Scattered, here one day, there the next, everywhere, jumbled like lost gems on a beach, unknown and sometimes despised in the indifferent multitude, the true heroes and the liberators of the future await the moment when they will put their ideas into play, when they will secure their triumphs.

—Rafael Serra, “Nadie lo sabe,” 1894

How many setbacks would he not overcome and how much fortitude would he not develop before opening the way for himself, and rising, rising high to make himself admired by a society that was refractory toward all those of his race!

—Sotero Figueroa, Ensayo biográfico, 1888

Years later, the writer Lorenzo Despradel described La Liga, the “famous” educational and recreational society located at 74 West Third Street, as the meeting place where all the important elements of the nationalist movement crossed paths in the early 1890s. We begin the tale of this convergence with a seemingly simple question: Where did these “radial lines” originate? Many generations of biographers, with a wide range of political agendas, have provided a fairly rich account of the childhood and early career of José Martí. But for the others who gathered to hear him speak at the apartment on West Third Street, the question of origins is difficult to answer. Nationalist writers—especially writers of color—frequently wrote and published sketches highlighting the literary and political accomplishments of men of “humble” origins, including some of those who passed through La Liga. But they faced a tension between the desire to emphasize how far their subjects had come—their extraordinary triumphs of self-making—and the likelihood that full disclosure about their origins
would dishonor and tarnish their public reputations. Thus in his collection of biographical sketches of men of color who had lived in the United States, the black Cuban journalist Teófilo Domínguez noted only that the founder of La Liga, Serra, was born in 1858 in Havana, received a primary education, entered the cigar workshops of Havana, and “began to earn his own sustenance when he was scarcely thirteen years old!” Domínguez then shifted to the most important narrative action: “By his own efforts he continued to acquire varied knowledge.”

This emphasis on self-making—a quick pivot from obscure origins to an accounting of literary and political accomplishments—helped express the principle that a man’s achievements mattered more than the circumstances of his birth. Rather than detail such circumstances, authors typically employed a range of polite phrases, including “from nothing,” “from a humble cradle,” “a child of the people,” “obscure,” and “among the disinherited of the earth.” They wrote hardly at all about women. Their vision of racial unity was heavily invested in a shared experience of manhood. Yet in the few exceptions to this rule, nationalist writers used similarly vague allusions. Martí himself reported on a gathering of a group of women of color organized by Gertrudis Heredia, describing “the heartfelt and modest speeches, spoken with the trepidation of a new bride, by women who, in that other life from which they come, the life of darkness and impiety, never learned the arts of association.” This way of discussing origins required few potentially embarrassing specifics of the particular obstacles that Serra, Heredia, and others faced on their way to becoming “something.” But these details are exactly what would be most helpful, looking back from a distance of more than a century, to fully understand the beginning points of the lives that converged at La Liga, and the varied contexts of racial domination that gave rise to the visions of racial and class justice that these men and women espoused.

Still, it is possible to dig deeper into the circumstances of their “humble” points of origin. To make the task manageable, I focus here on the early lives of just three of the key personalities in the book. The first of these is Serra, cigar maker, poet, and politician. The second is Heredia, a midwife who became one of the few black women to complete a certification program in obstetrics at the University of Havana before joining her husband, Serra, in New York. There, the couple raised a daughter. Heredia, along with another midwife, led the various women’s organizations
affiliated with La Liga. The third is Figueroa, a Puerto Rican typesetter and journalist. Figueroa set the type, proofed copy, and oversaw the printing of Martí’s newspaper, Patria. He was an official in the Cuban Revolutionary Party, and gave speeches alongside Martí and Serra at countless party events. Like Serra, he served as a bridge to working-class and black and brown constituents in New York. But he also helped to bring the relatively smaller community of Puerto Rican exiles under the umbrella of the Cuban Revolutionary Party. After Martí’s death, Figueroa and Serra led the charge in defending a radical vision of “the Apostle’s” legacy. The experiences of three other figures help to fill in some crucial gaps around the stories of the first three. One is Manuela Aguayo, who married Figueroa in the late 1870s, but who died of tuberculosis several years before he moved to New York. The second is Juan Gualberto Gómez, the most important journalist of African descent and civil rights leader in Cuba from the 1870s through the end of the century, and a close ally to Martí, Serra, and Figueroa. The last is Martí himself, who was born in Havana only a few years before Serra, but grew up in wholly different circumstances.

These individuals—four men and two women; four Cubans and two Puerto Ricans; two people with dark-brown complexions, three with lighter-brown skin, and one regarded as white; a midwife, a seamstress, a typographer, two journalists, and a cigar maker—do not represent the full spectrum of diversity within the group that would later converge at La Liga. But their stories are sufficiently distinct from one another to provide a starting place, a sketch of the varied racial landscapes out of which they came. In fact, the differences among their stories are what prove to be most important. Like almost everyone associated with La Liga, all these characters except Martí were identified as members of the “artisan” class (urban, skilled workers) and as people “of color.” Yet naming their class and racial status in this way provides little more information than the euphemistic allusion to their “humility.” Indeed, precisely because of the seeming familiarity of the concept “of color,” simply calling them intellectuals and leaders “of color” risks papering over the diversity of their experiences of race. To be an artisan “of color” in San Juan, the small administrative capital of Puerto Rico (where Figueroa was born and raised), was to fall within a range of experiences that was similar but not identical to the range of experiences perceived by people described as “of color” in Havana (where Serra was born), the opulent capital of Cuba’s booming.
slave economy. To be the granddaughter of the leaders of an African ethnic society in Matanzas, Cuba’s wealthy second city (as Heredia was), was not the same as to be the illegitimate daughter of a white politician in the small town of Toa Baja, Puerto Rico (as Aguayo was). To be a man was to experience color and class in ways that were dramatically different from the experiences of women. These tales of self-making share some important features but also differ in crucial ways.

A HUMBLE CRADLE

In 1856, a couple named Cayetano Heredia and María del Socorro del Monte brought their infant daughter to the cathedral in the city of Matanzas to be baptized. For a fee, the parish priest conducted the required ritual, applying holy oil to the child’s head, washing clean the original sin with which she had been born, and advising two godparents of their spiritual obligations to the child. He gave the baby the name chosen by her parents, María Gertrudis. Then, at some point later that day or that week, he turned to the sacramental books that were in his charge in order to record the details of the ceremony. Cuba, one of the two remaining Spanish colonies in the New World, was a society without any civil registry and characterized by low levels of literacy. Sacramental registers were the closest thing to an official record of the identities and lineages of the people who lived on the island. Parish priests produced formulaic accounts of baptisms in a deliberate hand, inserting relevant details such as date, the name and sex of the child, and the names of parents, grandparents, and godparents. They also made important determinations of social status, indicating whether children were free or enslaved, and whether they were white. In the case of María Gertrudis, the priest copied the details of the event in a racially segregated baptismal register for pardos and morenos. He recorded that she was the daughter of Cayetano Heredia, “native of Africa,” and María del Socorro del Monte, a woman born in Matanzas. He then indexed the record by writing surnames and other details in the margins, and tucked the book away in the sacred repository. A second priest made the same determination in 1858 when Rafael Serra and Marcelina Montalvo, “free morenos from Havana,” went to a local parish in Havana to baptize their son. This priest too inscribed José Rafael Simón Agapito Serra in the book set aside for baptisms of pardos and morenos.
In Cuba at the midpoint of the nineteenth century, to be recorded in one of these separate baptismal books was to be assigned to an explicitly inferior social status. Ideas about racial difference provided the ideological backbone for the central feature of Cuban economic, political, and social life: the systematic enslavement and brutalization of Africans and their descendants. Even for those who were legally free, to be marked as pardo or moreno was a significant barrier to social standing. For instance, though there was technically no law against interracial marriage in the Spanish Empire, local officials in Cuba interpreted laws designed to prevent minor children and persons of noble blood from contracting “unequal marriages” without the consent of their families as an impediment to any marriage across color lines. This obstacle could only be overcome by obtaining permission from a representative of the Crown. These practices derived from Spanish legal restrictions on the Christian descendants of Jews and Muslims based on a concept of inherited difference known as “impurity of blood.” In the slave societies of the Caribbean the same restrictions were applied to people with the somewhat different inherited “stain” of blackness. And they persisted well after the concept of blood purity fell out of use in Spain itself. Beyond the question of marriage, to be accepted unconditionally as a person of rank, to be eligible for certain offices, to enter certain professions, and to be treated with honor and dignity by other persons of standing, required a public reputation as a white person.

These two baptismal records offer a sure sign that Gertrudis and Rafael, who many years later would become migrants and community leaders in New York, were not born into such a reputation. Nor does it seem likely that the priests in question would have experienced much doubt in making their determinations about where the two children stood in the local racial hierarchy. Similarly, the priest in another Havana parish who baptized José Martí in 1853 would not have had much doubt about placing his record in the baptismal book for white persons. José, known to his family as Pepe, was the child of two Spanish immigrants to Cuba. His parents had neither significant property nor claim to aristocratic distinction, and they would later fall on hard times. But José’s father was a professional military man—a position reserved for men who could prove their purity of blood. The idea of blood purity had its origins in attempts to manage the ethnic diversity within Spain, but in the colonies, the Martí family
and other new arrivals from the peninsula were automatically granted the benefits of whiteness.10

Color was also a key element of social hierarchy in the other remaining Spanish American colony, the smaller Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. But the system for assigning color status did not work in precisely the same way. This is evident in the record produced in 1853, when José Mercedes Figueroa and María Rosenda Fernández brought their son Sotero to be baptized in the cathedral in San Juan. The priest fulfilled all the same rites: the anointment with oil, the admonition to the godparents, the collection of an emolument from the parents, and the recording of the act in a sacramental book. Yet this book was segregated on different principles. In fact, less than a year before Figueroa was born, the bishop of Puerto Rico had reviewed the sacramental books at the San Juan Cathedral and ordered priests to end the segregation of baptismal records by race. The bishop did not suggest that he favored the end of all racial distinctions or believed that all races were one. Nor did he offer any reason for the new policy. He merely specified that all free white, black, and brown people should appear in the same book, and only slaves should appear in a separate, second book. Under the bishop’s orders, the priests at the cathedral crossed out the words “white persons” on the title page of the book previously reserved for whites, inserting the words “of all classes.” Puerto Rican record keepers shifted the line of separation from race to legal status (free or enslaved), and began to leave race unspoken or to treat it obliquely, in contrast with record keepers in Cuba.11 So although he had recorded the baptisms of Sotero’s older siblings in the register for pardos and morenos, the priest recorded his birth in 1853 in the newly desegregated book, with no mention of his race or that of his parents.12

In all three cases, the priests recorded the status of these families with some variation of the phrase “native of Havana,” “residents of this parish,” and “of this city.” These phrases were probably small details for those involved, but they are highly significant for historians seeking to understand exactly where these families stood within these two societies. In the 1850s, most people of African descent on both islands lived in rural settings, as either peasants or slaves. But both Cuba and Puerto Rico had long-established urban communities of African-descended artisans, peddlers, entrepreneurs, washerwomen, and seamstresses. Free colored tradespeople and their families were able to achieve, through economic
success, a degree of honorable personhood. Service in local militias also granted some free men of color privileges, including pensions and immunity from civilian courts and jails. Authorities also permitted and even encouraged the expansion of associations for free people of color, including lay Catholic brotherhoods. It is not clear if any of the parents who appeared in these baptismal registers had attained this honorable status, but it is certain that they were “of the city,” which in and of itself could be a mark of a certain distinction.13

Yet there were clear differences in the circumstances of free people on the two islands. The port of Havana, Cuba, was a required stopping point for the great fleet of the Spanish Empire in its heyday, home to a sizable administrative and military presence. Puerto Rico lay outside the main imperial trade routes. As in other remote parts of the empire, the small scale of economic production created relatively more space for people of African ancestry or mixed ancestry to live outside the bonds of slavery while reducing the number of people who could be considered white. Thus by the last third of the eighteenth century, free people of color constituted only one-fifth of the population of Cuba, but about half of the population of Puerto Rico.14 These differences then grew even more dramatic when, over the subsequent half century, the economies of Cuba and Puerto Rico shifted toward the production of tobacco, coffee, and especially sugar for export. In both Cuba and Puerto Rico, this dynamism relied heavily on a new influx of enslaved people from Africa.15 But the two islands differed dramatically in the scale of this shift toward slave production. During the period when Figueroa was a child, the enslaved population in Puerto Rico totaled only 41,738 as compared with 241,037 free people of color. In Cuba, when Heredia, Serra, and Martí were children, 370,553 people lived in slavery along with 232,493 free people of color. The contrast is even more marked if we break down the two islands by region. San Juan, where Figueroa was born and raised, remained a modest administrative and military capital, while most of the island’s sugar production and most slaves were concentrated in the southern and western ports of Ponce, Guayama, and Mayagüez. Havana and Matanzas, in contrast, were not only grand modern cities and the principal ports in Western Cuba but the nearby countryside was also the most productive sugar region in Cuba (and the world).16

The massive growth of sugar production, and the corresponding growth of Havana and Matanzas, provided economic opportunities for some free
people of color. But the burgeoning export economy also led to a growing and increasingly powerful Cuban planter class, and to widespread concerns among white Cuban intellectuals about the “Africanization” of the island. Cuban thinkers were acutely aware of the fate of the plantation society that the French had constructed in nearby Saint-Domingue, where African slaves had far outnumbered white colonists. Indeed, the Cubans had eagerly taken advantage of slave rebellions in Saint-Domingue in the 1790s to build their own sugar industry. Then they had watched as armies composed of former slaves waged a successful anticolonial revolution and established an independent black republic, Haiti. In this context, white intellectuals expressed ambivalence, if not outright hostility, toward pardo and moreno artisans and militiamen. They worried that the presence of so many black and brown people in the urban trades discouraged the immigration of white workers, and the “improvement” of the artisan class. They expressed concerns that free people harbored aspirations that would unsettle clear lines of social hierarchy and threaten the very stability of the slave system. And they regarded free pardos and morenos as the potential allies of slaves, part of a unified “African race” or “race of color.”

This shifting politics of race came to a head after 1844 when Cuban authorities discovered several planned slave uprisings in the countryside around Matanzas. A Military Commission conducted a widespread investigation, employing torture to uncover, or perhaps invent, a conspiracy for a coordinated attack on slavery, led by free people. The commission executed a dozen accused leaders, including Matanzas poet, silversmith, printer, and carpenter Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido). The authorities also banished more than four hundred free men of color, and imprisoned more than a thousand. The Military Commission further confiscated the property of the accused in order to cover the cost of investigation, trial, and detention. This episode of state violence proved devastating to the economic fortunes of the most well-established African-descended families in the cities of Western Cuba. Though it is not clear whether any close relative of Gertrudis and Rafael came under suspicion, children baptized to free families in Havana and Matanzas in the 1850s grew up in the shadow of this violence. Indeed, Plácido’s mother-in-law, the midwife Pilar Poveda, continued to act as a community leader in Matanzas well into the period of Gertrudis’s childhood. Plácido’s widow remarried a local violinist who had been imprisoned but not killed during the
investigations. Their son Enrique later became a close friend and ally of Rafael and Gertrudis.\textsuperscript{18}

So the two Cuban couples, Rafael Serra (Sr.) and Marcelina Montalvo, and Cayetano Heredia and Socorro del Monte, brought their children to be baptized in a period when white society in Havana and Matanzas worked to reinforce the boundaries between whites and nonwhites, eliminating the free colored militias and segregating public facilities. Cuban elites also organized to encourage the immigration of white people to the island in the hopes of insulating themselves against black rebellion and preparing for the transition from slavery. In 1854, rumors spread that the Catholic hierarchy and a liberal governor had plans to relax the restrictions on interracial marriage (as part of a project to promote sacramental marriage and crack down on consensual unions). This led to a backlash and a decree reinstating the broadest possible interpretation of Spanish laws governing unequal marriages. The principle at stake, however, was no longer the defense of the “purity” of individual white families, but rather a broader question of security. Intermarriage, opponents argued, would incite the aspirations of the race of color. By the 1860s, the authorities had stopped granting any licenses for “unequal” marriages. Priests likely held a range of views, but they dutifully continued segregating sacramental registries, maintaining racial divisions in the spiritual world and in the island’s only system of public records.\textsuperscript{19}

By contrast, the San Juan of Sotero Figueroa’s childhood was comparatively insulated both from the influx of Africans and the wave of repression that swept Western Cuba. To be sure, Puerto Rico was a society profoundly marked by slavery. Nearly half a century had passed since a visitor had remarked “there is nothing more ignominious on this Island than to be black, or to be descended from them: a white man insults any of them, with impunity, and in the most contemptible language.”\textsuperscript{20} But such prejudices persisted. White families, government officials, and representatives of the church still shared a widespread consensus that “unequal” marriages ought to be discouraged. But concerns about such marriages continued to be a private matter related to the integrity of family honor, against a backdrop of pervasive racial mixture, rather than a political concern that interracial marriage would lead to rebellion and insecurity.\textsuperscript{21} Worries about slave rebellions, especially after slave uprisings in Saint Croix and Guadalupe in 1848, led to a new set of legal punishments for
free people of color who “rose up” against whites in Puerto Rico (the famous Decree against the African Race). Clearly, the idea of a threat from a unified African race was not absent altogether. Those measures seem never to have been enforced and were quickly reversed.22 Compared to their Cuban counterparts, wealthy Puerto Ricans seem to have been little concerned with segregating public space or sociability, or systematically undermining the status of free people, or at least they lacked the power to put such concerns into effect.23 They were also much less successful than their Cuban neighbors at attracting Spanish immigrants, meaning that whiteness itself was often a fairly ambiguous status. As we will see, this does not mean that whiteness ceased to be an important component of social hierarchy in Puerto Rico. Yet it does help to explain why the segregation of sacramental documents no longer seemed necessary in Puerto Rico at midcentury, while the practice continued in Cuba.

In addition to segregating baptisms into distinct sacramental books, priests in Cuba and Puerto Rico (before 1852) often assigned additional distinctions according to degree of blackness, using the terms “pardo” (light brown), “moreno” (a more respectful way to describe someone perceived to be dark brown), and “negro” (a less respectful way to describe someone perceived to be dark brown). Public officials and notaries applied these categories too. Rafael’s parents were morenos. Sotero’s parents appeared with no racial descriptor on his baptism, but the priests described them as “free pardos of this city [San Juan]” on the baptismal records of two older children, created before the church desegregated sacramental records. It seems fairly sure that they and their children continued to be treated as pardo in their everyday lives, even after the change in church policy.24 These were not trivial distinctions. The Spanish government, for instance, divided militias on both islands into three battalions: one for whites, one for free morenos, and one for free pardos. In Cuba especially, religious brotherhoods also frequently segregated pardos from morenos. These color categories were not defined simply or even principally by physical appearance. Color terms reflected perceptions of public behavior, relative economic status, and how other members of a person’s family and social networks were positioned in the racial hierarchy too. They depended as well on how far removed a person was seen to be from captivity in Africa. “Negro,” for example, was a word reserved, for the most part, for persons held in slavery or only recently manumitted. Colloquially, there
were still more terms for particular combinations of complexion, hair texture, and facial features. Yet especially for free people of African descent, these various elements did not necessarily fit together in predictable or consistent ways. The ascription of a particular color status by a priest at the moment of baptism or by a notary at a later date was significant but not indelible. In fact, the color ascriptions assigned to a particular family on official documents could change over generations or over the course of the life of a single individual. In a few cases, individuals were able to mobilize official pressure to convince priests to amend the baptismal records.25

Despite these basic similarities between the use of color terms in Cuba and Puerto Rico, these gradations worked differently in different parts of the Spanish Caribbean. Census officials on both islands cared deeply about the question of race in their statistical estimates of population for the same reason: they believed that the numerical superiority of white residents was an important, and perhaps the most important, factor in the success of their aspirations for social stability, economic growth, and political freedom. But they diverged, along with the societies in which they were embedded, in the ways that they understood and represented racial categories. For one thing, official statistics, collected by mayors, parish priests, and neighborhood constables, consistently indicated that people of intermediate status were a much-larger proportion of the population in Puerto Rico. Cuban censuses in this period estimated that free pardos narrowly outnumbered free morenos. They also concluded, though, that there were more than twice as many enslaved “negros” as there were free people of color altogether. By contrast, Puerto Rican census takers considered that the free pardo population outnumbered free morenos by a factor of more than seven to one, and also far outnumbered people held in slavery on the island.26

The difference between an island where most persons of African descent were mixed and only distantly descended from slaves and another island where most persons of African descent were black and closely connected to slavery might be expected, given the difference in the scale of the recent sugar boom on each island. But island censuses were more than just a neutral accounting of racial groups; they required crucial decisions about how to count and sort diverse and variegated populations into racial categories. In Puerto Rico, officials generally counted in a way that expanded the middle of the spectrum, describing what they saw as a small
and shrinking population of morenos. By midcentury, Cuban census commissions typically chose not to report the numbers of pardos and morenos separately, instead lumping these groups together as free people “of color.”27 This was consistent with the idea of a “class of color” that, authorities sometimes argued, was poised to “rise up against the whites.” By the 1860s, even African-descended intellectuals and activists sometimes used the terms “race of color,” or even “negro,” to refer to all African-descended people, though specific individuals were still frequently identified as pardo, mulato, africano, or moreno.28 The concept of a “class of color” or a “race of color” appeared in Puerto Rican public life as well, but its use was less frequent. Perhaps more important, while many Puerto Ricans understood African ancestry as an indelible stain on family lineage that could not be mitigated, in a society with little immigration from Europe, the borderline between pardo and white was typically a matter of reputation, and therefore open to considerable flexibility.

These differences in the mode of recording and counting race between Cuba and Puerto Rico, together with the differential status afforded to persons of mixed race in both societies, help to make sense of the “humble” origins of the three children at the heart of this story. Figueroa was the son of free urban “pardos” whose race went unspoken on the key official document that marks his early life, at a time when priests stopped referring openly to race. He would come of age in a period in which officials collecting racial data, including the local constable in his neighborhood, tended to see most Puerto Ricans of African descent as mixed rather than black. Meanwhile, Heredia was the daughter of an African-born man, and Serra was the son of free “morenos” in Western Cuba, where public officials sought to collapse the varied color statuses into the category “of color” or simply “negro,” and to rigorously separate whites from nonwhites. Intermediate categories continued to exist in Cuba. But large numbers of African-descended people, including both Gertrudis and Rafael, lived at one end of the racial spectrum, and a large group of recent immigrants, including the family of Martí, lived at the other extreme. In fact, Martí’s father was one of the officials responsible for counting and ascribing racial categories to the residents of Havana. After an undistinguished career in the military, Martí’s father found a job as a celador de barrio, or neighborhood constable, responsible for keeping tabs on the local population.29 In cities at the center of the plantation complex, Gertrudis and Rafael’s
blackness seems not to have been an open question, not something to be negotiated over the course of their lives. Figueroa, on the other hand, was already something other than black at the moment of his birth, and as we will see, his racial status continued to evolve over the course of his life.

Yet there are more wrinkles to the story. The priest who performed Gertrudis’s baptism described her father, Cayetano, as a “native of Africa.” On the baptismal record of her younger sister, their father appears as “of the Carabalí nation.” Many, but not all, persons who were eventually identified as Carabalí in Cuba came on slaving ships originating in the port of Calabar, and received their ethnic descriptors in bills of lading and acts of sale. Cayetano’s ethnic identification thus opens the possibility that he was born in one of the small, interconnected communities of the Cross-River Delta, near the border between present-day Nigeria and Cameroon, in which many of the people shipped through Calabar were taken captive. One way or the other, he almost certainly arrived in Cuba as a captive, destined for slavery.  

We can only imagine the details of his transformation from a free person into a captive, and the luck and strength that allowed him to survive capture, movement within coastal Africa, separation from kin and from the resting place of his ancestors, the trauma of the sea voyage across the Atlantic, and the dangerous first years of enslavement in Cuba, known as “seasoning.” Cayetano probably forged bonds with other people transported on the same slave ship. He likely received his Christian names and surnames from the persons who first purchased him in the Matanzas slave market. He may also have participated in the Abakuá Society, an all-male secret fraternity in Havana and Matanzas that was closely associated with the initiation-based societies that helped to govern the Cross-River Region. The baptismal records do not speak to this, nor do they give details about how, between his arrival in Cuba and the birth of his daughter, he managed a most extraordinary feat of self-making. How, in the middle of the immense and brutal profit-making machine of plantation society, did he make himself free?

Indeed, this is a question that must be asked about some member of the family tree of each of the free people of African descent in this story. For some, the last enslaved member of the family was many generations removed. Free people of African descent had lived on both islands since the first shipments of African captives arrived in the sixteenth century. But for Rafael Serra, like Gertrudis Heredia, the border between slavery and
freedom may not have been far in the past. In a poem published in 1880, Serra declared that he had been born into slavery. “This is the shocking slavery,” he wrote, “into which this writer was born.”33 This may well have been a rhetorical device rather than an autobiographical detail, as it contradicts the information on his baptismal record. Perhaps he meant figuratively that he was born in the time of slavery. Or maybe the person speaking in the first person in the poem was not intended to represent Serra literally. Later in life, however, Serra described himself as the “son of enslaved parents.”34 Here again it is possible that he was speaking metaphorically. Men in the independence movement often used the term “slavery” when referring to colonial oppression. Or perhaps his parents were free at the time of his birth, but like Cayetano, had previously been enslaved. The only other clue to his family’s legal and economic position is a brief mention of an aunt, Chuchú Serra, whom Serra described as a seamstress and schoolteacher of “extremely humble” birth.35 The emphasis, extremely, added to this common euphemism could suggest that she too was a slave who became free over the course of her life.

How, then, was such a thing possible? Perhaps, as sometimes happened, the persons who held Cayetano and Chuchú in captivity conceded the gift of freedom in return for loyalty or extraordinary service. It was more common, however, for enslaved people in Cuba to purchase their own freedom. Urban and domestic slaves in Cuba were frequently in a position to engage in some sort of independent economic activity. This allowed some to save for or to purchase their freedom in installments—a process called coartación.36 To help understand this process, we can turn to an example about which historians know more (and introduce a historical figure who will come to play a major role in this story). Juan Gualberto Gómez was the most famous writer and politician of color in Cuba between the 1870s and the 1920s, a close ally of Martí, Figueroa, and Serra, and after independence a member of the Cuban Senate. Gómez was born on a plantation in rural Matanzas in 1854. His parents, Fermín Gómez and Serafina Ferrer, were enslaved domestic servants, Cuban born, of mixed racial ancestry, and apparently favorites of their masters. The family that held them in slavery allowed the couple to marry. They also permitted Serafina to take in sewing and Fermín to plant a vegetable garden, selling his produce in the market. Through these efforts, the two managed to save enough money to purchase Juan Gualberto’s freedom prior to his birth, for a sum
of twenty-five pesos. The priest inscribed this arrangement on his baptismal record. By the time Juan Gualberto was ten, Fermín and Serafina had purchased their own freedom as well and moved to Havana, where his mother operated a laundry, and his father sold fruits and vegetables.37

Perhaps Cayetano Heredia did something similar, earning the money to purchase his freedom while still legally enslaved. Maybe Chuchú Serra did the same thing. As a seamstress, she would have had precisely the skills necessary to undertake this sort of project. Alternately, either may have been a “rented out” slave, living independently from their masters, turning in a portion of their wages and keeping the rest for the purposes of self-purchase. Or perhaps they secured loans from relatives or members of a mutual aid association, possibly someone with a shared African ethnic identity, paying the money back once they were free and able to control their own wages. Maybe they depended on relatives (either blood relatives, shipmates, or kin created through godparentage) who were already free to help bear these costs. Maybe, once they were free, they did the same for other relatives.38

Generally speaking, people who had been born free enjoyed a higher social status than those who had become free during their lives, and people separated from slavery by several generations enjoyed higher status than those for whom the connection was easily remembered. So even in a context where the broad category “people of color” was increasingly salient, Gertrudis would likely be understood to have the lowest status of these three children, because of her close connection to Africa and slavery. Rafael might have had slightly higher status because his parents were creole, Cuban born, and possibly freeborn. Sotero might have higher status still, as a member of a family identified as pardo and with no close ties to slavery. What is more, his father, José Mercedes, had been born in Venezuela. The fact that he was an immigrant created a geographic as well as a generational distance from enslavement, effectively preventing Puerto Rican neighbors from obtaining specific information about just how his family came to be racially mixed, or how long ago.39

But things were never quite that simple. The priest who conducted a baptism for Gertrudis in Matanzas in 1856 was likely familiar with her family, especially her maternal grandparents, Rita del Monte and Sebastián Campos. Both del Monte and Campos were identified by various priests as of the “Lucumí nation.” This, and the timing of Rita’s baptism, suggests
that Gertrudis’s grandparents may have been born in the Bight of Benin, in the vicinity of the Oyo Empire, and may have been captured and sold into slavery during the civil wars that shook that region in the 1820s.\footnote{The baptismal record of Rita’s oldest daughter (Gertrudis’s mother) in 1831 identifies Rita as a Lucumí woman and the “slave of Captain José del Monte.” Yet by the time of the baptism of her second daughter in 1843, she appeared as a “morena libre.” At about the same time, she and her husband, Sebastián, first appeared in the church to serve as godparents to the child of another woman. By the time that Gertrudis was born thirteen years later, at least twenty more people had prevailed on Rita and Sebastián to serve as godparents. Some of their godchildren were infants, some were adults, some were enslaved, and some were free. Most remarkable of all, when Rita brought an enslaved woman of the Mandiga nation to be baptized, the priest reported not only that Rita was the woman’s godmother but that she was also the woman’s owner.\footnote{By the year that Getrudis was born, colonial officials also recognized her grandfather as the leader of the cabildo Fernando VII. Cabildos de nación were societies made up of people who, having been wrenched from communities of origin, found others whose language and customs were intelligible, and reconstructed communal ties and spiritual practices under the umbrella of African “nations.” In his role as leader of the cabildo, Sebastián managed funds and property, and organized dances and ritual gatherings. He was responsible for maintaining relationships with local priests, who had oversight of funerals as well public celebrations on feast days. For instance, when Gertrudis was eight months old, her grandfather received permission from the local authorities to lead his cabildo in the parade for the Feast of the Rosary, marching behind the banner of their patron, Santa Bárbara. Because the members of the cabildo Fernando VII were Lucumí, they knew this saint as the alter ego of the oricha named Changó, the deity of fire, lightning, drumming, and dance associated with the powerful city-state of Oyo. The year that she turned eight, her grandfather applied for and received permission to hold no fewer than forty-five dances at the cabildo headquarters on Calle Daoíz. Gertrudis, like other Cuban-born descendants of cabildo members, was technically not allowed to attend such gatherings.\footnote{Sebastián and Rita’s leadership may have reflected a high social status that they had previously enjoyed in Africa, or unusual spiritual power.}}

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Or perhaps it stemmed from their ingenuity within the local economy in Matanzas or simply to good fortune (relative to others brought to Cuba in captivity). As head of the cabildo, Sebastián would also have had to negotiate with secular authorities, especially the local constable. Here again, the contrast between the ways that the characters in this story were inserted within the same set of social relations is stark. José Martí’s father, Mariano Martí, served as constable in several neighborhoods of Havana. Mariano was, Martí’s boyhood friend recalled, “one of those agents of authority who, when passing through the streets with his two bodyguards behind him, frightened away all evildoers, except for those who were his collaborators.”

Mariano’s official tasks included witnessing and certifying the election of cabildo leaders, and then interacting with those leaders to approve petitions to hold dances, collect taxes, impose fines, and sometimes mediate conflicts within the cabildos. It is not clear whether Gertrudis’s grandmother, Rita, occupied an official position in the cabildo Fernando VII. But women played prominent roles in practical governance and the spiritual life of the Lucumí cabildos of Matanzas. Indeed, within the ritual and philosophical practices that Rita would have known as Regla de Ocha (and later generations called Santería), lineages of initiation and spiritual knowledge often passed through female lines.

All this is highly significant for thinking about where Gertrudis and her family fit in the local social context. To Cuban society at large, being the daughter and granddaughter of formerly enslaved Africans might be seen as a severe defect. In the immediate world in which Gertrudis grew up, however, to be the oldest daughter of the oldest daughter of Rita and Sebastián was probably a sign of considerable prestige. To Martí, whose father had been part of the state apparatus that oversaw Afro-Cuban ethnic organizations, the fact that Gertrudis came from “that other life,” the world of “darkness and impiety,” made her a most unlikely participant in associational life. But to the African-born people of Matanzas, especially the people who were the godchildren or slaves of her grandparents, or members of the cabildo Fernando VII, Gertrudis may well have been born into a presumption of leadership.

A last crucial piece of information on these sacramental records complicates the question of status still further. Priests recognized both Rafael and Gertrudis (even Juan Gualberto Gómez, the child of people held as slaves) as legitimate children. Sotero, on the other hand, was illegitimate,
a natural child. To be a natural child in San Juan, Matanzas, or Havana was wholly unremarkable. Marriage was both difficult and expensive, out of reach for a large majority of the population, in both Puerto Rico and Cuba.\textsuperscript{45} Illegitimacy was thus a common element of poverty, and legitimate marriage was one of the ways that a small, self-conscious elite in the Spanish Caribbean imagined the distance between itself and everyone else to be the result of an inherent moral superiority rather than because of brutal systems of exploitation. In this sense, to be a natural child was similar in Puerto Rico and Cuba to having “impure” blood. Persons of high social rank, or “quality,” regarded natural children as persons without honor, making them ineligible to use the titles “don” or “doña,” rendering them unacceptable marriage partners for persons of high status, and excluding them from the priesthood, secondary education, and public offices.\textsuperscript{46}

Yet illegitimacy was not simply a social defect parallel to nonwhiteness. The two defects actually overlapped to a great degree, both in terms of the people whom they excluded and the ways that elites thought about them. To understand this point it can help to consider the moment in 1855 when “Don Manuel Aguayo,” a planter and the mayor of the Puerto Rican town of Toa Baja, brought his daughter Manuela to be baptized. Manuel was not married to the child’s mother, a woman named Ezequiela Pulido.\textsuperscript{47} This made Manuela a natural child. Her maternal lineage was also suspect. According to baptismal records in a distant parish in San Juan, her mother, Ezequiela, was the natural daughter of a woman reputed to be a parda and a man reputed to be white.\textsuperscript{48} But it is unlikely that anyone checked those records, and the fact that Manuel appeared at the child’s baptism left the racial status of the mother and daughter somewhat ambiguous. When men of high status confirmed their relationships to the mothers of their children through marriage, they could rescue those women from dishonor and their children from illegitimacy. Indeed, baptismal books in Puerto Rico were full of marginal notations indicating that subsequent marriages had converted natural children into legitimate children. Thus, when Manuel appeared along with her to recognize his daughter, Ezequiela’s attachment with the mayor of the town seems to have influenced the priest, who recorded her as “Doña Ezequiela Pulido,” affording her an honorific that suggested she was a woman of honor, legitimate and white.

Had Manuel gone on to marry Ezequiela that status would likely have been secure. But less than a year later Don Manuel married another woman,
from an established local family, with whom he subsequently fathered several legitimate children.49 This announced to the world that Ezequiela was an acceptable sexual partner but not a potential marriage partner. In the entangled logic of race and sex in the Spanish Caribbean, such treatment signaled to the world that Ezequiela was not of pure blood. Because members of the dominant classes typically considered women of African descent to be without sexual honor, their relationships with men outside marriage, even with more powerful white men, were thought to be the result of their intrinsically dishonest natures. When white women faltered, the logic went, they had likely been led astray. The honorable response was for the father to legitimate the child and restore the mother’s honor by marrying her. When nonwhite women faltered, even when they were forced, there was no honor to be restored. Thus, in a society where public reputation about who was white was more important than official record keeping, marriages (or their absence) became “racializing mechanisms,” fixing the status of women and children according to the treatment afforded them by powerful men. Manuel’s decision not to marry Ezequiela, then, stamped Manuela with the defect of illegitimacy and a strong implication of impure blood. This implication would have been further strengthened when Ezequiela, still unmarried, brought a second child to be baptized. This time neither Manuel nor any other man stepped forward to acknowledge the child. Years later, when Manuela and her own husband, Sotero, brought their legitimate children to be baptized, the priests acknowledged her as the daughter of Don Manuel, but afforded neither Manuela nor her mother the honorific.50

The implications of illegitimacy for racial status were somewhat different in the case of unmarried couples of relatively equal status, like Sotero’s parents, who seem to have lived as common-law husband and wife. But race and sex were still tied together. Church and government officials imagined the problem of illegitimacy (which they saw as a mark of the uncivilized culture of the Cuban and Puerto Rican poor) to stem primarily from the sexual improprieties that they attributed to women of African descent. So the priest who recorded Sotero’s birth, while not marking his status as pardo or keeping a segregated sacramental book, recorded his identity in a way that strongly implied his racial status by denying his parents the honorifics “don” and “doña,” and by marking him as a natural child. When he and Manuela went to have their children baptized, the priest recorded
Sotero without the honorific don as “the natural child of José Mercedes and María Rosenda,” neither of whom were afforded honorifics.

But if prejudice against illegitimacy continued to be a tool for reinforcing racial inequality, efforts to secure legitimacy through church-sanctioned marriage could be a means for reducing the stain of racial difference or for claiming respectability despite indelible racial difference. Some free people of color in Cuba and Puerto Rico, especially those who served in militia battalions and worked in skilled manual trades, therefore took great pains to create and maintain legitimate lineages and “dense” networks of legitimate kin through marriage and godparentage. Even if these networks were exclusively composed of nonwhite people, if all were married and legitimate, this had the potential to attenuate their exclusion from public life in their cities. It is in this sense notable that the Serras and the Heredias managed not only to free themselves but also to marry. Perhaps they took advantage of one of the periodic campaigns undertaken by church authorities in the 1850s to reduce sacramental fees and legitimate consensual unions. For some reason, however, Sotero’s parents either did not seek this status or never managed it, though they apparently lived as husband and wife, and baptized four children together (three of whom later joined the respectable, married, artisan class). As a result, Sotero began his life not only as a pardo but also as illegitimate, though the ascription of this status too would evolve over the course of his life.

SCHOOL

Clearly, none of these children came “from nothing.” Their projects of self-making began with grandparents who founded and ran community institutions and created broad networks of dependents (and purchased other human beings); parents who emigrated, who survived the Middle Passage, who purchased their own freedom, who baptized their children, and who married or who lived as if they were married. Yet in each case, the most important first step toward making their offspring into writers, public figures, or professionals was an education—something that could be obtained only against a backdrop of extremely adverse circumstances. Spanish law technically mandated that every municipality in Cuba and Puerto Rico create free public schools beginning in 1844. But the number of people who actually attended primary school in the colonies was
miniscule, especially in Puerto Rico. Wealthy Puerto Ricans resisted the
taxes that would have been necessary to support public education, espe-
cially in rural districts where landed elites also had a vested interest in
pressuring the children of poor families into field labor. Officials settled
on creating an insufficient number of schools and paying low salaries to
teachers. Teachers, in turn, often absented themselves from schools alto-
gether, paying a fraction of their stipends to substitutes to whom they left
all the work of instruction. Public school teachers also generally charged
tuition to those who could pay, treating nonpaying students as “spectators”
rather than as pupils. The consequences of these policies were dramatic.
When Figueroa reached school age in the early 1860s, official statistics
showed that only 8.3 percent of the population of Puerto Rico could read
or write. The figures were significantly worse among the segment of the
population identified as nonwhite, at 2.3 percent, and significantly better
for those recorded as white, at 14.9 percent. Education was the privilege
of those who could pay for it, and secondary and higher education were,
for the most part, the special privilege of people reputed to be white.

Because he lived in San Juan and because his parents did not require
him to begin earning money at a young age, Figueroa was able to enroll
in a school that was run as a charity by a cigar maker named Rafael Cord-
ero. Cordero, identified as moreno by contemporaries, was not the only
teacher of African ancestry in Puerto Rico. Nor was he the only teacher
to accept children who were, as Figueroa would later put it, “disinher-
ited by fortune.” Especially after midcentury, teaching was an occupation
of intermediate status, within reach for men from plebeian families (or
men with unacknowledged ties to patrician families) seeking to enter the
professions. Yet when Cordero created his school in 1810, it was one of
the only primary schools of any kind in the city. For fifty-eight years, he
taught generation after generation of boys while still earning his living
rolling cigars. Indeed, his workshop and his classroom were one and the
same. By the time of his death in 1868, he was largely responsible for, as
one writer put it somewhat condescendingly, “the little learning that a
tenacious observer can discover in the class of color.” Nevertheless, his
school was also one of the better options for white students in the city,
even for some boys from well-situated families. As Figueroa himself put it,
Cordero taught “a large number of the persons who today give brilliance
to this society.”

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This presented a significant opportunity for Figueroa. By the time that Figueroa started school at the beginning of the 1860s, Cordero was already a much-beloved elderly man, well known to colonial authorities, to local priests, and to neighbors of all social classes. Indeed, three men who had been Cordero’s students in the 1830s, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, José Julián Acosta, and Román Baldorioty de Castro, were, by the time Figueroa was a student, leaders of the emerging liberal reformist and abolitionist movement, and outspoken advocates for popular education. Tapia and Acosta enjoyed the privileges of uncontested whiteness. Baldorioty, as we will see, was illegitimate and therefore contended with some suspicion about his racial purity. These three men were at the heart of San Juan’s small community of writers, teachers, and intellectuals—a new kind of urban elite without ties to landholding or inherited title. They had studied or traveled in Europe, and they developed what one writer has called a “militant desire for modernity,” which they exercised through participation in government boards and commissions, and in one of the few institutions of civil society permitted by the Spanish monarchy, the Economic Society. They looked around at their small capital, a grid of six streets by eight streets, with no public water supply, inadequately paved streets, no streetcars, and no opera house, and responded with disgust. They hatched projects to remake the center of the city, to regulate public behavior, and to develop public institutions, even as a growing population put pressure on the housing market, pushing poorer residents into a handful of new neighborhoods outside the city walls.

More than anything, the liberal intellectuals in the Economic Society sought to improve education on the island, publishing textbooks, supporting the creation of secondary and technical schools, and fostering literary contests and prizes. These efforts mainly benefited the children of wealthier Puerto Ricans. But in theory, the reformists also favored education to uplift and civilize the poor. This was advocacy of a particular sort. In their calls to educate poor Puerto Ricans, reformists described the varied popular cultures in Puerto Rico, especially those derived from African antecedents, as a wasteland of ignorance, barbarism, and superstition. They portrayed their own European training as universal civilization. By the time that Figueroa entered school, these reformists had begun to cast Cordero—who had been their teacher—as a hero of liberal reformism, a man whose rudimentary training and Christian morality had kept a
spark of enlightenment alive in Puerto Rico despite the dereliction of the colonial authorities. In 1858, “a group of good patricians” proposed that Cordero receive recognition in the form of membership in the Economic Society, though they never followed up on the idea. While eager to recognize the “generous efforts” of Cordero and to congratulate themselves on their liberal racial attitudes, these reformists worked toward a society in which men like themselves would exert more control over the educational system, bringing the next stage of enlightenment to the Puerto Rican population. Their affection for their old teacher, however, seems to have been genuine, as was their support for his more brilliant students. So if their plans for reform had little impact on the lives of the great majority of Puerto Rican children of Figueroa’s generation, for Figueroa himself, the close relationship between his teacher and the leaders of Puerto Rico’s liberal reform movement would prove important.

The educational system was significantly more developed in Cuba than in Puerto Rico, especially in Havana, where official literacy rates reached 57 percent by the early 1860s. In the first decades of the century, most teachers in Cuba were, like Cordero in Puerto Rico, free people of color without formal education or training. Serra’s aunt Chuchú was a teacher in this tradition. Similar to Puerto Rico, by midcentury a group of creole intellectuals supported education and scientific research, and advocated public schooling through the institution of the local Economic Society. Because of the enormous wealth produced by the sugar and tobacco industries, these reformists benefited from considerably greater resources than their Puerto Rican counterparts. They created a public library, supported literary societies, funded schools, and sat on boards to oversee curriculum and select teachers. These efforts were strongly inflected by their location at the center of the burgeoning slave society of Western Cuba. At the same time that the members of the Economic Society in Puerto Rico began to venerate El Maestro Rafael, members of the Economic Society in Cuba sought to remove teachers like Chuchú Serra from their posts. Such teachers, in the words of Antonio Bachiller y Morales, the secretary of the Economic Society, were “not only ignorant to the point of stupidity, but also unclean in their behavior and of the wrong race.” They also sought to eliminate the “mixture of all classes and castes in a single classroom.” In practice, this meant excluding students of color from public schools. The Spanish government instructed Cuban municipalities to provide segregated
schools for children of color. Yet local authorities and the Economic Society ignored these directives, explained Bachiller, because of the “irresistible conviction” that it was too dangerous to educate children of color in the context of a slave society. Bachiller would later flee to New York, where he would become an important figure in the Cuban Junta in the 1870s.

Both Martí and Heredia reached school age in the early 1860s, at a moment when the Economic Society had largely succeeded in imposing these reforms. Martí’s father had lost his job as a petty official, and the family depended almost entirely on the income that his mother and sisters earned as seamstresses. But a family friend took on the expense of sending him to the premier secondary school in Havana, where he became a star student and the protégé of one of the great literary figures in Cuba, Rafael Mendive, a poet and abolitionist who served as principal of the school. Things were different for Gertrudis. There were no longer any teachers of color in Matanzas. The census reported 1,178 free girls of color residing in the jurisdiction of Matanzas, about half of whom were school aged. But only 40 of them attended school. There is no evidence as to whether Gertrudis was among this lucky few. It is clear that what minimal educational opportunity existed meant something different for girls of color than it did for boys. The most honorable occupation for women in Matanzas was to be married and employed in domestic chores, or in the supervision of a household staff, in one’s own home. This kind of status required the presence of a male breadwinner and was strongly correlated with race. Girls like Gertrudis might aspire to this status, but because white men were prohibited from marrying them and nonwhite men faced severe economic constraints, they were almost certain to be engaged in paid work for most of their lives. When looking for work, furthermore, the options were few. Washerwomen had more independence than women who performed domestic labor inside the homes of other families. Yet their independent movement through public spaces in the city subjected them to dishonor. White women therefore eschewed this trade. Seamstresses, on the other hand, could take in piecework, earning their living safely within the confines of private homes. As such, this occupation attracted many white women, including Martí’s mother and sisters, who supported the family through his father’s chronic unemployment. It was also one of the few occupations preferred by white women that was also open to women...
of color. Training in manual skills such as sewing, then, was one of the key advantages of schooling for girls who faced exclusion based on impurity of blood. Manuela Aguayo, who had been recognized but not legitimated by her father, the mayor, had the good fortune to learn this trade. Townspeople in Toa Baja (and her own family members) may have viewed her as other than white, but at least this reputation was not compounded by the need to work or conduct business in public.

The few opportunities that girls like Gertrudis had to attend school, including classrooms run by older seamstresses like Chuchú, therefore focused on teaching basic literacy and manual skills. These were more useful than academic subjects in expanding the limited life chances offered by the colonial and patriarchal economic system. There is no record of whether Gertrudis ever attended primary school or if she ever worked in any of these occupations. But she did learn to read and write. As we will see, Gertrudis eventually made her way through a more difficult path to become a licensed midwife, with a title from the University of Havana, and community leader.

Serra took the first steps toward becoming a teacher, journalist, and politician in nearby Havana. By the time that Serra was old enough to begin school, none of Havana’s more than sixty public schools (including the one attended by his future friend and ally Martí) reported any children of color in attendance. Serra probably attended one of eleven private primary schools for children of color in the city, or one of the three private primary schools that accepted both white and black students. Again, it is interesting to draw on the better-known story of Juan Gualberto Gómez. Having secured the freedom of all its members, the Gómez family moved to Havana by the time Juan Gualberto was ten. He attended a private school run by Antonio Medina y Céspedes, a man usually identified as pardo. Medina was part of the generation of intellectuals of color that had survived the repression unleashed in the wake of a suspected conspiracy including free and enslaved people in 1844. He was a tailor who worked creating sets and costumes in the elegant Teatro Tacón in the 1830s. Medina became a published playwright and journalist in the period before the repression, moving in the same circles as the poet Plácido. In the 1850s, as educational reformers worked to impose new standards, in large part to get rid of teachers that they considered to be of the “wrong race,” he studied to obtain his certification as a teacher. In 1861, he opened
a private school, El Colegio Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados. Medina thus threaded the needle of the period of reform that followed the repression, and Gómez received his education in a space frequented by other survivors of the earlier era of pardo literary expression.

Serra likely attended one of the lesser-known and lower-status “incomplete” primary schools in the city. But his teacher was, quite likely, also a survivor of the period of repression and the efforts by reformers to “elevate” the teaching profession. The fact that his aunt Chuchú, a seamstress of “extremely humble” origins, operated this kind of rudimentary private school suggests that some of the adults in his family were literate, and committed to the project of self-making through education and teaching. This is crucial, as Serra’s formal education (like Figueroa’s and Heredia’s) could only have come about as a result of a conscious investment of family resources in order to pay school fees and to clothe him appropriately. Public subsidies for education in Cuba went almost exclusively to white children. Sending children to school also meant forgoing the income that their early entry into the workforce would have provided. It is unlikely that a seven-year-old child, no matter how remarkably gifted, could have conceived of this project independently, or carried it off without the support of parents or other adults.

**FINDING WORK**

With a few extraordinary exceptions, the professions remained closed to boys of color and to girls, independent of racial status, in San Juan, Matanzas, Toa Baja, and Havana at the end of the 1860s. This included even those who, like Heredia, Figueroa, and Serra, could read and write, and Aguayo, who had several well-connected male relatives. The trades remained the surest path toward economic stability and modest social standing, and almost all the people of African descent who later became community leaders, writers, and intellectuals on the two islands, and in exile, first became artisans. Figueroa became a typographer, Serra a cigar roller, and Aguayo a seamstress. Heredia, the granddaughter of Rita del Monte of the Lucumí nation, became a midwife. Let us begin with her story, as it is probably the most remarkable of the four. Like washerwomen, midwives moved independently around the cities of the Spanish Caribbean. Because such movement implied dishonor and racial impurity,
for most of the colonial period the profession was almost entirely left to women of African descent, for whom it was a significant opportunity for economic gain and status. As late as the early 1860s, in the years that Gertrudis reached school age, the great majority of licensed midwives in Matanzas were women of color. The most famous midwife in Matanzas, Pilar Poveda, was the mother-in-law of the famed artisan and poet Plácido. When Plácido was executed as a supposed leader of the free people of color accused of provoking a slave rebellion in 1844, Poveda was sentenced to a year of forced labor for allegedly assisting him. She then moved back to Matanzas to resume her practice. She was a contemporary of Gertrudis’s grandparents.75

Gertrudis came of age precisely as Poveda and other midwives of her generation faced not just political repression but also new pressures from medical and political authorities. In the same way that educational reformers recoiled in horror at the prospect of black teachers presiding over the classrooms of white children, doctors and government officials lamented the tradition of black women attending to white women in childbirth. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Economic Society secretary Bachiller y Morales described the teachers he deemed unfit for service as “intruding midwives.” In the wake of the repression in 1844, medical reformers began a project to “elevate” the profession of midwifery, to bring it under the authority of doctors, and to attract white women. They instituted a training program for midwives at the Clínica de Partos of the Havana Hospital. They implemented new licensing rules that required midwives to be married and literate—a combination that proved nearly impossible for free women of color to accomplish. An additional requirement that midwives be of “good moral character” meant that women of color not only had to learn to read (in the near-total absence of schools) and marry in a church (though it was expensive, though they outnumbered black men in the city, and though they were legally prevented from marrying white men). They also had to overcome widespread stereotypes about their sexual dishonor, including depictions of them on the stage, in literature, and on thousands of cigarette packages that aimed to capitalize on the erotic fantasies of white men. Finally, authorities imposed steep new training and licensing fees as a barrier to entry for poor women. As a result, by 1869, there were no licensed midwives of color in Havana or Matanzas, although many probably continued to practice without a license.76
Remarkably, then, Gertrudis managed to become a midwife in the period after reformers had succeeded in their effort to make it a more respectable profession, precisely to exclude women like her. Most likely she began her training as an apprentice to an unlicensed midwife in Matanzas. Such training would have been shaped by the world into which she was born. Women in this world likely relied on midwives with practical skill, but also influence over the spiritual world (both Christian saints and Lucumí orichas), to face the most physically trying and dangerous moments of their lives. But in the mid-1880s, she enrolled in the clinical certification program at the University of Havana, at which point she had to pay seven and a half pesos and convince a physician with a professorship at the university to take her on for a three-year period of supervision. At the end of this period, she had to pay a fee of a hundred pesos, along with additional taxes. Finally, a committee of doctors administered an examination covering “anatomical and physiological knowledge of the pelvis and the reproductive organs” as well as diagnosis of presentations, and the care of mothers in labor and newborn infants. She also passed a practical examination, supervising the delivery of a baby under the watchful eye of her examiners. They judged her on the basis of a rigorous regime of hand washing and disinfection, on the proper attire (a clean apron and sleeves rolled up to the elbows), instruments (including a stethoscope), ointments (white Vaseline and under no circumstances almond oil), and the proper mixing and application of antiseptic washes. The tribunal approved her with a mark of “outstanding,” granting the title of midwife to the woman they identified as “the morena, Gertrudis Heredia.”

The archives in Havana preserve almost no details as to how she managed any of this. It is clear, however, that she submitted her baptismal record to the university in application for her license. The unusual step that her parents had taken in getting married, decades before, made it possible for her to pass the scrutiny of university officials and enter the certification course. It is also clear that she submitted a copy of the sacramental record showing that she had married Serra in 1878. This provided her with further proof of her dignity and moral worth, without which she could not have attempted the examination. It established a distinction between her and other women in her community, including her sister-in-law María de Jesús Serra, who brought her daughter to be baptized a few years after Rafael and Getrudis married. The two women experienced the
strangeness and joy of their first pregnancies and deliveries at about the same time, but the priest recorded the child born to María de Jesús as a “parda,” child of a “free morena” and an unknown father. He was probably not literally unknown, of course, but rather could not be compelled to marry María de Jesús or recognize their child because she was black.78 From a distance of more than a hundred years, the record demonstrates the deep injustices embedded in the concepts of legitimacy and sexual honor. At the time, it simply confirmed widespread beliefs about the indecency of black women, especially in their relationships with white men. Gertrudis was spared the worst consequences of this system because of her relationship with Rafael. Fortunately, her husband was also a proponent of women’s education and, having already left Cuba by this point, had access to well-paying work in cigar factories in New York. He may well have contributed to the substantial resources that Heredia had to gather to pay for training and licensing fees.

It is impossible to know, but not to imagine, that when Gertrudis first appeared at the university, when she presented herself for annual reviews, when she interacted with her clinical supervisor, and when she returned to take her examination, she must have dedicated painstaking attention to her self-presentation. Her dress, movements, speech, and professional skills were likely judged differently because of white doctors’ and patients’ prejudices about black women. Indeed, only two years before Heredia took her examination, a white physician named Benjamín de Céspedes caused an upheaval in Cuban public life by publishing a collection of clinical case studies of advanced venereal disease. He based these on gynecological examinations of prostitutes. Céspedes called his book *Prostitution in the City of Havana*, framing the case studies with a historical and sociological account of the causes of prostitution that relied, mainly, on rabid denunciations of Cubans of color. He concluded that “in Cuban society’s lymphatic organism, the purulent abscess of prostitution is rooted in the behavior of the colored race.” Black and mixed-race women, he thought, were a dangerous source of contagion: “their intimate contact infects everything they touch.”79 Céspedes also offered a nearly pornographic account of the immoral and sensuous dancing of black and brown women. This was no surprise to the reading public in Cuba, which was already inundated with cigarette packages adorned with color images depicting mixed-race women as harlots. The book quickly became a best seller, receiving
resounding praise from white journalists and reviewers, and righteous rebuttals from journalists of African descent.\textsuperscript{80} As one of the first black women to receive advanced training in obstetrics at the University of Havana, Gertrudis had not only to contend with the stereotypes built by generations of reformers who had tried to remove black midwives based on the notion that they were illiterate, dirty, and “intrusive”; now, in the middle of her training, Céspedes ignited debate in the Cuban medical community with his account of the damage black and brown women had done with their “infernal machine of fornication.”\textsuperscript{81} What mechanisms of self-possession would be necessary for this young woman to overcome the burden of such stereotypes, to answer clearly and professionally the questions put to her by her examiners (all white men) on pelvic anatomy and the function of the reproductive organs?

On the other hand, the memory of a time when midwives of color attended all births in Western Cuba was not so far in the past. White women may have been more willing to contract Heredia’s services because of this tradition, and their patronage may have bolstered her reputation as decent and moral. In this role, clients would have trusted her with their most intimate secrets: hidden pregnancies, attempts to avoid or end pregnancies, clandestine adoptions, and baptismal records written to conceal paternity or even maternity. Discretion was likely as important a quality as Christian morality for such a sensitive occupation.

At the same time, attending women of African descent, in moments of profound pain and joyful emotion, seems to have helped to make her into a trusted community leader, an heir to her grandmother. Maybe her professional training allowed her the satisfaction of providing scientific information about reproduction and sexual health to women who lived in “humble conditions,” including labor and delivery, care of infants, and strategies to avoid or terminate pregnancy. Perhaps she infused the gift of this information with advice, and advice with judgment or condescension. Maybe she carried into her interactions with clients the message, prevalent among doctors in Havana and Matanzas, that maternal hygiene and Victorian morality were one and the same, and that black women, as a rule, were seriously deficient in both. Maybe her patients saw her careful attempts to present herself as “of good moral character,” for the benefit of her professional reputation, as attempts to place herself above them. Maybe they saw the rituals of hand scrubbing, antiseptic washes,
and stethoscopes as strange impositions on their expected routines of childbirth, which turned on intercession with saints or spirits, not on the invisible power of microbes.

Unfortunately, available documents offer almost no insight into these questions, so we are forced to use our imaginations about what might have been. We can discern a clue, however, in a report of Gertrudis’s professional activities in the newspaper for the class of color, *La Fraternidad*. The mention of Heredia in *La Fraternidad* is brief, but the outlines of the case seem to be the following. Mrs. Concepción Morales, a woman of color honorably married to the newspaper’s editor, Miguel Gualba, had a difficult labor requiring the intervention of a medical doctor, Mr. Cándido Hoyos, and two midwives. One was Gertrudis. The second midwife, Estefanía Barrera de Meireles, was a woman whom the medical examiners at the university recognized as white. How exactly this trio came to work together on the case is not clear.82 Maybe Hoyos was a clinical supervisor from the university. Perhaps Heredia was attending to Morales on her own when the labor turned problematic, at which point she called the doctor. This would make sense given the social and political ties she had to the woman in labor. But where did the second midwife come from? Was she working alongside Heredia from the beginning? Did Doctor Hoyos bring her along when he received the call? Was this an implicit comment on his trust in Gertrudis or his attitude toward black midwives? We cannot be sure. It is notable, though, that the writer in *La Fraternidad* referred to the two as “the intelligent midwife Estefanía Barrera de Meireles,” and as “the no less studious Sra. Gertrudis Heredia de Serra.” For writers in *La Fraternidad*, her studiousness, her status as a married woman (indicated in the title Sra. de Serra), and her ability to traverse the narrowing path of opportunity to become a trained professional were clearly matters of pride. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine a tone of slightly wounded pride in this impeccably polite presentation of the “intelligent” midwife (whom doctors treated as “Doña Estefanía Barrera de Meireles”) and the “no less studious” midwife whom they treated as “the morena María Gertrudis Heredia”?83

Figueroa’s first step to becoming a professional writer in San Juan, when he finished at the school run by the cigar maker and teacher Rafael Cordero at the age of twelve or thirteen, was to obtain a position as an apprentice. He found one in the printing house owned by the most celebrated of Cordero’s former students: teacher, abolitionist, and liberal
politician José Julián Acosta. An apprentice cajista, or typesetter, would first be given the task of distribution: taking apart compositions at the end of a print run, sorting types, cleaning them, and putting them in the correct positions in the boxes for the next project. This meant learning to identify and put in its place every possible character, including italics, bold, and upper- and lowercase. It meant special attention to avoiding the most common mix-ups, confusing 6 and 9, p and q (as in the expression “mind your p’s and q’s”), or n and u as well as learning technical and mathematical symbols, and understanding and sorting the many different sizes and shapes of blank types necessary to produce white space in a text. All this was complicated by the fact that types were made in the inverted image of the text they produced. A box of types badly sorted, or types that were mishandled, dropped, or badly cleaned, would undoubtedly subject an apprentice to the ire of the older, more experienced cajistas, who memorized the location of all the types to speed their work. When the typesetters reached into their “lower case” for an impeccable italicized p, that is exactly what they wanted to find.

Little by little, Figueroa would have been allowed to begin composing, transforming handwritten manuscript into lines of type. He would have started by composing three lines at a time, reaching for type with his right hand and aligning it in a small tray held in his left. Each line would be set, double-checked, and justified through the insertion of spacers to make the lines the same length. The trick was balancing the empty spaces between words and characters so that none were too close and none were too far apart. The lines were then carefully transferred to a wooden frame large enough to hold an entire page. Once a page was complete, the typesetter would print a proof and submit the results to the copy editor. With corrections in hand, Figueroa (once he had learned to read the specialized notations used for editing) could return to the page of type and carefully execute the corrections. This meant pulling free any misplaced types and replacing them, then checking justification and adjusting both vertical and horizontal alignments. After multiple rounds of proofs and corrections, on all the pages of a book, he might help with the armado. The typesetters made sure that all pages were the same size and similarly aligned, added page numbers, chapter titles, and notes, and then checked their work and made corrections before handing it off to the pressmen.84 It was only once he finished his apprenticeship and moved into the work of setting that he
would start to collect a salary. Wages earned through labor were a mark of passage to manhood in these workshops. The typographer and writer Juan Coronel (who later moved to Puerto Rico) remembered the first payment that he received as a young printer in Cartagena: “More inflated than a peacock, I arrived at my house to hand over all that I had earned in the first week. In the street, I wanted to stop passersby and show them the money, telling them: I obtained this with the efforts of my own hands.”

An ambitious young typesetter, eager someday to be a regente, or head of production, Figueroa would have studied each aspect of the printing process. He would have asked older workers to explain complex layouts such as statistical tables and figures, advertisements, mathematical or musical notation, and foreign-language composition. He would have taken pride in his own editorial skills, eager at first to make the job of the copy editor lighter and eventually to be able to perform as a copy editor (which he later did for the newspaper Patria). He would have learned the job of the pressmen, keeping up with advances in press technology (most San Juan shops worked with steam-powered cylindrical presses) in order to someday supervise all elements of production. He would have become a perfectionist, hoping to provide authors and publishers a beautiful product, visually elegant, technically sophisticated, and free of errata: errors noticed once it was too late to correct them and listed at the end of a volume—the shame of a typographer.

He would also begin to absorb the particular ideological commitments shared by printers. Anyone who has spent an hour formatting a research paper, a poster, or a school newsletter knows the feeling of converting a fleeting bit of text into something durable and public. In the nineteenth century, however, the transformation from manuscript to newspaper, handbill, or book was the exclusive purview of printers. They tended to see this process as transcendent and themselves as the “operatives who worked at the loom of ideas, which take on eternal life as they are printed.” Given the high level of literacy and editorial skill required of them, their constant contact with writers, and the reverence with which they regarded the printed word, it is small wonder that print workers often tried their hand at writing. Indeed, print shops became one of the most common spaces for working-class self-education in San Juan, as in other parts of the Caribbean, Europe, and North America. Acosta himself later noted that when Figueroa became a writer, he merely followed
“the beautiful example provided by his comrades in the art, the Franklins and Greeleys in the American Union, the Michelets in France, and George Smith in England.”

Figueroa’s own later writings also help to explain this trajectory within the particular context and small world of San Juan publishing. Of the handful of booksellers and authors in the city, several of those who had risen through the ranks of the print shops seem to have served both as models to emulate and as supporters encouraging him to take up writing. In his essay on “those who have most contributed to the progress of Puerto Rico,” Figueroa highlighted Nicolás Aguayo, a man from a prominent white family. Orphaned as a child and left without economic support, he became an apprentice in a print workshop, where he studied independently, eventually becoming a secondary school teacher, an author, a member of the Economic Society, and an abolitionist. José González Chaves, another orphan, set up the first bookbinding workshop in San Juan. He eventually operated a leading bookshop. By the 1870s, his son, José González Font, became a publisher with a shop not far from where Figueroa worked. The publisher Pascacio Sancerrit was, Figueroa wrote, born “among the disinherited of the earth.” Here the suspicions aroused by the familiar euphemism are confirmed by Sancerrit’s baptismal record. He was the natural son of a free parda woman and a white man, and his baptism was recorded in the book reserved for pardos and morenos. Sancerrit began working as a guard in a merchant house at fourteen. He taught himself humanities, mathematics, and languages as well as typography. He eventually became a teacher, a journalist, and a prominent liberal publisher. These biographies offer clues both to the models that Figueroa adopted when forming his own intellectual ambitions, and to the network of mentors and patrons that he relied on.

Without a doubt, the most important figure in this regard was Sancerrit, the head of production at Acosta’s printing house when Figueroa became an apprentice there. Figueroa remembered that Sancerrit “encouraged in us our literary interests, when we took our first hesitant steps along the path that we still traverse without security; he indicated which authors we should consult in order to develop good taste; and lastly, with docile good humor, he looked over more than one of our meager productions, without a doubt to encourage us, signaling and applauding that which he judged to have some merit.” Yet Sancerrit was part of a broader group of
intellectuals, including the owner of the print shop, Acosta, who also took an interest in Figueroa's progress as a writer. Acosta was a former student of Cordero and a central figure in educational reform efforts. He was also an abolitionist and a proponent of worker education. Through the efforts of men like Acosta and González Font, and through the diligent labor of their employees, print culture expanded rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century, providing space for the emergence of many workers with intellectual aspirations. Typographers' status, on the upper edge of the artisan world, was akin to (and interconnected with) that of school-teachers, who occupied the lower edge of the professional world. In late nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, teaching and printing were professions that required neither formal certification nor proof of purity of blood. In fact, almost all the men of color who became authors in Puerto Rico during this period were schoolteachers, typographers, or both. Once he had established himself as a typographer, Figueroa married Manuela Aguayo, the natural daughter of a minor colonial official.

Following in the footsteps of Benjamin Franklin, Horace Greeley, or Nicolás Aguayo was not a path open to Rafael Serra in Cuba. In the decades after the repression of 1844, the first workers' associations created by Cuban typographers, many of whom were Spanish immigrants, helped to close off opportunities in the print shops in Western Cuba to all but white men. When he finished schooling at the age of thirteen, Serra went to work in a cigar factory. The cigar trade was booming at the time. Havana had upward of five hundred cigar workshops employing more than fifteen thousand workers. These workshops ranged from small operations called chinchales, run independently by one or two artisans, to large factories employing hundreds of workers. Apprentices in cigar factories were typically signed over to factory owners by their parents in an exchange of labor for training. They were often overworked and abused, frequently working alongside slaves, and sometimes punished by whipping. Serra would likely have begun with lower status tasks (often reserved for children and slaves), such as stripping stems or packing boxes with finished product. At the end of his apprenticeship, however, Serra was a trained torcedor, a roller. Though initially a difficult skill to master, rolling soon became a repetitive enterprise for experienced workers. Serra and his comrades sat for hours at benches, lined up at rows of desks on the workshop floors, using only a chaveta, curved blade, and careful movements...
of the hand to shape piles of cured tobacco leaves into stacks of Havana cigars. By the time Serra entered the trade, each year Havana workers provided hundreds of millions of these increasingly prized luxury items to the world market.94

Like print shops, the cigar factories of the Spanish Caribbean developed a worker culture of self-instruction as well as literary and political aspiration. Black teachers who were so common in the early part of the century, and who had become targets of reformers like Bachiller y Morales, were commonly cigar makers by trade. When Serra entered the factories, though, a new worker education movement had recently emerged, led by an Asturian cigar worker named Saturnino Martínez. Martínez attended lectures and recitals at the Liceo de Guanabacoa, an elite literary society, and became an assiduous patron of the public reading room of the Economic Society. In 1865, Martínez helped to create the first labor newspaper in Cuba, *La Aurora*. In it, he advocated self-education and the creation of mutual aid societies for cigar workers, deploying a stern moralizing tone. He also called on manufacturers to allow workers to read edifying texts aloud during working hours. In 1865 and 1866, workers in dozens of factories began contributing a fraction of their daily wages to make up for the pay lost by workmates who took turns reading to the group. Employers did not have to contribute anything except their permission, although they were encouraged to build platforms called “pulpits” on the shop floors. Employers also had veto power over exactly what texts could be read.95

Conservatives and the colonial government expressed concerns that reading in the factories would become a source of disorder or rebellion, banning the practice in 1866 and again in 1868. Others poked fun at what they considered ridiculous pretension.96 Yet the nascent liberal reformist movement in Cuba, led by a lawyer named Nicolás Azcárate and an agronomist named Francisco de Frías (generally known by his title, Count of Pozos Dulces), celebrated artisan education as a way to instill an ideal of self-making among workers instead of socialism or rebellion. The reformist newspaper, *El Siglo*, to which both men contributed, joined *La Aurora* in its support for reading in factories, recommending that workers read “biographies of useful and good men, above all of honorable artisans, who offer the example of a Franklyn, printer, a Palissy, potter, of a Jacquard, weaver, of a Lincoln, lumberjack, of a Hartzenbusch, cabinetmaker, of a Watt, mechanic, of a Moratin, silversmith, and of a Johnson, tailor.” In
step with Puerto Rican counterparts like Acosta (whom they knew from student days in Madrid), the Cuban reformists saw education as a vehicle for instilling their own values among workingmen. They believed that reading in factories, paid for by workers themselves, would help foster thrift and self-discipline, at no cost to employers. This practice, it turned out, was also a potential training ground for collective action, though this was not necessarily something that reformists hoped for. Taking up a collection to support a reader was not so different from taking up a collection to help a sick comrade, a worker organization, or even comrades out on strike.⁹⁷ Serra was only seven years old when reading was first instituted in Havana factories. At the time, many shops still employed enslaved people alongside indentured apprentices, Chinese contract laborers, and free workers, black, brown, and white. Free people of African descent constituted about half the cigar workforce. So the voices of factory readers reached a diverse audience. By the time that Serra was thirteen and began to work full time in the factories, the first Cuban war of independence was underway and reading was officially banned in the factories.⁹⁸

**LIBERALISM**

Rafael Serra, in the cigar workshops of Havana, Sotero Figueroa, in the print shops of San Juan, and José Martí, then just starting high school, were thus situated at distant coordinates within the same broad intellectual world. Even as the leading liberal thinkers on each island began reaching out to artisans, they joined forces with one another to push for reforms within the Spanish Empire. In 1866, the Spanish Overseas Ministry invited patrician voters on both islands—a group of landowners, manufacturers, merchants, and professionals selected on the basis of their level of tax contribution to state coffers—to elect representatives for a commission in Madrid to discuss the possibility of colonial reforms. Several hundred voters from the two islands elected representatives, among whom were none other than Azcárate and Pozos Dulce (close on the heels of their campaign of advocacy for reading in the factories) as well as Acosta, the printer and supporter of worker education who (a few years later) would be Figueroa’s employer. These men knew one another from their days as students, and were all allied with the same set of peninsular thinkers and politicians. The liberal reformists from the two islands
joined forces against conservative representatives, who argued for the status quo. The liberal position was twofold: all Spaniards should enjoy more civil freedoms and tax reform, and Spaniards born in the colonies should have the same status as that enjoyed by Spaniards born on the peninsula, including representation in the Spanish Cortes. Conservatives argued that slave societies and societies with large free populations of African descent were too volatile to be invested with political freedoms. “Special laws” distinguishing the colonies from the peninsula, appointed governors, and a strong military presence were necessary to keep order in this context.99

Yet the liberals in the Cuban and Puerto Rican delegations differed on the key questions of race and slavery in ways that reflected the different circumstances in the two colonies. Acosta and the other Puerto Rican liberals proposed the immediate end of slavery, laying the substantive groundwork for what would become the abolitionist movement in Spain over subsequent decades. They further argued for opening higher education and the professions to people of color, and even extending rights of suffrage to all adult men who paid a minimum tax of twenty-five pesos, independent of color. This proposal even included persons previously enslaved so long as they could prove that they had been free for at least five years. The Puerto Ricans congratulated themselves that contrary to the warnings of conservatives, there was little danger of upheaval on their island. Back in Puerto Rico, the liberal schoolteacher and notary José Pablo Morales contended, “It is our good fortune that we have always treated the blacks better here.” As a result, he wrote, in Puerto Rico there was “less hatred to be extinguished.”100 The Cubans, led by Azcárate and Pozos Dulces, agreed that slavery was detestable. They wished that the slave traders had never populated the island with Africans or tied the colony’s economic fortunes to slavery. The Puerto Ricans, they added, were to be congratulated on their proposal. But it would never work in Cuba. Cuba’s survival, they maintained, required that slavery be eliminated gradually, which is to say, no time soon.101

None of this should be taken to mean that Puerto Rican liberals favored a radically egalitarian society. They imagined a transition to free labor in which white patricians, guided by enlightened professionals and administrators, would remain firmly in control, in which most Puerto Ricans would provide docile labor for export production, and in which the majority of workers would not be black. Their belief that this transition could
be managed effectively rested on their view of Puerto Rican demographics, especially their optimism about free people of color. They argued that the island was blessed with a large free peasantry, many of whom they considered to be white or at least not dangerously black. These peasants could be incorporated as productive free laborers in a revitalized plantation regime. Puerto Rico’s large population of free people of color, “one of the elements that contributes most to the future of that society,” they asserted, would serve as a crucial ally in the orderly transition to free labor. Free people of color would act as a buffer, helping to integrate former slaves into a harmonious and stable social order. No legal restrictions should therefore be placed on free people of color, Puerto Rican liberals contended, lest they be pushed into resentment. The Cubans were much less sanguine about the free population of color on their island, which they described as “not without danger.” They argued that only the whitening of the Cuban population through immigration would bring stability, progress, culture, and morality to the island. White workers, they concluded, were an “element of order and stability.” Only white immigrants could be expected “to propagate and perpetuate the culture of the spirit and the greatness of the moral world.” Immigration, they maintained, was thus essential to the evolution of Cuba into a liberal society, and to the project of gradual abolition.102

The divergent views expressed in the 1866 meetings in Madrid help to situate Serra’s experience as a young cigar roller in Havana and Figueroa’s as a young typographer in San Juan. The liberals who most actively sought alliances with artisans in the late 1860s in San Juan and Havana, and who gathered to discuss colonial reforms in 1866, differed in their regard for free workers of African descent. The reformists who supported efforts at worker education in Cuba were the same men who favored the civilization of the workforce through white immigration. Supported by reformists, Spanish-born workers made up a growing proportion of employees in cigar factories, dominated the highest-skilled and highest-paying positions, and occupied leadership roles in the first mutual aid societies and craft unions, which did not include workers of color.103 While Figueroa relied on a network of mentors and allies among San Juan’s reformists, Serra relied on “his own efforts” to advance his education. These efforts were surely influenced by the culture of reading and self-education in the factories where he worked, just as they were probably connected in some way with the
older traditions of black and brown teachers, like his aunt Chuchú, operating small schools for poor children of all colors. But there seems to have been no leading liberal thinker who took on the role of mentor for Serra in Havana in quite the way that Azcárate did for the Spanish-born Saturnino Martínez, and Sancerrit or Acosta did for Figueroa in San Juan.

The year after the meetings in Madrid, Puerto Rican writer Alejandro Tapia (who would also become a supporter of Figueroa’s intellectual efforts) published the play *The Quadroon*, which used a story of romantic love between a white creole doctor and abolitionist and a woman of partial African ancestry, to offer a sharp critique of racial prejudice. The play was pointedly set in contemporary Cuba, not Puerto Rico. This was a bit of a sleight of hand. There was surely plenty of racism to expose in Puerto Rico. Yet for all its flaws, during the 1860s the Puerto Rican liberal movement had begun to articulate opposition to both slavery and legal restrictions based on color. The Cubans had not.

This panorama would change radically, however, as a series of rebellions unfolded in the Spanish Empire in 1868. In particular, a decade of warfare in Eastern Cuba, the creation of a large Cuban émigré community in Key West, and a surprising, if short-lived, moment of democratic opening in Puerto Rico would create a new, quite-radical version of liberal ideology and new opportunities for artisans of African descent to assert themselves within the liberal movements. In Cuba this took shape, by the end of the first armed insurgency, as a movement to create educational and recreational societies for the uplift and integration of the class of color as well as newspapers, and the beginnings of a movement for full civil and political rights. It was in the context of these transformations that Figueroa, Serra, Gómez and other men in their generation—but almost never women—started to make the leap from worker to author.