

TO TELL IT IS TO WEEP

Papá Esteban's Puerto Rico

LUCE LÓPEZ-BARALT

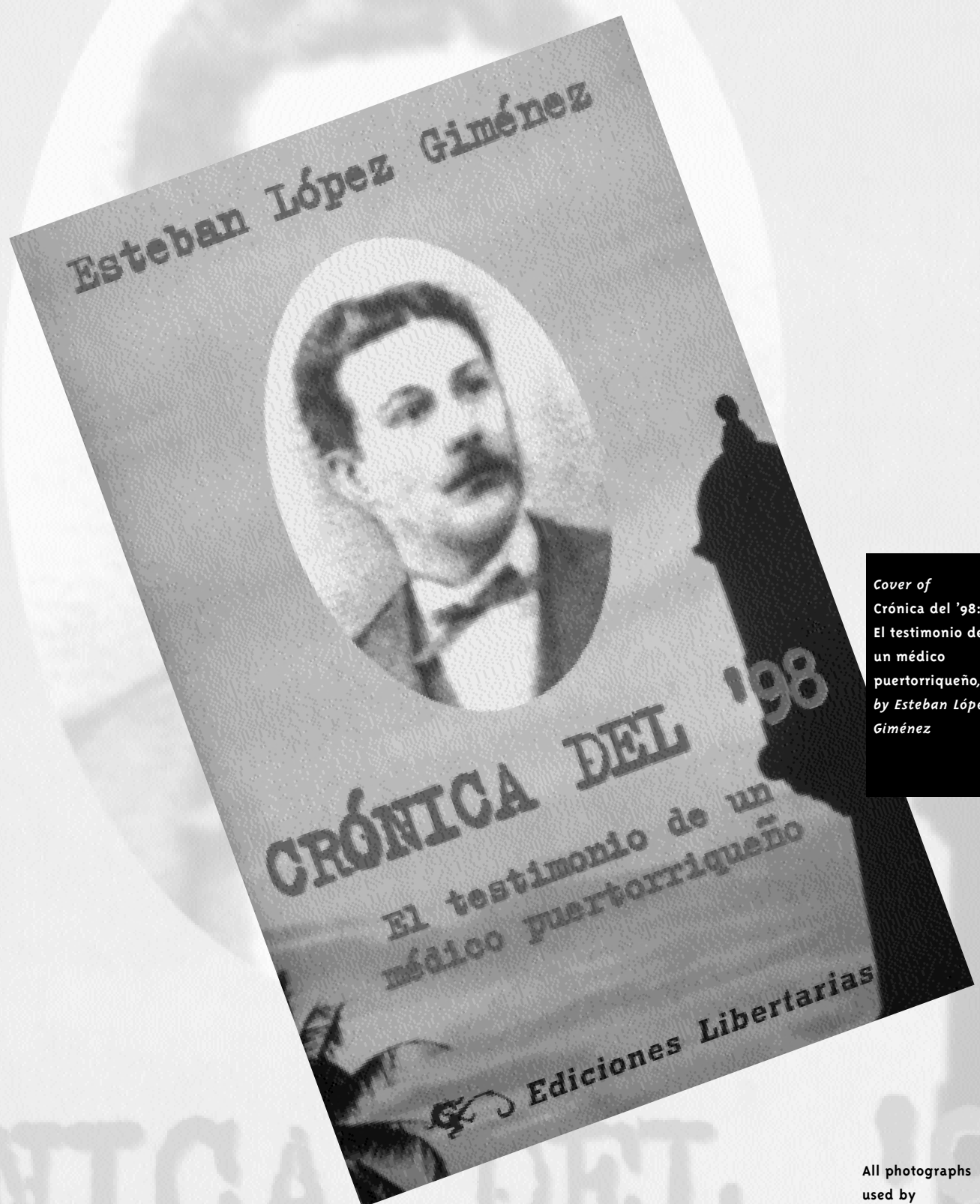
Translated by R. Kelly Washbourne

Esteban López Giménez (1845–1905), a staff doctor in Fajardo and Toa Baja in turn-of-the-century Puerto Rico who, four generations removed, is still called Papá Esteban in our family, bequeathed to his descendants the most coveted of all possible patrimonies, *la palabra*, the word, and with it the everlasting gift of his innermost thoughts. *Escribirlo es llorar*, to tell it is to weep—these words are from the Peruvian *cronista* Guamán Poma de Ayala. My great-grandfather, who suffered so many tribulations, echoed them.

In his newspaper pieces, and especially in a small manuscript volume of personal memoirs (which my sister Mercedes and I published in book form in 1998 to commemorate the centennial of the Spanish-American War and from which the following excerpt, drafted in January 1900 in Fajardo, is taken), Papá Esteban relates his anguished work as a physician in rural Puerto Rico, an area suffering great poverty at the time. Thus his memoirs constitute a chronicle of a diseased world oddly similar in tone to the brazen naturalism of Emile Zola—whose work caused a frenzy in the Puerto Rico of that day—and Manuel Zeno Gandía, the greatest Puerto Rican naturalist writer. Papá Esteban's pages bring forth hydrocephalic births; babies in the poor countryside who are accidentally cooked in cauldrons or devoured by swine; worm-infested legs. His diseased world strikes us today as an ominous symbol of his wounded country. And his *costumbrista* depictions offer a silent parallel with the island, adrift in the 1898 juncture, with an aborted historical destiny. In his own words:

They came to call on me . . . for a legal-medical case. It was a very remote [village], accessed by the most arduous roads. . . . A woman lived in a shanty that had a living area, a bedroom, and a stove all in the same space. . . . In the cooking pot she left sweet potatoes and taro on the boil.

The spectacle offered to my gaze was that of a little child of eight or ten months stuck head first in the boiler, cooked as if he had been a turkey or a rabbit. . . . The little siblings, seated in a corner, silent and frightened. The mother, indifferent.



Esteban López Giménez



CRÓNICA DEL 198

El testimonio de un
médico puertorriqueño

Ediciones Libertarias

Cover of
Crónica del '98:
El testimonio de
un médico
puertorriqueño,
by Esteban López
Giménez

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In another stunning depiction, owing, as the author points out, “to the forsaken state in which little children are left,” Papá Esteban tells of a mother who went to the countryside to collect kindling, leaving her baby on a hammock, tied to a rope. Their pig, hungry and lactating,

got loose, entered the shack in search of food, and set upon the poor little infant. The scene was horrific: blood and guts on the floor; the woeful little corpse with its face mutilated. Its body was disemboweled and its innards strewn all over the ground. The mayor who went with me was so deeply affected that he fell sick for several days. The chill one feels in his heart from incidents like this!

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In his medical chronicles Papá Esteban is pained to have to bring into the world a stillborn hydrocephalic, despite his professional satisfaction at having saved the life of the indigent mother. The hydrocephalic, born in the very year of 1898—again the subliminal parallel with

gives the surgeon reason to suspect that the infant is hydrocephalic. He has to resort to removing the neck—in other words, to decapitating the fetus—and to puncturing its cranium for the brain fluid to run out. In this way he can finish the extraction and save the mother.

Indeed, so diseased is his world, so in crisis, that Papá Esteban is the first to consider himself one of the aggrieved: he confesses that after the change in sovereignty, “my afflictions have worsened, my nervous system lies in ruins, and never again shall I be the man I once was.” But aside from his numerous medical testimonies—this testimonial genre has always been well represented in the Spanish Americas, which are still in the process of conceiving of themselves—what is most urgent to my ancestor is to preserve for posterity the events he experienced from the moment that thirteen U.S. Marines invaded his coastal village of Fajardo on 5 August 1898. He seeks to sort out the whirl of conflicting emotions in which the “change of nationality” plunged him, and it should be noted that his reflexive chronicle constitutes an exception in the context of 1898 Puerto Rico. He

declares himself in open emotional conflict in August of that year, while the

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his homeland in crisis—brings to mind symbolic hydrocephalics in Hispanic literature, such as the one in *Torquemada en la hoguera* [Torquemada on the bonfire], by Benito Pérez Galdós (1885), and the one in *La guaracha del macho Camacho* [Macho Camacho’s beat], by Luis Rafael Sánchez (1980). We are made to witness a symbolic childhood that, instead of flourishing into hope, is off to a monstrous start and comes to a violent end. The chronicler explains in his medical report that the woman in labor is dying and that the fetus, which emits the smell characteristic of a decomposing corpse, has died twelve hours earlier. With the modest assistance of two brave, charitable women, he works the body free, but the head will not budge, which

early supporters of the U.S. invasion start to show signs of historical disillusionment as their hopes for freedom and economic progress do not materialize. The new regime is not civil but military.

¶

The celebrated *Crónica de la guerra hispano-americana en Puerto Rico* [Chronicle of the Spanish-American War in Puerto Rico], by Angel Rivero (1922), extended the sad saga of war narrated by my ancestor. Let me briefly recall the facts. On 5 August 1898 several American ships were anchored in the port of Fajardo; during the previous night they had managed to take over the lighthouse. Dr. Santiago Veve

Calzada traveled by boat with an interpreter from Tortola named John as far as the monitor *Amphitrite*, anchored in the bay, and asked the American authorities to invade the village, reasoning that at that moment it was unprotected by Spanish troops. The telegrapher Joaquín López Cruz (son of Papá Esteban and my grandfather), who was on guard duty ashore, wired the lighthouse for the customary report.

Because the occupants replied in English, he thought at first that his fellows were playing a joke on him. But as he continued to receive their messages, he became convinced that it was an invasion. He immediately contacted the headquarters of the Spanish government and alerted it of the facts. Field Marshal Macías gave him orders to withdraw and to destroy the telegraph. López Cruz destroyed it but did not obey the orders to withdraw; he remained in Fajardo on the pretext of being ill.

Meanwhile, Veve and a small contingent of invaders, surrounded by a throng of children and onlookers, made their way toward the center of Fajardo. There they met with Enrique Bird, who was on horseback, and Captain Barclay, who named him his interpreter, since Bird knew English. On reaching the Casa Alcaldía, they lowered the Spanish flag and replaced it with the American one. Barclay, through Bird, greeted the inhabitants of Fajardo and named Veve military governor of the eastern region of Puerto Rico, in charge of keeping order and defending the American flag there. But the Spanish troops had already been tipped off by López Cruz's telegram, and the Patria battalion, under the command of Colonel Pedro del Pino, burst into Fajardo to reestablish Spanish authority. Veve and the meager detachment of marines fled to the *Amphitrite* in shameful flight, which subsequently made him the butt of many comic poems, some possibly from the pen of my great-grandfather or one of his children. General Nelson A. Miles, who was invading from the south of the island, refused to send the aid requested by these insubordinates, who had done nothing

but compromise their own strategies, and left them to their own devices. Likewise disbanded on the spot was a "citizens' brigade" armed with machetes, shovels, and thirteen guns that the marines had left behind, modern weapons that almost no one knew how to use. Another of my ancestors, Hilario López Cruz, was among this makeshift militia.

The ensuing skirmish was not particularly heroic, either. The Spanish forces attacked the lighthouse and withstood the cannon fire and grenades launched at them from there and from the ships anchored offshore. The Spaniards, under orders to give the lighthouse "no more than a shove," lowered the Stars and Stripes at the Casa Alcaldía, and Fajardo was briefly restored to Spain, until it reverted to U.S. control when the armistice was signed.

These events are easy to verify in documented books. The novelty is Papá Esteban's emotional reaction: he is the chronicler who bears witness to the events and who seeks, as Mario Benedetti would say, "to put the accent on the man."



*Isabel López Cruz
de Bird, daughter of
López Giménez*

I was supremely vexed, since I had never been a sympathizer, and I was wholeheartedly sorry to change nationality. Because I loved Spain, I was not a separatist, and although I hated the governments of Spain here, I loved my mother country; my Latin American race; my Roman Catholic religion; my rich language, in which I have thought and

have commended myself to God, asking him for the salvation of my soul and of my poor native land.

Papá Esteban portrays, with moving brushstrokes, the inner contradictions at the marrow of Puerto Ricanness and stares fixedly into the abyss of the loss of being. (He does so, naturally, from nineteenth-century historical coordinates, not taking into account, as we do today, the black and indigenous imprint on our national profile.)

This inner conflict emerges also from the totality of the historical framework in which Papá Esteban narrates. The chronicler, who has access to both sides as staff doctor and as president of the Red Cross of Fajardo, relates a collective saga of confusion, anguish, helplessness, shame, dissimulation, humiliation, fear—and betrayal. Heroism is conspicuously absent from this brief, inglorious war, which, when all was said and done, left not a single casualty in Fajardo.

But many tears were shed. The first were my ancestor's: "From the balcony of my house I bore witness to the entrance of the thirteen . . . marines, and an indiscreet tear burned my cheeks (which were red with shame) on seeing that so few people were taking possession of Fajardo." Papá Esteban reluctantly offered his medical services to the invader, who reclaimed him as an employee of the new authorities:

*Opuscul de dolos.
Página triste.
Cuando el cambio de
nacionalidad, sinaton
de las 3 invadieron la
poblacion de Fajardo
fueron soldados de mar
na americana con el
Dr. Santiago Vercis, q' les dijo
bajaran al pueblo. g' arria
trabaja bandera Española
q' ondeaba en la Casa Por
historia, y unas bolson
de las franjas y estrellas
Se dijo q' el oficial de
marina, invitado a ser
queria, porque no era
señal orden q' tenia, p'*

Page of López
Giménez's diary

When I arrived [at the mayor's office], I went to Dr. Veve. . . . "Here I am. Introduce me to the commodore."

"The only commodore here is me . . ." he told me most emphatically.

"My good sir," I said to him, and stood to one side, astonished at the confusion, the uproar, the comings and goings, shouts, and beer drinking.

New humiliations awaited him, this time from the Spanish side. When Colonel Pino's troops burst into Fajardo, Papá Esteban's sense of duty, keener now than ever in this time of war, forced him once again to render his professional services. The chronicler tells of his anguish on reaching the headquarters of the peninsular troops: "[It gave me pause] that I might be suspect to the Spaniards, because my oldest son [Hilario] was a comrade-in-arms with Dr. Veve against Spain; my son-in-law Don Enrique Bird, likewise; and my son Joaquín, the government telegrapher, could not follow the troops in their withdrawal, as per the orders from above."

I was in agony. I recalled episodes I had read in which, at the beginning of the war with Cuba, they had caught the fathers of insurgent rough-necks and mercilessly slashed them for not surrendering their sons. I thought, "How can I keep these people from venting their fury on me, the father of insurgents, and demanding that I write my son and tell him to come so I can turn him in?" At other times I would say to myself, "If they're going to kill me, who can save me; who can even explain the situation? They'll say I was insubordinate, or some such thing, and leave my family without the least recourse!"

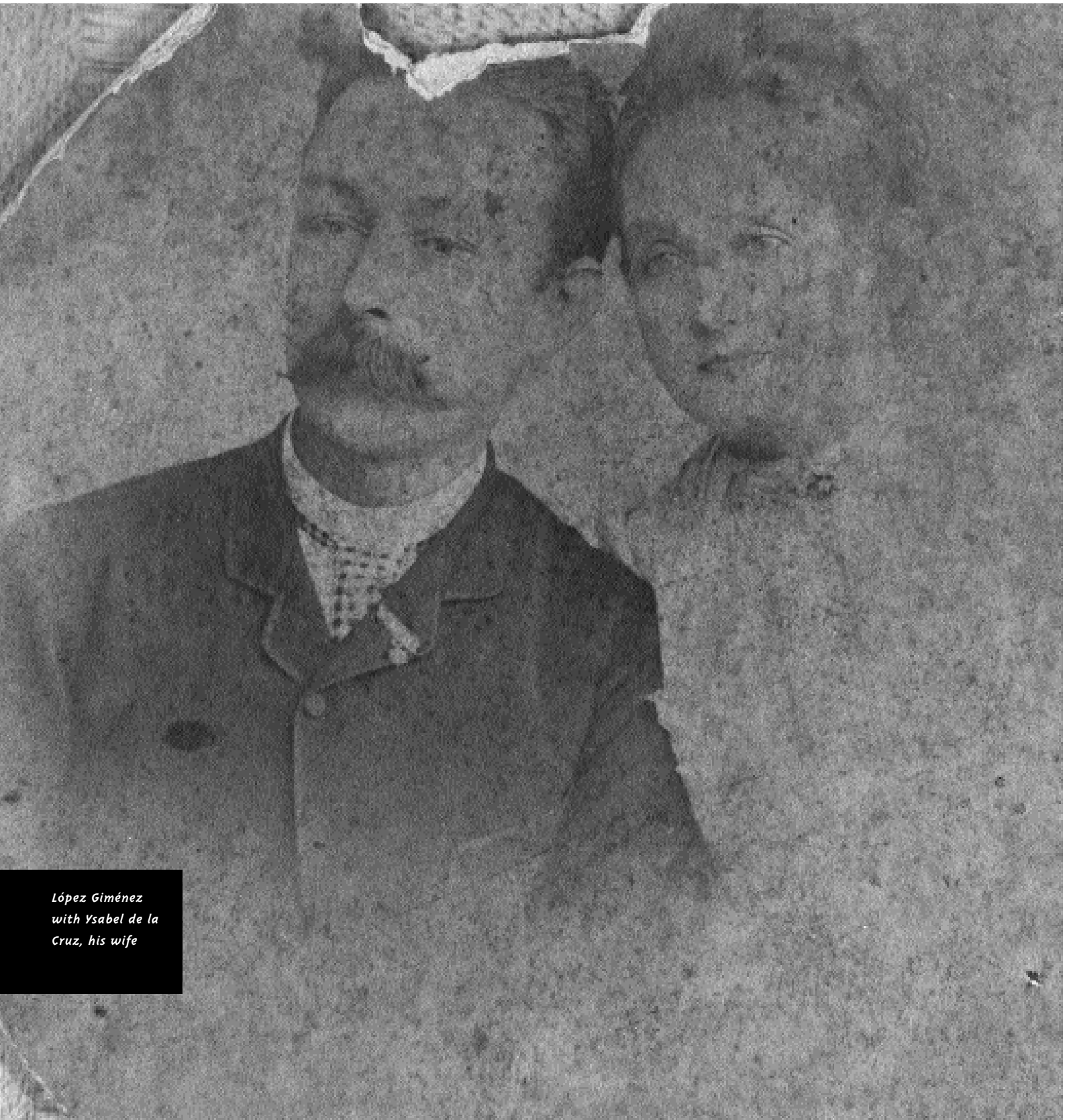
This was my mental state on finding myself alone amid eight hundred or a thousand soldiers, some furious because of the marches they had been forced to endure and others because of Dr. Veve and the gringos' lowering of the flag.

No doubt they *were* furious, and a black-bearded captain harshly reprimanded our author: "López, do you have an insurgent son?"—he was referring to Hilario—and later: "You have a son who's a telegrapher, who refused to follow the troops as ordered. You know, López, all the evidence points against you." My telegrapher grandfather was arrested and hauled off by two civil guards in the presence of Colonel Pino, who spared his life but ordered him to restore telegraphic service.

Colonel Pino and some Spanish officers maintained their respect for Papá Esteban for having discharged his duties under such dangerous circumstances; he then prepared the hospital for the eventuality of war. It was not long in coming. U.S. boats began to fire on the village of

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Fajardo and trained their guns on the Red Cross flag, no less, which our doctor ordered lowered posthaste from his makeshift hospital. The rumor began to circulate that a grenade casing had killed his son Hilario. As a father, Papá Esteban instinctively foresaw another danger, the one his daughter Isabel was in: she was expecting her third child and, as the wife of Henry Bird, Captain Barclay's interpreter, was hiding in the lighthouse with her other young children. "Although I was unaware that my daughter and grandchildren were there, on the night the Spanish troops were set to attack [the lighthouse] some secret intuition shook me, and I suffered horribly at every cannon blast—and there were more than two hundred of them, which could be heard clearly in San José. What a night!"



*López Giménez
with Ysabel de la
Cruz, his wife*

The Spanish victory—it was not yet apparent how swift it would be—brought in its wake another shameful event that the chronicler describes with embarrassment for his own countrymen: “The next afternoon the Spanish troops arrived, headed for the town hall, lowered the American flag, . . . and ran up the Spanish one to thunderous cheers that were returned by the crowd, in which stood every last person who hours before had cheered those from the mainland. How wretched these people were!”

Indignant at the behavior of his compatriots, who slipped in confusion from one faction to another, and tormented by the two imperialist powers fighting over the spoils of war on his “poor native land,” Papá Esteban was reduced to tears and to prayer. In his beloved Spanish language, whose future he considered precarious, he commended himself to God, asking him for the salvation of his soul. A curious prayer, to be sure—no one prays that way unless he intuits that the hour of his death is at hand—but in fact something fundamental would die in his soul, in his wounded Puerto Ricanness, that August afternoon. Thus the chronicler ended his prayer by asking God to save his island—his “poor native land”—which was historically adrift in that tragic year of 1898 and which he saw under the threat of death, as unprotected as the wretched little children whom he had to attend to in vain, after they were dead.

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I confess that I sense a halo of piety glowing around my reminiscences. The Fajardeños’ confused actions are the tip of the iceberg of unresolved conflict in our national personality. Papá Esteban’s chronicle is neither aggrandizing nor heroic; it is simply true. We Puerto Ricans are still nostalgic about heroism and about an honorable foundational myth on which our backward-looking historical gaze rests. The proof of it is that we have found it necessary to invent

this origin myth, as the story “Seva,” by Luis López Nieves (1984), demonstrates. His fictionalization of the village of Seva, which heroically resists the American attack and is reduced to ashes, has been read by many in Puerto Rico as an authentic historical chronicle. My own foundational myth as a Puerto Rican woman is not this imaginary Seva but my chronicle-writing great-grandfather’s conflict. Albeit a bitter foundational myth, it is *ours*, and authentically Puerto Rican. A hundred years removed from

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the events, we are still tormented by not knowing for sure if Puerto Ricans a century from now will still be able to read Papá Esteban’s anguished memoirs in the original Spanish. National identity is fading, and the homeland is vanishing into thin air. As a student of distant historical lives, I realize that national identities are unstable and that none remains uniformly whole. Nevertheless, unjust assimilations leave unhealing wounds open to the possibility of an equally unforeseen vindication.

Papá Esteban foresaw all these conflicts in 1898. From the aggregate of his autobiography emerges fin de siècle Fajardo—the fractured fin de siècle Puerto Rico—preserved in time as in some marvelous flask of alcohol. *La palabra escrita*, the written word, for whose indelible legacy I am so thankful, has enabled me to visit this space, worn away by time but immensely instructive, time and again. cl