

## “Look for Progress in Our Moral Perfection”

### Racial Regeneration and the Post-Zanjón Black Public Sphere

In 1878, nationalist rebel leaders accepted the terms of peace proposed by the Spanish colonial government, effectively ending a decade of war. These terms, referred to as the Pact of Zanjón, entailed a series of political and economic reforms.<sup>1</sup> The pact granted Cubans new rights to publish in the press and to form associations. New political parties organized to advocate on behalf of an expanding electorate. The government also emancipated enslaved Blacks and indentured Chinese laborers who participated in the war and promised to end slavery altogether; it did so in 1886. Throughout the island, a small but dynamic group of aspirational Black women embraced these reforms as community leaders ready for the task of building a modern society. Writing for the Black press and creating organizations, establishing schools and libraries, and forming nuclear families, they aimed to break with the social stigma of enslavement in order to gain recognition as racial equals.

One such woman was Cristina Ayala.<sup>2</sup> Born into slavery in 1856, the teacher and prolific poet in the town of Güines devoted her life to serving the population of African descent. In 1888 she outlined a vision of uplift in the poem “A mi raza” (To my race).<sup>3</sup> Slavery had ended two years earlier, unifying recently emancipated Blacks and freeborn people of color under the umbrella category *la raza de color* (the colored race) or *clase de color* (colored class). Abolition, she determined, presented all Black men and women with the opportunity to forge new lives. She declared, “Now is the time beloved race that, our servitude having ceased, we give proof of our citizenship and have a life of our own.” She called upon African descendants to “look for progress in our moral perfection.”<sup>4</sup>

Ayala directed her poem to the Black population, but she also addressed

elite whites concerned with the island's social "demoralization" and incapacity for self-governance.<sup>5</sup> "A mi raza" responded to the pamphlet of the Spanish intellectual Francisco Moreno titled *Cuba y su gente* (Cuba and its people), in which he denigrates Blacks and women of all races for their "immoral" behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Ayala challenged Moreno's position as she boldly mandated that whites take responsibility for "the time that had passed."<sup>7</sup> She blamed enslavers for creating the circumstances that hindered Black social advancement; she refuted assertions that African descendants alone were to blame for low marriage rates and levels of education. Yet, even in challenging Moreno, she affirmed his association of "moral perfection" with marriage and the denial of African culture.

Ayala's literary activism highlights the interplay of Cuban national and Black public spheres, both of which expanded following the implementation of Pact of Zanjón reforms.<sup>8</sup> African descendants who previously had limited opportunities to be published in the national press established more than 120 publications during the final decades of the colonial era.<sup>9</sup> Many of these publications served as forums for Black associations. Historians have detailed how elite and upwardly mobile Black men advocated on behalf of the *raza de color* through the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> Men of African descent positioned themselves as community leaders who debated and brought visibility to the racial issues they deemed important; they forged connections between Black social networks and the broader political realm.

Women contributed to the growth of the Black public sphere as well. Their writings and organizational activities helped determine the political goals of the community. Their public-sphere activities included labor, social events, protests, civic clubs, and educational endeavors. Elite and upwardly mobile Black women's public engagement, rather than embrace patriarchal gender norms that relegated women to the home, challenged the gendered public/private dichotomy promoted by white Cuban elites. African-descended women who navigated the public sphere worked to inscribe themselves and their visions of citizenship into nationalist agendas.

Women who entered into the Black public sphere tested the possibilities for racial integration as all Cubans grappled with immigration, economic crises, and urban migrations, dynamics that threw social relations into crisis. As slavery came to an end, elite whites reasserted racial hierarchies and claimed leadership over the modernization of the island. Leaders of the

Liberal Autonomist and Conservative Parties employed slightly different approaches to engaging populations of African descent, but the primarily white membership of both shared the perspective that Blacks needed to prove their capacity for integration while also excluding them from opportunities for socioeconomic advancement. This perspective marginalized African-descended men in the electoral realm. It was deployed to justify discriminatory practices against Black men and women in public spaces and in institutions more broadly. Persons of African descent thus obtained new freedoms of political expression while experiencing attacks on their ability to participate fully in modern life.

Ayala represented a community of elite and upwardly mobile African descendants who responded to such dynamics by formulating a platform of racial “regeneration.”<sup>11</sup> Racial regeneration discourses outlined a path for moving beyond the perceived darkness under which African descendants had lived during slavery.<sup>12</sup> Utilizing the Black public sphere, racial regeneration advocates emphasized socioeconomic advancement through racial unity and personal responsibility. Women who embraced racial regeneration principles stressed their feminine virtue as educated and patriotic citizens. As public figures, they formulated a model of political action in which elite women contributed to the moral, economic, and intellectual development of the Black population. Their actions illustrated and expanded dominant definitions of the culturally refined woman to include African descendants. By the late 1880s, elite and upwardly mobile Black women and men protested assaults on their moral character and launched a civil rights movement to demand legal protections in education, employment, and public venues.

Dealing with racialized attacks on their femininity gradually led many African-descended women away from a model of women’s political action that had set them apart from their white counterparts. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Black women’s public presence as laborers and activists drew scrutiny as elite whites determined their mobility to be a potential threat to the island’s stability.<sup>13</sup> The reforms that characterized the post-Zanjón public sphere prompted women of African descent to realign their public roles with shifting standards of Cuban citizenship. By the 1890s, Black women would be less likely to organize outside of male-headed institutions. Increasingly, they drew on such institutions to address racial exclusion.

## “An Integral Part of Society”

In 1888 the educator, musician, and writer Úrsula Coimbra de Valverde echoed Ayala’s vision of racial regeneration that would define Black civic activism as slavery came to an end. Writing for the Black newspaper *La Fraternidad* under the pen name Cecilia, the Cienfuegos native declared, “In order to compete with other races more privileged than ours, we need only to develop our capabilities; then our rights will be guaranteed to rest in illustration, and we will once again show the good desires that animate us and make us an integral part of society.”<sup>14</sup> Individuals like Coimbra promoted illustration through formal education and elite social customs. In what ways did African descendants need to develop their capabilities following abolition? And how did proving their capabilities shape the political strategies of those like Coimbra, who were freeborn and came to align themselves with recently emancipated Blacks?

The Ten Years’ War (1868–1878) engendered critical shifts in how Cubans articulated citizenship. Insurgent leaders envisioned an independent nation without African enslavement. Leaders called for the establishment of a republic in which all men were equal before the law, regardless of race. Racial dynamics, however, remained strained throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century. Enslaved and free men of color joined the Liberation Army in support of the rhetoric of racial equality. Those who rose to high-ranking leadership positions experienced discrimination from white soldiers. Pro-Spanish colonial forces pointed to the large contingent of Black soldiers, who comprised 40–60 percent of the rebel forces, to invoke fears of a race war. Independence intellectuals responded by presenting favorable images of Black insurgents, with whites reinforcing a depoliticized trope of Black male docility. Tensions between racism and antiracism, as Ada Ferrer has asserted, defined Cuban nationalism from its emergence.<sup>15</sup>

Abolition presented Blacks with opportunities to assert control over their daily lives, yet many whites continued to exercise control over the mobility of laboring African descendants. The logic employed by the Spanish colonial government exemplified this dynamic; it established the *patronato* (apprenticeship) in 1880 to provide the remaining enslaved population with, in the words of the minister of Ultramar, “help, protection, defense—in short, guardianship” during a gradual process of emancipation.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the colonial government encouraged Chinese and Spanish im-

migration to fill the island's labor force. Employers relied on foreign labor to undermine the rights of native workers.<sup>17</sup>

The paradox of granting Blacks new legal rights while undermining their ability to exercise such rights shaped the electoral sphere as well. The Spanish government permitted men to vote in parliamentary elections in 1878. But the government issued a five pesos tax requirement that excluded most men from formal participation, especially men of African descent. The Constitutional Party (also referred to as the Conservative Party) supported Spanish colonial rule and promoted the rights of white male landowners and businessmen, and the Autonomist Party embraced reforms that appealed to veterans of the Liberation Army. Yet anti-Blackness also characterized the Autonomist Party's inner workings. Some party leaders suggested that persons of African descent become "civilized" before asking for equality. They advocated Spanish immigration as a strategy to ensure national progress through whitening. Practices of discrimination led Blacks in Oriente Province to withdraw from the party by 1894.<sup>18</sup>

Though Úrsula Coimbra de Valverde did not use the word "civilization," she likely had the concept in mind when she called upon African descendants to follow the racial regeneration platform outlined by *La Fraternidad* editor Miguel Gualba. Her life exemplified a path toward regeneration. Born into a prominent family, she received formal training in musical arts, language, and literature, possibly at one of the few private schools that accepted children of color. Her marriage to the tailor and independence activist Nicolás Valverde y Basco sustained her honorable reputation. Coimbra, similar to Cristina Ayala, offered classes to prepare Blacks for employment beyond the agricultural and domestic sectors. She wrote articles that asserted Black women's civil rights and responsibilities. "Who can resist," she asked, "what a complete gentleman [Gualba] demands of us, invoking the *patria*, friendship, and duty?"<sup>19</sup> In her writings she appealed to both elite African descendants and the laboring poor. Abolition's promises of racial integration, Coimbra contended, would remain unfulfilled as long as Blacks failed to avail themselves of the opportunities around them in a modernizing society.

Coimbra's efforts to help Blacks develop their capabilities responded to evolving discussions of citizenship. During the late nineteenth century, discourses of civilization sustained a "new racial etiquette" as racial categorization in public records became less frequent.<sup>20</sup> Cubans gradually shifted

from discussions of their identity as Spaniards to articulate a nationalist identity, and elite whites employed civilization discourses to exclude persons of African descent. To be “Cuban” meant to embrace a Spanish-Catholic identity, patriarchy, and loyalty to the colonial state.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, Blacks, whom whites generally associated with immorality and African barbarity, lacked the characteristics necessary to participate in modern life.

That white political leaders employed the language of civilization to enforce racial divisions demonstrates their reluctance to abandon social hierarchies established during slavery. The white Ten Years’ War veteran Manuel Sanguily suggested that persons of African descent “remain in their place” rather than push for racial equality. In his war memoir he attacks the Black newspaper *La Igualdad* for promoting the contributions of persons of African descent to the initial insurrection. Sanguily further dismisses African-descended veterans’ participation by suggesting that “the origin, preparation, initiative, program and direction of the Revolution, that the Revolution in its character, essence, and aspirations, was exclusively the work of whites.”<sup>22</sup> Staunchly opposed to miscegenation, he also applauded Black men for not attempting to sleep with white women. Sanguily concluded that Black men lacked the capacity to contribute to building an independent nation.

Elite whites contended that Blacks lacked civilized customs to justify discriminatory practices beyond formal politics. Sanguily and other men formed civic institutions that promoted civilization through balls and *tertulias* (salons).<sup>23</sup> Leaders of most elite white mutual aid societies, which provided employment and educational opportunities as well as health care, barred African-descended men from membership. Following abolition, elite whites continued to enforce segregation in hospitals and schools. Business owners denied Blacks access to hotels, cafes, and restaurants. Elite white men thus crafted a Cuban identity in which they assumed the role as its architects and reinforced ideas of Black inferiority through spatial division.<sup>24</sup>

Marginalized within a modernizing society, elite Blacks protested discriminatory acts but affirmed the principles that claimed they needed to reform themselves. Racial regeneration ideals enabled them to interpret civilization discourses to meet the particular goals of the population of African descent. Many Black activists echoed the perspectives of white elites