo suffered a sudden tuberculosis attack that eventually took her life. She was buried with a simple funeral, a testament to her life living in poverty and without luxury. Her children mourned her, as did the many workers, of both genders, she had dedicated her life to. She was buried in the public cemetery in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico (Valle-Ferrer 1990, p. 58). Though she created many enemies with her outspoken attitude and revolutionary beliefs, she was an inspiration for a generation of women that were taught that they had no rights to an education, to work, and to be respected. She demanded that for all people, of all races, and of all classes. The testament of her life lies in a non-profit organization made for the defense of women who are abused mentally or physically, and named after her. She inspired many other Puerto Rican women, like Ana Roquet, to further the advancement of female rights in Puerto Rico successfully, and she is considered by historians to be the first official Puerto Rican feminist (Romero-Cesareo 1994, p. 775). There are libraries made in her honor in universities all over the island, and in high school, she is taught as an iconic figure who stood for peace and justice for all people. Though a lot of her other beliefs, like free love and anarchism, are censored, most people know who she is and what she stood for as a feminist.

Luisa Capetillo forged the road for feminism in Puerto Rico, but the woman herself was much more than her ideals. She was complicated, she loved, she was betrayed, and she had many duties above being an activist. She was a mother and a scholar, whose beliefs made her an outcast from her society and made it hard to be the mother and free thinker she wanted to be. Her condition of being a woman born in the wrong era made her life hard, but she had no regret. She loved what she did, and she loved the island and the people she did it for. Her ideal of free love expanded past family and lovers, but to her community and her beliefs. Her dedication to her cause is a source for my inspiration and her ideals are ones that I have adopted as my own. Recently, my cousin asked me if I knew any Puerto Rican icons that contributed to progression and peace on the island. Without a moment of hesitation, I told her to look up Luisa Capetillo: an anarchist feminist who shared her love with a world that did not want to love her back.

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