

## ARTICLE

# Feminisms of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean<sup>1</sup>

Stephanie Rivera Berruz 

Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

## Correspondence

Stephanie Rivera Berruz,  
Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, 1121 E. Meinecke Ave Milwaukee, WI 53212, USA.  
Email: [stephanie.riveraberruz@marquette.edu](mailto:stephanie.riveraberruz@marquette.edu)

## Abstract

This essay explores the philosophical productions of women from the Spanish speaking Caribbean. Here the Caribbean is understood as a multiplicitous and polyphonic space that exists amidst modernities engendered by colonization. I present the intellectual contributions of Luisa Capetillo, Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta, Petronila Angélica Gómez, Ochy Curiel, Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso, and Yomaira Figueroa as fertile philosophical starting points from which to frame a feminist tradition of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean that appreciates the multiple and often conflicting body of ideas that emerge from within a sea of islands.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: THE ASSEMBLAGE OF MODERNITIES IN THE CARIBBEAN

The Caribbean is polyvalent, complex, and multi-layered. It survives in the wake of the projects of colonization and imperialism that has produced many Caribbeans; all trailed by intellectual traditions that embody the contradictions generated by colonial cultural histories (Henry, 2000, p. 11–14). In this context, the feminisms rooted in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean are reflective of varied and often opposing ideas. Here, the nexus of gender/race/class/sexuality is always meaningful as it reveals the ways in which women understood the possibilities of producing knowledge in a context that has historically constructed their agency primarily through their reproductive capabilities.

The essay that follows presents two sets of women-identified intellectuals from what we contemporarily refer to as the Spanish-speaking Caribbean: Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. The first group includes Luisa Capetillo (Puerto Rico), Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta (Cuba), Petronila Angélica Gómez (Dominican Republic). These thinkers reflect over the role of women in political life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; a pivotal time of colonial, imperial, and capital transformation in the Caribbean. Their perspectives demonstrate that women's intellectual productions were highly varied given their contexts, and at times, reflect colonial inheritances. Collectively, they posit the possibilities of women's emancipation and more equitable futures, but participation in said futures is scaffolded by localized understandings of womanhood. The second set of figures emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and take the decolonial turn as their starting point for critical feminist analysis. These are Ochy Curiel, Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso, and Yomaira Figueroa. Their projects make anti-colonial gestures that disrupt the discursive colonial inheritances that structure our understandings of the world. Specifically, they posit the ways colonial inheritances shape our understandings of

gender, race, and sexuality as well as the possibilities of emancipatory politics. Their decolonial perspectives respond to the ways in which colonization is lived out contemporarily as an arrangement of global capitalistic power that permeates all aspects of human life, including the status of the human itself. Juxtaposed to the first set of figures, feminist of the decolonial turn reveal how the modernities engendered by the colonial project make possible the conditions of inequality that Capetillo, Rodríguez Acosta, and Gómez are trying to resist.

Collectively, both sets of figures respond to modern conditions violently engendered through colonization that shape understandings of womanhood, liberty, and futurity. In the wake of colonization, they share in their engagement with the many modernities forged in/through the Caribbean. The first group is largely framed through political discourses in response to the impositions and molds of the modern nation-state that produce the norms of citizen subjects in their homelands that actively relegate women to the margins of political and intellectual life. The second group similarly confronts modernity but understands it as a project intimately produced by colonization. Hence, the decolonial starting point of the second group of feminist thinkers recognizes that the very framework from which the first set of figures operate is already the product of colonial matrixes that impose myths of European modernity that dramatically shape the meaning of gender, race, and sexuality through a European epistemic world view.

The Caribbean has never been outside of the purview of modernization, but rather it was the grounds through which the first and most brutal appearances of modernity emerged (Fischer, 2004, p. 12). The sugar plantation machine was the first large scale experiment in industrial agriculture and a laboratory for the exploitation of human labor (Fischer, 2004, p. 12). Slavery and the plantation economy required justification of labor processes through the instrumentalization of human life that gave rise to modernity. This means that modernity is heterogeneously assembled through colonial power and, when read from the Caribbean perspective, heterogeneity comes into focus by elucidating the fact that modernity has never had just a European face (Fischer, 2004, p. 22). Rather, the primacy of European modernity has been part of the colonial strategy to disavow the modernities that emerged in and through the Caribbean. As a result, ideas about revolution, struggle, and emancipatory politics of the Caribbean must be understood as conflicts over modernity and its progress, including who can claim it and on what grounds (Fischer, 2004, p. 22).

The interstitial intellectual cultural landscape of the Caribbean cannot be understood through traditional teleological narratives that dominate the intellectual, literary, and cultural histories of the modern nation-state.<sup>2</sup> The linearity of time emerges with modernity and operates as a mechanism that disparately impacts how we apprehend the intellectual productions of Caribbean women. In certain respects, it both methodologically discloses liberatory possibilities (futurity) while at the same time entrenching a linearity imposed by the colonial project. Although most of the figures discussed here may not temporally overlap, they are, I contend, threaded by their recognition of the fact that the projects of emancipation require the centering of subjects on the margins of the barbarism of modernity in order to more adequately theorize the possibilities of emancipatory futures.

The history of the Caribbean is so heterogenous that it resists being folded into one linear history. It is for this reason that Antonio Benítez-Rojo opens the introduction of *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1997) by reflecting on the challenges posed by studying the Caribbean, which itself tracks characteristics often used to define the region: "its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism, etc. (1997, 1). Benítez-Rojo's point is further amplified in the context of Latin American philosophy, which also tends to treat the Caribbean as too fragmented to form part of its intellectual chronology. As a result, the geo-temporal space of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is treated as a temporal borderland; one that if pushed into the present is circumvented by its anachronic status. In other words, it simply does not fit within normative philosophical senses of time and space that structure the norms of the history of philosophy. Subsequently, the key historiographical insight engendered by the Caribbean is its status of in-between, the fragmented non-unitary characteristics of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean often used to describe its backwardness and lack of temporal synchronicity are precisely the types of characteristics that make its ideas so meaningful.

Reflecting on the feminisms of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean does not take up the demand for unity or overarching threads that tie the performative acts of writing and reading together, but rather begins from pondering the

spaces where women went in order to have intellectual lives. Following Vicky Unruh's line of inquiry: "But where did women who wanted to be writers rather than muses build their intellectual homes?" (2006, p. 2). Intellectual literary culture was the habitat of men, where women negotiated their identities, but not in relationship to other women (Unruh, 2006, p. 22). Rather, women's performative intellectual practices were oriented around the cultural worlds of political men. The intellectual life of women in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is framed by a culture oriented around a masculinist and heterosexual project of modernity that situates women outside of its production or as its muse, but not its agents (Unruh, 2006, p. 8). It is for this reason that writing emerges and continues to be an act of insurrection, a mechanism of uprising that strategically and performatively interrupts the normative roles charted for women in the wake of modernity.

The figures considered below share in a reflective agency that operates as an act of insurrection, one that enacts resistance through self-reflection that emanates from concerns produced by the anomalous status of women intellectuals, writers and orators alike. Nevertheless, their positionings as women intellectuals must be framed by an attention toward their lives within their historically specific cultural conversations. In the juxtapositions that follow it is important to note that I am not offering a singular model of how to read their contributions, but rather I seek to offer a multidimensional lens through which to read them—of which there could be many more. Furthermore, I appreciate the fact that the practices of reading and writing are themselves embodied performative acts, and ones that are already coded in a particular type of legibility. As Diana Taylor argues, the Western epistemic tradition is rooted in the preponderance of writing (2003, p. 16). The use of writing as a proxy for embodiment and cultural memory has colonial underpinnings. The colonialist perspective on Indigenous peoples deployed the "lack of writing" as a lack of existence. It is for this reason that she advocates for the revalorization of expressive embodied culture (Taylor, 2003, p. 16). Taylor's insights remind us that although the project here tracks written work, writing itself is also a performative act that is embedded in a social and political web of meaning that requires more than just the actual act of writing for the transmission of knowledge. Oral and non-verbal practices are always already present in the environments from which we write and carve out intellectual spaces. However, it is the act of writing itself that gives entry into the modern intellectual world of the Caribbean that was actively predicated on the exclusion of women and people of color.

## 2 | IN THE FACE OF MODERNITY: LUISA CAPETILLO, OFELIA RODRÍGUEZ ACOSTA, AND PETRONILA ANGÉLICA GÓMEZ

### 2.1 | Luisa Capetillo (1879–1922)

Often heralded as Puerto Rico's first feminist figure, Luisa Capetillo, was an anarcho-feminist activist born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico and heir to French intellectual ideals made possible through homeschooling provided by her parents. She forged her intellectual and political life during a time of fervent anarchist and working-class activism largely emanating from Puerto Rico's tobacco factories. Tobacco processing sites were the epicenters of anarchist organizing and intellectual production making possible a radical worker culture whose political commitments were oriented around demands to end class hierarchy, private property, religion, and nationalism (Suarez-Findlay, 1998, p. 234). The U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico (1898) further created intense debate across social worlds about laboring classes and the meaning of democracy, which was framed by the discourses of U.S. occupation as the disseminators of freedom. U.S. occupation dramatically restructured the material-economic conditions of Puerto Rico as it dramatically accelerated capitalism transforming the sugar and tobacco industries. The reorganization of the tobacco industry to large scale production also meant the introduction of women to the laboring force. Between 1904 and 1920 the tobacco industry was the largest employer of women, many of which worked as stem strippers (Suarez-Findlay, 1998, p. 232). In this context, Luisa Capetillo emerges as a fervent labor activist and intellectual figure. She authored four books over the course of her lifetime: *Ensayos libertarios* (1907), *La humanidad en el futuro* (1910), *Mi opinión* (1911), and *Influencias de las ideas modernas* (1916). Notably, she was a reader in tobacco factories, which served as a space from

which to disseminate her ideas. Over the course of her life, she would come to reside in Cuba, Ybor City, and New York City.

Capetillo develops an anarchist intellectual framework oriented around the emancipation of women. While other radical leftist political writings of the time often discussed the importance of ending women's oppression, they often did so only as part of a larger project of emancipation. Capetillo distinctly advocates for women's emancipation through economic self-sufficiency, free love, and class struggle (Suarez Findlay, 1998, p. 246). The heart of her intellectual project is undergirded by the importance of sexual autonomy for women's lives. The promotion of freedom in all aspects of women's lives required access to economic self-sufficiency through education as well as sexual education that placed women's lives at the center of politics (Suarez Findlay, 1998, p. 246). Hence, she develops a sexual politics premised on the idea that in order for women to be free, their sexual autonomy must be taken as seriously as their economic liberation—for her the two go hand in hand.

The project of workers emancipation more broadly had to take seriously women's liberation, which required a profound appreciation of a person's ability to enter and exit unions without the prospects of harm. Free love hinges on intimate freedom of movement disentangled from duties, rights, and obligations that mold the meaning of love through the frame of marriage. Marriage, Capetillo argues, is the prostitution of love as it is an unnatural institution built around a contract regulated by the state (marriage) that women never enter equally (Capetillo, 2004). Capetillo understands love to be a relation that emerges under conditions of absolute freedom and the contract of marriage distorts the possibilities of love because it is built on strict formulations that place obligations on love through marriage that disparately impact women and their freedoms. Her advocacy is framed around the abolishment of marriage and the centering of free love as a mechanism for enacting more socially just conditions. She writes: "freedom in love for women the same as for men is nothing other than a great act of justice" (Capetillo, 2004, p. 34). Freedom in love for women meant ensuring that love not be conflated with the perceived social convivence of marriage that distorts love into a contract mediated by the state.

Capetillo embodied her philosophical commitments until her death in 1922. She died from tuberculosis upon her return to Puerto Rico from New York. She was, as Lisa Sánchez González argues, part of a conglomerate of exiled nomadic writers that initiate the first chapter of Puerto Rican social and literary but seldom recognized as such (21). In this capacity, Capetillo was a transnational agitator writing and speaking against the national literary grain outside of the normalized purview of the bourgeoisie philosophical literary canon. She was, as Sánchez González describes, "scandalously anomalous" (23).

## 2.2 | Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta (1902–1975)

Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta was born in Pinar del Río, Cuba. Rodríguez Acosta was a pioneering feminist activist, public intellectual, and graduate of the Institute of Havana. She was a prolific writer and published extensively as she was an active and public journalist. Additionally, she wrote seven novels, two books of short stories, one book of chronicles, three short essays, and one play. Her intellectual public positioning made Rodríguez Acosta a very visible and legible feminine subject in Cuban society. She founded her own magazine (*Espartana*, 1927), was an active member of "El Club Femenino de Cuba" (one of the most important feminist organizations of Cuba during her lifetime), and at one time she belonged to a women's labor union. Moreover, her political positioning that oriented itself around resistance against the Machado dictatorship frames her feminist intellectual projects (Cámara, 2008, p. 25).

Her status as a public intellectual figure is most reflected in a weekly publication in *Bohemia* concerning feminist issues titled: "La Campaña Feminista." Contextually, it is important to note that *Bohemia* was the largest circulating Cuban magazine at the time with a weekly print of 50,000 copies. "La Campaña Feminista" or "The Feminist Campaign" centered the challenges faced by women and further took up the underappreciated and undervalued qualities associated with femininity during the era as a critical point of analysis (Cámara, 2008, p. 28).

Rodríguez Acosta's intellectual framework is umbrellaed within a sense of state-nationalism that sought a feminist reformist agenda grounded in the possibilities of social progress through commitments to democracy (Cámara, 2008, p. 27). Her commitments to women's equality are founded in a broader project of democratic national reform that understands the importance of women's equality as a question on the betterment of human life. In this context, Rodríguez Acosta recognized the importance of economic self-sufficiency as a central feature of women's emancipation. For instance, in an essay published in *Bohemia* in 1931 on the topic of feminism, she notes that gaining the right to vote will not be sufficient to establish equality. Life, she notes, is measured in economic responsibility (Rodríguez Acosta, 2009, p. 176). A feminist triumph must attend to the problem of economic vulnerabilities engendered by gender difference, which situates women in economic slavery cross social lines. The triumph of feminist politics, she argues, is achieved through the recognition of women's humanity with important roles to play in contemporary social life (Rodríguez Acosta, 2009, p. 176). Here the recognition of "shared humanity" serves as the backdrop from which she articulates the possibilities of emancipation.

The project of equality is about intimacy as much as it is about social dynamics and Rodríguez Acosta's intellectual framework understood this connection vividly as her perspectives on sexuality interrupted the concept of the heterosexual nuclear family most associated with the production of the Cuban nation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her feminist interventions come at a moment when the identity of the Cuban nation was under intense consideration as part of broader national conversations of Cuban identity that understood the family as the material-symbolic nucleus of the nation and readily managed by the state in a political atmosphere produced by dictatorship. In this context, Rodríguez Acosta develops a body of work that reflects the possibilities of same-gender intimacies as part of national belonging, and as a result, interrupts normative narratives of motherhood, marriage, friendship, and love. She opens a space from which non-conformist women could participate in the project of national belonging through the possibilities of same-gendered love that discloses the potentiality of radical freedom in the absence of masculinist, heterosexist norms and pressures.

One key example of the development of an iconography of women is found in her second and most famous book *La Vida Manda* (1928). The main character of the novel, Gertrudis (herself an homage to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda y Arteaga, a Cuban born Spanish writer), serves as a literary experimental embodiment of Rodríguez Acosta's ideas on marriage, love, and same-gender intimacies. Gertrudis' character lives a life untied by marriage, on a path of economic independence, and dedicated to her work as a writer which acts as a fountain of emancipatory potential (Fleites-Lear, 2015, p. 44). For instance, reflecting on the nature of work and liberty in *La Vida Manda*, Gertrudis states: "Yo miro al trabajo como una medida emancipadora, y desde un punto de partida meramente feminista; yo lo miro, a veces, y así lo ejecuto, como una misión social, como una función humana, como un imperativo fisiológico. Me lo pide el cuerpo" ([I view work as emancipatory and from a feminist point of view; I look at it and sometimes I execute it as a social mission, as a human function, like a physiological imperative. My body asks for it] (Rodríguez Acosta, 2009, p. 69)). In a similar insurrectionist practice, the character of Gertrudis does not take up motherhood as a unificatory ideal of belonging in the production of the Cuban nation, but rather she takes up a non-normative possibility of childbearing out of wedlock, which sadly concludes in the death of the child shortly after being born.

Continuing to trace the intimacies of everyday life as a location of emancipatory potential, Gertrudis serves as a vehicle for exploring same-gender intimacies through her relations with another character, Delia. Rodríguez Acosta opens a space of intimacy between two women with liberatory possibility. If existing outside of the norms of marriage in relation to men subverts the imagined nation space, then same-gender intimacies offer a radical alternative from which to imagine belonging. The character of Delia serves as the embodiment of that potential as she leads the successful vision of an independent life and is the one who approaches Gertrudis in admiration; an invitation Gertrudis turns down. Her unrequited love for Gertrudis is profound. Delia approaches Gertrudis with the following words: "Yo nunca he amado a una mujer como usted, hasta la renuncia, hasta la pureza de los sentidos, con estar los sentidos tan pendientes de ella..." [I have never loved a woman like you, to resignation, to the purest of the senses, with my senses so aware of her...] (Rodríguez Acosta, 2009, p. 90). Gertrudis' life in the novel is ultimately framed by the challenges

she faces as she is confronted with a world unfit and at odds with her ideological positions. As a result, as readers we are also confronted by the perils of being a non-confirming woman.

Rodríguez Acosta's intellectual contributions serves as a testimony to the fact that writing can be an act of insurrection even amidst the diverse ecosystems Caribbean women were writing in that it discloses other possible worlds even if material enactments remain fraught with challenges. In this context, Rodríguez Acosta discloses the possibilities of a nation where a plurality of gender relations and intimacies might be possible (Fleites-Lear, 2015, p. 41). In so doing, she paves the way for Cuban women (and women of the Caribbean and Latin America) to rethink belonging in the face of the modern condition in ways that do not require maternal heroism, but rather hinge on their freedoms to love, to think, and to write.

### 2.3 | Petronila Angélica Gómez (1883–1971)

Petronila Angélica Gómez was a pioneering feminist born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Gómez was a schoolteacher and the director and founder of *Fémína*, the first feminist magazine of the Dominican Republic. Gómez was educated in the first Escuela normal (Normal School or teachers' college) in the Dominican Republic founded by Puerto Rican intellectual Eugenio María de Hostos, a staunch advocate for women's rights in the context of nation building projects. Gómez saw women as the necessary element for the regeneration of the Dominican nation, which at the time had just witnessed U.S. occupation (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 253). In 1916, the U.S. invaded the Dominican Republic and established a military regime that lasted until 1924, under the auspices of the Dominican-American convention of 1907. The U.S. occupation sought to militarily restore "order" and build infrastructure that benefitted the U.S. economy. Gómez founded *Fémína* in 1922 and centered its feminist calling at the intersection with anti-imperial politics. Women's activism, in this context, was foiled into a national project of sovereignty grounded in resistance of U.S. occupation that stimulated the development of the feminist movement in the Dominican Republic (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 253). *Fémína* stopped publication in the early 1940's during which time Gómez retired from a public facing role until the 1950's when she re-emerged with the publication of two books: *Contribución para la historia del feminismo dominicano* (1952) and *Influencia de la mujer Iberoamericana* (1955) (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 255).

*Fémína* was unique in that it brought together the voices of men and women in transnational dialogue over the role of women in social life. The transnational conversations made possible through the journal brought together alliances that stretched from Europe to Latin America, the Spanish speaking Caribbean, and North America. Moreover, Gómez strategically relied on male intellectual figures for support in the development of the journal (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 254). The fact that anti-imperial politics and nation building were central points of critical departure for her feminist agenda made these types of allegiances possible. Gómez was a staunch advocate for women's equality that simultaneously corresponded with resistance to the U.S. military regime.

Interestingly, her project of women's emancipation gets off the ground precisely because the occupation was seen as a masculinist failure to protect the nation (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 257). The conditions of occupation served as evidence for a feminist project. The maternal role that women play exceeds the domestic space, and would for her, become a project of social and national maternity. Civilization, she argued, was going to be the product of mothers, in a political material world where men had failed to produce conditions of sovereignty and progress. The demand for women's equality was envisioned through the perceived political failures of men. The sovereign Dominican nation could not subsequently exist without women at the heart of political life and the future of the Dominican nation rests on the possibilities of women's participation in political life. As a result, her lines of argumentation draw parallels between woman and nation, where women were responsible for educating future generations of citizen subjects, transmitting Dominican cultural values, and appeasing the failed efforts of men that had routed the nation to its current situation (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 260). Reflecting this point, she writes: "...La mujer debe ser la que triunfe en el moral del hogar; su obra debe ser edificadora de esa moral, que es columna granítica que sostiene a las

naciones en sus momentos más difíciles de acerbadas pruebas” [Woman must triumph in the morality of the home; her work should be edifying of that morality, it is a granite column that sustains nations in their most difficult moments and sour tests.] (*Fémina* 113, 1928 14).

In other respects, Gómez's feminist activism also exceeded the confines of the Dominican Republic. In 1923 she joined La Liga Internacional de Mujeres Ibéricas e Hispanoamericanas (The League of Iberian and Hispanic American Women). The League was an intellectual network of exchange that sought to dialogically connect women from these geographical nodes while simultaneously resisting the contempt and racism of U.S. feminists (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 261). In this context, Gómez would come to close off her positions on gender equality across racialized class lines seeing her project of women's emancipation as one for “cultured” women; a point which lurks in the background of her nationalist feminist agenda.

As the Trujillo regime fortified in the early 1930's Gomez's intellectual pursuits were thwarted. The regime ensured the silencing of Gomez with the intent of assembling a one-dimensional narrative of emancipatory feminist politics uncritical of military regimes (Fernández Asnejo, 2016, p. 274). The emancipatory future envisioned by Gómez requires an appreciation for how the violence of U.S. occupation and military regimes permeates every aspect of human life including who is remembered against the backdrop of the production of the modern nation state. The context of the Dominican Republic demonstrates how modernity frames political governance (success and failures) in terms of gendered and heterosexist logics that Gómez is facing as she tries to assemble notions of belonging that respond to the failures of masculinist politics. Unfortunately, her envisioned future was fundamentally at odds with the political wrath brought on by the thirty-year military dictatorship of Raphael Trujillo.

### 3 | THE DECOLONIAL TURN: OCHY CUIEL, YUDERKYS ESPINOSA MIÑOSO, AND YOMAIRA FIGUEROA

A more contemporary historiographical look at the Spanish speaking Caribbean reveals that feminist concerns sit at the nexus with decolonial and anti-imperial projects oriented around the possibilities of decolonial politics, the colonial underpinnings of modern nation states as well as the meaning of diaspora amidst global, neoliberal contexts. Conceptually, the intellectuals discussed in this section share broader decolonial feminist concerns that stretch beyond their homelands and are intellectually driven by global contexts that appreciate the production of the Caribbean as a geopolitical space networked in a broader context of imperialism, colonization, and diaspora. I thread the ideas of each of these authors under their shared commitments to decolonial gestures through their writing, which intercedes, and interrupts colonial threads internalized in Western imperial-colonial systems of thought, which they continue to develop contemporarily.

I present these thinkers as offering different faces of contemporary decolonial feminist Caribbean scholarship that is not exhausted by their ideas, but rather as part of a broader attempt to interrupt the systems of power and unfreedom that live in the wake of colonization. Taking anti-colonial or decolonial orientations as their investigatory starting points, this set of figures is largely critical of nationalist and liberal conceptions of emancipation as they are understood to be rooted in the production of modernity in the wake of colonization. By re-writing and re-imagining ideas of emancipation and liberty, these thinkers critically confront the conditions for the possibilities of the modernities that Capetillo, Rodríguez Acosta, and Gómez confront and critique. For instance, the project put forth by Ochy Curiel centers a decolonial turn that appreciates race as an experiential category that produced problematic epistemologies about racialized peoples in a global context that foil notions of nation and liberty. Juxtaposed to Gómez, who is also writing from the Dominican Republic one hundred years prior, Curiel illuminates how the concept of race that Gómez deploys problematically reproduces said epistemologies and helps us as readers to appreciate how the world-system that Gómez is moving through is itself produced not just by the failures of masculinist national projects, but in the threads of colonization itself that made race and nation meaningful categories in the first place.

Curiel, an Afro-Dominican decolonial feminist activist takes up concerns over the importance of centering Afrx<sup>3</sup> subjects within the global context. Her essay "Rethinking Radical Anti-Racist Feminist Politics in a Global Neoliberal Context" (2016) challenges radical politics in global contexts as it explores the dehumanizing effects of neoliberalism on racialized peoples with an eye toward the impoverished and women. In thinking through global systems of power, she conceptualizes colonialism as not just a materially driven project of domination, but one that also produced epistemologies about "other" cultures rooted in ideas of evolution and progress (Curiel 2016, p. 47). She draws attention to the ways ideas about racial mixture in Latin America and the Caribbean functioned as nationalist ideologies that worked to homogenize populations carrying out the continued effects of colonization (Curiel 2016, p. 48). In order to work against these tropes and center the contributions of Afro-descended women, she insists on the importance on exposing the imbrication of matrices of domination at the intersection between race, class, and sexuality. Decolonization for Curiel involves a recognition of the ways in which economic, cultural, political domination has produced effects that persist and permeate our social imaginaries (Curiel 2016, p. 50). Hence, she writes: "decolonization is, therefore, a political and epistemological position which traverses individual and collective thought and action: our imaginaries, our bodies and sexualities, and our ways of being and doing in the world" (Curiel 2016, p. 51).

Further elaborations on her perspectives on decolonialization can be found in the body of her work as she attends to systems of power and their material lived effects. For instance, *La nación heterosexual* (2013) and *El patriarcado desnudo: Tres feministas materialistas, Colette Guillaumin - Paola Tabet - Nicole Claude Mathieu* (2005) she explores regimented systems of domination that produce exclusions: heterosexuality in the former and the traffic of ideas of in the latter. In "La descolonización desde una propuesta feminista crítica" (2015) she clarifies the meanings of decolonization given its varied uses and contexts.

Following a similar line of thought, Yuderlys Espinosa Miñoso draws important links between feminism and lesbianism in the context of Latin America and the Caribbean. In "The Feminism-Lesbianism Relationship in Latin America: A Necessary Link" (2011) she argues that lesbianism produces conditions that require a critical understanding of obligatory heterosexuality as an institution that produces particular types of feminine subjects whose intimacies require dependency on men (2011, p. 403). This type of self-recognition in the realm of social and political life functions as a window into the claim that paths for emancipation and freedom for women have historically meant a revision of relationships to men on all levels of human life. As a result, many women have developed alternative forms of sexuality that exclude or de-center their relationships to men (Espinosa Miñoso, 2011, p. 404). Nevertheless, she notes that affirming this reality has been neither easy nor transparent, and that it has historically suffered from the marginalization of lesbianism that results from internalized homophobias produced through colonization. The reality is further entrenched with modern nation building projects that regulate citizen subjects through sexuality by producing and entrenching the norms of heterosexuality. The node at the intersection between sexuality, race, colonialism is consistently interrogated through the length of Espinosa Miñoso's work. For example: "Superando el análisis fragmentado de la dominación: una revisión feminista decolonial de la perspectiva de la interseccionalidad" (2019), "De por qué es necesario un feminismo descolonial: diferenciación, dominación co-constitutiva de la modernidad occidental y el fin de la política de identidad" (2012), and "La política sexual radical autónoma, sus debates internos y su crítica a la ideología de la diversidad sexual" (2011) hinge on an interrogation of identity politics that takes seriously the claim that sexuality and race serve as mechanisms of power and control in the wake of colonization.

Of final note is Yomaira Figueroa whose decolonial feminist scholarship tackles the relationships between women of color feminisms, decolonial feminisms, and the diaspora. In one of her most recent essays, entitled, "After the Hurricane: Afro-Latina Decolonial Feminisms and *Destierro*," Figueroa fleshes out the concept of *destierro* in decolonizing work as it sits at the nexus of emerging Afro-Latinx feminist methodologies that work within intersections of diasporic identities, experiences, and politics (Figueroa, 2020, p. 3). Specifically, she argues that the concept of *destierro* (roughly translated literally to de-territorialization) captures important dimensions of dispossession and impossibilities for home for Afro and Indigenous descended peoples (Figueroa, 2020, p. 4). Looking toward the cultural production of music, Figueroa illuminates the ways in which the transgenerational traumas of colonization often exceed the written word and are entrenched in networks that actively seek to erase the memories of home and land.



Here, music, discloses the unspeakable grief of loss that produces a paradox of dispossessions while still embodying a memory of home. A bridge between orality and writing, Figueroa reminds readers that the work of decolonial feminisms must contend with the complexities of *destierro* as we continue to work in and across difference. Figueroa further unpacks *destierro* in her first book *Decolonizing Diaspora* (2020) as she analyzes the relationships between Afro-Hispanophone subjects pushing our senses of the boundaries of the Caribbean archipelago by linking Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic with Equatorial Guinea. The book aims to offer a reading of a peripheralized literary and philosophical canon that disrupts how we have come to understand diaspora. In her words: "This project, then, offers a lens through which to read peripheralized Afro-diasporas in a different way, not only from the perspective of the underside, but from an approach that sees difference as consequential, and the Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone diaspora as a palimpsest, as an archive of overlapping histories and incommensurable differences" (29).

Curriel's, Espinosa Miñoso's, and Figueroa's intellectual productions are ongoing. Their projects are contemporarily paving the way for new ways of thinking about the Caribbean beyond the reproduction of colonial and imperial logics that produced the modern notions of the archipelago. I offer them as a polyphonic conglomerate of voices who share in their commitments to unraveling, subverting, and resisting in the many wakes of colonization as a lens through which we can come to appreciate the modernities that women intellectuals at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were confronting. The notions of liberty and freedom that they construct from their respective peripheral spaces is made possible by the processes of *destierro* (Figueroa) that required revisions vis-à-vis male subjects (Espinosa Miñoso), foiled by racialized epistemologies produced by the colonial encounter (Curriel).

## 4 | CONCLUSION

The feminisms of the Spanish speaking Caribbean are as heterogenous as the Caribbean itself. As can be seen through the projects of Capetillo, Rodríguez Acosta, and Gómez the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created particular historical and contextual terrains that posed unique challenges for womanhood in relationship to the intimacies of life. Whether it be the relationship between woman and nation, woman and man, or women and women, modernity in the Caribbean has meant confrontation with living ecosystems of ideas that were predicated on the exclusion of women's ideas. How women in different home-lands sought to remedy their positionalities so as to create a habitus that made intellectual life possible varied. Their variability of experiences predicated on the complexities of their identities across race, class, and sexuality distinctly impacted how they sought out to imagine more inclusionary futures. Nevertheless, as the decolonial turns in feminisms reminds us, inclusivity is not without colonial underpinnings. The desire to articulate notions of belonging is already networked into colonial histories that re-arranged how people relate to one another from the levels of quotidian life to the networks of imagined communities that comprise modern nations. As a result, the project of building an archive of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and its feminist traditions contend with the fact that difference is always already present in the articulations of our historiographies. Those differences carry social meanings that link us with a past that is not yet past, narratives that can not only be searched for in written words, and histories that continue to shape our imaginations, bodies, and relations (as Curriel reminds us). The heterogenous qualities that make the Spanish-speaking Caribbean so challenging to spatially and temporally map are the very reasons we should continue excavating its intellectual narratives. It is at the nexus of these landscapes that the most rich and complex ideas about emancipation and freedom become possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authorship of this article was made possible through the financial research support of the Department of Philosophy at Marquette University. A very special thanks to Jessica Wolfendale for setting up the writing groups that allowed my writing to come back to life. A deep thanks to Jorge Montiel for your labors of research assistantship, to Angelina Mosher Salazar for your loving creative space, Kristen Uribe & Darci Curwen-Garber for your constant creative nurture, Andrea J. Pitts for your support, and to Adriana Novoa for always being a sounding board.

## ORCID

Stephanie Rivera Berruz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8579-6084>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the term “feminism” is young and tied to the West as a project that has historically centered gender as a critical category of analysis of white feminist projects. Hence, I do not use the term feminist to refer to figures unless they refer to themselves as such. Moreover, I want to further acknowledge that “Spanish-speaking” is also fraught with difficulty in capturing the context from which ideas emerge as it centers Spanish colonization.
- <sup>2</sup> One key challenge to working within marginalized intellectual histories is the imperative philosophy places on categorization for legibility. We refer to traditions in spatial-temporal terms such as Non-Western, Ancient, Caribbean, Latin American, Modern—to just name a few. The categorization neatly bookends content for the sake of integration into an already framed base of philosophical history. In recent years, the discipline of philosophy in the U.S. has come under scrutiny for its lack of diversity and narrow provincialized model of intellectual histories. In said context, efforts have been made—this essay among those—to shift the orientation of how we think about philosophy, where it comes from, and who its main interlocutors are. Notwithstanding, when diving into traditions that sit outside the frame of the canon one is often confronted with the push to chronologically systematize and historicize ideas in a way that can converge with already established modes of philosophical discourse—a process Tommy J. Curry has termed epistemological convergence (2011). In this context, the Caribbean poses unique challenges to the models we have of doing work in the history of philosophy precisely because it does not participate in a chronological temporal continuity that normatively frames Western thought.
- <sup>3</sup> I follow Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez in her use of the term Afrx in Decolonizing Diaspora, which maintains that the use of Afrx captures the ways the prefixes Afro- and Afra-have been used in the Caribbean and Latin America to denote descendancy in a manner that centers Africa and highlights the forms of domination that have made Caribbean modernities possible.

## REFERENCES

- Cámara, M. (2008). *Cuban Women Writers: Imagining a Matria*. David Frye. (Trans). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Capetillo, L. (2004). *A Nation of Women: An Early Feminist Speaks Out*. In F. V. M. Rodríguez (Ed.), Arte Público Press.
- Curiel, O., Borzone, M., & Ponomareff, A. (2016). Rethinking radical anti-racist feminist politics in a global neoliberal context. *Meridian*, 14(2), 46–55.
- Espinosa Miñoso, Y. (2011). “The Feminism-Lesbianism Relationship in Latin America: A Necessary Link.” (Trans). Joan Flores. *The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America*. In J. Corrales, & M. Pecheny (Eds.), University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Fernández Asnejo, M. (2016). Activismo político y feminismo en la República Dominicana: Petronila A. Gómez y Fémina (1922-1939). In *Meridional: Revista Chilena de Estudios Latinoamericanos* (Vol. 7, pp. 251–277).
- Figueroa, Y. (2020). After the Hurricane: Afro-Latina Decolonial Feminisms and Destierro. *Hypatia*, 1–10.
- Fischer, S. (2004). *Modernity Disavowed*. Duke University Press.
- Fleites-Lear, M. (2015). Transgresiones cubanas: Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta y la mujer/nación independiente y lesbica. *Revista de Filología y Lingüística de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 41(2), 35–51.
- Henry, P. (2000). *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy (Africana Thought)*. Routledge.
- Rodríguez Acosta, O. (2009). *La vida manda y otros textos*. In M. Cámara. (Ed.), Stockcero.
- Suárez Findlay, E. J. (1998). *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870–1920*. Duke University Press.
- Taylor, D. (2003). *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press.
- Unruh, V. (2006). *Performing Women and Modern Literary Culture in Latin America*. University of Texas Press.

## FURTHER READING

- Benitez-Rojo, A. (1997). *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Duke University Press.
- Curiel, O. (2013). *La nación heterosexual*. Brecha Lésbica.
- Curiel, O. (2015). La descolonización desde una propuesta feminista crítica. *ACSUR-Las Segovias*, 1–50.
- Curiel, O., & Falquet, J. (Eds.). (2005). *El patriarcado desnudo: Tres feministas materialistas, Colette Guillaumin - Paola Tabet - Nicole Claude Mathieu*. Brecha Lésbica.
- Curry, T. J. (2011). The Derelict Crisis of African American Philosophy: How African American Philosophy Fails to Contribute to the Study of African-Descended Peoples. *Journal of Black Studies*, 42(3), 314–333.
- Fémina. (1922)–1939. *Revista Ilustrada*.

- Figueroa, Y. (2021). *Decolonizing Diaspora*. Northwestern University Press.
- Gómez, P. A. (1952). *Contribución para la historia del feminismo dominicano*. Ciudad Trujillo: Editorial Librería Dominicana.
- Gómez, P. A. (1955). *Ciudad Trujillo*. Editorial Librería Dominicana. Influencia de la mujer Iberoamericana
- Sánchez González, L. (2001). *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora*. New York University Press.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Dr. Stephanie Rivera Berruz** is an assistant professor at Marquette University. She received her Ph.D. in Philosophy from SUNY Buffalo in 2014. She is the recipient of the Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellowship (2017-2018) for her work on Latinx feminisms and Latin American Philosophy. Her main research interests lie in Latin American Philosophy and Latina/x feminism as well philosophy of race, gender, and sexuality. She approaches these topics at their intersections as she is committed to the importance of diverse approaches to philosophical praxis. She recently published a co-edited anthology: *Comparative Studies in Asian and Latin American Philosophies* (2018), and her work has been published in *Hypatia*, *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, and *Essays on Philosophy*.

**How to cite this article:** Rivera Berruz, S. (2021). Feminisms of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. *Philosophy Compass*, e12766. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12766>