

## **CIP Digital Storytelling Fund Grant Report 2019-2021**

Project Title:

*Spiritism by Puerto Rican Women: From Remarkable Pioneers to Contemporary Heirs*

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### **Projection Description**

*Spiritism by Puerto Rican Women: From Remarkable Pioneers to Contemporary Heirs* studied, documented, and created digital representations of imperiled cultural heritage materials by pioneer Puerto Rican writers who, as practitioners of Spiritism, helped sustain and transform Puerto Rican society during its disruptive, colonial transition from Spain to the U.S.A. Collection, preservation, and interpretation of their primary works is of significant value to humanities scholars, students, and general audiences by addressing three key questions: What happens when women spiritists take on the tasks and discourses that traditionally have defined power? How do they transform the space where society produces its laws and social norms? How do their present-day heirs uphold such practices? Interpretation of primary works and oral histories from prominent contemporary spiritists constituted the foundation for a digital humanities bilingual exhibit providing a scholarly digital narrative of the origins and development of Spiritism in Puerto Rico by women, and their molding and expression of power in society. An important, overarching goal of the project is to promote the teaching of, and to preserve and make available to broad specialist and non-specialist audiences, this element of Puerto Rican history, religious culture, and literature for which no equivalent resource was available to date.

### **Outcomes**

The primary outcome of this project is a digital bilingual exhibition entitled *Spiritism by Puerto Rican Women: From Remarkable Pioneers to Contemporary Heirs* (<https://espiritistaspr.kenyoncip.org/en/>). This digital collection contains biographies, digitized primary works, and textual analysis of eight 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century pioneer writers and activists. It also features an interview with an important historian of Spiritism in Puerto Rico, Dr. Gerardo Hernández Aponte, as well as an interview with me, providing an academic, critical perspective of Spiritism by Puerto Rican women. Another section in the collection contains ten oral histories, digital stories and complete transcriptions by prominent contemporary women who have actively engaged with Spiritism. A third section contains approximately 3,000 pages of digitized materials including three important spiritist periodicals, from 1900 to the present. A critical introduction and a downloadable bibliography on the subject frame the exhibition.

### **Collaborations**

The project enabled establishing valuable internal and external collaborations. From Kenyon, a core group of ten individuals worked intensely for two years to bring the project to fruition.

Jenna Nolt, digital initiatives librarian at Kenyon, designed the digital infrastructure and archive for this project in Digital Kenyon (<https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo/>). Her work included data management, digitization support, and digital collection design and archiving, as well as providing research support in her role as a library liaison. Ashley Butler, digital media instructional technologist at the Center for Innovative Pedagogy (CIP) offered support in the creation of digital stories and the implementation of best practices in digital media for student interns. Sofia Alpizar Román, digital media intern at the CIP (spring 2021) and digital summer scholar (summer 2020), created digital stories and thematic videos for the oral history section, and edited all the texts produced for the project. Scout Crowell, digital media intern at the CIP (fall 2019 and spring 2020), created digital stories and thematic videos for the oral history section and developed transcriptions in Spanish and English. Beimnet Kassaye, digital media intern at the CIP (spring 2020), was in charge of the organization, development, and archival of microfilms. Abdul Hafeez, digital media intern at the CIP (spring 2021), worked in the digitization of periodicals and other at-risk materials. Emma Brown, webmaster and Kenyon alumna (spring and summer 2021), designed and created the project's website. Henry Hirschfeld, Summer Scholar (summer 2021), translated to English all of the texts produced for the project, under my mentorship. From the Ohio Five, Olivia Geho, serving as the Five Colleges of Ohio Post-Baccalaureate Fellow in Digital Scholarship, recorded the first ten interviews, took photographs, and copied and organized the archival documents (summer 2019). I am indebted to this group of exemplary collaborators who made my work an intellectual and creative adventure, supported by internships at the CIP, the *Kenyon Summer Scholars Program*, the *Ohio Five Digital Scholarship* grant, the *Oral History in the Liberal Arts* (OHLA) grant from the GLCA Consortium, and the *CIP Digital Storytelling Fund* grant.

External collaborations included a remarkable group of scholars, librarians, writers, and visual artists without whom this project would not have been possible. These included Puerto Rican scholars, who contributed not only documents and primary sources, but also biographies of pioneer writers: Dr. Gerardo Alberto Hernández-Aponte, author of *El Espiritismo en Puerto Rico, 1860-1907* (*Spiritism in Puerto Rico, 1860-1907*), Dr. Sandra Enríquez Seiders, professor of history at the University of Puerto Rico, Utuado; Dr. Carmen Romeu Toro, professor of History at the Ana G. Méndez University at Carolina and instructor of spiritist doctrine at the Instituto de Estudios e Investigaciones Psíquicas (The Institute of Psychic Study and Research) (I.N.E.S.I.P.) in Río Piedras; Dr. Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, educator and great-granddaughter of Agustina Guffain; Nydia E. Lozada, president of the Association of Puerto Rican Spiritist Women in Action (A.M.E.P.A.); María E. Ordóñez Mercado, director of the Colección de Estudios Puertorriqueños (Collection of Puerto Rican Studies) at the University of Puerto Rico Río Piedras; Axel Toro, director of the Municipal Archives of San Sebastián; visual artist Lizza I. Román, who granted permission to include three of her paintings in order to illustrate core ideas of the study; and José Arroyo, director of the Escuela Espírita Allan Kardec (Allan Kardec Spiritist School) in Río Piedras, who connected me with the Movimiento de Cultura Espírita (Spiritist Culture Movement) (CIMA), a prominent international organization for secular Kardecian Spiritism. Through CIMA conferences, I discovered a vibrant global spiritist community that educated me through a network of spiritist experts who study, explain, and update Spiritism today. Without the generosity, knowledge, and historical materials offered by these extraordinary collaborators, it would have been very difficult to recover the biographies and primary texts of the pioneer and contemporary Puerto Rican spiritists.

## Funding

This project was made possible through the generosity of the following organizations: The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Ohio Five Library System Consortium, the GLCA Consortium, Kenyon Center for Innovative Pedagogy, and Kenyon Summer Scholars Program. Preparations for this project were initiated over 2019-2020 academic year. We obtained \$ **34,980.00** in total funding to complete the project. Of this overall amount, \$ **11,980.00** was funded by external grants totaling:

- Ohio Five Digital Scholarship Grant (amount funded: \$ **6,980.00**)
- OHLA Faculty Development Award (amount funded: \$ **3,000.00**)
- Ohio Five Digital Scholarship Grant (amount funded: \$ **2,000.00**)

We also received internal grants, totaling \$ **23,000.00** to support the project:

- Digital Storytelling Fund (amount funded: \$ **10,000.00**)
- Kenyon Summer Digital Scholar Program (2020) (amount funded: \$ **6,500.00**)
- Kenyon Summer Scholar Program (2021) (amount funded: \$ **6,500.00**)

We are most grateful to these organizations for their invaluable support.

## Fulfilling the Reciprocity Commitment

The CIP *Digital Storytelling Fund* grant included an element of reciprocity. To that purpose funds were provided to enable a series of presentations on the outcomes of the research to the various centers and institutions in Puerto Rico which collaborated with me to make the project a reality. Following below is a list of presentations given to date or planned for the near future.

### **Presentations to-date:** (total documented live or online audience of **7,435 participants**)

1. Asociación de Mujeres Espiritistas en Acción (AMEPA), Talk, 11/7/2021, Juncos, P.R.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRM\\_69DF3eU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRM_69DF3eU)  
Audience - 30 in-person; online views at/since presentation - 49
2. Escuela Espírita Allan Kardec, Talk, 11/7/2021, San Juan P.R.,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZ9GL\\_tFaTE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZ9GL_tFaTE)  
Audience - 25 in-person; online views at/since presentation - 131
3. Bookstore Laberinto, Book Presentation, 11/8/2021, Old San Juan, P.R.,  
Audience - 20 in-person
4. Radio Raíces, Interview with Víctor Rivera Pastrana, 11/8/2021, San Sebastián, P.R.

<https://fb.watch/a1IQfwE1bT/>

Online views at/since presentation - 321

5. Casa Pepiniana de la Cultura, Talk, 11/12/2021, San Sebastián, P.R.

<https://fb.watch/a1ILtZFnce/>

Audience – 30 in-person; online views at/since presentation - 930

6. Centro Amor al Bien, Cabo Rojo, P.R., Talk, 11/14/ 2021,

Audience – 25 in-person

7. Instituto de Estudio e Investigaciones Psíquicas, Talk, 15/11/2021, Río Piedras, P.R.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBphJRikFKM>

Audience – online views at presentation – 30 people

8. Bookstore La Casita, Interview, 11/19/2021, Aguadilla, P.R.

<https://www.facebook.com/100004951429478/posts/2042206009287760/?d=n>

Audience – online views at/since presentation – 462

9. Bookstore Mágica, Río Piedras, P.R., Talk, 11/20/2021,

Audience – 25 in-person

10. Interview with Nelson del Castillo, Inter News Service, San Juan, P.R., 11/20/2021

11. GLCA Webinar, 12/2/2021, Ohio, U.S.A.

12. CIMA Interview (Movimiento de Cultura Espírita), Venezuela, 12/5/2021

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD\\_Vy1M3G\\_4&t=4s297](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD_Vy1M3G_4&t=4s297)

Audience – online views at/since presentation – 297

13. Temprano en la Tarde, Radio Program, Interview José Cepeda, 12/8/2021, Ponce, P.R.

<https://go.ivoox.com/rf/79377806>

Audience – 132 listeners

14. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, San Juan, P.R., Talk, 12/14/2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNG5ZYNAacA>

Audience - online views at/since presentation – 2,890 (with audience from P.R., U.S.A., Spain, Peru, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Argentina, El Salvador, Panama, Anguila

### **Planned/Confirmed Presentations**

1. Bookstore El Candil, Ponce, P.R., Book Presentation, 4/2/2022, 1:00 p.m.

2. Instituto Espírita Renacimiento, Mayagüez, P.R. 4/3/2022, 9:30 a.m.

3. Bookstore Tazas y Portadas, Hormigueros, P.R. 4/3/2022, 4:00 p.m.

4. Interview with Gilda Mirós, New York City (Date and Time TBA, 2022)

5. CIMA (Movimiento de Cultura Espírita), Venezuela, Talk (Date and Time TBA, 2022)

6. Museo Felisa Cintrón, Talk, (Date and Time TBA, 2022)

### **Additional Reciprocity Outcomes**

Several oral history participants as well as other institutional members persistently made the point that an all-digital exhibition likely would not be accessible to much of the older segment of the population who also would have a great interest in the work. As a result, I took on the additional challenge of creating a manuscript in book format that could be given out to the study participants and others as a gift of reciprocity. To make this possible, I engaged a well-known book publisher in Puerto Rico who printed the 500 hundred copies of the book supported by the grant, which I am in the process of giving away to individuals, centers, cultural and educational institutions, public libraries for which the book could be a useful and valuable addition to their book collections. To date, approximately 120 books have been distributed. I will continue to distribute them, free of charge, over the coming months to complete the planned gift of books.

As a separate initiative, I also paid, out-of-pocket, for the printing of 500 additional copies, which are being made available to bookstores throughout the island for sale at \$14.99 each. The reception of the book from these commercial outlets has been quite enthusiastic with upwards 200 books already sold.

### **Conclusion**

The project was fruitful in the extreme. For me, as a scholar, but also at the personal level, it enriched me well beyond expectations. Academically, it opened an unexplored treasure trove in the writings of women of valor who, empowered by Spiritism, dared to speak up against the prejudices of religion, class and gender that prevailed in Puerto Rico at the time of the disruptive transition of the Island from Spain to the U.S.A. Personally, it reconnected me with my early history and enabled new and lasting friendships with the oral history participants who generously gave of their time and, most especially, of their trust to share close, intimate stories of their lives as contemporary spiritist women. The project, very importantly, enabled key, valuable collaborative connections within the College that show, splendidly, what well vectored collaboration can accomplish. Several of the strongest collaborations that enabled our success happened within the auspices of the CIP and the Kenyon Library.

In its dimension of community reciprocity, I considered the project to have delivered beyond expectations. In total, 14 presentations have been given, whether live or online, which, as documented to-date have reached nearly 7,500 people who have become acquainted with the impressive body of primary works of our early spiritist and activist Puerto Rican women, via the presentations supported by the CIP grant. And, of course, repositories of such information have been created in several of the venues that hosted presentations (i.e., digital copies of presentations, interviews, etc.); this, beyond the totality which is already available in the digital exhibit. Moreover, of the creation of a book, as an additional outcome of the project, came

another confirmation of the interest the people of Puerto Rico have in this topic, as evidenced by the warm reception the book has had among the various bookstores where it is now available.

In summary, this is well beyond any measure, the scholarly project that has given me the most opportunity for growth and discovery in the past few years, not to mention personal and professional enjoyment and satisfaction. I see it, very much, as a delightful capstone to my Kenyon career.