

JORELL A.  
MELÉNDEZ-  
BADILLO

**THE**

**LETTERED**

**BARRIADA**

Workers, Archival Power,  
and the Politics of Knowledge  
in Puerto Rico



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Workers, Archival Power, and the  
Politics of Knowledge in Puerto Rico

JORELL A. MELÉNDEZ-BADILLO

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson

Typeset in Elephant and Arno Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Meléndez Badillo, Jorell A., author.

Title: The lettered *barriada* : workers, archival power, and the politics of knowledge in Puerto Rico / Jorell A. Meléndez-Badillo.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021002275 (print)

LCCN 2021002276 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478013853 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478014782 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478022091 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Partido Socialista (P.R.)—History. | Working class—

Political activity—Puerto Rico—History—20th century. | Labor

movement—Puerto Rico—History—20th century. | Press, Labor—Puerto

Rico—History—20th century. | Press and politics—Puerto Rico—

History—20th century. | Intellectuals—Puerto Rico—Attitudes. | Puerto

Rico—Politics and government—1898-1952. | Puerto Rico—Historiography. |

BISAC: HISTORY / Latin America / General | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Ethnic

Studies / American / Hispanic American Studies

Classification: LCC HD8238 .M45 2021 (print) | LCC HD8238 (ebook) |

DDC 322/.2097295—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021002275>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021002276>

Publication of this book is supported by Duke University Press's Scholars of Color First Book Fund.

Cover art: Kelvin Santiago Valles, cover art from the pamphlet “Juana Colón: La Juana de Arco Comerieña,” published by the Secretaría de prensa y propaganda del comité local de Comercio del Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (“Juana Colon: the Joan of Arc of Comercio,” published by the Press and Information Committee of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party of Comercio), 1972. Courtesy of Colección Gilberto Arias González.

Para abuela Ada y abuelo Carlos,  
esto es fruto de su cosecha.

Para Aurora y Libertad,  
mis fuentes de inspiración.

Para mis madres,  
Iris y Robin.

Para todxs mis maestrxs,  
en el salón de clases,  
en la calle o en el texto.

Para quienes no aparecen  
en este libro.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On a warm May afternoon in 2014, my family came together at the home of one my great-aunts in Moca, Puerto Rico. Since my *abuela* (grandmother) had fourteen siblings, growing up with my grandparents meant that family celebrations were massive. I had just come back from finishing my first year of doctoral studies in the United States. Suddenly, I found myself in the balcony surrounded by all the men. They were trying to figure out what I was doing *allá 'fuera* (abroad). “What? A doctor? In history? Ha!” Struggling with my words, I tried to explain that I was a historian, which meant that I was trying to write stories just like the ones they had told me on multiple occasions about long shifts in tobacco factories, about train rides in search of work, or about the blistering sun in the sugarcane fields.

I was finishing an article about an agricultural strike that took place in 1905 and told them all about it. They attentively listened until my great-uncle Guilo interrupted me and said, “Strikes? Papá [my great grandfather] was an expert. He was called every time there was one. Papá was a *rompe huelga* [scab].” When I asked him to clarify what he meant, he just replied with a smile, “Of course, Papá would travel throughout the island on the train. Whenever a strike broke out, that meant he had work.” And right there, on that balcony, my conception of history was profoundly altered. I had spent years doing research about the most radical segments of the Puerto Rican working classes, written a book on anarchism, and dedicated countless hours to the study of strikes. While I had taken an interest in

these topics because of my working-class background, I had failed to understand that my family were those on the other side, the ones anarchists and striking workers fought against, the *rompe huelgas*.

Hearing my great-uncle was a lesson about the multiple protean identities that people like them often negotiated. Learning about Papá's scab days did not make his stories about labor migration, exclusions, and exploitation less real. In fact, it added another layer to the already complicated histories that had been passed down to me by my great-aunts and great-uncles. On that day, I also understood that I wanted to write a history that was attentive to how identities were forged, negotiated, and mobilized at different historical moments. To be sure, the people that inhabit this book had access to things my family lacked: unions, self-managed pedagogical projects, and, eventually, political power. I came to understand these complexities, not by reading hundreds of books—which I did read—but through conversations like the ones that took place in that balcony. My family also taught me about the importance of community. Thus, I consider the production of history to be a collective endeavor.

This book was first conceptualized in that balcony with my family in Moca, Puerto Rico. It was written in between Storrs, Connecticut; Amherst, Massachusetts; and Hanover, New Hampshire. I finished it in another balcony, this time overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in Manatí, Puerto Rico. In the journey of transforming an idea into a book, I have inherited many debts that I will never get to fully repay. I have been very privileged to share conversations, laughs, and ideas with many colleagues and friends on different continents. In that sense, this book is my young self's wildest dream. It is a tribute to the people from the La Charca neighborhood, where my family comes from; the housing project Las Muñecas, where I spent the first years of my life; and the *barriada* Cabán, where I came of age. It is a tribute to all those—like my family—who remain unnamed and absent in history books.

At the University of Connecticut, a community of scholars and colleagues were crucial in conceptualizing the first drafts of this work. I am grateful to Matt Guariglia, Shaine Scarminach, Nathan Braccio, Eddie Guimont, Jessica Strom, Danielle Dumaine, Matt Perse, Erica Willis, Marc Reyes, Maggie Stack, Gabrielle Westcott, Aimee Loiselle, Mike Limberg, Allison Horrocks, Carla Silva Muhammad, Andrea Chunga, and Yesha Doshi. My time in cold Storrs, Connecticut, was made bearable by the warmth of Carlos Gardeazábal, Fatima K. Espinoza, Orlando Deavila, Claudio Daflon, Tania Torres, Gabriel Martínez, Marianna Todd, Ilán Sánchez, Luisa Arrieta,

Jenn and Christina Honeycutt, Nick Bannon, Guillermo Irizarry, Anne Lam-bright, and Ángel A. Rivera.

This book would not have been possible without the support of the University of Connecticut's History Department, including Kathy O'Dea, Jessica Muirhead, Heather Parker, Janet K. Watson, Chris Clark, Peter Baldwin, Cornelia H. Dayton, Michael Dintess, Melina Pappademos, Sylvia Schafer, Nancy Shoemaker, Fiona Vernal, and Emma Amador. El Instituto: Institute of Latina/o, Caribbean, and Latin American Studies not only served as a source of funding but also became an oasis for Latinx folks to connect, get together, and create knowledges. There, I am grateful to Anne Theriault, Anne Gabbelein, Samuel Martínez, and Charles Venator. I am forever indebted to Mark Overmyer-Velázquez and Mark Healey for all their support, mentorship, and friendship. I am especially thankful to my mentor and friend, Blanca G. Silvestrini. Her work has redefined the field of Puerto Rican history and has greatly informed my ideas.

The research for this book was funded by the Mellon Faculty Fellows Program at Dartmouth College, the Ford Foundation, and the University of Connecticut's Humanities Institute. In the latter I became part of an interdisciplinary community of scholars that greatly influenced this book. I am thankful for all the conversations with Michael Lynch, Alexis Boylan, Deirdre Bair, Rebecca Gould, Eleni Coundouriotis, Ruth Glasser, Kenneth Gouwens, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, Harry Van Der Hulst, Sarah Berry, Laura Wright, Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco, and Tracy Llanera. During my time in Amherst, I was made to feel at home by a group of scholars at the University of Massachusetts and the Holyoke Public Library. I am particularly grateful to Gloria Bernabe, Agustín Lao-Montes, Roberto Alejandro, Yuri Gama, and Manuel Frau.

At Dartmouth College I have been fortunate to be part of a vibrant scholarly community. I am grateful for the intellectual dialogue, collegiality, and laughs with Bethany Moreton, Pamela Voekel, Matt García, Annelise Orleck, Israel Reyes, Udi Greenberg, Jennifer Miller, Rashauna Johnson, Golnar Nikpour, Yumi Lee, Robert Bonner, Leslie Butler, Cecilia Gaposchkin, Jeremy Dell, Dave Petrucci, Stefan Link, Soyoung Suh, Matt Delmont, Mingwei Huang, Jacqueline Wernimont, Eng-Beng Lim, Desirée García, Kyle Booten, Mary Coffey, Tatiana Reinoza, Eman Morsi, Marcela Di Blasi, Yana Stainova, Yui Hashimoto, Becky Clark, Jorge Cuéllar, and Cristina Tedman-Lezcano.

The first person to read my initial book manuscript was Montse Feu, for whom I am very grateful. She gave me careful comments and suggestions

that allowed me to morph the text into what it is today. Margaret Power and Aura Sofía Jirau read earlier versions of chapter 5 and were of enormous help, for which I am very grateful. This book also greatly benefited from a manuscript review workshop sponsored by Dartmouth College's Department of History and the Mellon Faculty Fellows Program. In the workshop, Eileen Findlay, Jorge L. Giovannetti, Matt García, Israel Reyes, and Pamela Voekel read the full manuscript and gave me invaluable comments, suggestions, and critiques.

This book would not have been a reality without the support of Gisela Fosado at Duke University Press. She believed in the project from its early stages and supported me throughout the editorial process. I am also thankful for all the help and support provided by Alejandra Mejía and Ellen Goldlust. Likewise, the book benefited from the careful reading and suggestions offered by Duke University Press's anonymous reviewers.

I am beyond privileged for having the following people in my personal, professional, and political life: Michael Staudenmaier, Ileana Rodríguez-Silva, Sandy Plácido, Solsiree del Moral, Jorge Duany, Adriana Garriga-López, Claudia Sofía Garriga, Joaquín Villanueva, José Fusté, José Atilés, Sarah Molinari, Mónica Jiménez, Roger Reeves, Daniel Nevárez Araújo, Pedro Lebrón, Nicole Cruz, Karriann Soto Vega, Marisol LeBrón, Jenny Kelly, J. Kehaulani Kaunui, Lord Lewis, Reynaldo Lastre, Eilyn Lombard, Mark Bray, Yesenia Barragán, Enrique Alejandro Vargas Rivera, Mariel Acosta, Julio Ramos, Jesse Cohn, Silvia Álvarez Curbelo, Sandra Pujals, Juan José Baldrich, Ángel (Chuco) Quintero-Rivera, María Dolores Luque, Luis Agrait, Albeyra Rodríguez, Jorge Nieves Rivera, Javier Alemán, Pablo L. Crespo, Bianca Medina, Kenyon Zimmer, Dave M. Struthers, Kirwin R. Shaffer, Raymond Craib, Kevan Antonio Aguilar, Anna Elena Torres, George Ciccariello-Maher, Eileen Findlay, Jorge L. Giovannetti, Gladys Jiménez-Muñoz, Kelvin Santiago Valles, Rodney Lebrón Rivera, Glorimar Peña, Nelson Pagán Butler, Mayra Vélez Serrano, Rachell Sánchez, Raymond Laureano, Jacqueline Villarrubia-Mendoza, Roberto Vélez, and Alexis Lorenzo Ruiz. I am enormously grateful for the PFNKR Reading Collective, which fostered a lively intellectual space and a community of care during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

In every archive and library consulted throughout my research, I have only found the most helpful and amiable people. I am thankful to all of them, but especially to Evelyn Solá and Milagros Rodríguez. In Puerto Rico, *tierra de mi corazón*, a network of people have kept me grounded throughout this process. I am grateful for friends like Hommy Cabrera, Paola Sán-

chez, Zevio Schnitzer, Paola Maisonet, Francis Rosario, and Lucas Noble. My family-in-law, Blanca Ortiz, Julio Santana, Guadalupe Santiago, and Freida Borges, have supported me every step of the way. My mothers, Iris Meléndez and Robin Guzzo, have always been there for anything that I have needed, and I will be forever thankful. My abuela Ada Roldán and my abuelo Carlos Nieves (may he rest in power) are the reason I wrote this book; it is a tribute to them.

Libertad Brouhns Santiago is the ray of sun that lights my every day. Libertad, this is the book I told you so much about, the one that stole many hours of play from you. Thank you for your patience, your joyfulness, and your love. Aurora, there are no words to describe how grateful I am for your everyday acts of solidarity. You have been patient and supportive with all my endeavors, but, most importantly, you fill my life with joy and happiness. This book is also the product of all our late-night conversations, theorizations, and debates. You have always challenged me to push my intellectual boundaries and to test the limits of my historical imagination. I am grateful for all you do and hope that the rest of our lives continue to be full of laughter, music, and happiness. Your love, *cariño*, and friendship are my bedrock, *te amo más de lo que las palabras pueden expresar*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every morning at the break of dawn, vendors flocked to Arecibo's *plazuela del mercado* (market square) hoping to sell some of their goods, produce, or livestock. Even before the plazuela's daily hustle and bustle began, the smell of coffee filled the air as Nemesio Morales opened his *cafetín* (small café) to the public. There, customers could enjoy a cup of coffee, order breakfast, or have lunch. Cafetines were also places where people came together to gossip about events in their neighborhoods, engage in debates about politics, or simply buy their newspapers. In December 1910, Nemesio's patrons were exposed to a recently published daily newspaper called *El combate* (The combat), dedicated, according to its subtitle, to dignifying labor.<sup>1</sup> Anyone that came into the cafetín and glanced at the newspaper's masthead could easily perceive its rhetoric. Besides its socialist grandiloquence and its confrontational tone, the paper's header portrayed labor as honorable and presented education as an instrument to achieve dignity and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

When asked by his clients about the newspaper, Nemesio might have answered that he did not know much but that it was the product of three young idealists from the Federación Libre de Trabajadores (FLT; Free Federation of Workingmen) guided by Esteban Padilla.<sup>3</sup> People might have recognized Padilla's name because of his activism. After all, he was one of organized labor's most vocal advocates in the northern town of Arecibo. *El combate* had a short life of six months. In one article, its editors criticized the town's mayor, causing an uproar in Arecibo's political establishment.



The mayor sued the paper for libel, and Padilla took the blame. He spent a few days imprisoned until he sent a letter to the mayor asking for forgiveness. At a time when the lines between public and private life were often blurry, Padilla's arrest or his involvement in the creation of Arecibo's Partido Obrero Insular (Insular Labor Party) might have put his name in the townspeople's mouths.<sup>4</sup>

Those of Nemesio's patrons who disagreed with *El combate*'s radical rhetoric but still flipped through its pages could at least find some usefulness in its announcements of cultural events taking place in Arecibo, or in the news section, which covered all of Puerto Rico and beyond. Some might have been puzzled as to how these three workingmen were able to document events taking place in faraway places, such as Sweden, Spain, and the United States. Beyond its fiery political rhetoric, the workingmen behind *El combate* also carved a space to experiment with their literary sensibilities by publishing poems, short essays, and philosophical commentaries. And while unfamiliar readers might have found these intellectual pursuits odd, *El combate* was hardly an exception.

By 1910, *El combate* was one in dozens of labor newspapers published throughout Puerto Rico.<sup>5</sup> Different forms of print media (including books, pamphlets, and single-page leaflets) allowed a small group of self-educated workingmen to produce knowledge and ideas in the margins of Puerto Rico's cultural elite. At a moment when workers started organizing unions and venturing into partisan politics, a handful of people that self-identified as *obreros ilustrados* (enlightened workingmen) crafted a makeshift intellectual community, which I refer to as the lettered *barriada*. Physical *barriadas* were poor neighborhoods usually interconnected by a system of alleys that allowed people to move from one place to another. These narrow passageways between houses were less streets than trails made with asphalt, stones, or dirt. Resembling the veins of a cardiovascular system, alleys were also added on the go as housing structures were built, creating spatial unity among the *barriada* dwellers. The lettered *barriada* came alive through the nexus of literary production and print culture, political participation, and labor rituals that reconfigured social and physical spaces. Newspapers became its alleyways, books became its houses, and social study centers were its public plazas.

*The Lettered Barriada* tells the story of how a cluster of self-educated workingmen were able to go from producing knowledge within their workshops and labor unions in the margins of Puerto Rico's cultural and intellectual elite to becoming highly respected politicians and statesmen. It is a story of how this group of workingmen produced, negotiated, and archived

powerful discourses that ended up shaping Puerto Rico's national mythology. By following a group of ragtag intellectuals, this book demonstrates how techniques of racial and gender silencing, ghosting, and erasure also took place in the margins. Ultimately, it is a book about the intersections of politics, knowledge, and power relations in Puerto Rican working-class intellectual production at the turn of the twentieth century.

WHAT OTHER NEWSPAPERS were sold at Nemesio Morales's cafetín? Would *El combate* sit next to national papers like *La correspondencia de Puerto Rico* (Puerto Rico's correspondence), or were there other working-class newspapers being sold? Would people actually buy *El combate*, or would Esteban Padilla collect a packet of unsold newspapers at the end of every week? Since we lack the sources to answer these questions, we must resort to the realm of speculation and imagination. Some questions posed in this book will remain unanswered because they did not fit any of the competing archives that generated what we have inherited as historical knowledge. By "archive," I am referring not only to physical repositories of documents but, following historian Antoinette Burton, to any "traces of the past that are collected either intentionally or haphazardly as 'evidence.'"<sup>6</sup>

Puerto Rican workingmen did create material archives by housing their institutional documents in union venues and locales. They built a decentralized national network of makeshift libraries, night schools, and social study centers that stored books, newspapers, and photographs. Obreros ilustrados also participated in the creation of nonmaterial archives that came to life through the print word and that I refer to as "ideational archives." The nature of these archives was twofold. On the one hand, they came alive through print media and workers' intellectual production. On the other, the discourses and narratives produced in their pages acquired power beyond the text and often operated autonomously. While I am attentive to the materiality of working-class archives, I am also interested in unpacking the ways in which particular historical narratives and discourses operated as archives in themselves—archives of particular desires, ideas, and political projects.

Workers' ideational archives were not created in a vacuum. In the late nineteenth century—as literary scholar Lorgia García Peña argued in relation to the Dominican Republic—Puerto Rican liberals built the "archive of *puertorriqueñidad* (Puerto Ricanness)" through "historical documents, literary texts, monuments, and cultural representations sustaining national ideology."<sup>7</sup> Beyond the hegemonic national archive, minor ones served the structure and logic of the archive of *puertorriqueñidad*; that is, in early

twentieth-century Puerto Rico, multiple competing archives operated simultaneously. Each archive sought to establish its own “truth” to shape “history.” After all, “the archive,” as philosopher Michel Foucault argued, “is the first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.”<sup>8</sup>

There were also “counterarchives” that challenged such logic and often-times were silenced from the historical record by those that controlled the modes of working-class knowledge production. One such case was the feminist counterarchive created by the anarchist Luisa Capetillo, who stormed the male-dominated lettered *barriada* with the publication of various books and newspapers. Perhaps more radical were the counterarchives created by the Black laundress Paca Escabí or the Black illiterate labor organizer Juana Colón (further discussed in chapter 3). While paying attention to multiple archives, *The Lettered Barriada* focuses on the archive—both physical and ideational—created by the FLT and the Socialist Party because it acquired hegemonic dimensions within working-class history. These organizations had the financial, material, and intellectual resources to create long-term editorial projects, publish books, and create physical repositories.

This book began as an attempt to find the voices of those people like my family—my great-grandparents, grandparents, and great-aunts and great-uncles—who were not unionized, did not aspire to become modern or “civilized,” and might have even opposed unions. Since I was not able to find them in the historical record, I began to pay attention to a question that ended up guiding this book’s narrative: *why* were they absent? Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s argument that archives are neither neutral nor natural, and that silences are always actively produced, added another layer: *how* were they silenced? Seeking to answer these questions, this book explores obreros ilustrados’ worldviews but also takes into consideration how they became historical narrators.

Because obreros ilustrados eventually dominated the means of working-class knowledge production through their leadership positions within Puerto Rico’s premier labor organizations, the narratives they created have oftentimes been equated with history itself.<sup>9</sup> That is, obreros ilustrados got to dictate what was deemed important enough to become history. In the process, and to be legible in the archive of puertorriqueñidad—an archive crossed by centuries of colonialism, slavery, and imperial violence—they silenced those that did not fit their whitened and male idealized worker identity.<sup>10</sup> Thus, racial discourses, workingwomen, and nonunionized workmen were rendered invisible. This was, as Trouillot argued, “archival

power at its strongest, the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research and, therefore, of mention.”<sup>11</sup>

NEMESIO MORALES’S CAFETÍN was located in Arecibo’s plazuela del mercado, an important space for socializing. The plazuela was the town’s commercial center. While people from the countryside could get copies of working-class newspapers only at labor-related events, city dwellers could buy them in specific stores, cafetines, or union venues. Indeed, the lettered *barriada*’s physical space was undoubtedly urban, embodied in social study centers, printing houses, and union halls. Yet its social space was not geographically limited to Puerto Rico.

Let us imagine a workingman who had never traveled outside Puerto Rico or the northern region of Arecibo deciding to stop for a coffee at Nem-esio Morales’s cafetín. If he was one of the fortunate few who knew how to read, he could take a sip from his drink as his eyes flitted through *El combate*’s pages. There, he could read about massive mobilizations in Belgium or about the assassination of Catalan anarchist pedagogue Francisco Ferrer i Guardia. Perhaps he could feel connected to others who, in his mind, suffered the same oppression as his. Maybe, for a second, he could also imagine that he was part of a movement that transcended national borders. He could imagine himself as a global subject, all without ever leaving the cafetín.

The expansion of capitalism, new technologies, and travel routes made the turn of the twentieth century a heyday of labor’s globalization. Since the 1860s, workers from around the world had made a concerted effort to connect with each other through international congresses, migration, correspondence, and the circulation of the labor press and other cultural products. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Puerto Rican obreros ilustrados became active participants in that global phenomenon. They read and published in international newspapers, celebrated labor rituals of remembrance like May Day, and established contacts with comrades in different countries. Through global interactions, they joined what one workingman described as “the concert of advanced nations.”<sup>12</sup> That transnational subjectivity, or global sensibility, is an underlying theme throughout this book.

This does not mean, however, that the *barriada* was disconnected from broader political and social processes in Puerto Rico. It was created and developed in tension with the country’s political and cultural establishments. During the first decade of the twentieth century, and as a new polity emerged after the US occupation and colonization of Puerto Rico, obreros

ilustrados used print media to craft protean identities that allowed them to establish proximity to the populace at times and distance at others—all while becoming workers' self-assigned interlocutors.

After the creation of the Socialist Party in 1915, obreros ilustrados moved to centralize working-class knowledge production with the aim of attracting workingmen to the ballot. By the 1930s, after the Socialist Party became an undeniable political force in Puerto Rico, many of those who had been in charge of producing knowledge and organizing labor unions had turned into career politicians. Meanwhile, as tensions within the party increased, and as a generational relay began to take place, it became imperative for aging labor leaders to write the movement's historical narratives. The publication of three books by the movement's most recognized leaders in the late 1920s and the 1930s (Santiago Iglesias Pantín, José Ferrer y Ferrer, and Rafael Alonso Torres) consolidated the ideational archive that began at the turn of the century and that would later shape historical production about Puerto Rico's working classes. To be sure, workers had been publishing books and pamphlets for decades, but these three books became foundational texts for Puerto Rican labor historiography.

The obreros ilustrados this book focuses on—a group mostly composed of urban and skilled workingmen—were also successful in crafting their political identities through their participation in the lettered *barriada*. They were deemed legitimate political subjects, as they occupied seats in Puerto Rico's senate and legislature. The cultural elite, however, saw workingmen's intellectual credibility as dubious at best. Nonetheless, at a moment when the labor movement had not been a serious object of academic study, these workingmen understood the power of crafting their own historical narratives. Those who published newspapers like *El combate* and distributed them in cafetines, on public corners, or at rallies perhaps never imagined the impact they would later have in Puerto Rican history and society. This book is the story of how that handful of ragtag intellectuals who stole time off their nights to study, debate, and educate other workers were able to successfully influence Puerto Rico's politics, national mythology, and, later, historical interpretations of the "Puerto Rican reality."

### **Conceptualizing the Lettered Barriada**

Producing history is a collective effort. My work builds on and is indebted to scholars who pioneered working-class studies in Puerto Rico decades ago and have reimagined the field several times since. Under the name of

*nueva historia* (new history), in the 1970s a group of scholars set out to analyze what until then were understudied social sectors. Most of the other books and articles published about the labor movement were centered on the figure of Santiago Iglesias Pantín and reproduced the idea that he “created” the organized labor movement.<sup>13</sup> Influenced by trends in social history, this new generation of academics from the *nueva historia* was skeptical of grandiose historical narratives and sought to rewrite Puerto Rican history from below.<sup>14</sup> Since then, scholars of Puerto Rican labor have paid attention to workers’ theatrical plays, literature, and social study centers as part of their class struggle, demonstrating that most literary and cultural production was created as organizing propaganda. Yet workers’ cultural production also reveals the emergence of an intellectual project and community. Thus, looking at obreros ilustrados as part of that community allows a deeper understanding of the power relations among the working classes.<sup>15</sup>

In this book I use the concept of the lettered *barriada* in dialogue with a key text in Latin America’s intellectual tradition, *La ciudad letrada* (*The Lettered City*), by the Uruguayan literary critic Ángel Rama. In *La ciudad letrada*, Rama mapped the urban dimensions of Latin American cultural production, the relationship between elite intellectuals and the state, and the centrality of reading and writing to the creation of urban (social and political) life. The workers that inhabited Puerto Rico’s lettered *barriada* participated in similar processes but did so in the margins of the country’s cultural and intellectual elite. These mostly self-educated workingmen used their makeshift libraries, improvised pedagogical projects, and public events to build the lettered *barriada*.<sup>16</sup>

Rama argued that in Latin America, “there were more real links between *letrados* [men of letters] and labor organizations at the turn of the century than in the 1930s (when such links became so central to left ideology).”<sup>17</sup> While this was true in some Latin American countries, as exemplified by thinkers like Manuel González Prada in Peru or Rafael Barrett in Paraguay, this was not the case in Puerto Rico. Both González Prada and Barrett were raised in wealthy families but later in life became militant anarchists, publishing several incendiary books and articles.<sup>18</sup> Intellectuals that came from the Puerto Rican professional classes sought to articulate a national project in the late nineteenth century and excluded workingmen from such conversations. I do not want to imply that it was a firm binary, but like any social process, interactions were porous at times. There were intellectuals, albeit few, that sympathized with the socialist program of the FLT, including Rafael López Landrón and Matienzo Cintrón, both lawyers.<sup>19</sup> Unlike

Rama's assertion, it was precisely in the 1920s and 1930s—after the Socialist Party facilitated the entrance of workingmen into Puerto Rico's political spheres—that the imaginary line between intellectuals and workingmen began to dissipate, but not entirely. By then, books written by working-class authors circulated more widely and ceased to resemble those rustic pamphlets produced within the lettered *barriada* at the turn of the twentieth century.

Similarly, Rama contended that a new *letrado* emerged in early twentieth-century Latin America and joined the ranks of professional writers. This new *letrado*, “usually from a lower class,” lacked “contact with the most esteemed instruments of formal education” and “necessarily developed a less disciplined and systematic, but also more liberated, intellectual vision.”<sup>20</sup> While the process of intellectual formation described by Rama resembled what Puerto Rican workingmen went through, they did not end up joining the rank of professional writers. Most people did not have the privilege of pondering the muses of leisure and had to dedicate most of their time to work. Many of the *obreros ilustrados* that I follow through the lettered *barriada* abandoned the workshop as they became full-time organizers and politicians, not writers.

The creation of makeshift intellectual communities in the margins of a country's cultural elite was not a process exclusive to Puerto Rico. If we understand the development of the lettered *barriada* as the convergence between print media, alternative social spaces, and political participation (broadly defined), then workers, radicals, and intellectuals across the Americas had been building their intellectual communities since the last decades of the nineteenth century. For example, ever since the 1860s, workers in Buenos Aires and Havana published dozens of newspapers and books; opened social study centers, rational schools, and bookstores; and sought representation in political processes from the war for independence in Cuba to the consolidation of academic disciplines in Argentina. Nonetheless, these processes were tied to the particularities of the historical moment in which they developed. This book explores how Puerto Rico's lettered *barriada* was forged in a Caribbean country at a colonial crossroads, from Spanish colonialism (1493–1898) to US imperialism (1898 to present day).<sup>21</sup>

In early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, access to the printed word, either through writing or reading, was a marker of social power and authority among the laboring masses. That is why Rama's formulation about the relation between letters and power is crucial to my conceptualization of Puerto Rican workers' intellectual production. Furthermore, understand-



ing the lettered *barriada* not only as a physical space, but also as a social one allows me to look at the transnational dimensions of local processes. While there has recently been a shift toward a transnational scope in Latin American labor and working-class histories, it has been rooted in the migration of peoples through national borders. In the following pages, I engage in conversation with recent literature on the topic, yet I shift the emphasis toward understanding how the circulation of ideas transformed the subjectivities of those who did not necessarily move outside Puerto Rico.<sup>22</sup>

In recent years, the field of Puerto Rican labor history has also moved toward much needed nuanced analyses of gender and race, which have added different interpretations to the previous class-based studies.<sup>23</sup> As Ileana Rodríguez-Silva has argued, the silencing of race was crucial for the making of class and nation building in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Puerto Rico.<sup>24</sup> When nineteenth-century liberals began to discursively articulate the Puerto Rican nation, workingmen were racialized and feminized, and thus excluded from those imaginaries. Instead of challenging these discourses, the nascent labor movement and its cadre of intellectuals reproduced them in their writings, cultural production, and historical narratives. In the process, they enacted many layers of exclusion and silencing. Workingwomen also actively participated in the organized world of labor since its beginnings. When *obreros ilustrados* wrote their histories of the movement, however, workingwomen were largely absent. *Obreros ilustrados* erased not only workingwomen but femininity in itself, as well as blackness.

The exclusion of blackness was not necessarily tied to Black bodies, as some were allowed participation in different echelons of the labor organizations these workingmen created. Yet they were allowed only if they practiced a de-Africanized and “respectable” form of blackness. That is, they were allowed participation if they aspired to become “civilized” and “modern,” if they aimed to become whitened. The *obreros ilustrados* affiliated to the FLT and the Socialist Party sought to silence the histories of those who partook in practices racialized as Black and thus coded by the elites as backward, foreign, and uncivilized. These exclusions were not deviances but integral to the creation of labor’s ideational archive and still operate with great transhistorical power in present-day Puerto Rico.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, this book takes into consideration the significant role the geopolitics of knowledge play in how research questions are articulated. Although there are outstanding exceptions, oftentimes works produced in Puerto Rico are not in dialogue with those published in the United States, and vice versa. By paying attention to both historiographical strands, this



book engages in conversations happening not only within Puerto Rico and the United States but also in the Caribbean and Latin America. As literary scholar Arcadio Díaz-Quinones has argued, Puerto Rico is often overlooked by the institutional knowledge produced in North American universities. Since it is neither Latin America nor the United States, it ends up disappearing.<sup>26</sup>

Recognizing such dichotomy, this book situates Puerto Rican working-class knowledge production within the Caribbean and Latin America but also pays attention to the US empire's regional power at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the lettered *barriada* emerged in the early years of US colonialism in Puerto Rico, in the following pages I resist the urge to make colonialism or empire the book's central analytical axis. Several scholars have done an excellent job exploring how imperialism and empire operated in Puerto Rico and how they shaped policies toward education, sexuality, and labor.<sup>27</sup> By not centering empire or colonialism, I am not negating the archipelago's colonial condition, which is still sustained with great transhistorical violence as I write these words.<sup>28</sup>

This book explores the complexities and contradictions of *obreros ilustrados'* ideational worlds beyond their opinions about the island's political status. It seeks to move away from a binary logic of "resistance or integration" that obscures other political processes, desires, and sociabilities. In fact, there's a nationalist-infused historiographical strand that has accused early twentieth-century socialists of being traitors or expounding "empty rhetoric of principles."<sup>29</sup> That binary logic not only downplays the agency of historical subjects, but also limits our analysis of what can be considered radical politics. As philosopher Jacques Rancière argued, "A worker that had never learned how to write and yet tried to compose verses to suit the taste of his times was perhaps more of a danger to the prevailing order than a worker who performed revolutionary songs."<sup>30</sup>

While it is true that the Socialist Party's leadership supported the annexation of Puerto Rico to the United States, this book aspires to think what it meant for self-educated workingmen—most of them also ex-convicts—to enter intellectual and political spaces that had been denied to them in the past.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the binary logic of "resistance or integration" also ignores the fact that colonialism and coloniality should not be solely defined by political status. The violence of these systems of power permeated (and still permeate) social relations, regimes of knowing, and often-indiscernible modes of societal control.<sup>32</sup> This book, then, pays attention to how the *obreros ilustrados* negotiated, challenged, and reified

those systems of colonial power through their praxis, discourses, and shifting positionalities.

### **Weaving the Barriada into Puerto Rico's Historical Fiber**

The last three decades of the nineteenth century offered a whirlwind of changes for Puerto Ricans. Transformations in the Iberian Peninsula sent shockwaves through the Caribbean island, which had been a colonial possession of the Spanish empire for nearly four hundred years. After 1868, the crown was swayed by a series of revolutions that gave birth to a brief republican government in Spain and, later, a seemingly moderate reinstituted monarchy. In merely three years, from 1870 to 1873, Puerto Rico saw its first political parties, censorship eased away, and people could freely associate; slavery and the system of forced labor known as the *libreta de jornaleros* (laborer's notebook) were abolished; and new technologies that would alter agricultural production arrived at the scene.<sup>33</sup>

These transformations also refashioned Puerto Rico's societal fiber. Landowners (*hacendados*) and factory owners ranked highest in the country's social hierarchy. Meanwhile, toward the end of the nineteenth century, a new group composed of foreign-educated professionals (mostly lawyers and doctors) started to emerge. Both social groups had different political and ideological agendas. Their interactions were oftentimes porous, as they were connected through bonds of friendship and familial relations. Landowners wanted to implement a hegemonic project to control the island's polity and means of production while the new professional class aspired to set the foundations for a generalized national consciousness. Slavery produced such wealth that landowners could send their sons to study abroad in the United States and Europe's most important intellectual centers. Salvador Brau, one of the leading intellectuals among these professionals, noted that this young group was infused with modernizing and liberal ideas when they went to study abroad, only to arrive back to the island with the most fervent antislavery stances and political projects.<sup>34</sup> Other liberal thinkers, like Francisco del Valle Atilas, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, and José Julián Acosta, joined Brau in establishing the intellectual foundations of the imagined Puerto Rican nation and the archive of *puertorriqueñidad*.<sup>35</sup>

These professionals created a cross-class project that sought to include landowners, professionals, and workers. The "Great Puerto Rican Family" was to be used as a powerful discursive tool to unify the country. Attesting to its power, sociologist Carlos Alamo-Pastrana suggests that it still

operates nowadays “within the field of Puerto Rican studies, especially in literature, . . . as the major trope for framing the island’s racial heterogeneity. The great Puerto Rican family (*la gran familia puertorriqueña*) discursively constructs Puerto Rico as a patriarchal, inclusive, and mestizo nation.”<sup>36</sup> Although the Great Family aspired to civilize and modernize labor, workers were excluded from the conversations that created it.

After 1873, and following three years of conditioned liberty, freed formerly enslaved peoples entered the country’s precarious labor market. Some became salaried workers in both agricultural and urban settings, while others used their previous labor experiences to become artisans and skilled workmen.<sup>37</sup> Groups of urban workingmen started crafting their own cultural and societal projects, such as newspapers, mutual aid societies, and literary soirees. But, in a country that in 1899 had a total of 659,294 inhabitants over the age of ten and 328,850 who were unemployed and did not attend school, cultural projects were produced and enjoyed by few.<sup>38</sup> This gave way to the creation of several hierarchies within the laboring masses.

Ramón Romero Rosa, a printer and one of the most prolific writers among the early twentieth-century obreros ilustrados, wrote: “There was a time, very stupid for sure, in which what can be called a ‘worker supremacy’ (*supremacía obrera*) was established among the working class that attended [literary] soirees.” He continued, “Printers, barbers, silversmiths, and people from other trades thought that the word ‘workingman’ was humiliating to their craft because they truly saw themselves as artists, organizing their racket centers which they called ‘Artistic Casinos,’ . . . denying access to bricklayers’ assistants, non-skilled workingmen (*peones*), [and] dockworkers.”<sup>39</sup> As Romero Rosa pointed out, workingmen were not a homogenous group. To the contrary, they created social hierarchies based on trade, remuneration, and access to cultural capital.<sup>40</sup> Even when excluded from Puerto Rico’s cultural elite, those workingmen who had access to letters crafted an intellectual project that would seek to discursively unify workingmen from all trades. To do so, obreros ilustrados, most of whom were urban skilled workers, used print media, labor mobilizations, and cultural projects to create labor’s historical narratives, collective aspirations, and masculine whitened identities.

On July 25, 1898, Puerto Rico was militarily occupied by the United States as part of the Spanish American–Filipino–Cuban–Puerto Rican War. Barely three months after the occupation—and three days after the US flag was officially hoisted in Puerto Rico—a group of workingmen created the archipelago’s first labor federation, the Federación Regional de Trabajadores (FRT; Regional Federation of Workingmen) on October 23. Under its ban-

ner, workers held strikes throughout the island, published the newspaper *El porvenir social*, and organized the first public May Day celebration. The FRT leadership favored Puerto Rico's annexation to the United States. They believed that joining the northern nation would allow them to be protected by US laws. In their program, the FRT advocated for the eight-hour day, maternity leave, work safety laws, abolition of child labor, and the creation of public dining halls, as well as reforms in the educational system.<sup>41</sup>

Some FRT leaders also promoted the creation of a joint political strategy with the pro-statehood Republican Party.<sup>42</sup> A group steered by Ramón Romero Rosa, José Ferrer y Ferrer, and Santiago Iglesias Pantín, among others, fiercely opposed any political alliance. That dissident group created the FLT on June 18, 1899. In October of that year, members of the FLT also created the Partido Obrero Socialista (Socialist Labor Party). Santiago Iglesias Pantín was elected president and Ramón Romero Rosa, the party's secretary.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, military governor George W. Davis abolished universal male suffrage—established months before the US occupation—and did not allow the party's participation in the first local elections under US rule.<sup>44</sup> Two years later, in 1901, the FLT became affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.<sup>45</sup>

The people of Puerto Rico sought to make sense of the rapidly changing economic, social, and political landscapes. The US colonial government consolidated its control over Puerto Rico and paved the way for transnational corporations to dominate the island's two major exports: sugar and tobacco. The entrance of US capitalism also meant a sharp transformation in the modes of production, which materialized in different organizational structures within workshops. Cigarmakers, for example, went from being well-respected artisans who knew the “secrets of the trade” to replaceable units in a rapidly mechanizing system.<sup>46</sup>

The obreros ilustrados saw the moment as an opportunity, even amid their different approaches, ideologies, and political orientations. Using their newly created unions, they sought to leverage Puerto Rico's emerging polity. While some of them, such as Romero Rosa and Manuel F. Rojas, cautioned against colonialism, others, such as Santiago Iglesias Pantín and Jesús María Balsac, promoted the incorporation of Puerto Rico into the United States as a step toward becoming legitimate political actors. Seeking to strengthen their unions' political bonds, the obreros ilustrados created alliances with local politicians and US government officials.

The Foraker Act of 1900 allowed Puerto Ricans to vote for members of the local House of Delegates, while the US president appointed the governor

and his executive council. At times the governor and municipal authorities' relations were frail at best. For example, Manuel Egozcue Cintrón was the mayor of San Juan intermittently from 1900 to 1904. While in office, the mayor gave impunity to mobs that attacked anyone who opposed his Republican Party. Even when the FLT had cordial relations with the governor, and some labor leaders corresponded with high-ranking US officials, they were physically attacked and persecuted in the streets of San Juan by members of the mayor's political party.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, the FLT sought to create an institutional identity that would allow its members to participate in the country's political, social, and intellectual life. To do so, labor leaders experimented with multiple short-lived political alliances that, even when not always effective, allowed labor leaders to articulate their demands in the political sphere. Furthermore, by 1905 the FRT became almost nonexistent beyond the San Juan area, allowing the FLT to project itself as Puerto Rico's leading labor federation.

With the FLT's growth also came attempts to centralize the diverse political visions and strategies within labor organizations. For example, Ramón Romero Rosa and four other FLT members participated in the 1904 elections through the Union Party ballot. The Union Party, which later became the Socialist Party's rival, represented the old landowning class and intellectuals, and was organized around patriotic lines in defense of the imagined Puerto Rican nation. All the FLT members who ran for the House of Delegates were elected. Yet the Unionists did not allow Santiago Iglesias Pantín, then president of the FLT, to participate in the elections. Enraged by his exclusion, Iglesias Pantín demanded that all elected FLT members resign from their political positions. When they refused, the elected workingmen were expelled from the labor federation. Romero Rosa had been one of Santiago Iglesias Pantín's most loyal defenders. He wrote Iglesias Pantín's first biography in 1901, elaborating what historian Gervasio L. García called the "Early Riser Myth," in which Iglesias Pantín was portrayed as the "creator" of the labor movement. Nonetheless, Romero Rosa became a persona non grata for refusing to follow Iglesias Pantín's orders.<sup>48</sup>

Around the same time, in 1905, Puerto Rico was rocked by a series of strikes in the northern and southern agricultural fields as well as in San Juan's docks. Since the FLT's beginnings, the organization had aspired to unionize the agricultural labor force, which was the country's overwhelming working majority. For labor leaders, the southern agricultural strike of