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Ana Echegoyen: A Republican-Era Black Woman Educator's Approach to Civic Engagement

ABSTRACT

This article uses the life and work of the Black Cuban educator Ana Echegoyen Montalvo (1902–1970) to connect the history of Cuban education with Black diaspora studies of the early twentieth century. For almost forty years, Echegoyen worked at different levels of the Cuban education system and was extremely active in the Black social club community. While the existing literature rightly points out the heterogeneity of the Black community, it also has generally focused on Black men who were elite military and political figures, leaving discussions about the experiences of Black women largely absent. Furthermore, the pursuit of formal education by Black Cubans during the colonial and Republican eras has been previously documented; however, there are few studies that focus on the lived experiences of specific Black Cuban educators. This article argues for a more pronounced attention to Black women educators and their approaches to social activism during Cuba's Republican period (1902–1958). This article also highlights the ways that women like Echegoyen, unlike their male counterparts, silenced explicit discussions of race in their professional work but used their status as educators, the metalanguage of education, and the development of education programs to create opportunities within the Black social club movement in Cuba and abroad.

RESUMEN

En este artículo, a través de la vida y obra de la educadora cubana negra Ana Echegoyen Montalvo (1902–1970), se relacionan la historia de la educación cubana con los estudios de la diáspora negra de comienzos del siglo XX. Durante casi 40 años, Echegoyen ocupó cargos en diferentes niveles del sistema educativo cubano y fue extremadamente activa en la comunidad de los clubes sociales negros. Si bien la bibliografía existente señala de manera acertada la heterogeneidad de la comunidad negra, también es cierto que la atención se ha dirigido hacia los hombres negros, figuras de la élite militar y política, dejando de lado, en gran medida, los análisis acerca de las experiencias de las mujeres negras. Asimismo, si bien ya se ha documentado la búsqueda de educación formal por parte de cubanos negros durante las épocas colonial y republicana, son pocos los estudios que se enfocaron en las experiencias vividas por determinados educadores pertenecientes a la comunidad cubana negra. Por lo tanto, en este artículo, se respalda la necesidad de prestar mayor atención a las educadoras

negras y a sus maneras únicas de abordar el activismo social durante el período republicano de Cuba (1902–1958). Aquí también se destacan los modos en los que mujeres como Echegoyen, a diferencia de sus pares masculinos, silenciaron discusiones explícitas sobre la raza en su labor profesional, pero que se valieron sus estatus como educadoras, el metalenguaje de la educación y el desarrollo de programas educativos para generar oportunidades dentro del movimiento de los clubes sociales negros, tanto dentro como fuera de Cuba.

In August 1940, the US-based National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) traveled to Havana as part of its inaugural summer series program to examine "the cultural, economic, political, and social conditions of the Cuban people—especially of the Negro race."[1] The organization, dedicated to empowering Afro-descended women and families, was welcomed by members of the host committee: the Black mutual-aid society La Asociación Cultural Femenina (ACF); Eusebio L. Dardet, commissioner of the National Tourist Division Program; and representatives from other Black organizations on the island. Program proceedings captured in NCNW's *Aframerican Woman's Journal* thanked a Cuban woman named Ana Echegoyen (1902–1970) "for everything—not the least of which [was] her gesture to the children of the United States, in the gift of the first book in her Spanish Reader Series, autographed for a little girl who will have a fortunate introduction into Spanish literature at the hands of a really remarkable woman of today."[2] As the first Black woman professor at the University of Havana, a notable literacy expert, and an active member in Cuba's Black mutual-aid societies, Echegoyen's book offering exemplified a unique Black feminist praxis that united literacy and Black racial solidarity. This exchange hints at how Black Cuban women's roles as educators made them especially well positioned to integrate education and racial uplift without betraying professional obligations or racial allegiances. Given the societal constraints on women and people of color during the Republican period, what other techniques did Echegoyen and other Black women educators like her use to pursue their sociopolitical goals? How might a focus on Black women educators broaden understandings of activism in the Cuban Republic (1902–1958)?

The exchange at the 1940 summer series provides an opportunity to consider the role of Black women educators as part of the emerging effort to recover and formalize historical knowledge about Afro-descended Cuban women who have figured less prominently in studies about Black Cubans during the Republic.[3] While existing texts about Black social life at the time rightly point out the heterogeneity of the Black community and offer new renderings of diaspora constituted by shared experiences of exploitation rather than a longing for an African homeland, they have also generally focused on Black men who were elite military and political figures.[4] Furthermore, the pursuit of formal

education by Black Cubans has been previously documented; however, few studies focus on the lived experiences of specific Black Cuban educators.[5]

To address this gap in the literature, the historian Takkara Brunson (2021) traces the changes in Black feminist thought in Cuba throughout the Republican period and shows how women employed in different fields created social change by using select political strategies like writing and participating in social organizations.[6] In doing so, these women navigated dominant ideologies around race and femininity so that their attempts at organizing did not inhibit their ability to be seen as respectable women—a descriptor primarily reserved for well-to-do white women. While many Black and mulatto women were employed in other professions—domestic labor, tobacco stemming, journalism, law—organizing from the perspective of formal education was a way for women to have a hand in shaping the future of the Cuban nation by influencing how and what people learned. Given that teaching was considered an extension of women's presumed natural nurturing capabilities, creating social change through formal education was an avenue uniquely available to women educators at the time.

Building from Brunson's work, this research not only considers how women activists managed contemporary gendered and racial ideologies but also considers how their employment status, in this case as educators, shaped their approaches to activism. There are documented cases dating to the nineteenth century of Black and mulatta teachers in precarious positions—easily dismissed or part of contentious hiring processes—for fears associated with the possible threat posed by an educated Black population. What is consistent over time is that these women educators supported and even established institutions that addressed the exclusion of Black students. Whether it was the *escuelitas de casa* (kindergartens) of the early colonial period or the Our Lady of Charity Academy opened by the Oblate Sisters of Providence in the 1900s, Black women educators sought to fill the educational gaps in the Black community.[7] Similarly, Echegoyen's contemporaries like María Dámasa Jova and Consuelo Serra y Heredia used their positions to publish newspapers, found schools, produce radio shows, and participate in national political convenings. Echegoyen stands out for her academic publishing and extensive international travel, which may have been a way to extend her scope of influence beyond Cuban borders.

This is a notable group of interest because Black women educators working for improved educational outcomes aligned with national aims of cultivating a well-educated Cuban population to reflect the country's newly independent status and ability to achieve self-determination. These women also provided tangible solutions for countering the ongoing discourse about Black people's presumed incivility and cultural deficiencies. They were contributing to Black racial uplift by giving better opportunities to members of the Black

community—a pressing need that long had been denied them, considering how education beyond the primary school level was prohibited for Black people as late as 1878 (Papademos 2011).[8]

With these considerations in mind, I suggest that Black women educators of the time enacted a particular Black feminist pedagogical praxis, a "metalanguage of education," and used education as a proxy to address other interrelated topics such as race, gender, and nation. Their Black feminist educator praxis involved conforming to the dominant expectations of virtuous womanhood so integral to the well-being of the private sphere but also bringing those same virtues into their public works. As Black women educators, they made an impact from a space that was socially acceptable—through education and alongside other women. While Black male activists were leading public antidiscriminatory campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s and even lobbying for legislation in the 1940s, Black women did not take the same approach likely to maintain an image of cohesion within the Black community. Instead, they leveraged their education and the preexisting expectations around women's natural nurturing abilities as their platform to create change in the public sector and further the cause of Black racial uplift.

This article uses Ana Echegoyen's life and work to argue for more pronounced attention to Black women educators and their approaches to social activism during Cuba's Republican period. Her experiences navigating normal school, interacting with international organizations, and pioneering a country-wide literacy campaign show how she practiced a form of acceptable Black professional womanhood while also pursuing her professional goals. Echegoyen's life and work show how education was an acceptable entry point for Black women to intervene in such debates that were largely dominated by male voices.[9] Black women were able to maintain this position in Black social circles by continuing their feminine focus on education, thereby not usurping the authority of Black males. This article also highlights the ways that women like Echegoyen, unlike their male counterparts, silenced explicit discussions of race in their professional work but used their status as educators and the development of education programs to create opportunities in the Black social club movement in Cuba and abroad. In doing so, they were able to astutely connect the education of individuals, especially those in the Black community, to the advancement of the Cuban nation at large.

Echegoyen's Early Career and the Cuban Education System

Following independence from Spain in 1898, Cuba's education system was leveraged as a key institution for supporting the country's goals for effective self-governance. The educational infrastructure had fallen into complete disarray during wartime, and at the conclusion of the War for Independence,

only one-third of the population was literate.[10] For context, the literacy rate for Black people between the ages of ten and nineteen in 1899 was only 30 percent and 40 percent for white people in the same age group.[11] During the two US occupations, 1898–1902 and 1906–1909, the education system went through a major overhaul, and primary schooling was prioritized because it was considered a key component of a stable government. Throughout the Republican period, school curricula and pedagogical approaches were continually refined with greater Cuban influence.[12] The formalization of Cuba's teacher-training process was still relatively new, with teacher examinations first established in 1909 and correspondence courses and normal schools instituted in 1916.[13] For the newly independent nation, universal education was integral to providing a well-rounded political socialization for Cuban citizens, which intimately linked education to the goals of national progress.

In all this, Afro-Cubans took advantage of these expanded educational opportunities. By 1931, the literacy rate in the Black community slightly exceeded 70 percent, thereby doubling the literacy rate of thirty years earlier and nearly closing the Black-white literacy gap.[14] Formal schooling, in theory, not only signaled a chance to become learned but also granted access to social capital, greater civic participation, and previously unavailable employment opportunities. As noted by Epifanio Calá, a member of the Black Cuban elite, education could help make Black Cuban men an "entirely regenerated, respected citizen, who is respected for his virtues and his talent, a factor in civilization, and an exponent of national dignity."[15] For him, education had the power to transform the way that Black men were perceived in society. Even with this hopeful outlook, formal education was continually used to maintain racial barriers for Black teachers and students alike, thereby highlighting the continued salience of race in a supposedly raceless nation.[16] While Cuba's independence was not the great equalizer, education was mobilized as a major tool for pursuing racial equality. Through a multifaceted approach that included applying political pressure, publishing dissenting opinions, creating schools and libraries, and even sending children abroad to schools like the Tuskegee Institute, Black community members adamantly sought out the education they felt entitled to as Cuban citizens. Knowing intimately the stakes involved with obtaining an education, the work of Black educators was not merely academic but also deeply communal.

This is the context into which Ana Fermina de la Caridad Echegoyen Montalvo was born on July 7, 1902, in the city of Santa Clara. Born to an unwed Fabiana Montalvo, Echegoyen grew up in a small town on the periphery of Havana and went on to secure the means to relocate to the nation's capital and enroll in the Havana Normal School.[17] Given her class status in early life, it is possible that Echegoyen was assisted by benefactors with the necessary social and economic capital to help aspiring teachers gain access to normal

schools and maintain their teaching certifications after graduation. At the Havana Normal School, Echegoyen experienced firsthand the inequities of the education system, as evidenced by enrollment trends in which Black women constituted 10 percent of overall enrollment in 1915 and only 17 percent of total enrollees by 1925.[18] There are accounts of enrollees of color being barred from highly visible activities and from representing the school in social events like marching band.[19] Nonetheless, Echegoyen managed to graduate at the age of nineteen and went on to a long career in Havana public schools. She first entered the classroom as a primary school teacher on May 30, 1921.[20] Echegoyen began her career at a time when the Cuban education system was approaching a notable apex, with the numbers of teachers and students at the primary level having doubled between 1902 and 1925. In fact, Cuba had the highest enrollment percentage of school-age children in all Spanish-speaking republics for the 1925–1926 school year.[21]

She would later be promoted to principal at Primary Schools 17 and 18.[22] As stated in a summative document from the Ministry of Education, Echegoyen worked for the school system for exactly sixteen years, seven months, and eight days, "in person and effective without interruption or any unfavorable notes."[23] The teaching profession in the early twentieth century was markedly distinct from other fields because of its racial and gender characteristics. It was the only profession with racial parity—the representation of Black teachers was comparable to white teachers; however, teaching was the profession with the lowest salary.[24] So, while it was relatively more accessible, teaching did not lead to the economic prominence of other jobs, likely in part because it was a feminized profession. Women were specifically called on to fill these vacancies because their involvement in the teaching force resonated with broader conversations at the time that connected women's work to the fate of the nation. The historian Lynn Stoner writes that "many leaders felt it wise for women to become teachers, since women had natural influence over children and being educators formally trained them in that vocation. Educated women would become the conveyors of a new knowledge and the principles of democracy."[25] Given the centrality of women in education, the number of women teachers and college professors ballooned over the years, from 5,122 to 16,780 and 34,845 in 1919, 1943, and 1953 respectively.[26] While there was great demand for women to enter the classrooms, race had an impact in terms of where teachers taught. Black educators at the time were marginalized within their profession and largely excluded from teaching in elite, mostly white private schools.[27] The percentage of Black teachers in private schools peaked at 5.1 percent in 1929, but in public schools, they represented at most 16.3 percent from 1925 to 1929. School admissions and hiring practices were characterized by rampant graft and nepotism. One retired Black woman recounts how she and her two classmates, who earned the top-three test scores on their normal

school entrance exams, were disqualified on account of the school director's incredulousness that they could have such a strong understanding of the decomposition of light. On another occasion, upon finding that a teaching position she desired was sold to a politician's daughter, one Black woman opted to teach in a neighborhood school that was outside of the school district jurisdiction and open to youth and adults. [28] Existing studies indicate that, despite inequitable treatment, Black women educators used their professional roles to support national goals of academic excellence through a "socially responsible individualism," ensuring that they used their professional status for the greater good of their community.[29]

While working in Havana public schools, Echegoyen enrolled at the University of Havana, declaring intentions to pursue a doctorate in pedagogy in the fall of 1921.[30] Much like her normal school experience, Echegoyen found herself at an institution where Afro-descended representation was limited. Women were first admitted to the university in 1883, and Black people were allowed entry at the beginning of the Republic.[31] Despite these advances, the university remained predominately white. For the 1925–1926 school year, Blacks and mulattos constituted 11 percent of students and 16 percent of total graduates.[32] Echegoyen took classes there intermittently until 1937, all the while continuing her work in the Havana public school system. This is not surprising given that teachers received a relatively low salary.[33] Early records indicate that Echegoyen was a serious student who was simultaneously balancing her studies with work and likely other familial responsibilities. Echegoyen repeatedly submitted formal requests to the dean of arts and sciences for her fees to be postponed or waived on account of her exceptional academic performance. In one request during the 1933–1934 academic year, Echegoyen noted in the "specific information about my economic situation" section that seven people lived at her Calle Villuendas 156D Havana address.[34] There is evidence that Echegoyen was married to Dr. Matías Cañizares Barbón, a dentist, whose office was located at the same address as Echegoyen's place of residence.[35] With multiple people in the household on top of a full-time job and doctoral studies, it seems that professional employment did not necessarily alleviate economic hardship for members of the Black community like Echegoyen.

Eventually, Echegoyen completed her doctorate in 1934 and would soon make history at her alma mater. First hired in a provisional instructional role at the University of Havana in 1937, one year later, she became the first woman of color to hold a teaching position at the university: She was assistant professor in the pedagogical methodology concentration. Despite her humble beginnings, Echegoyen's professional and social standing put her among a very particular professional class of African-descended people. Most of her colleagues at the university were probably used to interacting only with Black women employed as domestic laborers or in other low-wage

positions. Louis Pérez Jr. acknowledges how the legacy of chattel slavery and ongoing disparities in the educational system reflected the working trends of women of color at the turn of the century. He notes that approximately three-fourths of employed female wage earners—or 48,7676 out of 66,356—were women of color, and that women of color were more likely to work outside of the home in the fields of domestic labor and agriculture.[36] As one of the few faculty members of color, Echegoyen likely represented a much-needed touchpoint for the other Black colleagues and students at the predominantly white institution. In the 1940s, for example, Echegoyen associated with Irene Diggs, an African American anthropologist and former assistant to W. E. B. Du Bois, who was visiting the university on a Roosevelt Fellowship.[37] Regarding her relationship with students, the editor of *Amanecer*, a Cuban magazine, described Echegoyen's rapport with students as follows: "In Doctor Echegoyen, as a professor, exists tenacious dedication and enthusiasm that never wavers. The students become disciples, disciples become friends, the friends become children. A deep maternal feeling governs her."[38] While being praised for her work, she was also judged according to mainstream gendered connotations of women's nurturing capacities, which extended from grade schools to institutions of higher education. That Echegoyen was able to reach such a level means that she represented the new opportunities of the Republic, but she also faced challenges in navigating such spaces not only as a Black person but specifically as a Black woman.

Pursuing National Development Through Literacy

Throughout her education career, Echegoyen worked to actualize a Cuban education system that bettered the individual and the collective. Echegoyen's mix of real-world experience and scholarly interest in eradicating illiteracy meant that she played a key role in explicitly supporting national progress and implicitly supporting racial uplift. While the first half of the Republican period was characterized by an interest in how to train teachers, the Cuban historian Nicolás Garófalo characterizes 1933–1958 as a distinct stage focused on how to systematize teacher development and improvement.[39] These efforts were meant to address the general erosion of Cuba's public education system since the highwater mark of the 1920s. The onset of the Great Depression triggered severe economic turmoil on the island, evinced by falling sugar prices and massive unemployment, especially for civil servants, teachers included. The broader shifts that were taking place in the country were reflected in student achievement. In 1919, the national literacy rate for those age ten to nineteen years old was 61.3, and that number increased significantly by 1931 but had largely plateaued by 1943 to 73.0 percent.[40] Well into the 1940s, the country experienced stagnant and/or declining literacy rates despite increased