

**LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

# Ambivalence and Representations of Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century Spanish American Writing, 1861–1896

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Debates over shifting gender roles in nineteenth-century Spanish America included the question of women's participation in the workforce. Writers of fiction and nonfiction posed arguments about paid employment for middle-class women and often represented work itself in ways that reinforced traditional gender norms by envisioning women's entry into the labor force as an extension of their family and household roles. Nonetheless, the tactics that allowed writers to make stronger claims for women's right to paid employment often reimposed limitations on women. The complex rhetorical maneuvers that many authors deployed bespeak their anxieties about the potential for social change brought by newly visible options for women. This essay examines novels and nonfictional essays and argues that authors who advance progressive agendas about and for women sometimes undermine their own purported arguments when they fall back on more conventional attitudes about women's roles in families and society. This article contends that these problematic moments in the selected texts serve to maintain a system in which privilege accrues to male elites.

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Los debates sobre los papeles de género en el siglo decimonónico hispanoamericano incluyeron la cuestión de la participación de las mujeres en la fuerza laboral. Autores de ficción tanto de ensayo propusieron argumentos sobre el empleo pagado para las mujeres de la clase media y muchas veces representaron el trabajo en sí en maneras que apoyaron las normas tradicionales de género al retratar la entrada de las mujeres en la fuerza laboral como una extensión natural de sus papeles en la familia y el hogar. Sin embargo, las estrategias que permitían que los autores hicieran argumentos más fuertes a favor de los derechos de las mujeres de ganar un sueldo por su trabajo muchas veces re-impusieron límites en las mujeres. Los mecanismos retóricos complicados que muchos escritores utilizaban indican sus ansiedades sobre el potencial para el cambio social relacionado con las nuevas opciones para las mujeres. Este trabajo examina novelas y ensayos periodísticos y arguye que los autores que avanzan agendas progresivas para y sobre las mujeres a veces subvierten sus propios fines cuando tienen recurso a actitudes más convencionales sobre los papeles domésticos de las mujeres. Este trabajo propone que estos momentos problemáticos en los textos analizados mantienen un sistema en que las élites masculinas siguen acumulando privilegio.

## Introduction

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Throughout nineteenth-century Spanish America, men and women alike grappled with changing attitudes about gender roles and social codes related to gender. Increasingly, the debates around those changes included the question of women's access to and participation in the workforce. As writers of fiction and nonfiction posed arguments about the status and meaning of paid employment for middle-class women, they often represented work in ways that reinforced traditional gender norms by casting domestic work as an exalted vocation for women and envisioning women's entry into the labor force as an extension of their family and household roles. At the same time, across the continent some women found paid employment and more options than the traditional ones of marriage or the convent, or, more aptly, they

found greater public acceptance and visibility of options that had existed since the colonial period. Public opinion about such changes ranged from condemnation to praise, and writers who advocated either for or against the entrance of middle-class women into the labor market typically leveraged powerful cultural rhetoric about gendered standards of behavior. Texts such as novels and journalistic essays encoded and communicated particular attitudes toward and arguments about women's status in their communities, from home to nation. Some authors downplayed the formal and informal modes of labor in which women engaged; others employed textual strategies to break with conventional beliefs about women's labor without transgressing discursive norms about femininity. Nonetheless, the very tactics that allowed writers to make stronger claims for women's right to paid employment often reimposed limitations on women. These complex rhetorical maneuvers, and the fact that many authors felt it necessary to deploy them, bespeak their anxieties about the potential for social change brought by newly visible options for women. By examining novels by Jorge Isaacs (Colombia), Eligio Ancona (Mexico), and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera (Peru) alongside nonfictional essays by David Joaquín Guzmán (El Salvador), Cabello de Carbonera, Soledad Acosta de Samper (Colombia), and women publishing in the Mexican journal *Violetas del Anáhuac*, I argue that their statements of opinion conveyed these authors' often purposeful, and often ambivalent, statements about women's roles in their newly modernizing societies. I further assert that across both genders and all genres of publications, intellectuals attached their visions of gendered labor activities to other agendas about social change. Even authors who advance progressive agendas about and for women sometimes undermine their own purported arguments when they fall back on more conventional attitudes about women's roles in families and society. Such slippages reveal and construct particular beliefs about gender that maintain women's subordination rather than allowing for meaningful social change. This article contends that these problematic moments in the selected texts serve to maintain a system in which privilege accrues to male elites.

The intersectionality of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, sexual, and gendered identities means that speaking about "women" entails careful differentiations around race, class, and region.<sup>1</sup> Many lower-class women in nineteenth-century Latin America may have seen their interests as aligned with lower-class men, not with elite women, and many, although not all, white women did not always understand their experiences as similar to those of women of color, to name but two instances in which gender was far from the dominant category through which people experienced working conditions. Pierre Bourdieu (2002, 93) asserts that while women have in common their experiences of being different from men, women also experience "economic and cultural differences which affect, among other things, their objective and subjective ways of undergoing and suffering masculine domination" and which thus separate and divide women from one another. Understanding gender as a category that exists in relation to other social forces and life experiences helps us analyze the ways in which people interpret their own lived experiences as members of gendered, classed, and racial communities and in which they communicate their attitudes about gender roles and norms.

Women experience work in many contexts over the course of a day, week, and lifetime, in their homes, their communities, and their workplaces (French and James 1997, 4–5). For the purposes of this article, work refers to domestic work or unpaid labor done by women of all classes within the home; work performed by enslaved and indentured women; and wage work by lower- and middle-class women. A strictly Marxist interpretation of work and labor runs the risk of excluding domestic work as a category of capitalist accumulation and thus devaluing it, as Pamela Odih indicates (2007, 11). Odih explains that "capital's political economy of time depends upon the expropriation of domestic labour time as a non-economic resource" (2007, 17). Domestic work is routinely undervalued but integral in society's functioning. I contend that while some authors in nineteenth-century Spanish America marginalize domestic work, others seeking to advocate the primacy of women's labors revalorize that same domestic work. Finally, while white women, women of color, wealthy and poor women, and free, enslaved, and indentured women all worked in various ways, such work was encoded differently and held different meanings depending on context. Indeed, there was no such thing as "women's work," work in which all women engaged, regardless of class or race, in neither colonial nor, I would add, in nineteenth-century Spanish America: "Race and class divided colonial women to the point that these almost entirely extinguished any sense of communality based on sex or gender" (McCreery

<sup>1</sup> As Judith Butler (1990, 3) writes, "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts. ... As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained."

2000, 93). People experienced their genders and their work according to the other intersectionalities that constituted their identities and experiences.

One of the dominant discourses about gender in nineteenth-century Spanish America was that of the "ángel del hogar," or angel in the house, which became enormously popular in periodicals, stories, and novels aimed at elite readers. The self-sacrificing angel dedicates herself to making the home a morally uplifting place for her family. Within the home, the domestic angel creates a sanctuary from the public sphere and urban life. The angel in the house focuses outwardly on the needs and wishes of others, not inwardly on herself (LaGreca 2009, 10). Through her beneficent influence her family maintains its spiritual virtues and finds respite from the contamination of public life. Many nineteenth-century Spanish Americans advanced the idea that the family formed the basis of civil society and, as Francine Masiello (1992, 17) affirms, they charged the family with protecting national interests and bringing stability and peace to the nation. This vision of the family made woman's role even more crucial to national security and sovereignty, and dovetailed with the domestic vision associated with the angel in the house doctrine. The 1859 publication of the Spaniard María del Pilar Sinués de Marco's *El ángel del hogar* in Spanish America and her prolific publishing career, during which she wrote over a hundred novels and published widely in periodicals in Spain and Latin America, were instrumental in spreading the doctrine of the domestic angel. Arguing that women were naturally suited for domesticity and that making the home a haven was their social and spiritual duty, Sinués de Marco mobilized traditional Catholic beliefs idealizing motherhood and female purity and newer discourses of modernity advocating the split between public and private and the ensuing relegation of women to the domestic sphere.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, as Mary Louise Pratt (1990, 51) explains, middle-class women's roles in their nations were defined through their capacity as mothers of future citizens, the concept of "republican motherhood."<sup>3</sup> Pratt (1994, 267) also asserts that liberal theory presupposes a division of labor in which female noncitizens are responsible solely for reproduction and social continuity; these noncitizen women make possible the self-realization of men in the polity. These normative discourses helped determine acceptable roles for middle- and upper-class women and explain why in many texts elite and middle-class women are depicted as engaging in leisure-time activities in the home while lower-class women, regardless of color, and the daily labor of households receive brief, scant references. Yet such representations or lack thereof run counter to the fact that many women worked in and outside the home in both pre-encounter indigenous societies and the colonial period, as the work of historians such as Elizabeth Kuznesof and Sylvia Arrom, among others, demonstrates. Kuznesof notes that women and children contributed to São Paulo's household economies by doing domestic chores, manufacturing food and household utensils, weaving cloth, and working in the fields (1986, 36), and avers that "the woman's work was as important as that of the man" (1986, 37). Toward the end of the colonial period, the Bourbon administration actively encouraged wage work for lower-class women, and by the 1790s, for example, almost half of the women in Mexico City working outside the home were in the trades or commerce (McCreery 2000, 97).

Latin America's economy remained chiefly agricultural in the 1800s after independence, and many lower class indigenous and Afro-Hispanic women, free and enslaved, worked on subsistence farms and large plantations. Formal systems of slavery and economic peonage ensured that many women of color had to work for others' benefit rather than their own. For example, Kathryn Sloan (2011, 112) writes, "African slave women worked in the sugar cane fields throughout Latin America until the late 19th century. [...] Mayan and enslaved Yaqui women toiled in the hot Yucatecan sun on henequen plantations in late 19th and early 20th-century Mexico."<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, women of all classes except the most elite did the work of the home that contributed to their families' well-being by preparing food, sewing and laundering clothing and bedding, cleaning the home, and often maintaining a household vegetable garden and tending to domestic animals.

As Latin American nations underwent gradual and uneven transitions to urbanization and industrialization, they also experienced demographic changes that saw an increasing concentration of people in urban centers and facilitated the growth of industries and job opportunities related to new technologies. These changes expanded work possibilities for men and women but did not eliminate the home-based labor of women. Such economic transformations sometimes permitted women to enter the workforce by allowing some lower-class women to transition from agricultural or artisanal work to factory labor. According to Carmen Ramos Escandón, the focus on mechanizing modes of production related to female-assigned tasks often facilitated

<sup>2</sup> For more on Sinués del Marco, see LaGreca (2009, 7–11).

<sup>3</sup> Kerber (1976) expounds on the concept of republican motherhood.

<sup>4</sup> See McCreery (2000, 99) and Sloan (2011, 102, 108, 112) for more on the forced labor systems of the colonies and nineteenth century.

women's movement into the paid labor market, and Arrom (1985, 164) has found that in mid-century Mexico City, fewer women were domestic servants while more were working in food preparation, other service industries, and commerce. Ramos Escandón (2005, 237) also sees this trend elsewhere in the country, affirming that during the last third of the nineteenth century, Mexican women tended to work in industries that mechanized previously home-based tasks, such as the preparation and sale of food, domestic services, primary education, and clothing manufacturing. Women's systematic movement into the labor force was generally more culturally acceptable when they engaged in extensions of work typically coded as female. For middle-class women, as Marysa Navarro and Virginia Sánchez Korrol (1999, 80) note, toward the end of the century, "teaching, nursing, and clerical employment offered the first opportunities for middle-class women to work outside the home."<sup>5</sup> In sum, in the nineteenth century women continued to work, paid and unpaid, as they had for centuries, although in many cases the scale, scope, and location of their work changed. Concurrent with these concrete social phenomena, some of the discourses about women's employment likewise changed in response to the pressures of modernization and to rhetoric, usually associated with political liberalism, about progress and national modernity. In what follows, I analyze texts that represent women's labor and argue that these representations are motivated by and respond to authorial concerns about women's roles in their countries' emerging economies and the implications for—and potential threats to—gendered roles and social norms. Selected texts include Jorge Isaacs's *María* (Colombia, 1867), one of the most canonical and widely read Latin American novels of the nineteenth century, which projects a nostalgic vision of a near-Edenic past that involves elite white women, contained within the home, whose work nurtures the family unit. The Yucatecan author Eligio Ancona's *La mestiza* (1861), in contrast, remains a marginal and relatively unstudied novel. Here the titular protagonist is a lower-class woman of color for whom work outside the home is insistently presented as dangerous to her personally and to family structures broadly. The last novel analyzed is Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's *Blanca Sol* (Peru, 1888). Controversial and widely read after its publication, the book later fell into critical disfavor. Its Cinderella-esque heroine has been reduced to working for wages from her previous elite status, while its antiheroine chooses sex work at the end of the novel to support her children. To demonstrate that such ambivalence about women's presence in the workforce prevailed throughout the century, I also examine nonfictional works by men and women, including essays about women's access to education in various forms, their aptitude for different types of professions, and their contributions to family and society. I argue that these writers represented women's work as extensions of their roles in the family because such strategies were more persuasive and had more staying power than more overtly transgressive claims for female empowerment and agency, but that these strategies were also limited and limiting and offered little scope for women's full entry into the workforce and into public life.

### Fictions of Work: *María*, *La mestiza*, and *Blanca Sol*

In Isaacs's *María*, references to female work in the text are intermittent and unbalanced, representing the activities of the elite white women with greater frequency and emphasis than those of the novel's lower-class mestizas and black women. The narrator's female relatives work at sewing and flower arranging, activities whose representation enhances their traditionally feminine virtues of modesty and domesticity.<sup>6</sup> The production of the family's daily meals by black women servants is almost never mentioned, but at one point María brings Efraín and his father a treat she has prepared herself: "son las pastas que más les gustan y ... las he hecho yo" (these are the treats you both like best and ... I have made them myself) ([1867] 1998, 70). The rarity of this occurrence is clear in the emphasis Isaacs gives this episode, for if María were regularly cooking, the fact that she is doing it here would not be noteworthy. María's bestowal of the food represents her affective bonds with Efraín and his father; she is not assigned the chore of food preparation but chooses to do it. She makes food to delight their palates, not, or not only, to provide nutrition. This underrepresentation and elision of the work of food manufacture casts domestic labor as unproductive within the capitalist scheme (Odih 2017, 17). María's onetime work in the kitchen is supplemental to the daily work that we must assume other women do. María does provide childcare for Efraín's younger siblings, which magnifies María's allure for Efraín by emphasizing her status as a domestic, protomaternal

<sup>5</sup> See McCreery (2000, 132–133) for more on the transition to factory-based mechanized labor.

<sup>6</sup> Early in the novel, for example, Efraín, the narrator, visits his mother's sewing room: "María estaba con ella; mis hermanas se habían ido al baño. Después de contestarme el saludo, María bajó los ojos sobre la costura." (María was with her; my sisters had gone to the bath. After answering my greeting, María lowered her eyes over her sewing) ([1867] 1998, 15). Sewing allows María to demonstrate her feminine skills. Too, Efraín must explain the absence of his sisters, suggesting that normally they would have joined in the work of sewing.

paragon.<sup>7</sup> The need to care for children was often adduced as a justification for keeping women out of the paid workforce, and childcare and motherhood were not figured as work per se but, in the angel in the house trope, as a higher calling for women endowing them with spiritual and moral power.

María's work is the most visible but least productive of all women's work in the novel. Efraín is served food by lower-class mestiza women but dismisses their work: "Las mujeres habían vuelto a sus faenas" (the women had returned to their chores) ([1867] 1998, 42). Meanwhile, the work done by female slaves is not mentioned, and Felicianita is the only named African woman in the novel, manumitted before the novel begins. In a flashback, Efraín's father separates childcare and labor, saying: "Yo no necesito una esclava sino una aya que quiera mucho a esta niña." (I don't need a slave, but a nursemaid who will love this girl greatly) ([1867] 1998, 104). To underscore this, Felicianita's work for Efraín's family is never described, and she reappears in the novel only on her deathbed. Historians Nina de Friedemann and Mónica Espinosa Arango (1995, 61) write of her: "A diferencia de otras esclavas, no desempeñó trabajos recios y peligrosos, como era costumbre en la hacienda" (different from other slaves, she didn't carry out hard and dangerous labors, as was the custom on haciendas). Their research affirms that female slaves in Colombia worked in mines and on plantations. They also sold food on the street, provided childcare, and were midwives, cooks, and laundresses. Finally, they were often forced into prostitution or made to participate in selling contraband or other illegal activities (Friedemann and Espinosa Arango 1995, 53). Similarly, Luis Javier Ortiz Mesa's (1995, 183–184) analysis of data from the 1870 Colombian census shows that at that time a third of all working women, regardless of race, were farmers, fisherwomen, miners, and ranchers and most other working women were in domestic service. While eliding women's work, Isaacs frequently depicts work done by Efraín and his father, in the office and on the plantation, and by Efraín's friend Emigdio and the (male) tenant farmers on their lands. Efraín takes frequent excursions, both with and without his father, around the plantation to inspect the buildings constructed by his father's slaves and the farms worked by the plantation's tenants, and his father conducts an extensive and active business correspondence from his office. Dr. Mayn's visits to treat ailing family members offer another example of masculine work. While the existence of the 1870 census data displays the Colombian government's interest in measuring and categorizing the work contributed by women of all socioeconomic strata to the nation's economy, the fact that Isaacs's novel contains only scant references to female labor helps reinforce his message that women's roles should remain based in the home and the family.

Eligio Ancona's *La mestiza* represents mixed-race, lower-class protagonists and portrays work conducted by women but replicates similar discourses as Isaacs's novel. *La mestiza* was the first novel by this Mexican author, journalist, and government functionary. A member of the Liberal Party, Ancona (1836–1893) had previously published articles and stories, mostly satirical in nature, in journals in Mérida.<sup>8</sup> Likewise set in Mérida, *La mestiza* centers on a lower-class mestiza, Dolores, and her aunt, Marta, who raises her from childhood. The narrator naturalizes childcare as the loving attention innate to a woman's disposition: "Marta, que no tenía a quien amar, amó [...] a su sobrina como si fuera hija suya." (Marta, who had no one to love, loved her niece as if she were her own daughter) ([1861] 1927, 36). By locating childcare as a family responsibility that falls solely on women, and by representing it as an act of love—common tropes in discourses about women's roles in the household—Ancona disguises the labor that Marta and, by extension, other mothers and mother figures carry out, just as Isaacs does. Here domestic labor is precisely the work not compensated through wages that is necessary for the capitalist economy to thrive (Odih 2007). Although there is no expectation that Marta receive a salary for taking care of Dolores, the facts are that providing the same service for an unrelated child would earn her wages, and that her presence as a caretaker in the household enables Dolores's father to earn money. Marta's unsalaried position thus enables the male of the household to work for money. The social construction in which women are biologically, emotionally, and spiritually ideally suited for childcare enables, perhaps even causes, Ancona to reposition that work as natural and hence unpaid. In this way, Ancona contributes to the dominant discourse of his time linking working-class morality to social stability and inculcating traditional values about the role of women in order to counter perceived threats from the lower classes (French 1992, 533). Ancona further maps those socioeconomic concerns onto race, as in his novel the working class is also indelibly mestizo. To control mestizo and indigenous workers, middle-class strictures that ensconce women in domesticity are reinforced.

<sup>7</sup> For more on María's maternalism, see León (2006) and Sommer (1991).

<sup>8</sup> Ancona subsequently wrote several historical novels about the conquest of Mexico and the colonial period as well as the multivolume *Historia de Yucatán*. For more on Ancona's career as a historian, see Castillo Canché (2004) and Savarino (2000). He also held various political positions.

As for other work, Marta editorializes, “se paga tan mal el trabajo de la mujer, cuando puede encontrarlo, que nos vemos obligadas a trabajar todo el día y aun parte de la noche para ganar nuestro miserable alimento” (women’s work is paid so badly, when we can even find it, that we are obliged to work all day and even into the night to earn our miserable rations) ([1861] 1927, 46). She and Dolores sew and sell their products at the market, of which Marta comments, “siendo tus costuras más estimadas que las mías, podremos ganar más dinero, trabajando tú más de lo ordinario” (since your sewing is more valued than mine, we will be able to earn more money if you work more than usual) ([1861] 1927, 48). Increased mechanization of the textile industry and the rise of the modern department store during the Porfiriato toward the end of the nineteenth century meant that consumers turned to mass-produced clothing, which was held in greater esteem than handwoven and hand-sewn items (Bunker 2012, 103–107), but sewing machines were not widely used in households until the turn of the twentieth century (Bauer 2001, 166). Sewing was one of the few tasks widely represented as appropriate for impoverished women in mid-nineteenth century Mexico; Sylvia Arrom (1985, 189) calls sewing “the fallback of abandoned wives, widows, and orphans.” As characterized in “La costurera,” an episode of the 1855 book *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos*: “Hay una infinidad de chicas salidas de todas las clases de la sociedad que condenadas a la miseria buscan con el trabajo de sus manos un triste alimento, y hallan a fuerza de sudores un miserable refugio contra el hambre y la infamia” (there is an infinite number of girls from all social classes who, condemned to misery, seek a sad ration with the work of their hands, and by the sweat of their brow find a miserable refuge from hunger and infamy) (Frías y Soto et al. 1855, 50). These seamstresses work in sweatshops rather than at home, and the authors assign negative moral value to that public work, arguing that the women’s constant exposure to luxury items leads them to indulge in physical, sinful pleasures of all sorts. The exception is the seamstress working from home, the domestic or private worker, “tímida, encogida, semi-devota, encerrada en su casa” (timid, hunched over, devout, shut up in her house) (1855, 54). Staying within domestic space signifies that the seamstress is isolated from negative social influences; this protection from the public sphere makes her paid work permissible. Finally, the authors conclude that love is always the ultimate objective of the seamstress. In their construct, women work not for personal fulfillment or financial independence but to eke out economic survival until rescued by marriage. The framing, in *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos*, of women’s work as temporary pending marriage normalizes social beliefs that construe women’s roles as residing in the home and within their families, even if and when lived experience offered other potential models for female behavior. Kari Soriano Salkjelsvik and Felipe Martínez-Pinzón (2016, 17) assert that nineteenth-century Latin American *costumbrismo* had the disciplinary, didactic purpose of creating and enforcing social codes and behavioral norms promoting modern capitalism.<sup>9</sup> The *costumbrista* representation of the Mexican seamstress as oppressed by the public space of the factory, at worst, and as a temporary worker waiting rescue by marriage, at best, supports the idea that capitalist society literally and metaphorically values men’s public work and devalues women’s work, be it public or private.

In *La mestiza*, Dolores’s money-earning activities fail to sustain her. In fact, seamstresses in nineteenth-century Latin America were rarely self-supporting, as free trade, the greater availability of ready-made clothing, and increased competition from other unemployed women drove prices for labor down after independence in the 1820s (McCreery 2000, 100). As his dying wish her father recommends that she seek employment from his former employer’s widow: “mi antigua ama no se desdeñará en recibir en su casa a mi hija [...]. Dolores [...] no se avergonzará de servir a una mujer que trata a cuantos la rodean con tanta amabilidad y dulzura” (my former employer will take my daughter into her household ... Dolores won’t be ashamed to serve a woman who treats those around her with such kindness and sweetness) ([1861] 1927, 28). When Dolores’s father ascribes to Dolores’s potential employer the intangible advantages of upper-class womanhood (kindness and generosity), the novel puts into play the notion of “feminine capital,” defined by Kate Huppatz (2012, 27): “feminine capital is the gender advantage that is derived from a disposition or skill set learnt via socialization, or from simply being hailed as feminine.” Dolores’s possible employment in another woman’s house is socially acceptable because she is moving from one enclosed domestic space to another and performing the same labor in both arenas. Moreover, the fact that her employer enjoys a certain feminine capital due to her publicly acknowledged virtue signals that Dolores will receive moral oversight and possibly acquire her own stock of feminine capital. Characterizing the workplace in terms applicable

<sup>9</sup> *Costumbrismo* refers to the literary and artistic movement which depicted local daily life and the manners and customs of “typical” groups, often but not always the lower classes and people of color. Collections of *costumbrista* essays, stories and visual representations were popular in Spain and Spanish America in the nineteenth century.

to the home blurs the lines between public and private and disguises the fact that Dolores would work for wages.

Yet, aside from her father's posthumous recommendation, the suggestion that Dolores work for money outside the home never arises again. The novel's message is that leaving home to work is dangerous for young, attractive women, as Ancona represents trips to the marketplace as opportunities for elite white men to meet and seduce lower-class mestizas. This narrative of sexual threat reinforces the prevailing doctrines of domesticity and the angel in the house. Women who leave their homes for money lose their scant feminine capital, both in the principal narrative and in the interpolated tale that Dolores's aunt tells her about Juana, another mestiza. Because Juana is working, she purchases bread from a neighbor; during her visits to the neighbor's house, Juana meets a white man who seduces, impregnates, and abandons her. Finally she prostitutes herself. Public work for women is here inevitably sexualized and denigrated. Dolores herself is persuaded to leave her home to work in the house of the woman to whom her father recommended her, but when she arrives there she finds not her putative employer but the white man who rapes and impregnates her. Ancona's message in both story lines is clearly that leaving the home for economic gain leads to female sexual ruin and the concomitant destruction of the family unit. When tied to entry in the capitalist economy, work imperils women's chastity and, given the cultural importance assigned to female sexual purity, endangers their feminine capital, their social good standing. Ancona communicates that women's paid work outside the home harms traditional values and the heteronormative structures that demand the subordination and confinement of women within the home.

Peruvian essayist and novelist Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera (1845–1909) tackled issues of women's employment, access to education, and financial dependence on male family members in her novels and essays.<sup>10</sup> In her 1875 essay "Necesidad de una industria para la mujer" in *La Alborada: Semanario de las Familias*, Cabello frames women's access to paid employment as a question of education: "¿La mujer debe o no recibir una educación industrial?" (1875, 1), that is, vocational training for specific jobs. *La Alborada* appeared weekly in Lima from 1874 to 1875 and published poetry, short stories, and articles about religion, cultural events, and fashion. Men and women writers were equally represented in its pages, and it was unusual in having a man and a woman share editorial duties. By the time Cabello was writing, liberal politics held sway in Peru generally (Klarén 2000, 168) and in Lima in particular. Peruvian liberals, like their counterparts across much of Latin America, advocated for expanding and secularizing educational opportunities and favored models drawn from Great Britain and the United States, where, as some pointed out, women could pursue their education beyond primary school. In her essay, Cabello connects women's access to vocational education to public morality, to industrial and commercial growth, and to familial well-being, touching on the three main topics under discussion in Peru at that time, as the 1873 world depression and the collapse of the guano market plunged the country into economic crisis (Klarén 2000, 180). Unemployment rose and the government implemented austerity measures, deepening social divides and causing widespread unrest. By attaching her question to other topics of societal interest, Cabello moves the proposal that women should have a useful education onto the national stage. Her efforts to have women enter the workforce when jobs for men were disappearing needed greater justification than the abstract notion of women's rights, hence her claim that women's work would promote civic unity, a striking take on republican motherhood's vision of the family as a motor of national peace. She focuses particularly on middle-class women without inherited wealth, who cannot do physical labor due to the social vigilance equating physical work with the lower class, because, as she argues, middle-class women who take on labor encoded as lower class lose their social standing. Bourdieu (1984, 106) affirms that social class is constructed by the complex web of relationships "between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices." In Cabello's construction, middle-class status is contingent at least in part on the ways in which a relation of difference from the lower class is structured and on the property of social judgment, because other participants in the class system enforce standards through ostracism, public negative commentary, and other social controls. Writing fifteen years later than Ancona and a decade after Isaacs, Cabello mobilizes the rhetoric of liberalism and its affirmation that middle-class women could engage in (certain types of) paid work and remain "respectable" as she reshapes the structure of relations that creates class differences for women.

Cabello claims that poverty puts so much pressure on bourgeois families that it causes marriages to fail. She mobilizes discourses of domesticity by noting that to avoid poverty some women marry men they do not love, "llevando así al hogar doméstico, este vacío espantoso que deja una unión que sólo ha formado

<sup>10</sup> For extensive discussions of Cabello's life, work, and cultural and social contexts, see Pinto Vargas (2003).

el interés, vacío que se torna en un abismo en el que van a sepultarse todos los goces de la familia" (thus bringing to the domestic home, this frightening void left by a union that only self-interest has formed, a void that turns into an abyss which is a tomb for all family happiness) (1875, 1). Rather than the traditional construction in which working destroys female virtue and family happiness, for Cabello *not* working instead destroys families. Her clever inversion takes advantage of feminine capital and repositions it so that women who want to work can do so without jeopardizing their access to that capital.

Further, Cabello appeals to a greater social good when she avers that enabling women to exercise professions such as teaching and communications will reduce social inequality in general by distributing income more evenly. Indeed, she argues that federal and local governments should systematically develop industries in which women can work, an idea placing women's work in the mainstream of national and local economies. Cabello declares that middle-class women only have access to work as seamstresses if they are virtuous, and, as previously established, sewing does not provide a living wage; on the other hand, if they have received inferior education, she implies, they become prostitutes. Indeed, as David McCreery (2000, 103) writes, "so many poor seamstresses supplemented their income with prostitution [...] that observers in both Spanish and Portuguese America assumed the two went together." The choice between the virtuous economic dead end of sewing or the lucrative yet morally bankrupt option of sex work is exactly the scenario that Cabello dramatized later in her novel *Blanca Sol*, as we shall see. Throughout her essay she consistently links general social progress to improved access for women to education and work. She also makes these arguments within the pages of a magazine largely directed to female readers, a friendly audience. Such discursive strategies enable her to argue for a societal change that could otherwise be seen as transgressing social norms.

Yet in her popular, controversial 1888 novel *Blanca Sol*, Cabello does not represent any of these expanded work options for elite women. Instead, she constructs a didactic cautionary tale in which the protagonist's own overweening social ambition results in the loss of her husband's fortune, his insanity, and the heroine's prostitution. Meanwhile, the aristocratic Josefina makes flowers and sews only because her family has lost its money. Cabello pointedly comments about the ways her society devalues women's work, as when the eponymous protagonist visits Josefina's home: "El aspecto humilde, casi miserable de la casa, en que vivía Josefina, dejole comprender [a Blanca] que allí moraba [...] el trabajo de la mujer, espantosamente mal remunerado y desestimado, en estas nuestras mal organizadas sociedades." (The humble, almost miserable appearance of Josefina's house gave Blanca to understand that there dwelt . . . the work of woman, frighteningly badly recompensed and despised, in our badly organized society) ([1888] 2004, 117). The socially acceptable work available to women cannot lift them from poverty, but, as the narrator continues, "sólo el trabajo metódico y productivo, que siempre está acompañado de la vida cómoda y el bienestar, fortifican el cuerpo y el espíritu" (only methodical, productive work, which is always accompanied by comfort and well-being, fortify body and soul) ([1888] 2004, 118). While this comment does not itself reference women's work, given its placement in the text it is clearly about women, as Josefina is described as appearing more like a woman of thirty than her true age, twenty-four (118). Her taxing yet intellectually unrewarding work depletes her vitality and youth, and sewing was a particularly rigorous occupation, as Bonnie Frederick notes (1998, 70). Cabello's remarks do not present women's work itself negatively; they present underpaid work carried out in dismal conditions negatively. Yet in her novel, Cabello does not put forward the argument that increasing middle-class women's access to meaningful and well-paying jobs will foster civic unity. Instead, such access improves women's physical appearance, a much more limited and limiting rhetorical strategy and one that very narrowly construes feminine capital. In fact, Cabello never shows engagement in substantive work outside the home as a viable possibility for either of her female protagonists. Josefina only exits poverty by marrying a wealthy man in what Nancy LaGreca (2009, 114) has aptly referred to as a "rescripted Cinderella story," and Blanca's descent on the economic ladder ends with her decision to prostitute herself. The novel's conclusion underscores traditional codes of gendered and classed behaviors by punishing Blanca's sexual transgressions and rewarding Josefina's adherence to class and gender norms. While Blanca vows to bring Lima's elite down with her, the novel concludes before that threat can be realized, meaning that the reader experiences Blanca's fall from her privileged status as an individual occurrence rather than a more general disruption of the social order.<sup>11</sup>

The message across these fictional renderings of working women is multipart: women work, when they work, from necessity not desire; acceptable work for women extends their domestic roles and ideally takes

<sup>11</sup> Despite this, and despite the runaway success of the novel, which went into three editions in rapid succession, Cabello was attacked widely for depicting sexual "degeneracy" in elite women, as Ana Peluffo (2002, 40) has astutely explained.



place in their own homes; work outside the home runs the risk of resulting in sexual victimization and the loss of social capital for women and is thus unacceptable. Such novels representing paid work for women as unrewarding, degrading, and abusive participate in larger social debates about work for women. They also reinforce hegemonic discourses of domesticity and the angel in the house and codify normative behavior for middle- and upper-class white women. Such images also function to marginalize and devalue the paid labor of lower-class women as well as the unpaid labor of slaves.

### The Reporting of Work: *El Repertorio Salvadoreño* and *Violetas del Anáhuac*

In contrast to fictional descriptions, nonfiction essays and speeches often foregrounded women's work as having positive and negative outcomes for men and women alike. While numerous articles emphasized women's higher calling as wives and mothers, some writers also deployed this rhetoric to advocate for women's increased access to education and for their entry into the labor force. These writers sometimes created explicit chains of meaning that connected women's paid employment outside the home with the desired national project of progress and modernization of their countries' political, social, and economic systems. Their writings leveraged liberal ideologies and, increasingly, positivist thinking and the widespread desire to achieve progress and modernity through political, economic, and social changes that would dispel any remaining vestiges of the colonial past and place the Spanish American nations on an equal footing with their peers in North America and Europe, often held up as models for Latin America and its inhabitants. Thus, when the scientist and writer David Joaquín Guzmán (El Salvador, 1843–1927), published "Amor a las ocupaciones del hogar" in *El Repertorio Salvadoreño* in 1889, he linked women's roles in the home as nurturers to their participation in national progress.<sup>12</sup> Guzmán proposes, "el mejor modo de que la mujer trabaje con provecho y honra de la sociedad, es cumpliendo con todos los deberes de la familia, y que a la vez, coopere también en el movimiento general del progreso" (1889, 101). While he does not advocate that women enter the workplace, he defines women's domestic roles as involving work, specifically uses the verb *trabajar* to describe women's activities at home, and links their work to society's betterment. Women should also conserve and augment the family fortunes and daughters should help their fathers "a no echar a menos las ocupaciones que contribuyen a la conservación del capital del padre" (not miss the labors that contribute to the conservation of the father's capital) (1889, 105). As Pamela Odih (2007, 17) reminds us, "capital's political economy of time depends upon the expropriation of domestic labour time as a non-economic resource"; Guzmán advocates a system in which female unpaid domestic labor is construed as filial devotion to support a male-dominated accumulation of capital. This strategy enables him to negotiate normative strictures about women's traditional roles by quantifying their work as a family obligation. He also presents women's ability to work as, crucially, a service to the state, given that it helps advance the national modernizing project. While Guzmán brackets these moments in which he favors women's ability to enter the workforce with rhetoric reproducing standard gender norms about women as domestic angels, he also encodes scenarios in which middle-class women could earn wages and links their paid work with national progress.

Such discursive maneuvers occurred elsewhere as well. When *La mestiza* was published in Mexico in 1861, the modernizing, positivist project that the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1878–1910) would later attempt to systematize was still far off. Toward the end of Díaz's regime, which saw such developments as the construction of a national railroad system, increased industrialization and urbanization, and the growth of an increasingly affluent middle class, some texts conveyed strong opinions about women's entry into the workforce and the processes of modernization. As middle-class women had more opportunities for paid employment, some writers represented women's labor as permissible by deploying images of domesticity in ways that shifted the focus from women's roles in the home to their roles in the public sphere. By doing so they fought against prevailing Porfirian norms that exalted the role of the angel in the house and, according to William French (1992, 543), considered family formation the most important role a woman could have. The women's journal *Las Hijas del Anáhuac* began publishing in 1887; in January 1888 it changed its name to *Violetas del Anáhuac* and ran weekly for another year. Coedited by Mateana Murguía de Aveyra (1856–1907) and Laureana Wright de Kleinhans (1846–1896), both iterations of the magazine published articles advocating women's entry into the workforce.<sup>13</sup> In the first issue, Concepción Manresa de Pérez

<sup>12</sup> The *Repertorio Salvadoreño* was the monthly magazine issued by the Academia de Ciencias y Bellas Artes de San Salvador, founded by Guzmán, who was the Museo Nacional of El Salvador's first director.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the journal, see Domenella and Pasternac (1991) and Infante Vargas (1996).

(1887, 7) defended women's education: "Si la desgracia nos deja en la orfandad y vemos que la costura y las labores de la mujer, *hoy en manos de los hombres*, no nos ayudan a subsistir, no por eso cubriremos de cosméticos y artificios nuestra epidermis para lanzarnos al vicio [...], sino por el contrario, las ciencias y las artes bienaventuradas nos ofrecerán el pan cotidiano, sin que por eso olvidemos los deberes de la Religión y los purísimos de la familia." (If disgrace orphans us and we see that sewing and other women's tasks, *today in men's hands*, do not allow us to subsist, we shall not cover ourselves with cosmetics and throw ourselves into vice ... on the contrary, science and useful arts will offer us our daily bread, and we will not forget our religious obligations and purest of all, our family duties.) Manresa de Pérez specifically rejects prostitution as a consequence of women's poverty, contrary to Ancona's and Cabello's novels, and asserts that education will enable women to provide for themselves. She claims a place in the paid labor force for educated women and, by underscoring that women workers will also be devout Catholics and family members, insists that women's work does not pose the grave threat to female morality and family stability that others believed it would.<sup>14</sup> She notes that male control over women's work choices prevents their access to more meaningful labor options. If, as Huppatz (2012, 28) writes, "gendered occupational segregation is the objectification of an unequal relationship between men and women," Manresa de Pérez critiques that inequality and, by reasserting women's moral and religious purity in the workplace, instead mobilizes its gendered discourse to protect her middle-class female peers as they enter the labor market. She also counters prevailing Porfirian rhetoric about the moral decay of Mexican society, which, as French (1992, 538) propounds, was a way for middle-class social progressives to shift debate away from class-based strife and workers' rights and economic status. French (1992, 542) claims that "Porfirians employed the so-called law of the female labor market to justify enforced female domesticity" and argued that women belonged at home rather than the workplace, but Manresa de Pérez and her peers contend instead that meaningful work will allow women to maintain their moral purity by giving them alternatives to prostitution.

In the same issue, Murguía de Aveleyra published "El profesorado en México" (1887, 17), in which she claims that teaching was "un recurso más eficaz contra la miseria"—more effective, that is, than sewing, the task which, as we have seen, was both socially approved and economically unfeasible. Discourses in late nineteenth-century Spanish America about women teachers were multivalent. As secular education became more common, women were more frequently called on to work as teachers, and teaching became a more respectable occupation for middle-class women (see Arrom 1985, 171–172). Teaching could be an extension of the traditional caretaking role that women exercised as mothers, but only if they taught younger children. The school could be an acceptable semipublic space for women to work, unlike the factory floor, as it extended the venues where women could nurture and guide children, "establishing lifelong habits of industry and morality" in them, as Porfirian thinkers stressed (French 1992, 544). Advocates for women teachers also pointed to the Anglo-American model of enrolling young women in teacher education colleges, which prepared them for paid work. Domingo F. Sarmiento had already implemented this system with apparent success in Argentina (Little 1978, 237–38). References to the United States as an exemplar of modernity and progress were common, and supporters of female teachers used the Anglo-American example to attach their arguments to this concept of the ideal modern nation. Murguía de Aveleyra also takes the government to task for paying women teachers less than male teachers, in an early example of the debate over equal pay for equal work. In that way she transgresses social codes that cast women's work as supplementary to the work of their male relatives and as a temporary way for women to help their families. French (1992, 543) points out that Porfirian advocates for the working class argued not that women should be paid equally with men but that men should be paid more than women so that husbands could enable their wives to remain at home rather than entering the workplace.

A year later, the pseudonymous "Elisa" crossed another boundary around gender norms when she presented work as desirable in and of itself, not only for its utilitarian value as a means for women to support themselves and avoid becoming a burden on private charities or the state. Elisa (1888, 104–105) argued, "Ojalá que todas las mujeres adquiriesen una profesión, arte u oficio conforme a su inteligencia, aptitud y fortuna, para que le sirviese de escudo contra la miseria en todas las eventualidades de la vida, [...] y] para proporcionarles las dulces satisfacciones que produce el trabajo." (May all women acquire a profession, skill, or job befitting their intelligence, aptitude, and destiny, which will shield them from misery in any of life's travails ... and give them the sweet satisfaction that work yields.) When she affirms women's rights to engage in satisfying work, she contradicts the angel in the house doctrine that women should sacrifice

<sup>14</sup> See Skinner (2006) for more on religious discourse and representations of women's work and education in *Violetas del Anáhuac* and other journals.

their own joy for their families. Elisa defamiliarizes the conditions in which women currently perform work and counters the hegemonic norms maintaining those conditions by explicitly advocating for women's emotional fulfillment through work.

### Contradiction and Class: Soledad Acosta de Samper

At almost the same time as *Violetas del Anáhuac* was appearing, the Colombian writer Soledad Acosta de Samper (1833–1913) similarly asserted women's rights to meaningful work in "La aptitud de la mujer para ejercer todas las profesiones," a speech given in Madrid in 1892, where she was a member of the Colombian delegation to the Congreso de Americanistas, which celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the Spanish arrival in the New World. In her speech Acosta argues that Latin American women, who lagged behind their European and North American counterparts in education and opportunity, need examples of successful women, and she names women philanthropists, doctors, lawyers, scientists, economists, and travelers. She draws the line, however, at female politicians, calling female emancipation "una idea absurda" (2011, 174). She inserts this critique of feminine ambition in the middle of her catalog of accomplished women and surrounds her aside rejecting the full participation of women in the political arena with specific anecdotes of intellectual elite women. By expressing the fear that women might acquire too much power, she deprives potential opponents of the chance to argue against women's right to work, and by describing women politicians as absurd—a position typical of most intellectual women of her period—she allows her other examples to be seen as acceptable, even normal. Acosta concludes that women's options of the traditional route of marriage and motherhood or the professions are both equally good. The invocation of traditional norms of domesticity is a protective maneuver as once again she preempts counterarguments about the destruction of the family, but it also imposes limits on women's ability to access all areas of life and work. Carolina Alzate (2015) defines Acosta's approach as one of "liberal feminism," "a feminism that seeks to broaden the activity of women in the literate class but which fundamentally does not challenge the way in which that class understands the nation and society as a whole" (2015, 115). Acosta thus maintains existing beliefs, usually associated with liberal ideology, about the appropriate sexual division of labor.

Acosta's affirmation of social norms continues when she writes, "[La mujer] jamás será respetable, nunca será digna del puesto que debe ocupar en el mundo, si renuncia a ser *mujer* por las cualidades de su alma, por la bondad de su corazón, y si no hace esfuerzo para personificar siempre la virtud, la dulzura, la religiosidad y la parte buena de la vida humana." (Woman will never be respectable, never worthy of the place she should occupy in the world, if she stops being a *woman* by reason of the qualities of her soul, the goodness of her heart, and if she does not strive to always personify virtue, sweetness, religiosity, and all that is good in human life) (2011, 175). There are several ways to read Acosta here. In one reading, she places boundaries around women's participation in the public sphere as she insists on adherence to gendered norms. In her scheme women cease to be women if they do not follow particular strictures, and given that one of the most damaging, and conservative, arguments against women's public work was and continues to be that it makes women "unwomanly," Acosta's assertions reaffirm the traditional binarisms that confine women to certain roles. Yet another reading of this passage is that Acosta strives to break through those binarisms by naming women who have negotiated the transition into the professions while retaining what she deems their essential feminine qualities. If women's traditional role involves marriage and motherhood, it also involves male protection and, beyond that, near-total dependence on the man's desires and whims, and she explicitly calls women in these conventional roles "weak" (2011, 175). The implication is that by contrast, professional women are strong and independent. Nonetheless, while Acosta apparently advocates for women's opportunities as professionals, her word choice creates a divide between women occupying traditional "dependent," "weak" roles coded "feminine," and women occupying "independent," "strong" roles coded "masculine." Acosta's discourse operates within a system of representation that produces gendered hierarchies, and her own representations of gendered subjects reinforce those hierarchies and binaries.

Indeed, four years later, Acosta published an advice manual focusing on women's traditional domestic roles. *Consejos a las mujeres* (1896) has three sections, two of which address married women and describe their domestic duties, including the oversight of household servants. The text creates an image of the ideal elite married woman as wholly dedicated to the moral, spiritual, and physical well-being of her family and to the oversight of her home and household staff to achieve domestic perfection. Acosta couches domestic labor as a saintly task: she counsels a new bride to be "no la prosa, no la materialidad de la vida de tu esposo, sino la poesía, la belleza ideal con que ha soñado él" (not the prose, not the materialism of your husband's life, but the poetry, the ideal beauty of which he has dreamed) (1896, 125), talks about wives' vital mission, and writes that mothers should accept the chore of breastfeeding "con el mayor gusto" (1896, 51). But her

word choice communicates the notion that the domestic work of childcare and household management as performed by elite women constitutes a grinding obligation. She announces, “Toda mujer que se casa debe comprender que dejó de ser libre y que será esclava de sus obligaciones como dueña de casa, como esposa, y como madre” (every woman who marries must understand that she stopped being free and that she will be a slave to her obligations as the lady of the house, wife and mother) (1896, 51), underscoring this idea when she refers to marriage as a cross and as a burden (1896, 131) and repeatedly describes women's matrimonial and maternal tasks as duties imposed on them. Acosta explicitly tells her readers that having a family is such a weighty burden that women who are not simultaneously strong and self-sacrificing must *not* marry and become mothers (1896, 78). These discursive strategies very clearly frame the work of the mistress of the house as *work*. If Marx excluded domestic work as a strategy of capitalist accumulation, as Odih's critique notes (2007, 11), Acosta firmly includes such labor within familial and social economies.

On the other hand, Acosta represents female household servants as inherently flawed—lazy, slovenly, and needing constant monitoring. The wife must personally care for her children because servants are bad influences: “inculcan malos hábitos, costumbres desaseadas e ideas indelicadas en los niños” (they instill bad habits, dirty customs and indelicate ideas in children) (1896, 52). The consistently negative representation of lower-class working women upholds class hierarchies; as Bourdieu notes, “women remain *separated from each other* by economic and cultural differences” (2002, 93; original italic). Acosta actively promotes that separation through frequent reminders of the failings of female domestic workers in order to bolster the standing of her elite peers and, by extension, of herself. Acosta's scrupulously detailed descriptions of the household chores carried out by upper- vs. lower-class women fortify class distinctions. Servants always act under their mistress's management; elite women have an agency within the domestic sphere that lower-class women lack. Maintaining and strengthening class divisions enables elite women to enhance their own status, as social status depends upon the network of relationships between the classes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, these representations of women's work in fictional and nonfictional texts in nineteenth-century Spanish America encode intense anxiety about the social changes of the modernizing process. While many advocated for progress, urbanization, and modernity, modernization also entailed societal changes in gender roles, family and domestic organization, and class structures. Writers displaced their general anxiety about the wholesale transformation of their societies onto one of the most visible markers of that transformation, working women. This may explain why middle-class women's work was criticized or described in ways that downplayed the extent to which women worked, on the one hand, and, on the other, was often represented in ways that transmitted the writers' messages about domesticity and family stability. If authors operate under the assumption that working women destabilize families, they cannot represent the work of those women positively, because the very representation of women working outside the home undermines the argument being made. Even authors who strove to validate women's work recurred to existing tropes, notably the angel in the house, that associated women with domesticity, the family, and the home, which limited what those authors could propose for female agency. This analysis demonstrates how even those thinkers who try to imagine new possibilities outside encoded social norms find themselves bound by codes of gendered behavior, as possible transgressions of societal rules restricting access to work opportunities end up attached to acceptable modalities of thinking and talking about gender roles. Examining the apparent contradictions about women and work in and between these texts enables us to untangle and understand more completely the complex web of interactions among gender, class, race and political beliefs in nineteenth-century Spanish America.

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