

CHAPTER 5

Women

INTRODUCTION

The Black newspapers and magazines were produced almost exclusively by male writers and editors. Female contributors to the publications were rare, and the perspectives, and even the language, of the papers' articles and features were relentlessly and unselfconsciously masculine.

Nevertheless, female readers and supporters were absolutely crucial to the Black press's survival, both as subscribers and by organizing benefits to raise money for the papers (5.3). As a result, the papers made occasional direct appeals to female readers (5.9) and included special features – social columns, poems and short stories, advice columns – intended to speak to them. Some of those features were written by women (1.5, 2.14, 4.13, 4.14, 5.3, 5.5, 5.6, 5.8, 5.13, 5.16, 8.5); others claimed to be written by women but contained hints of male authorship (5.7).

While the papers often invoked an ideal of Black women leading fulfilled lives in the home, caring for their husbands and children, they also acknowledged that for most Afrodescendants, that ideal was simply unattainable. Poverty and the need to support their families forced Black women into the labor market, in most cases as domestic workers. An 1881 piece in *La Broma* saluted Buenos Aires' Black laundresses as women who simultaneously brought cleanliness and sanitation to the city's upper- and middle-class households while resisting the temptation and dishonor of sex work (5.1). The Uruguayan newspaper *La Verdad* called on Black families to educate their daughters to enter the world of work (5.7; see also 8.10); *Nuestra Raza* profiled **Margarita Ubarne de Espinosa**, who had faced down racial barriers to pursue a successful career as an educator (5.12). In the 1940s, Uruguayan and Brazilian publications reported on

the efforts of Black (and White) domestic workers to organize and achieve the workplace protections enjoyed by industrial and commercial workers (5.14, 5.16).

The papers offer occasional evidence of Black women's political participation, and the limits of that participation. In Cuba, female readers wrote to the pro-independence newspaper *La Doctrina de Martí*, and to the **Partido Independiente de Color's** newspaper *Previsión*, to express their support of the papers' causes (5.3, 5.5). After female suffrage was enacted in Cuba in 1934, Calixta Hernández de Cervantes called for the inclusion of Black women in party lists for election to public office (5.13).

As we saw in Chapter 3, motherhood was a fraught and frequent topic in the Black press. The papers worried about high rates of illegitimacy and single motherhood in their communities, and enjoined mothers to prepare their children to lead honorable and productive lives (3.1, 3.4, 3.7, 3.9, 3.10). In 1889 the Cuban newspaper *La Fraternidad* published a harrowing account of a traumatic labor and delivery that the mother barely survived, and that the child did not (5.2). In 1928 the Brazilian paper *Progreso* joined the public campaign underway at that time to erect a statue in honor of the **Black Mother**, the symbolic figure representing the many enslaved and free Black women who were forced to care for their enslavers' or employers' children, to the detriment of their own (5.11).

Finally, female beauty was a regular topic in the Black papers, which offered advice on how to achieve it without violating norms of proper behavior (3.2, 5.6, 5.7), and public contests to determine who best embodied it (5.10, 5.15).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Several of these articles offer eloquent and heartfelt portrayals of Black women in specific situations: as poorly paid laundresses (5.1), in childbirth (5.2), and caring for other women's children (5.11). In each case, how might those portrayals have been different had they been written by women who had actually experienced those situations?
- Beauty contests limited to Black women were a regular feature of the Black press (5.10, 5.15). In what ways, if any, might such contests have benefited or harmed contestants? What about Black women in general? In what ways might those contests have benefited or harmed the editors of the papers? What about Black men in general?

- Domestic work is perhaps the most difficult, and also the most poorly paid, vocational category in modern economies. Yet in almost every country in the Americas, it was the occupation that Black women in the 1800s and 1900s were most likely to enter. Why do you think that was the case? And what do the articles in this chapter (5.1, 5.11, 5.14, 5.16) reveal about the multiple challenges of domestic work?
- To judge from these articles, what were the roles of Black women in local and national politics? How did those roles change over time? What were the institutional vehicles through which women participated in politics? What were the goals of that participation?

5.1 “THE LAUNDRESS,” LA BROMA (BUENOS AIRES,
ARGENTINA: OCT. 27, 1881)

Through the late nineteenth century, laundresses washing clothing on the wide, shallow banks of the Río de la Plata were a common sight in Buenos Aires. Many of these were Black women, for whom laundering, along with ironing, sewing, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic services, constituted a main source of employment. Indeed, the Black laundress became an iconic figure in representations of nineteenth-century Buenos Aires, a romanticized emblem, for many White writers and artists, of a bygone time.

Yet the work of washerwomen was thankless, harsh, and dangerously unhealthy, as this article made clear. Moreover, any job that brought women out of their homes and onto the streets cast doubt on their honor. This risk was especially acute for Black women, who in Argentina as elsewhere were often depicted as morally loose and sexually available. In this article, the pseudonymous Prometeo turned this logic on its head to issue an impassioned defense of Black laundresses. A beautiful young woman who could have traded her charms for material comforts, but persisted in the grueling job of laundress, irrefutably proved her virtue – something that, he implied, could not be said of many high-society ladies.

It strains belief that no writer, not even in a moment of levity, should yet have dedicated a few short lines to this subject, which I – a mere literary amateur – nonetheless intend to develop, as my limited faculties permit and from a social perspective.

What is a laundress?

“She is a poor woman, a wretch, who must be looked upon with scorn because of the dishonorable trade she plies and because it is generally women of ill repute who do that work.”

Such is the answer that, to my mind, a question of this sort would provoke, when directed to one of those frivolous and pretentious people who cannot perceive decency unless it is covered in silk and stones, obtained by means only God knows.

The laundress is, to me, a heroic woman, worthy of all praise.

Her calloused hands attest to the endless labor to which she is dedicated.

In summer, harassed by a feverish sun, her face flushed, her brow dripping sweat drop by drop, treading with her torn soles upon fiery sands, she does not yield to fatigue and works with fervor and perseverance to earn the bread with which she will alleviate her children's hunger!

One must admire her on one of those cold winter mornings! While the ladies of the comfortable classes, following a long evening of pleasure, rest upon their soft and springy beds, she abandons hers, counting herself fortunate to find enough strength to brave the hardships of the day.

Behold her! With what cheerfulness she takes her little pail and places her washtub upon her head, without fear of sullyng her hair with the water that pours from the fabrics entrusted to her for cleaning.

Observe her! She fears not the cold, she gracefully raises [the hem of] her dress to her waist and kneels comfortably to begin her task.

The waters are thick with frost, her feet and hands are stiff with cold, her lips and cheeks covered in crimson spots from the gusts of air that graze them.

Contemplate her on one of those hot days, as she carries upon her head a bundle of clothes that makes her flexible figure bend beneath its weight, and reflect for a moment – you, daughters of fortune, who pass the days of your existence without knowledge of the hazards of fate – reflect, for a moment, I say, [upon] the life of this martyr, who, from the moment dawn appears in the East to the time the sun hides at dusk, courageously withstands a hard and unyielding job that would exhaust the health of the most robust man; and tell me whether that woman deserves admiration or contempt!

But this is not all. There comes a moment in life, of the sort that leaves an everlasting memory – a moment of mourning, of grief, of terror, when even the bereaved dare not touch the articles of clothing that had belonged to a family member who has ceased to exist because of a contagious illness.

Everyone refuses to take them for fear of contagion – the laundress is the only one who, with her own hands, washes those clothes to strip away the miasmas they contain – without noticing, poor soul! that she exposes

herself to contracting the same illness that led the last owner of those garments to his grave!

And yet, what reward does that poor woman receive in exchange for so much suffering, so much abnegation?

One day she falls ill upon her hard bed, without enough resources to meet the demands of her needs.

Not one of those people who had received her services, and who have particular reason to treat her with consideration – because families have secrets that the laundress must certainly know, which would cause more than one person to blush should she fail to keep them – none of those people, I say, *has a spare moment* to go console her as she lies prostrate on her sick bed. And in the end, the [pauper's] hospital is the only institution to which, due to her lack of resources, she can turn for treatment and from there, one is unlikely ever to leave, unless it be to the grave!

Many young women of graceful features, flexible figure, and charming gaze have I seen dedicated to these arduous tasks, and I have become convinced of their honor.

For who can tell me that a laundress, being young and beautiful, is safe from the temptations that a thousand libertines, of those who swarm around in cities that, like Buenos Aires, possess a thousand beauties – who can assure me, I say, that more than one of these [men] has not made them propositions that would dazzle a poor young woman, in exchange for her honor?

That love which the laundress shows toward her work gives clear and evident proof of the virtue of her heart.

For what woman, having lost all modesty and shame, would resign herself to the sad and hazardous life of the laundress, instead of [enjoying] the lively and indulgent life that is offered to her?

No! We must admire those women because, even when many of them have committed some misstep, they give unequivocal proof that they have not entirely lost their virtue when they know how to earn their bread with the sweat of their brow!

Prometeo

5.2 “FROM CIENFUEGOS,” LA FRATERNIDAD (HAVANA, CUBA:
JAN. 31, 1889)

This account of a difficult labor and delivery was one of very few articles in the Cuban Black press that described intimate or private events within individual Black households. The woman giving birth, Úrsula Coimbra

de Valverde (see Figure 0.3), was a musician and piano teacher, and one of the most important Black women writers in Cuba from the 1890s through the 1910s. Childbirth was not only an extremely harrowing and dangerous experience for many women in Black communities, it was also a social event that could include older female relatives and extended family and friends. The midwives who managed these events were frequently Afrodescendant women and community leaders; in this case, after three days of labor the midwife, Amelia Gostly, called in physicians who were able to save the mother but not the child.

January 26, 1889

Señor Director of *La Fraternidad*, Havana

My good sir and esteemed friend: with deep sadness I recount the following episode: *Spare her, blessed God! Lord, please do not make her suffer!*

I heard these phrases, these exclamations, among other lamentations, last Monday, at the home of my special and esteemed friend, Coimbra.¹ Compelled by the true friendship which all of his family professes toward me, I rushed over, wishing to know the causes for the sad sighs and painful laments that had reached my ears. I arrived and found my cherished friends Valverde² and the Coimbras (father and son), full of confusion, with anguished faces, and hearts full of sorrow, along with a great many people who, like myself, are honored by their friendship. I inquired as to what made them so sad, and they told me the story that follows.

Oh, friend Director [of *La Fraternidad*], it still saddens me to retell it!! Since the previous Friday [January] 18, my kindhearted and loyal friend Ursulita had felt ill. Supposing (correctly) that her discomfort was the result of her impending motherhood, her solicitous husband sent for the midwife, Madame Amelia Gostly, who, fulfilling the responsibilities demanded by her profession, installed herself, together with Mrs. Pérez de Coimbra,³ at the head of Ursulita's bed. But, oh evil fate! ... they waited through *Friday, Saturday, and Sunday* without the desired result. And sadder still, Valverde saw his loving wife, the Coimbras saw their affectionate daughter, and the elder Coimbra saw his much beloved

¹ Musician and composer Marino Coimbra.

² Nicolás Valverde, Úrsula Coimbra's husband, was a tailor by trade. He edited several newspapers in Cienfuegos and, later, in Veracruz, Mexico.

³ Úrsula's mother.

granddaughter suffering cruel agony and, according to the predictions of Señora Gostly, nearing death's door.

On Monday at midday, Mr. Coimbra (grandfather) begged the midwife to speak with frankness, and the lady asked him to send for Doctors Frías and Peña. After a dangerous and difficult two-hour operation, which the patient endured with heroic bravery, they were able to remove the stillborn fetus. Señores Frías and Peña have performed an operation that once again does them honor, and proves how well-deserved are the high reputations that they enjoy in this city. They combine talent, ability, and skill with their excellent demeanor toward their patients, without a doubt the product of their brilliant education. Persons as learned as these two doctors deserve widespread applause and esteem. Ursulita is saved! And I, her most loyal and faithful friend, together with her family, through these columns, offer a prayer of thanks for Doctors Frías and Peña and I cry out:

Thank you, Almighty God! Thank you for this kindness!

5.3 "FROM OUR HEROINES IN EXILE," LA DOCTRINA DE MARTÍ (NEW YORK: MAY 6, 1898)

La Doctrina de Martí was established by a group of Black Cuban and Puerto Rican writers and activists in New York, along with a few White allies, during the final war of independence against Spain (1895–98).⁴ In this letter to the editor, a group of women living in Key West, Florida, explained why they had chosen to create a committee to collect funds to help support the newspaper. They summarized the editorial stance of the newspaper: "decorous" unity in the independence movement was only possible if workers and Afrodescendant people received equal and respectful treatment; and independence should be accompanied by profound social transformation. Most writers in this newspaper emphasized the role of men of color in this struggle, as soldiers, workers, and political organizers, but this letter offered a different view: "we women are struggling for our rights and guarantees." The writers expressed the conviction, unusual in the context of the Black press, that despotism should be eliminated from the family as part of a "radical" project for the "abolition of all privileges."

Committee to Aid
"La Doctrina de Martí"

⁴ Mirabal, *Suspect Freedoms*, pp. 97–138.

Key West, Fla.
 Key West, March 16, 1898
 Señor **Rafael Serra**,
 Director of *La Doctrina de Martí*, New York
 Distinguished Compatriot,

We are hopeful for the triumph of our longed-for national independence and convinced of the necessity of the existence of *La Doctrina de Martí*, because the battle to create, through nobility of spirit and character, happiness for all in a country bequeathed to us by sickly despotism will be no small matter. Convinced of this urgent need, we, your sisters and admirers, have gathered together to contribute, modestly but constantly, to the maintenance of your newspaper, which we love for its tendency toward decorous unity among the elements [of the nation] that have been segregated by the inhumanity of despotism, and for your tenacity in persuading those who, despite their talent and education, do not know the virtue of true sacrifice for the creation of a successful and happy fatherland. And none of this will be possible as long as [people] refuse to understand that the abolition of all privileges must be radical.

For we [women] understand that if women are struggling for our rights and [constitutional] guarantees, we ought not, once we attain them, become vain, and exercise despotism over our children because they are weaker, instead of consecrating ourselves to educating them for freedom. For this reason, though independence is the most certain means towards our glorious aim, we believe and we hope that the struggle to redeem Cuba cannot end with the mere fact of independence.

You will forgive us that, in order to send you five little pesos for *La Doctrina*, we should have chatted so long, but we must have some opportunity [to do so], your countrywomen, who will not abandon you in your noble labors.

Yours in P[peace] and F[reedom],
 Inocencia Araujo, President, Antonia Fernández, Treasurer, Julia Guerra, Secretary

5.4–5.5 TWO ARTICLES ABOUT WOMEN IN PREVISIÓN
 (HAVANA, CUBA: MAR. 1910)

The newspaper Previsión is mostly remembered as part of a dramatic project to create an independent political organization for Black men, the Partido Independiente de Color. Two articles provide evidence of the

role that the newspaper's editors and writers imagined for Black women. "At a Trot" (5.4) was the regular political column in the newspaper. In this installment, editor Evaristo Estenoz deployed the recurring fictional character José Rosario, a Black Cuban everyman, to complain of the number of government jobs held by women. Estenoz, whose most consistent political goal was the equitable distribution of government jobs to Black men, expressed a view of female domesticity and vulnerability that did not reflect the actual lives of most Black women, who had no option but to work for wages.

"To the Men of Color" (5.5), a letter from a female reader, was a rare instance of a Black woman expressing herself within the pages of *Previsión*. Carmen Piedra adopted the same masculinist logic expressed by male writers in the newspaper: anti-racism was the duty of men, like any defense of family or community honor. But Piedra turned this idea on its head, shaming men of color in order to encourage them to take action. "If I possessed the so-beautiful title of man," she wrote, "I assure you that I would be one of the most fervent in the struggle to conquer the rights of our race."

5.4 "At a Trot," *Previsión* (Havana, Cuba: Mar. 15, 1910)

The politicians, the legislators, the moralists, the writers, and all those who one way or another take up the question of the common good, channeling humanity's steps toward clear and open paths, have a duty to be very frank and sincere in the exposition of their ideas.

We, who fight for the political and moral exaltation of our race, without concern for the difficulties we encounter, feel each day stronger in the pursuit of our work.

We ask for morality, much morality, in order to cleanse our political environment.

There is an occurrence that until today has gone unnoticed by our legislators and writers, and it is the large number of ladies and young ladies who earn their livings in government offices.

We believe that [the] woman should be exalted to the greatest possible degree of comfort, granting her the means to fulfill in every way her elevated mission as daughter, wife, and mother simultaneously; and preparing her so that she may influence, with her wise suggestions, the best path of national development, from which she, like us, derives her happiness and sorrows.

But between this belief and having an extremely large number of women in our public offices, torn from their homes and put before the gaze of the anonymous [crowd], lies an unfathomable abyss.

We see with sadness that because of the unfortunate choice to take this route, thanks to a spirit of imitation that comes to us from North America, morality is losing out among us. The family is collapsing, slowly but surely, and no one dares to alert the public authorities that along this path lies total dissolution.

We treat this topic superficially today, not wanting to show the public the evil-smelling sores that characterize the state of things, because we have full confidence that those who are responsible for these *pranks* will try, with all the means at their disposal, to prevent the enthronement of an era of true immorality, comparable only to the one about which the Bible speaks.

Cuba must be neither a Babylon nor a New York, but rather a Switzerland, a Holland, or at the very least a Belgium, a small nation that, because of its morality, its honesty, and the work ethic of its sons, would be worthy of the respect of the strong and powerful nations.

José Rosario is morality itself, he practices it and he proclaims it to the four winds, certain that his voice will reach every corner and is already taken into account when it comes to matters of great importance for the well-being of Cuba.

Many times we have seen that he who has the desire to act does more than he who has the ability to act. It is proven; we are the ones who have to work for morality. That is why we did not find it strange when, walking along a narrow path in a very dense forest, we stumbled upon José Rosario, half-melancholy and half-smiling, saying to his bay pony, "My little Pastorcita, you who mean so much to me, why do you choose to follow the bad advice of those who tell you it is necessary to start off at a gallop? Don't you understand that everything is sinking around you, and that this way, softly at a trot, with the two-by-two of your creole gait, we will arrive safe and sound at the destination to which we aspire?"

5.5 Carmen Piedra, "To the Men of Color," *Previsión* (Havana, Cuba: Mar. 5, 1910)

Men of Color, you who have the high honor of being Black; who, when the Fatherland has needed you, have known how to answer the call of duty with pleasure, wherever it may take you, willing to abandon your homes and spill your blood; why do you tarry on the beautiful path that will lead

our race to greatness and free it from the moral slavery in which it lives submerged?

Why, if God in heaven has given you the beautiful title of men, do you not all contribute to the redemption of our race, making the White man see that you have more than enough civic responsibility and worth to defend what is truly yours[?]

If I possessed the so-beautiful title of man, I assure you that I would be one of the most fervent in the struggle to conquer the rights of our race.

Have you by chance not observed the degree to which the Black man is the object of exclusion? It is past time, then, for you to draw back the veil that has you blindfolded.

Carmen Piedra

5.6 “ENQUÊTE: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE JUPE-CULOTTE?”⁵ MINERVA (HAVANA, CUBA: APR. 15, 1911)

In the early 1910s, Minerva combined many common features of the Black press – political, cultural, and historical writing, as well as sports reporting, by male authors – with design and content more typical of a ladies’ magazine. Perhaps the most striking feature of the magazine was the extensive attention given to women’s clothing and physical appearance in posed photographs of young women (see Figures 0.8 and 0.12), extensive social reporting, advertisements for beauty products and hair stylists, and several regular columns dedicated to fashion reporting. These topics sometimes appeared in short notices in other Black newspapers. But the publishers of Minerva directed themselves toward female readers whom they understood to be consumers of fashion, responsible for keeping abreast of and understanding contemporary styles. The technical sophistication displayed in the fashion reporting, along with frequent advertisements for wholesale fabric and sewing machines, suggests that some readers were also fashion professionals: dressmakers and stylists (see 2.18).

In this “survey,” the editors of Minerva sought readers’ opinions on a running controversy over whether women should wear a style of wide-legged trousers known as split skirts. Over several previous issues, the magazine’s regular fashion reporter (writing under the name María Antonieta, possibly a pseudonym) had introduced readers to the style and to the controversies

⁵ Fashion reporting in *Minerva* focused almost entirely on new styles coming from Paris and London, and was therefore frequently laced with French terms such as *enquête*, survey, and *jupe-culotte*, split skirt.

raging in Paris and London. She summarized: "The partisans of the manly style will be those women of talent and the anti-trouser contingent will be women of elegance and beauty." Then she made some technical observations about various models (framed, as usual, around the mistakes so many Cuban women purportedly made in their understanding of fashion) and, finally, identified herself as firmly in the anti-trouser camp.⁶ In response, Carmela López de V. Cañizares and Dolores S. de Echemendía each revealed some hesitancy about claiming expertise and putting their opinions into print. Yet their answers were anything but tentative, suggesting the degree to which, for Black women readers and writers, the question of fashion, though always printed in the non-political sections of the magazine, could in fact be deeply political. López de V. Cañizares explained that she was willing to engage in the debate, even at the risk of public disagreement, because she was a feminist. Echemendía asked why men, who never gave much thought to fashions that injured or debilitated women (such as corsets and high heels), were so alarmed by the prospect of women putting on trousers. Perhaps, she teased, they were afraid of "feminist currents" in the field of fashion when, in fact, feminists were too busy distinguishing themselves in intellectual and artistic pursuits to pay much attention to such things.

A Word about the Split Skirt

Let us dedicate our attention for a brief instant to something that is, for us, not just a problem of the moment, but a matter of vital and very great importance, equally of interest to all [women].

I refer to the fashion of the Split Skirt, which has had and still has so many detractors (justified or unjustified), but which in our world is the topic of the moment.

Of course, I do not think myself able or qualified to offer you my opinion on this matter. But spurred on by a desire to oblige persons who are, I think, worthy of consideration, I cannot dodge this request. For this reason, and perhaps committing a very grave error, I will give you my opinion about the aforementioned fashion.

Needless to say, I have great sympathy for this fashion not only because it will relieve us somewhat of the tiresome need, imposed by [traditional] dresses, to gather up our skirts when it rains, even when this means showing our legs, but also because I think that our morality and our decency suffer no loss when we wear them [split skirts].

⁶ María Antonieta, "Correo de modas," *Minerva* (Mar. 15, 1911); María Antonieta, "Correo de modas," *Minerva* (July 1911).

There are styles that have a great acceptance among us which, though they put our charms more fully on display, do not, for this reason, cause the slightest damage to our honesty.

Why then, is such a resolute war being waged against the Split Skirt? ... Does it undermine, in some way, our morality? To my mind, it does not; but if my opinion is completely wrong, if I do not hold the opinion of the majority, I pray that you will pardon my indiscretion in this case, as I have done no more than set out my ideas, faithfully and freely.

And before closing, I should first make clear that whatever verdict is handed down in this matter, I will gladly accept it since before and above all, I am a feminist.

Carmela López de V. Cañizares

“For Minerva”

We cannot say much about the split skirt.

Because women worship that Sovereign known as “Fashion,” it will be the case that some will desire to follow the commandment to wear them [split skirts], others will not wear them, and others will criticize those who do wear them.

This style will hold its bloom only a little longer than a rose ...

But why has the stronger sex become so alarmed by this innovation? Why do [men] give more importance to the split skirt than to the corset, the hoop skirt, and the Louis XV heel,⁷ styles that are anti-hygienic and pose a threat to the health of their *compañeras*?⁸ Why this panic? Do they fear, perhaps, that feminist currents will be more formidable in the field of clothing than in the intellectual arena? Have no fear! The woman who triumphs in the academies and the museums will always value the degree she receives from an educational institution more than the anti-aesthetic fashion of the split skirt.

Dolores S. de Echemendía

5.7 MARGOT, “IN FAVOR OF FEMALE EDUCATION,” LA VERDAD (MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY: OCT. 15, 1911)

In debating the most appropriate education for the community's children, the Black papers occasionally focused specifically on the needs of girls and young women (see also 3.2). In this article, the pseudonymous writer Margot observed that young women were traditionally educated to be

⁷ A shoe with a heel higher than 2 inches.

⁸ The use of this term, meaning “female comrade,” signifies a partnership among equals.

wives and mothers. But if those conditions didn't materialize for them, they needed to be prepared to make their way independently of men, to earn their own livings, and to be "active members of society." After this rather progressive beginning, however, Margot swung back to the idea that women's principal duties were to please the men in their lives by being attractive, cheerful, and hardworking, rather than ugly, bilious, and sour. Education should cultivate their spirits, making them lively and appealing even after their physical beauty had faded (by age 40!) to "no more than a ruin of what it was." "Work," Margot declared, "is the source of happiness and the most powerful antidote against wrinkles."

All of the credited writers for *La Verdad* were male, and Margot may very well have been so as well. The only woman known to have written for the paper was *Margarita Ubarne*, later *Ubarne de Espinosa* (5.12), writing under the pseudonym *Lirio del Valle* (*Lily of the Valley*).

Until today, women have been educated exclusively for matrimony. From their most tender years, they have been taught the duties of a wife and mother, and those who did not become one or the other, found themselves condemned to suffer the bitterness and disappointments of a mistaken existence, completely opposed to the one for which they had been prepared.

Whence the figure of the ugly and bilious old maid, for whom life never held roses, because only through love did she seek them, and love always closed its doors to her. The only remedy that the unhappy one knew to apply to her misfortune was a profound hatred toward her peers. She hated women because she supposed them to be happy; [she hated] men because they didn't love her. Don't educate girls for marriage: educate them for life.

Rich or poor, place in their hands or in their spirits the means to make do without a brother or a husband, and should fortune ever turn against them, by this means you will help them avoid suffering and humiliation in the future. Teach them that work is the source of happiness and the most powerful antidote against wrinkles.

Study girls' aptitudes and cultivate those seeds from which they will gain the greatest benefit. Don't ever force tastes uselessly, as the only result will be to waste time and make their characters sour.

Beyond instructions, give your daughters a solid education, attending simultaneously to the soul and the spirit. Teach them to obey, without making them automatons bereft of will. The great merit of female teachers is principally to teach at the same time obedience and fortitude. Allow girls to express their little opinions, as this is the only way to know those opinions and to correct their defects. To prepare girls well for their future struggle, they need

to be taught to know how to suffer in silence. Make them see the ridiculousness of a complaining woman; how disagreeable she makes her own life and the life of others. Let them understand that being soft and delicate is not the way to please a man, and that for a father, brother, or husband, coming home tired from the tasks of the day, finding a happy woman, full of life, is much more attractive than the spectacle of a beautiful woman reclining on her couch, unable to move or smile because of her headache.

England and Germany have understood the great benefit that would result from reforming female education, and now they are seeing the happy outcomes of their efforts.

In those two countries, women's activeness rivals that of men. Rich or poor, they consider themselves to be the active members of society, bringing their share of labor to the work of progress. There, the husband finds in his wife a companion capable of understanding and even helping him in his tasks; the children, a mother who takes interest in their studies and helps solve the difficulties that they encounter.

And don't believe that, by being reasonably learned, women cease to be feminine and enchanting, because that somewhat manly education will increase her graces rather than diminish them. Youth and beauty are as fragile and ephemeral as the flower to which they are often compared. But the flower has perfume, and when the petals fall, dried out and discolored, the sweet smell remains, that soul of the flower that just days before bloomed from the bud. So it is with woman: by forty, her young, beautiful body will be no more than a ruin of what it was; but the spirit does not age. And I will say more: cultivation of the spirit slows for many years the physical ravages of time. And if you think not, compare the physique of those women who lead an active life to those who live in continual idleness. While the former arrive at thirty with an agile body and a soul full of life, the latter at the same age are old and spent. For Sarah Bernhardt, for Melba, for Carmen Sivia, fifty never arrived and those stars ceased to shine without passing through decadent phases.⁹

Oh, if women understood the thousand advantages that intellectual light provides, there would be fewer sad little heads in the balconies, little heads empty of ideas and whose horizons extend no further than the romanticism embodied in the longing for a sweetheart, who for so many will never arrive.

Physical beauty is at the mercy of any physiological setback and can be extinguished like a burning meteor that has blazed ephemerally in the

⁹ Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) was a famous French actress; Nellie Melba was the stage name of Helen Porter Mitchell (1861–1931), a famous Australian soprano. We have not been able to identify Carmen Sivia.

heavens of life. Spiritual beauty persists; the select souls come into being bearing the scent of the realm of ideas; the superior spirits are like gardens in an eternal springtime.

A woman of robust mentality always provokes universal and sincere admiration, much deeper than the wake left by physical beauty among the sensuality of men, as fleeting as all the passions of the flesh.

Mothers: guard the future of our daughters! They don't always have to be at your side, receiving cooing affection and sweet maternal caresses. Look to the future, which appears too hazy and misty, impossible to scrutinize through its darkness ...

5.8–5.10 THREE ARTICLES ABOUT WOMEN IN O MENELIK (SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL: 1915–16)

The three articles that follow illustrate the complex, diverse, and consequential roles that women played in the Black newspapers and their accompanying associational life. Especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was rare to see female writers in these papers; when women appeared as writers, it was usually through one-time special contributions, as in “A Life Lesson” (5.8). More frequently, male writers wrote about women or addressed them as readers. In “To Our Female Readers” (5.9), the editors of O Menelik used the language of romance, commitment, and courtship to describe the idyllic relationship between a newspaper and its readership. Behind that rosy sentimentality (which recapitulated dominant gender norms, with women as “charming” and “delicate” recipients of passionate male attention), we can perceive the centrality of women to the papers and their social networks as loyal readers, supporters, and subscribers.

“Beauty Contest” (5.10) offers one of the earliest instances, in Brazil's Black press, of what would become a mainstay of the Black papers and associations (see also 5.15). While beauty contests assigned women to idealized roles as objects of male pleasure, organizers conceived of them as rejoinders to White standards of beauty and expressions of pride in their community. Yet for all the efforts of male writers to encourage women to be docile, dainty, and demure, women had their own ideas, as the author of “A Life Lesson” (5.8) made clear. This young woman, an educated, avid reader of romances, wrote beautifully and frankly on sensitive topics like Black male beauty and her own love affair. She then deployed her talents against her inconstant fiancé, getting the last word in the very public space of the Black press.

5.8 “A Life Lesson,” *O Menelik* (São Paulo, Brazil: Oct. 17, 1915)

One fine afternoon, after my lessons, the sky was a deep, pure blue – unbroken but for a few white spots. The breeze was pleasant and refreshing, and I, taking advantage of the coolness, went for a stroll along the beach. To distract myself, I brought along a little novel.

In the distance, the sky appeared to meet the land. The sea was wild ... as if blanketed in white foam!

As I resolved to break away from the marine madness in which I had too long lost myself, I was interrupted by a young Black man, of good stature and with a magnetic pair of eyes. After greeting me, he said: “Are you still in school, miss?” “Yes,” I responded, “ever since I was seven years old.”

“How old are you now?”

“I will be fifteen in May.”

“Ah, well ... perhaps ... if I could have the honor of accompanying you on this lovely walk ... if only I could be worthy of such a thing ... ”

“More than worthy,” I responded.

And so we ambled along the ocean’s sandy coast!

At every step, from his lips there fell a declaration of love.

Dusk descended ever so slowly!

And when it did, we bid farewell amid impassioned pledges.

Fifteen days later, I was happily by his side, considering him my betrothed. But that happiness lasted only a few months.

Despicable intrigue conspired to separate our futures.

What torments did I endure, my God! But I made peace with my fate, unleashing upon him an intense hatred that will not end so soon.

Leopoldina Dias. Santos, January 1913

5.9 “To Our Female Readers,” *O Menelik* (São Paulo, Brazil: Jan. 1, 1916)¹⁰

After spending forty days far from the fond affections of your delicate hands – the sweet cradle of your soul – “*O Menelik*” began to pine for you.¹¹ And so, returning once again, nestling beside [your] generosity – my female beauties, behold it here.

¹⁰ This anonymous piece was likely authored by Deocleciano Nascimento, accountant and published poet, and founder and editor of *O Menelik*.

¹¹ *O Menelik* first appeared in October 1915, aspiring to be a monthly paper. But the reference to a forty-day gap suggests that the editors missed their deadline: instead of

Behold it here, vowing that from now on it will appear the first Sunday of every month to bring you news from the stars, hoping to be received with the usual charming smiles from your rosy lips! And all the while, its humble editor casts a thousand kisses of gratitude at your dainty feet.

5.10 “Beauty Contest,” *O Menelik* (São Paulo, Brazil: Jan. 1, 1916)

With this issue, we launch a women’s beauty contest. The contest will take place across two issues, organized as follows: in the first issue (beginning with our very next one), we will publish a general list of all those [women] who received votes, and in the second, the final results of the contest.

A portrait of the winning contestant will grace the front page of our newspaper, should she consent to let us so proceed.

N.B. The contest is, of course, among “the class [of color]” and votes must be cast by men who are our subscribers. To that end, they must fill out the following form:

DEAR READER
Who is the most beautiful young woman, in your estimation?
It is:
Street:
Signed

5.11 DAVID RODOLPHO DE CASTRO, “BLACK MOTHER,”
 PROGRESSO (SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL: AUG. 19, 1928)

In the 1920s, White and Black Brazilian journalists and public figures mobilized to create a statue to the Black Mother in Rio de Janeiro, as well as a holiday in her honor on September 28. The date was chosen to commemorate the passage of the Free Womb Law in 1871, after which all children born of enslaved mothers in Brazil were legally free at birth (although they could not enjoy this freedom until the age of majority). In

appearing in December 1915, issue number 3 appeared in January 1916. On the material and financial difficulties of the Black press in Brazil and elsewhere, see 4.1 and 4.2.

portrayals by White Brazilians, the Black Mother evoked nostalgia for a bygone era or for slavery itself, presented as a rosy and benevolent arrangement in which the love between Black nursemaids and their White charges bequeathed Brazil a legacy of racial harmony.

Black writers took different approaches to the Black Mother. Some echoed White writers' nostalgia as a way of rendering homage to Black women and their descendants. Others deployed the Black Mother as a symbol of the bonds of fraternity that ought to exist between Black and White Brazilians, but too frequently did not. In this article, a contributor to Progresso sounded some of those common themes, calling on Black Brazilians to "keep the flame of love for the Black Mother alight in the hearts of the Whites." But he also offered a rare, searing critique of the suffering of historical Black nursemaids, who were forced to set aside the needs of their own children and families to care for the children of the White "masters." Those Black Mothers, and their abandoned sons, were owed a debt of gratitude, the author argued, that should no longer go unrecognized or unpaid.

When we turn our eyes toward the ashes of the past, toward the arrogant muteness that enfolds those hearts cast, perhaps, in the molds of truth (yet unconscious of their debts of gratitude), [we see that] the abnegation of the Black Mother has passed unnoticed. We uncover what happens to spirits deprived of the beneficent light of instruction, and of the maternal education that is the principal factor of all human progress. We cannot allow a sacred duty, long forgotten, to remain silenced. We must never allow ourselves to disremember the dark torpor of ignorance as we educate our progeny.

Let us not forget, however, that the cornerstone and pedestal of this monumental task, uncommonly worthy of honor and praise, is maternal education: those drops of morning dew on flowers that slowly wither. Any individuals who seek social stability while denying or fleeing domestic duties are not worthy of the air they breathe.

The bedrock of our demand is maternal love, the divine substance that emanates from the Being of Beings into the depths of our hearts, the innermost recesses of our souls.

The cradle provides the foundation for our progress in all fields of human knowledge. We do not wish to see our children lost in the desert of doubt, or worse, in the black ocean of faithlessness.

As descendants of Blacks, we endeavor, as much as our strength allows, to keep the flame of love for the Black Mother alight in the hearts of the

Whites, who are her true children. We can say, with our nation's history as our witness, that the Whites are Blacker even than our ancestors, and that the White masters are more properly the sons of Black women than even our elders ...

We believe that those fortunate ones have more of a right to be considered [the Black Mother's] sons. Our grandmothers were never able to nurse, let alone raise, their children because they were forced (under threat of the whip) to deny their rotund breasts to the fruits of their love, so that they could, with extreme solicitude, raise the children of "their Lordships."

The outcome of this prohibition was sorrowful: mothers abandoning their children for the masters' [children] who, as adults, repaid such dedication with the lash. Wretched victims of inhuman slavery!

Their children grew up, most of the time, without the pleasure of feeling a maternal caress, the tenderness of a mother. In almost every case they did not even have the chance to meet her ... because they were sold away at the age of three or four.

When our ancestors' mothers, who nursed the children of the "Masters," were able to raise their own, they did so on bean broth, mush, and water. The heart of the Black Mother was nothing more and nothing less than a vast desert of hopes, or an interminable night of disbelief. Resistance always fails in the face of force ... The [enslaved] offspring of captivity who were raised deprived of caresses were more despised than unreasoning creatures. A horrifying and barbaric sight!

Among the historical paintings of scenes of slavery we find the works of renowned painters. One of them [is] of a Black woman of slender or medium build, wearing a white cotton shirt of the sort no longer seen in public, exposing her engorged bosom, and for a dress something resembling a nun's habit, as befits her suffering. In her dark arms she holds a plump, White infant, who avidly sucks from her rotund breasts the most precious and pure nectar of her indescribable nature.¹² A mother of another's children, in perpetual abandonment of her own, is worse than a flower without perfume. Yet even without its scent, [the flower's] elaborate and refined texture still draws the gaze and curiosity of observers. From the sarcophagus of necessity there emerges, occasionally, something unanticipated that astonishes the civilized world.

¹² The author likely refers to the famous 1912 canvas by Brazilian painter Lucílio de Albuquerque (1877–1939), "Mãe Preta," in which the Black nursemaid's own baby lies on the floor at her feet while she nurses her White charge.

It must be said: education molds the character, and instruction illuminates the spirit. We want to make it patently clear in these lines that the Black Mother is the true and legitimate mother of Brazilians. It is not our aim to offend anyone's sensibilities. We have as our only and exclusive goal the fusion of Whites and Blacks for the glorification of the Black Mother. This anomaly of sentiments [by which the Black Mother is deprived of her due], this irregularity of principles, must be extirpated for the order and progress of Brazil.¹³

São Paulo, 11-7-1928. David Rodolpho de Castro

5.12 AGUEDO SUÁREZ PEÑA, "A GREAT WOMAN: MARGARITA U. DE ESPINOSA," NUESTRA RAZA (MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY: MAY 30, 1934)

As a counter to images of Black exclusion and failure, the Black papers frequently profiled Afrodescendants who had achieved undeniable success in the professions, the arts, or sports. In this article, Nuestra Raza focused on Margarita Ubarne de Espinosa, a schoolteacher who, earlier in the century, had been an occasional contributor to La Verdad. Teaching was a profession that was notoriously resistant to entry by Afro-Uruguayans. Aguedo Suárez Peña explained how, throughout her career, Ubarne de Espinosa "opposed race prejudice with her iron will and her privileged intelligence." To leave no doubt about her professional success, he mentioned her close ties to some of Uruguay's most prominent families, who relied on her to tutor their children for high school and college. In short, she was "a great woman, a great spirit, a unique intellectual of our race, who does not fear the famous ghost of racial prejudice."

Eleven years later, Ubarne de Espinosa's professional success was cited, along with that of other Black professionals, as evidence of the absence of racial barriers in Uruguay (2.11). That article appeared in Revista Uruguay, edited (and perhaps written) by Aguedo Suárez Peña, whose views had apparently evolved in the interim.

¹³ The motto "Order and Progress" first appeared on the Brazilian flag at the start of the First Republic (1889–1930). The author's invocation of that phrase is one example of Black writers' frequent recourse to the tenets of republicanism, in those years and beyond (see 1.1, 1.6, 1.15, 2.5, 2.8).

When I read in these columns, this last March, the interesting story on Dr. [Francisco] Rondeau,¹⁴ and what the distinguished lawyer said about the injustices of which he has been victim, committed by the men of his time, injustices that resulted in his never occupying the position that his intelligence and knowledge deserved – I decided to present Mrs. Margarita Ubarne de Espinosa, as a unique example in our race of perseverance, of imposing her personality and her great intellectual capacity [in areas] where racial prejudice is the most hermetically sealed. When she began to teach in the schools of the capital [Montevideo], she found, here and there, among men and women, attitudes and gestures that showed their antipathy toward her presence as a Black woman. They knew that she had the virtues of great talent and maximum knowledge; but it didn't matter; she was Black and they had to remove her from the national body of teachers.

But this superior woman, dismissing the attitudes in the environment in which she developed her teaching activities, opposed race prejudice with her iron will and her privileged intelligence. And now we see her in her position as an educator, honoring our race and showing to the country a teacher equal to any challenge.

Very few members of our collectivity know the strong character and tenacity of Mrs. Ubarne de Espinosa. What a shame that we do not have our Social House.¹⁵ I am sure that [if we did,] she would give interesting lectures there on how our members should present themselves when, with indescribable sacrifices, they obtain their academic degrees.

Mrs. Ubarne de Espinosa is always studying. Her manner of teaching is so interesting that, at the request of her disciples and their parents, she is obliged to give them private lessons until they enter the university or high school. This detail gives a clear sense of her connections with extremely distinguished families. Those families receive this great woman, who, well before that moment, had helped make ideas shine through and make race prejudice disappear.

I feel a great admiration for the members of my race who distinguish themselves in any aspect of life. I give them my encouragement, urging them to continue and to go further and further. When Dr. Salvador

¹⁴ "Hablando con el Dr. Francisco Rondeau," *Nuestra Raza* (Mar. 1934), 4–5.

¹⁵ At this time, *Nuestra Raza* was promoting the idea of a Casa de la Raza, which would serve as both a social club and a civic organization to represent the city's Black population. See "Casa de la Raza" and "Necesidad de la fundación de un Club," *Nuestra Raza* (Apr. 1934), 5, 10–12.

Betervide obtained his law degree, I had high hopes for him, knowing his great talent and that he was a very worthy representative of our collectivity. But time has passed, and though he has not failed in his career, his name does not have the prestige that Mrs. Ubarne de Espinosa has in the national teaching profession.

For me, Mrs. Margarita U. de Espinosa is a great woman, a great spirit, a unique intellectual of our race, who does not fear the famous ghost of racial prejudice. Multifaceted, dynamic, and intelligent, we find her dominating her milieu, with stupendous authority. She is also a gifted devotee of the arts. Two years ago I saw her taking education courses, exclusively for teachers, where they showed their work in painting, embossing in wood and bronze, and other forms. It was a singular exposition of art, in which the distinguished educator showed sensitivity and culture.

I admire the beautiful spirit of this great woman who, knowing her extraordinary features, I sincerely believe lends honor to the collectivity. I present her not as an unknown in our milieu but rather as a voice of encouragement for those university graduates who do not know how to present themselves in such a way as to represent us with dignity, wherever that may be.

5.13 CALIXTA HERNÁNDEZ DE CERVANTES, “HORIZONS,”
ADELANTE (HAVANA, CUBA: JULY 1936)

After the mass uprising against President Gerardo Machado in 1933, the magazine Adelante emerged as a space for Black writers of diverse political affiliations to debate which strategies to adopt with respect to the largely discredited Cuban political system. Calixta Hernández de Cervantes was one of a handful of Black women writers who contributed regularly to these conversations.¹⁶ Her articles were part of a broader tendency in Adelante to represent the Cuban people as a coalition of Black people, women, and workers rather than a single homogeneous constituency. Hernández, a teacher, combined an emphasis on gender equality in the workplace with a particular focus on creating more opportunities for Black women in caretaker professions. According to her view, Black women with degrees in pedagogy and social welfare were uniquely qualified to educate less fortunate Black women and to formulate social policy to protect them.

¹⁶ Brunson, *Black Women, Citizenship*.

In this essay, she turned to the question of Black women's political participation and representation. Black men were guaranteed the vote in Cuba in 1902, but suffrage was extended to women much later, in 1934. Hernández de Cervantes celebrated the subsequent election of women to political office but noted the absence of Black women among them. She offered a critical assessment of the rapid incorporation of Black women voters into the Cuban party system and urged working-class Black women to use their political power to help elect elite Black women to public office.

The Cuban panorama offers a new horizon for women's struggle. With the elevation of several ladies to important elective offices in the government machinery, a new cycle has opened for female conquests, every day more positive and beneficial in their lineaments, which point toward a new social structure.

The House of Representatives, the Provincial Assembly, and not a few municipalities of the Republic have offered the beautiful spectacle of courteously seating estimable and intelligent ladies, who, in representation of our sex, have gone to cooperate with the men in the arduous and honorable work of national reconstruction.

All of this is very good, and we congratulate ourselves for it since, from any point of view, these events represent a significant step forward in the sphere of human conquests, which is our country's due in light of its specific conditions of progress and civility. Yet, it occurs to us to ask, why did no woman of color obtain the votes necessary to secure an office in the last elections? Is it possible that female voters of color were unaware that the names of the non-White women appearing on several candidate lists were the greatest and most estimable among our female contingent, and that the triumph of these energetic fighters would have translated into a positive and humane aid for them [Black women] in their abandonment, which is as real as it is unjust and tragic? Who will raise their voices in Congress to ask for justice for the little Black women workers who are displaced from decent jobs and must resort to the broom, the stove, or the ironing board? Why did the Black women who went to cast their votes by the hundreds not stop to consider this aspect of their problem and act consequently, in accordance with their needs and following the dictates of their instinct for survival?

To all these questions and a few others that could be posed, one can only answer that there was a lack of consciousness of the responsibilities

of citizenship that were acquired along with the right to vote. *Muñidores*¹⁷ with no conscience and no decency led the Black woman (blind, ignorant, and trusting) – I refer to the majority – where they wished to lead them. And though it is painful to admit it, we have given a palpable demonstration that we do not have the necessary ability to act in accordance with the requirements of reason, justice, and consciousness of our own responsibility.

During the last elections, many automobiles circulated around the city filled with Black women who went happily to fulfill the sacred obligation of every voter; along with the “chauffeur” in each vehicle there was always a “shepherd” responsible for bringing that flock to the polls where they had to make their cross-marks in the place [on the ballot] that suited the unscrupulous vote-gatherer. With the electoral struggle carried out in this way, the results were those that one might logically expect: few women elected, and none of color.

Female comrades; open your eyes and be more cautious the next time; do not allow yourselves to be guided by those who only seek their personal profit; choose, weigh, study the candidate lists and select from among the many names that appear on them those of our own female fighters, who will help us and will achieve for us a goal that we ought, by now, to have attained: absolute equality in all aspects of the lives of citizens, beginning with the right to work, which is the cornerstone of human dignity.

5.14 “OUR WOMEN WORKERS ARE MOBILIZING,” NUESTRA RAZA (MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY: AUG. 1940)

In every Latin American country, domestic service remains a very large occupational category that is majority female and closely tied to non-White racial status. Since domestic workers work, and often live, in their employers' homes, it has proven very difficult for them to organize unions or other collective mobilizations.

This article reported on an effort to create such an organization in Uruguay, based on an interview with one of the organization's directors. The anonymous interviewee stated that the group was not a union but rather an association that sought to lobby the government for pensions and other protective legislation and to provide educational and mutual aid services to its members. The reporter did not specify the racial

¹⁷ Party operatives responsible for rounding up voters and getting them to the polls, often through the distribution of favors.

composition of the group, and the director (also of unspecified race) stated that the members were not interested in addressing issues of race or Blackness, which “stir up social or psychological arguments that we don’t want to discuss. Here we are all comrades [compañeras], and it is enough that we live the reality of being poor and being workers.” This was a position that was very common in Latin American labor movements, which feared that employers might exploit race as a source of division and conflict among workers, thus undermining their efforts to organize.

Women today collaborate with men in social activities and participate with them in public life, their civil and political rights proclaimed and assured. But not, as would be just, on the same plane of economic equality as concerns salaries and work regimen. In this respect the exploitation of the feminine worker is unspeakable.

If we consider the insufficiencies in State services to poor women: assistance in old age and infirmity; assistance to working women and their children; to single mothers; efficient assistance, protection, and education to workers’ homes; and if we consider the living conditions of women in various sectors of work, and above all of female workers in domestic service, the picture is desolate; and even more so if we take into account, beyond the workers’ own subsistence, the demands of their families, who have the same rights as others to nutrition, education, instruction, and to persevere.

Dr. Victor Zerbino,¹⁸ explaining certain social problems concerning infant mortality, underlined that “the protection of the child is the protection of the mother; it is the protection and organization of the family, which is a function of the State: labor legislation, distribution of wealth, assistance to the family, investigations of paternity and [paternal] responsibility ... And we know that state protective services have few resources, and their action does not arrive directly to the home.”

* * *

There is now a bill to provide retirement pensions to female workers in domestic service, who have gathered to struggle for that just protection, perhaps the first of the many that they hope for every day.

We entered the headquarters of the Agrupación Pro-Jubilación [Association in Favor of Pensions] and interviewed one of its directors.

¹⁸ Victor Zerbino (1886–1943), a leading Uruguayan pediatrician.

“Is this a union?”

“Not really. For now, it is a simple workers’ association that works in favor of the right to a pension, which we named after Dr. Solís Vila, the author of the bill under consideration in Parliament. But with the enthusiastic blessing of numerous meetings, presided over by the energetic director Miss Dominga Ríos, and the secretary María L. R. Correa, we are considering the possibility of a broad mutual-defense organization of female workers, with impartial leaders and no distinctions of religion or politics.”

“?” [sic]

“We will study the rules and procedures and will request our legal incorporation, so as to transform the current Agrupación into a vast feminine center of education, culture, social assistance, and recreation. We will seek in that way to cooperate in raising the cultural level of the woman worker, through adequate instruction, classes, lectures, concerts, art exhibits, etc. We also need to establish classes in sewing and dressmaking, and culinary courses, for the technical perfecting of our members, preparing them to cook in the great hotels, which for a long time have been monopolized by a dozen foreign ‘maestros’ of moderate competence.”

“Speaking of cooking, *Nuestra Raza* recently published an interesting historical piece by the Northern [Brazilian] professor Dr. Gilberto Freyre, which highlighted in Brazil, since colonial times, the extraordinary genius of women of color in everything having to do with haute cuisine, which even today is still their purview.”

“True, we read it. Furthermore,” our informant continues, “in our future center there is no interest in reviving color prejudice or reaffirming racial exclusivism. How dark-skinned people feel in society; how they are situated; how they are viewed culturally – this stirs up social or psychological arguments that we don’t want to discuss. Here we are all comrades, and it is enough that we live the reality of being poor and being workers.”

“Very good. Also, there are so many specific instances of moral affinity between Whites and Blacks, who esteem and appreciate each other.”

“Exactly. And that affinity will continue to exist in our institution, for the most useful and efficient ends. And if we find the support that we expect and the resources that we will pursue through various festive initiatives such as raffles and bazaars, benefit shows, dances, etc., we will add to the services already mentioned all forms of assistance to working women, including medical, dental, legal, and financial services.

“It would be an extraordinary organization in the country, if it were extended to all female workers.”

“That’s possible. But what we call domestic service includes a considerable legion of workers, who come here and will come here to unite to struggle for just improvements, above all the enforcement of the labor laws, which will imply equal rights and consequent economic relief, a factor in [creating] that ‘vital space’ that, in the end, can be limited to the home – a home no less worthy for being modest, but with its daily bread assured.”

* * *

So you see that our women workers are organizing! Our mothers, sisters, and spouses! At the first smile of hope – the promise of goodness and justice – they move, the irresistible waves surrounding the immovable rock of men’s egotism and indifference! These women, perhaps the hardest working of all the workers, are agitating for the just rest that repays their long, bitter period of ... [illegible]

5.15 “CONTESTS FOR ‘THE QUEEN OF THE MULATAS’ AND ‘THE PITCH DOLL’,” QUILOMBO (RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL: JUNE 1949)

Following on earlier traditions (see 5.10), Rio de Janeiro’s Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN) imagined beauty pageants as instruments of anti-racism, correctives to the exclusion of Black women from Brazil’s beauty contests and standards of beauty. Contests for the “Queen of the Mulatas” (for lighter-skinned women of mixed African and European ancestry) were separate from those for the “Pitch Doll” (for darker-skinned women of predominantly African ancestry). Writers in the Black press typically deplored social distinctions based on color, but here the separate contests guaranteed that women with darker complexions would also be able to “show off their gifts of beauty, elegance, charm, and social distinction.” Well-versed in performance and pageantry, the directors of the TEN made these events a highlight of Rio’s social calendar, where people of different races and classes could “fraternize” while displaying an “elevated social level.” Quilombo featured photographs of the winning contestants, thus disseminating images of Black women from Brazil and elsewhere (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The magazine’s writers did not ask whether events focusing on attractiveness and bodily appearance might contribute to the oppression of Black women. Instead, they presented affirmations of Black female beauty as directly linked to



FIGURE 5.1 Photograph accompanying “Contests for ‘The Queen of the *Mulatas*’ and ‘The Pitch Doll,’” *Quilombo* (June 1949). Original caption: “Terezinha de Jesus and Dalva, extremely strong contestants for the throne of the *mulatas* last year, photographed in the sunroom of the former woman’s home.”

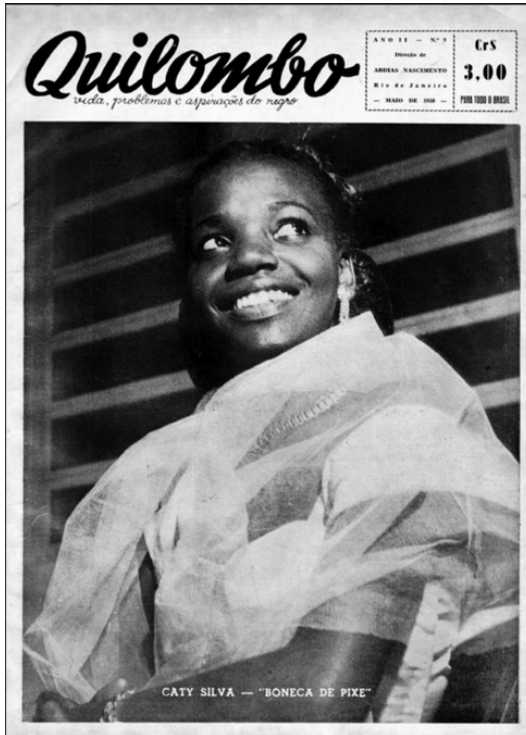


FIGURE 5.2 Cover from *Quilombo* (May 1950) featuring Caty Silva, winner of the recent “Pitch Doll” competition.

*longstanding political battles: the valorization of Black men and women in Brazil’s past and present (as in the reference to the **Black Mother**) and of Brazil’s deeply “mixed” civilization.*

Twenty thousand *cruzeiros* in awards for the winners – A night of art and elegance during the coronation party.¹⁹

The customary contests for “The Queen of the *Mulatas*” and “The Pitch Doll” will take place this year on one and the same date. The celebrations will increase their liveliness and splendor, surpassing the spectacular artistic and social successes of previous dances. And the

¹⁹ 20,000 cruzeiros was worth approximately US\$1,080 in 1949. International Monetary Fund, *Annual Report ... 1949*, p. 96.

pretty young women, [their skins] the color of cinnamon or ripe *jaboticaba*,²⁰ will thus have a unique opportunity to show off their gifts of beauty, elegance, charm, and social distinction.

Effective immediately, the director of the **Teatro Experimental do Negro** is accepting registrations from contestants for this sensational competition, which year after year rocks the very foundations of the city, and which in 1949 promises to take on an unprecedented degree of extraordinariness. Our next cover will feature the photograph of the first registered contestant.

The contest will end in September, in honor of the “Day of the **Black Mother**,”²¹ with a soirée so entertaining and elegant that it will make history, and a show featuring the most beloved artists of the radio, theater, and cinema. Valuable prizes will be offered to the winners, along with bronze trophies representing an *Ebony Venus*, designed by the famous national sculptor Bruno Giorgi and valued at 10,000.00 cruzeiros, as well as more than ten thousand cruzeiros in cash.²²

Despite its elevated social level, the ball for the closing ceremonies of the “Pitch Doll” and “Queen of the *Mulatas*” contests of 1949 is a democratic festivity – [one] of fraternization among races and various social strata, in which formal dress is not required. Black people should not miss this gala soirée for their “Queens” pageant, since, by attending, they will be lending prestige to one more initiative in favor of the aesthetic and social valorization of the racially mixed qualities of our civilization.

5.16 MARIA NASCIMENTO, “A WOMAN’S TURN TO SPEAK: THE NATIONAL WOMEN’S CONGRESS AND THE REGULATION OF DOMESTIC LABOR,” QUILOMBO (RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL: JULY 1949)

In Brazil as elsewhere in Afro-Latin America, Black women have been disproportionately represented in domestic work. An unregulated part of the labor market, with rules set entirely by private employers and no social safety net, domestic service has historically been a site of extreme precariousness (see 5.1, 5.14), exploitation, and abuse – a space particularly redolent of the labor arrangements of slavery. Maria Nascimento, along

²⁰ A tropical fruit that is purplish-black in color.

²¹ A holiday honoring the Black Mother on September 28 (see 5.11).

²² Bruno Giorgi (1905–93) was a well-known Brazilian sculptor; on the exchange rate for cruzeiros, see 119 above.

with other Black women activists, intellectuals, and contributors to Quilombo, was at the forefront of efforts to regulate domestic labor in Brazil at midcentury, understanding that improving conditions in that sector would make a crucial difference in the lives of many working Black women. As an activist in the Teatro Experimental do Negro, Nascimento founded a women's department within that organization, the Conselho Nacional de Mulheres Negras, to advocate for the specific needs of that group.

In this article, Nascimento applauded the call by an emerging national women's movement to regulate domestic labor, highlighting the particular stakes of such legislation for Black women and children. She ended by hailing the emergence of a new "Black woman" who, regardless of her line of work, rejected the logics bequeathed by slavery and was "learning to walk with her head held high."

The resolutions passed this past May by the women of all of Brazil, gathered here [Rio de Janeiro] in a national conference, deserve full attention.²³ [So do] all of the articles in favor of the life, happiness, and progress of women and, by extension, of the Brazilian people, of whom they are the dedicated and suffering mothers. The initiative to hold this meeting can thus only be worthy of praise, and its conclusions [worthy of] support. God willing, these [conclusions] will soon become reality.

Among the important resolutions reached, I would like to refer to the one that deals with the regulation of domestic labor. The Conference, taking into consideration that no legislation currently exists to protect the rights of domestic workers and professional laundresses, saw fit to include in its resolutions the securement of legal norms that will establish the obligations and benefits pertaining to that enormous class [of workers].

It is unbelievable that, in a time in which so much is said about social justice, there should exist many thousands of [female] laborers like domestic workers, who have no [daily] timetable for beginning and ending their service, no support during illness and old age, no protection during pregnancy and post-partum, no maternity hospitals, no day nurseries to shelter their children during working hours. For domestic workers, the [labor] regime is that same servile regime of centuries past, [or indeed] even worse than in times of slavery.

²³ The Conferência Nacional Feminina (National Women's Conference), organized by various women's organizations, including members of the Communist Party, with the aim of creating a unified, national women's movement.

Beyond that purely economic aspect [of the problem], there is another that is even more painful: the moral violence of which domestic workers are frequent victims. The lack of prestige [of domestic work] among official bodies tasked with protecting labor has consigned domestics to ignominious police control. Many people do not know that instead of [being issued] a work permit, domestics are registered with the police. Thus, under the guise of [providing] a system for identifying domestic workers, what the police actually do is to pre-judge all domestics as thieves or criminals. And even so, our Constitution speaks of the dignity of work!

I know that the “naïve ones of Leblon”²⁴ might retort that there are many day nurseries, many maternity hospitals out there. But, my “little angels,” those institutions are destined entirely for commercial employees, industrial employees, bank employees, and other classes protected by labor legislation, and there is never even the smallest opening for poor Black women who toil at oven and stove. The existing day nurseries are not sufficient for even a third of the children who need them. When these [children] are also of color – God’s poor little ones, who some racists affirm are children of the devil – the situation becomes even worse.

It so happens, however, that the Black woman is opening her eyes. During slavery and even now during the Republic, she led a passive existence, nursing the “little masters” and the children of “Doctor so-and-so.” Subjugated, diminished, she took refuge in her natural sweetness and gentleness, without weapons to fight and resist the vilest assaults on her personal honor and dignity. Happily, that time is now passing. [Whether as a] domestic worker, public servant, commercial worker, industrial worker, medical doctor, lawyer, or mother and homemaker, the Black woman is learning to walk with her head held high and assert her personality.

There are many problems, many situations to resolve. The regulation of domestic labor, however, is of an urgency that permits no further delays. All of us who are true friends of our people of color must put forth every effort to obtain protective measures for that class [of workers], so hard-working, humble, suffering, and indispensable.

²⁴ Leblon is a wealthy, overwhelmingly White beachside neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro.