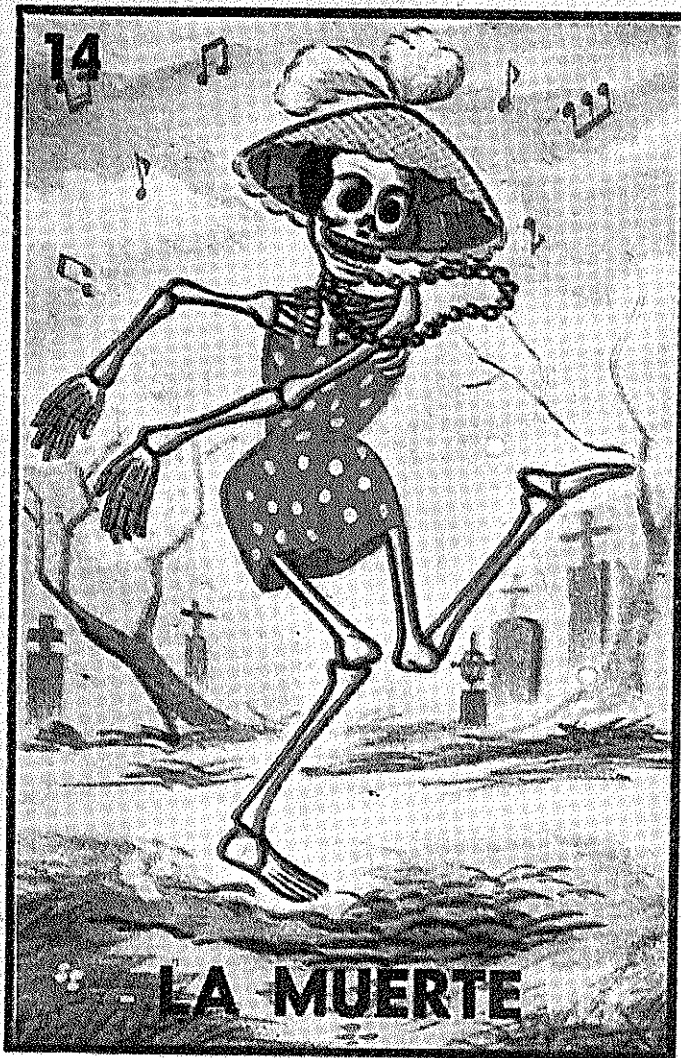




This Mexican lottery card from the 1920s identifies the “new woman” as a threat to social order.

THE HUMAN TRADITION IN MODERN LATIN AMERICA

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Campos, who spent years searching for lost pieces of Patrícia's life and assembling her widely scattered writings, resulted in the publication of his invaluable anthology, *Pagu: Patrícia Galvão: Vida-obra* (São Paulo, 1982). It includes several essays on her life and work; facsimiles of two manuscripts, Pagu's 1929 autobiography, "O álbum de Pagu," and Wald and Pagu's diary, "O romance da época anarquista"; autobiographical passages from Patrícia's 1950 political pamphlet "Verdade e liberdade"; Patrícia's poems, a selection of articles published in the press, and excerpts from her travels; contemporary reviews of her writings; testimonies from Patrícia's last husband, Geraldo Ferraz, and her sister, Léria, as well as by others who knew her; homages to her; photographs; a detailed itinerary of her life (which constitutes an outline of a biography); and the most complete bibliography of works by and about her. Facsimile editions are available of Patrícia Galvão's *Parque industrial, romance letario* (São Paulo, 1981), as well as of the journals *Revista antropofagia* (São Paulo, 1975) and *O homem do povo* (São Paulo, 1985). The first is now available in translation by Elizabeth K. and David Jackson as *Industrial Park* (Lincoln, NE, 1992). Background information on women in early twentieth-century São Paulo is taken from Susan Kent Besse, *Freedom and Bondage: The Impact of Capitalism on Women in São Paulo, Brazil, 1917-1937*, Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1983.

Ofelia Domínguez Navarro: The Making of a Cuban Socialist Feminist

K. Lynn Stoner

Lynn Stoner, professor of history and director of the Latin American Studies Center at Arizona State University, has become the leading voice in the United States on the status of women in Cuba since its independence from Spain in 1898. Her investigation of this subject began at Indiana University and resulted in her dissertation on the Cuban women's movement. Before going to Arizona State, Stoner was a consultant at the World Bank, worked for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and taught at Kansas State University. During a 1986 research trip to Havana, she had the opportunity to lead seminars at the Federation of Cuban Women.

In writing about Ofelia Domínguez Navarro, Stoner explores the role of women in Cuba against the background of that nation's history before Fidel Castro's revolution in 1959. For the three decades from 1920 to 1959, Cubans endured life in an off-shore appendage of the United States. Tourists eager for hard liquor (because of Prohibition at home), gambling, bordellos, and luxury vacations streamed to the island. The rise of leisure activities that were illegal in the States brought additional graft and introduced racketeering to Cuba. For Cubans their island became a poorhouse run by scoundrels, first under General Gerardo Machado (1925-1933) and then Army commander Fulgencio Batista, who manipulated puppet presidents (1933-1940), then ruled in person as president (1940-1944) and as dictator (1952-1959). This political charade was played out in concert with economic domination and political oversight from Washington. The great majority of Cubans lived on the margins of their own nation. Generally ignored, women, workers, and Afro-Cubans appeared only as entertainers or quaint characters for tourists or as mobs to be disciplined by the ruling plutocrats.

A number of themes emerge in Ofelia's story that invite comparison with those seen in the experiences of other individuals, especially other women, found in this volume. Her political attitudes, for example, should be compared with those of her Brazilian contemporary Pagu, the erstwhile Communist.

Radicalization in Cuba during the 1930s was a response to thirty years of frustrated democratic aspirations and political corruption. Following independence in 1898, Cuba's military and economic weakness in the face of U.S. domination deprived Cubans of their sovereignty. A series of presidents depended upon Washington's approval to govern and, consequently, put U.S. interests above national needs. In 1930 worldwide depression exacerbated Cuban frustrations and led students and workers to rebel. The repressive tactics of President Gerardo Machado incited the opposition of students, workers, middle-class businessmen, politicians, and women who took to the streets to protest his alleged dictatorship.

Ofelia Domínguez Navarro joined this opposition. Instead of choosing the predictable avenues of protest open to middle-class women and feminists, she became a socialist feminist. As a lawyer, she defended radical students, socialists, and Communists against government-ordered arrests and imprisonment. She was jailed and endured exile for her beliefs in democracy and broad-reaching social change. Incarceration, rather than discouraging her socialist principles, hardened her commitment to revolution.

Ofelia was in her prime between 1923 and 1946. During this time she suffered the trauma of cutting herself off from her friends who were not radical enough to see imperialism, economic disadvantage, and male dominance as the causes of injustice. Her direct experience with political and social inequity took an otherwise privileged lady and created a revolutionary.

Ofelia's high ideals, courage, and intellect came from both sides of her family. Born on December 9, 1894, in Mataguá, a suburb of Seibabo, Las Villas, she could recall the last years of the Cuban War of Independence, in which her parents were active participants. Ofelia's father, Florentino Domínguez, joined a revolutionary group in 1895 and moved to San Juan de los Yeras, where his parents lived. It was a dangerous time for rebels, whom the Spanish imprisoned, exiled, or executed. Ofelia's mother, Paula Navarro, aided rebel forces by smuggling arms to them and making them hammocks. When she drove her cart into the countryside, the contraband strapped to her body, she told Spanish soldiers that she was showing off her child to relatives. She carried along Ofelia, her firstborn, to convince the soldiers of her mission.

In 1895, Florentino was arrested after a member of his revolutionary group informed the Spanish government of his sympathy with the revolutionary forces. Florentino and his co-conspirators were sentenced to exile in Chafarinas, a penal colony near Algiers. There he worked in a rock quarry, yet he held stubbornly to his revolutionary activities. He and other prisoners printed a newspaper, *The Exile*, in which they demanded Cuban independence. Upon his return to Cuba, Florentino again became involved in the revolution. The Spaniards rearrested him and this time sentenced him to a lengthy exile in Mexico. His family accompanied him.

As a child, Ofelia experienced the harsh realities of the independence struggle. She and her mother lived briefly in one of Cuba's infamous concentration camps, which were rife with disease and hunger. An aunt who had married a Spaniard watched her four children starve to death while her husband flourished in the Spanish army. Another aunt watched helplessly as her son, caught aiding the patriots, was tied behind a horse and dragged. In desperation she tried to yank him free, but instead she had to witness his body broken on the rocks, his brains and body parts left on the streets.

These experiences contributed to the development of Ofelia's principles and courage. Exile and imprisonment, rather than being shameful punishments, signified stalwart adherence to the principles of independence. While this alone did not make Ofelia a revolutionary, the example of her parents made radical action in the name of nationalism acceptable to her.

Peace and stability did not automatically follow Cuban independence. Political disruption and violence characterized the early republican period, and misgovernment, corruption, and U.S. manipulation of national affairs soon alienated Cuban nationalists. In the first decade and a half of the republic, white Cuban elites vied for the administrative power abandoned by the departing Spaniards. National parties were merely launching pads for political careers and had no ideological bases. Politicians used assassination to remove opponents from office, and those who ordered assassinations were immune from arrest. Political campaigns were carried out in the streets, not in the polling booths.

Ofelia learned what political immunity meant as a young adult, first in 1911 when she took a teaching job in Jorobada, a small rural community outside Aguas Bonitas in Las

Villas, and later in Havana where she practiced law. Her teaching experience brought her into direct contact with people who had little hope of escaping poverty, illness, drudgery, superstition, hunger, and premature death.

There was no school building in Jorobada, and the few children who attended classes met in the house of Lao Pérez, an old friend of the Domínguez family. Nineteen-year-old Ofelia had to jerry-build a schoolroom: each day she carried a bench from the park for seats, used an oilcloth as a blackboard, and turned a piece of wood and a barrel into a desk.

Offering the students a modern curriculum threatened the peasants' religious understanding and principles. Some parents were ambivalent about bringing their children to school. They objected to Ofelia's curriculum, which included reading, writing, arithmetic, singing, and physical education. In the P.E. class, the boys marched and jumped hurdles while the girls jumped rope and marched. Some parents complained that their children were being sent to school to learn to read and write and not to ruin their shoes. "For that," one said, "the children could join the circus."

Other parents eagerly brought their children. One father, dragging in his kicking and screaming son, told Ofelia, "I have brought this kid so you can learn him . . . so that between his ears letters will flow along with the blood."

After school, Ofelia read newspapers to the townspeople, who commented on and interpreted national and international news according to their own experiences. She also read their letters to them and then wrote replies. As her life became intertwined with those of the campesinos, she came to respect their essential integrity and honesty, and she began to understand how difficult was their struggle for dignity and the necessities of life.

The principal arm of the government in Jorobada was the *rurales*, a rural police force that "kept the peace" in the countryside. Young peasant males clamored to join the *rurales* because by serving in the force, by donning its well-known yellow uniform, they could earn a steady salary, hold power, and achieve status. Repression and corruption were unconcealed facts of life in Jorobada, and bribes were the *modus operandi* in local politics. Anyone could become the victim of police extortion. Victims had no recourse because such actions were not regarded as crimes.

Torture was a common means of extracting information about local discontent, theft, and anything else the police

wanted to know. The police station opened onto an alleyway beside Ofelia's makeshift school, and she and her students could hear the screams of tortured prisoners.

One day, a local officer, Sergeant Nardo, came to the window that faced Ofelia's desk. In front of the class he challenged her to approve of his activities. "Can you hear it, teacher? We are beginning the torture again. Any man leaving this jail leaves in tatters."

Heedless of the consequences, Ofelia exploded with indignation. "Students," she said to the class, "corporal punishment is prohibited by our constitution, and the first time a uniformed bandit lifts his whip or machete against you, kill him and do not tolerate the affront."

"Teacher! Teacher!" the sergeant roared while the students applauded, "you don't know what you are doing!"

"Yes," she answered, "I am doing what I should do."¹

Ofelia was not exempt from political exploitation simply because she was a teacher. During her first year of teaching, she earned forty pesos per month, just enough to cover food and clothing, yet she also had to donate money to build a school. When the people of Jorobada learned of the arrangement, they built the schoolroom and paid her rent for one year. She used what extra money she earned to defray the expenses of her younger sisters' and brothers' educations.

Sometime later, the government raised teacher salaries to eighty pesos per month, but the teachers had to donate half of their pay to build a house for the minister of education. Incensed, Ofelia went into action and refused to pay for the home of a man who had wealth and lucrative businesses. Although Ofelia thought she was alone in her protest, teachers at the normal school, most of whom were women, demonstrated publicly.

While Ofelia taught in Jorobada, she also was studying for her *bachillerato* (high-school diploma). After completing the degree, she decided to attend law school. Her father wanted her to study for a doctorate in pharmacology because it was a popular degree among educated, elite women in Havana. Ofelia prevailed. She completed law school, mostly through correspondence courses, and moved from Jorobada to Santa Clara and then to Havana to practice law.

Ofelia learned about the seamier side of life through her experience as a criminal attorney. She defended murderers, prostitutes, and thieves. She also saw how public office could be used to subvert the legal system and how legal power

often benefited the privileged class. Ofelia could have become cynical about the legal profession and human misery, but she did not. Although she was repelled by crime, she often felt compassion for the victims and the accused. A delinquent, to her way of thinking, was the product of an exploitative system, and ignorance and desperation were the real motivations for crime. Ofelia was most compassionate toward prostitutes. Without denying the immorality of the occupation, Ofelia felt that prostitutes were made to suffer for the transgressions of the men who were their customers. She argued that jurists, who often saw prostitution as a "necessary evil," never considered the women's destitution, which, in Ofelia's opinion, was the fundamental cause of this activity. It was through her defense of these women that Ofelia became a feminist.

Ofelia was not the first to raise the question of women's rights in newly independent Cuba. Women of her mother's generation had fought for independence alongside their husbands and brothers, and they had won respect and recognition for their efforts. Yet, after the signing of the Cuban constitution in 1902, these same heroines found themselves disenfranchised and sent home with nothing more than monuments and poems as rewards for their sacrifices. The principles of independence apparently did not include equality between men and women. Women's rights did not receive attention until women took up the cause for themselves. In 1917 women of good education and high breeding challenged male politicians to reform the laws so that women would have the same rights as men.

Middle- and upper-class women who became leaders in women's organizations were the first to connect women's legal and political disadvantages with the promises of independence. They demanded universal suffrage, representation in court, government welfare programs, and control of their own and their children's lives. They believed that the freedoms they sought for themselves would benefit all women regardless of race or class. These early feminists became self-appointed leaders of a women's civil and legal rights movement. They were part of a ruling class that expected to lead and to define new rights in terms of their own understanding of freedom and justice, but they were reluctant to give power to women of the laboring classes so that they might articulate their own notions of justice.

On the surface, Ofelia Domínguez Navarro appeared to be a typical member of Havana's highly educated, cosmopolitan middle class. She was a lawyer and a founder of the Club Femenino de Santa Clara and the Alianza Nacional Feminista, two feminist organizations. Ofelia's colleagues were progressive women of property and influence, who traveled in Europe and the United States. Yet Ofelia's background also included struggle and hardship, and she was sympathetic to the needs of the poor. She supported the women's movement, but she opposed its philanthropic programs for disadvantaged women. In time, she broke with the middle-class women's organizations over the question of poverty, the rights of illegitimate children, and political activism.

Ofelia first became nationally known as an advocate of women's rights in 1923, when she attended the First National Women's Congress. The Club Femenino de Cuba, one of several women's organizations, had called the congress to assess the state of Cuban feminism and set directions for the women's movement. Delegates from thirty-one organizations and all seven of Cuba's provinces attended. Advocates for change spoke about women's comparative legal disadvantages, and the delegates enthusiastically passed reform resolutions. The harmonious atmosphere was disturbed when Ofelia, Dulce María Borrero de Luján, Hortensia Lamar, and others proposed a resolution to correct the unequal status of legitimate and illegitimate children. At this point, the congress erupted into pandemonium. For many feminists, Ofelia's resolution, that illegitimate children receive the same assurances of care, shelter, and love as legitimate children, was scandalous. According to many conservative delegates, the protection of unwed mothers was not a feminist matter but a moral question that revealed a woman's, not a man's, immoral character. The delegates, many of them also influenced by Catholic Church directives, defeated Ofelia's resolution, although they did put it on the agenda for the next national women's congress, scheduled for 1925.

If Ofelia was disgruntled by the conservatives at the first congress, she must have been appalled at the Second National Congress in April 1925. She again addressed the issue of equal rights for all children, regardless of their parents' marital status. Since the last congress, she had gathered evidence about the living conditions of unwed mothers and

the hopelessness of their children. But rather than consider the plight of these women and children, the conservative faction accused Ofelia of being a Communist. They argued that she, as a single and childless woman, could not understand mothers and children, and that in her arguments she was merely espousing Communist ideology, which sought to destroy the family by supporting divorce, free love, and concubinage. The kindest criticism called her a stupid sentimentalist.

What had been pandemonium over the issue in 1923 turned into a near riot in 1925. Women pounded tables with their shoes as they vied for the floor. The conservatives threatened to walk out, but Ofelia and her supporters upstaged them and left first. After the progressives' departure, the reactionary Catholic elements met in secret sessions so that they could control the voting on all issues. As a result, the congress passed nothing more radical than a suffrage resolution.

After this congress, Ofelia increased her activity in the Club Femenino, one of the more radical groups within the women's movement. The Club differed from philanthropic organizations in its demand that the state take more responsibility for the poor and that women have the same civil and political status as men. The Club joined student militants who were fighting in the streets for the release of Julio Antonio Mella, the founder of the Cuban Communist party, who was being held in jail without bond. Although the women in the Club were not Communists, they did sympathize with the students' protest against corruption and gangster politics.

The Mella incident was crucial in Ofelia's political development, for Julio Antonio Mella was a friend with whom Ofelia shared some ideological ties. She had been his guest at the Popular University when she gave a talk about the equality of children.

Mella went on a hunger strike, protesting his arbitrary arrest and harsh treatment in prison. Many Cubans thought his arrest was unjust, and they feared that Mella would be allowed to die. The Club Femenino, led by Ofelia, supported the nationwide demonstration. Together with the students of Santa Clara, she planned a massive protest. Sánchez Arango and Gómez Guimeranez organized factory workers, and Ofelia brought out the students from the institute, the normal school, and the law school. In less than three hours,

the students, workers, and others marched peacefully on the provincial government. They held a meeting in Santa Clara's central park and then dispersed.

But Ofelia was not through. She led a contingent of delegates to the home of President Machado's parents, who lived in Santa Clara. Ofelia told them of the arrest, the hunger strike, and the misuse of the law. Señora Lutgarda Morales was visibly moved by Ofelia's description of Mella's fragile condition. She immediately telegraphed her son, asking him to release Mella. "We beg you as your parents who have loved their children to order the release of the poor young prisoner."² In Havana even larger demonstrations had been held to demand Mella's release. At the eleventh hour, Machado released Mella, thus sparing his life.

Ofelia's association with students and workers broadened her understanding of oppression and of how to organize against government retaliation. Her interest in reform was no longer defined solely in terms of the women's movement. Despite her enlarged perception of what constituted social injustice, she remained loyal to women's issues. Between 1915 and 1928 she participated in national and international women's meetings to which she carried her message about the rights of illegitimate children. She met other Latin American feminists, such as Paulina Luisi of Uruguay. She also encountered the North American feminists who proved that they were no friends of Latin American women at the 1926 Interamerican Women's Congress in Panama. The delegates from the United States abstained in the vote for a resolution that Latin American nations grant women their civil and political rights. These delegates said that they were not convinced that Latin American women were ready to exercise their rights. This episode reinforced Ofelia's anti-U.S. sentiments.

Women's suffrage turned out to be a political issue inextricably linked to the overthrow of the Machado government. As such, it initially pulled together the conservative and radical elements of the feminist movement. General Gerardo Machado became Cuba's fifth president in 1924, and some hoped his administration would be different from previous, corrupt regimes. Machado acknowledged the need for improved public works and for the elimination of corruption. Many of his projects, especially the trans-Cuban railroad, were popular. At the urging of his supporters, he appointed a constitutional assembly in 1927 to rewrite the 1902

constitution to extend the presidential term from four to six years, thus allowing him to succeed himself. To deflect allegations that he was a dictator, Machado declared his support for women's suffrage. He wanted to convince Cuban dissidents that he was broadening the electoral base and favoring democratic rule, despite his consecutive terms in office, abolition of certain parties, and repressive tactics.

By 1927 essentially all feminists, regardless of their political leanings, supported universal suffrage, since that had been their cause for ten years. Even Ofelia spoke before the constitutional assembly in favor of Machado's resolution. She argued that votes for women would dignify the electoral process and give women the same rights as men, which they should have had immediately after independence.

The constitutional congress's decision to reject universal suffrage sharply disappointed the feminists, many of whom had stood vigil outside the capital to await the decision. Although the delegates had felt free to tinker with the constitution and provide for an irregular presidency, they claimed they did not have the authority to grant women the vote.

Outraged feminists formed a group called the Committee for the Defense of Women's Suffrage. They interviewed the most prominent men of the constitutional assembly, made declarations to the press, and presented a petition to Dr. Antonio Sánchez de Bustamante, president of the convention, demanding that the assembly write women's suffrage into the constitution. The members of the committee knew they would be unable to convince the assembly, but they wanted to keep the issue alive and before the public. Ofelia, along with Hortensia Lamar, Pilar Jorge de Tella, Rosaria Guillaume, and Rosa Arredondo de Vega, carried the petition to Dr. Sánchez during an assembly meeting. She and her associates also denounced the claims made by some of the delegates and medical doctors that women were physically and mentally inferior to men.

In the wake of the setback, a group of women decided to create a united feminist front with members from all social sectors of the republic to fight for the civil and political rights of women. In 1928, Pilar Jorge de Tella and Ofelia invited feminists to an organizational meeting. Pilar urged them to continue the feminist struggle, stating that women's rights were necessary for the well-being of the nation and world peace. Ofelia spoke about the legal status of women, remind-

ing those present that laws included problems of criminality and the economic subjugation of women. Upper-class women such as Elena Mederos de González initially supported Ofelia.

Within days of the meeting, Ofelia invited women working in tobacco factories to become part of the organization. Working-class women, teachers, factory workers, professional women, and the wealthy formed the Alianza Nacional Feminista on September 6, 1928, in the Salón de Actos of the Reporters' Association of Havana. The women called themselves the "*mambisas* for the new army of justice, ideals, and rights."

On behalf of the Alianza, Ofelia sent a letter to President Machado demanding that women have the vote and full citizenship. She argued her case not only in terms of women's rights but also in terms of the rights of the poor. The president promised only to send a message to congress supporting women's suffrage. Whether he fulfilled his promise is not known, but no resolution came before the assembly.

Popular opposition to the Machado government was in its infancy in 1928, and Ofelia was in its vanguard. She wrote for opposition journals and newspapers, several of which were published by the Communist party. She also did regular radio editorials on Havana stations. Fascism was rising in Europe, and some of its repressive tactics were being adopted by its supporters in Latin America, whom Ofelia strongly criticized. But she differed from many of her *compañeros* in the Communist and Socialist parties because of her feminist views that women must advance both as members of the proletariat and as women.

Ofelia's radical leanings were not lost on the moderate feminists in the Alianza. Although their stated purpose was to include women of all classes in the fight for women's rights, their vision for change would primarily benefit the middle class. The Alianza focused on legal changes to improve the civil status of women and labor laws. Many members of the Alianza, rather than tailor their program to include prostitutes, peasant women, tobacco workers, domestic servants, blacks, and mulattos, believed that discipline, education, and better health standards would improve the poor's standard of living. Until poor women could become respectable women, the moderates thought, feminists could aid them only through philanthropy and educational programs.

Ofelia broke with the Alianza in 1930 after losing the organization's presidential election. The membership had tolerated her radical views as labor vice president, but it would not accept her as its leader. María Collado, the leader of the Suffrage party and a vigorous opponent of Ofelia's views, claimed that Ofelia lost the election because she was egotistical and tyrannical. Ofelia's memoirs offer another explanation:

Because of the heterogeneous composition of the Alianza, we could not do any more than act for civil and political rights for women. We could not incorporate poor women and address their needs. Since rich women predominated, they could not reconcile their interests with those of tobacco workers, sales clerks, or teachers, etc.

For my part, I confess that in spite of the high intellectual and moral values represented in the Alianza, they were skewed enough to make me feel uncomfortable because I had to limit my activities which favored the social rights of working women. . . .

The Alianza had a number of issues and activities. I eventually left this group for no other reason than ideological convictions. The group did not address the needs of people outside their economic and social class.³

On May 30, 1930, Ofelia and Bertha Darder Bebé formed the Unión Laborista de Mujeres, which was intended to attract women of all classes to fight for a broad program of reform. The new group focused on women's issues, but it also was anti-imperialist and nationalistic. It differed from the Alianza by identifying poverty, gender exploitation, and North American capitalist imperialism as the sources of women's oppression. It called for collaboration between women and men to create new economic bases and opportunities for all Cubans, especially for those who worked. Ofelia insisted that the Unión be free of Church interference and the influence of members' husbands. Women of prestige and status filled the administrative positions, but they were women whose loyalty to socialist values was unquestionable. The Unión soon had the support of many progressives in the press, among the veterans of the wars of independence, and from the international feminist community.

At this point in her life, Ofelia was a socialist feminist, not a Marxist-Leninist. She did not advocate the destruction of democracy through revolution, nor did she support a totalitarian state or communism. She also refused to let

women's issues be subsumed by the proletarian struggle. She worked within the democratic system, and she argued for reform in democratic terms. Because her organization called for major economic and social changes and because of her alliance with other political groups, Ofelia was swept into the political turmoil that erupted between 1930 and 1934.

Four months after the founding of the Unión, Rafael Trejo, a student at the University of Havana, was assassinated. His murder by police during a demonstration galvanized opposition to Machado's regime. Until then the targets of Machado's repression had been striking workers and outspoken opponents of his administration. When Trejo, a student who had had no previous association with revolutionary groups, died, Machado was serving notice that he would use indiscriminate violence to preserve his presidency.

Trejo's death prompted accusations of police misconduct. Students rushed to newspaper offices to publish their denunciations. Trejo's friends, defying repression, carried his body first to the emergency room of a nearby hospital and then to his parents' home where it lay for public viewing. Ofelia and the women in the Unión stood vigil all night.

President Machado declared a state of siege until after Trejo's funeral. He ordered that only family members could accompany the body to the cemetery, but women from the Unión and other prominent radicals marched at the head of the funeral procession. Unión members were pallbearers and carried the casket on their shoulders from the chapel to the grave site. For once, being female had an advantage, for soldiers stationed along the route were reluctant to shoot women who were doing what women do after outbreaks of violence—mourn the dead. Ofelia delivered the eulogy, intended to unify everyone who objected to Machado's repressive tactics.

The Unión did not stop with its participation in Trejo's burial. Its members demanded the firing of the university's rector, who had called for police intervention, and insisted that the police be brought to justice. For those efforts, the Unión became the target of police investigation. Occasionally, policemen interrupted Unión meetings and disrupted the recruitment of new members. They also searched Unión offices for evidence of seditious activities.

Undaunted, the Unión leadership kept up public protest, but they always conducted themselves like ladies and avoided violence. On one occasion, the executive committee of the Unión, along with Dr. Candida Gómez Cala, the niece of

Maximo Gómez, one of the greatest generals to survive the wars of Cuban independence, visited Camp Columbia, the military headquarters in Havana, to protest police brutality. The police, who were used to society ladies visiting police headquarters to see that prisoners were clean and well fed, cordially received Gómez and the delegation. When Colonel Castillo, the commander, realized that their purpose was to criticize police behavior, he stiffened and asked that his staff members leave the room. Gómez humiliated Castillo by impugning his nationalism and accusing him of betraying the objectives of independence by repressing Cubans as the Spanish had done. Castillo, chastised, only mumbled that he had no answer to their accusations. The women left unharmed and returned to their homes.

As his administration came under increasing fire from opposition groups, Machado searched for a way to appease some of his opponents. An obvious ploy was to offer votes to women. As proof of his support for suffrage, he reminded the public of his 1927 constitutional resolution, blaming the congress for rejecting the measure. Although few feminists believed Machado, his maneuver succeeded to some extent in dividing the movement.

Most of the women's groups—the Alianza Nacional Feminista, the Partido Sufragista, the Club Femenino, and even the Lyceum—called for an end to the dictatorship and for women's suffrage, but they did not insist upon major political or economic changes. The Unión, on the other hand, was a more radical feminist organization. Ofelia and the executive council accused the government of trying to dilute the strength of the women's movement by using the vote to draw feminists' attention away from more difficult problems. Ofelia called on feminists to forget about suffrage for the time being and concentrate on economic, racial, and gender issues. She went so far as to say that, by paying exclusive attention to suffrage, the feminists demonstrated that women were a retarding force in revolutionary movements.

Machado's desperate attempts to appease opposition elements were unsuccessful, and 1930 marked the beginning of three years of bloody repression. The president outlawed public gatherings during the November by-elections. Newspapers threatened with censorship closed. Police hunted down and killed students because they were members of the Directorio Estudiantil, and they shot and killed protesters and suspected conspirators with their infamous "shots into

the air." Violence only begat violence, and groups such as the ABC, a middle-class organization that advocated the violent overthrow of Machado, joined the fray.

At first, the Unión did not endorse violence as a means of ousting Machado. The women became radical only after helping families search for fathers, sons, and brothers who had disappeared. The experience taught them the lengths to which Machado and his supporters would go to crush rebellion. After they had visited prisons as defense attorneys for jailed students and workers, Ofelia and the women of the Unión openly advocated revolution, although they would not bear arms themselves.

Ofelia was first arrested on January 3, 1931, when she and others were recruiting students from the normal school for the Directorio Estudiantil. The meetings were always secret, but the special police (the "Porra," or experts) learned that the students were meeting at 106 Linea. There were two such addresses, and the Porra went to the wrong one. By chance, Ofelia and Dulce María Escalona de Rodríguez, another celebrated female activist of the time, happened past and recognized two police lieutenants. The women knew it was only a matter of time before the police found the correct address, so they drove quickly to Teté Suárez Solís's house, where the meeting was being held. By the time they convinced the students of the danger, the police arrived. Ofelia and several other women pretended they were celebrating Teté's birthday. The police found them listening to the Victrola, with no students in evidence. When the police demanded that they be allowed to search the house, Ofelia collapsed on the bed as if she were ill, for she did not want the police to enter the bedroom where many of the students were hiding.

Her efforts failed. The Porra arrested everyone in the house and packed them off to jail. At first, Ofelia thought she would be spared because she was not put in the wagons with the students. However, one of the policemen invited her, in the name of Lieutenant Calvo, the most infamous of the Porra, to join him in the police car. She suspected that the policeman was taunting her, so she refused and went to one of the wagons with the students. The route to the jail, located downtown at the base of the Prado, meandered through the business center and colonial quarter. Along the way, the prisoners shouted, "Down with tyranny! Down with assassination! Down with Yankee imperialism!" Ofelia recalled

Torriente Brau's strong voice calling out, "Who killed Mella?" The answering chorus rang out from the other wagon, "Machado, Machado!"

All gaiety ended at the prison. It was a cold January afternoon, and the prison had no heat. Ofelia's cell, which was ten to twelve meters long and four meters wide, was dark when her jailers opened the barred door. The cell's only fresh air came in through a duct, too high to serve as a window, that faced a bracken marsh. The duct's bars and metal mesh limited the amount of air that could enter, and the only light came in through two windows in the ceiling. The cell was so dank that it took Ofelia two days to dry her handkerchief. The cold and dampness chilled to the bone. The cell had eighteen narrow beds, a few steel chairs, one wooden table, and some small boxes nailed to the walls for storing personal possessions. The prisoners had to share one toilet. On each side of the entryway were small dungeons reserved for solitary confinement.

Ofelia, Dulce María, and Teté found Carmen Gil, a Venezuelan poet, in one of the solitary confinement chambers. She was burning with fever, and she told the women of her terror over the previous seven days. She had been tied to her bed and subjected to the grossest kinds of sexual abuse, all this when she was essentially postpartum, having had a baby only three months earlier. She was suffering from internal infections.

The women hardly slept that night. From down the stairway, they could hear sounds coming from the men's quarters, so they knew who had been arrested and who was being tortured. Dulce María could hardly contain herself at first because of worry over her two small children and then because she could hear the voices of her husband and brother in the adjoining male prison of the Castillo Príncipe.

Two days later, Ofelia and the women were released. Still enraged by Carmen Gil's plight, Ofelia went directly to the offices of *El País*, the Communist newspaper, where she reported what had happened to Carmen and her husband. The following day, Ofelia protested to the secretary of government, Dr. Vivanco, who threatened repressive measures if she did not keep quiet. But threats of reprisal did not intimidate Ofelia; if anything, they ignited her defiance.

Police arrested Ofelia four more times on manufactured charges, for she never violated the law. In her first arrest, the allegation was conspiracy, although the government

never prosecuted Ofelia. Future imprisonments followed charges of conspiracy and inciting riots, but she was never convicted, even in the one case that came to trial.

Another common characteristic of Ofelia's arrests was that the police offered her preferential treatment because of her class, status, and occupation. On one occasion when the police arrested her at the Unión office, they realized that she was not well, and they offered to put her under house arrest. She refused. On another occasion, Ofelia had a broken leg and was running a high fever. Again the police wanted to put her under house arrest, and again she refused. Preferential treatment saved Ofelia's life on two occasions. In 1933 and 1937 she fled Cuba after receiving warnings from people who were close to her family that she would be assassinated if she did not flee.

Until March 1931, when Ofelia served her second prison term, she was a socialist feminist with a commitment to democracy and to radical social reform. She sympathized with the Communists, but she had not joined the party. She was a defender of the right to political dissent, a principle of the independence movement but not necessarily one of communism. The isolation of her cell, the contact with prostitutes and thieves, the filth and the bad treatment made her despair. Her only support came from Communist women who befriended her and offered some reason to endure the suffering. They taught her to hope. The final break with her old allies, the progressive feminists, came as she found stronger bonds of compassion and support behind prison walls. Prison made her a revolutionary.

When Ofelia went to prison in 1931, she became both a prisoner and a reporter. She wrote graphically about her arrests, her treatment, and her relationships with common and political prisoners. She experienced firsthand what people on the outside could never know: the smells, the tastes, the sights, and the feel of prison. She knew of the prisoners' hopelessness, despair, ignorance, illness, and suffering. Stripped of her social and political protection, she stood defenseless before the abusive wardens and officers. She lived alongside prisoners who could be violent and duplicitous. She suffered physical illness and mental anguish. With nothing but her intellect as a tool, Ofelia identified her moral convictions, and she deepened her commitment to revolutionary socialism without forgetting her allegiance to feminism. Only socialism, she resolved, considered the motivating

factors for crime, and only feminism helped women assume a new consciousness about their victimization in a patriarchal society.

When Ofelia entered Guanabacoa prison in March 1931, nearly all of its 140 female inmates were serving sentences for prostitution. Most of them were disease ridden, and they knew how to steal, swindle, and cheat. Most probably would die a premature death by murder or from venereal disease. Ofelia had understood before she entered prison that a lack of skills and education limited women's chances of obtaining gainful employment, but prison showed her other cultural factors that contributed to women's entrapment in prostitution. Hopelessness and superstition ruled their lives. Santerías, Afro-Cuban rituals, were the sources for supernatural cures, curses, and hoaxes. The women wore red colors in their clothing, patted out rhythms with their feet, used cleansing ceremonies, concocted special drinks, and fulfilled promises to Santa Bárbara to cure themselves. During these ceremonies they often shrieked and fell into trances. The women used rituals to reduce their sexual passions, and they also took out curses against their enemies in prison or against the clients and pimps who were exploiting them. Ofelia saw the tragedy in the santería, for it was an artificial cure for the profound problems that confronted these women. Their minds were darkened by confusion and supernatural forces, leaving them helpless in the face of their oppression.

With no effective outlet for anger, shame, or desperation, the prisoners frequently fought among themselves. A fight might begin between two persons but it usually ended in a brawl between gangs. The issue might be insignificant or a facade for deep resentments between a homosexual couple. No one was exempt from the violence. The women's snarling and cursing, often consisting of racial slurs and taunts about what sort of beast another woman was screwing, shocked and horrified Ofelia.

Soon Ofelia felt some of her fellow prisoners' passions. She, too, experienced intense hatred, especially toward the jailers, whose authority was represented by the huge key used to open and close her cell door. The key became an icon of her contempt for her oppressors. She despised the stooges who went to the wardens with stories of prisoner disobedience. She hated the warden, who was stealing prison provisions and selling them for profit. Ofelia used her own

alienation to understand the self-destructive behavior of the women with whom she lived.

Nothing shielded Ofelia from the horrors of drug addiction and homosexual and heterosexual rape. Many of the prisoners were alcoholics and marijuana smokers whose pimps brought them drugs on visiting days. Without their chemical means of escape, the prisoners often became mean and abusive. Prisoners and guards both were involved in perverted sexual adventures, such as rape and bestiality, violations that occurred between prisoners and between prisoners and guards. Homosexuality seemed almost normal. Some of the women pointed out their lovers to Ofelia and told her they were engaged.

Ofelia despaired for these women, but was especially distressed by problems of venereal disease. Mothers arrested for prostitution were allowed to bring their youngest children to prison with them, and since the mothers were often syphilitic, their children also carried the disease. None of the prisoners understood hygiene, and, even if they had, cleanliness in the prison was impossible. Only prisoners who could afford private medical treatment received it, and even they depended on the prison officials to notify a doctor. Venereal disease was so prevalent that Ofelia learned to recognize it by its appearance and smell. Yet prison officials took no precautions to prevent its spread. The prisoners used everything in common: cups, soap, sheets, towels, and spoons. They shared three showers and three toilets.

Nothing sickened Ofelia more than the syphilitic children who were mentally and physically defective. Children who entered the prison healthy stood little chance of leaving it that way. Healthy and sick children played together in one corner of the prison and shared food and toys that they put in their mouths. Their mothers would pick up their children and kiss them with mouths full of syphilitic sores. During the night, children screamed from the pain of the disease, and one girl had to be restrained from tearing at herself where lesions had appeared. The adult women often used drinking utensils and common water supply for santerías intended to cure their disease, a practice that exposed everyone to contact with syphilis and gonorrhea.

Desperate to contain the spread of disease, Ofelia encouraged the prisoners to take precautions and sent letters of protest through the Unión Radical de Mujeres (the new name

of the Unión Laborista de Mujeres) to the secretary of health. She was unable to convince the prisoners that there were "bugs" in the water, and they saw no reason to separate the sick from the healthy children. Worse yet, the doctor sent by the secretary of health to investigate Ofelia's complaints never entered the prison, though he did write a letter denying her charges.

Perhaps Ofelia's greatest accomplishment while in prison was the effort she made to understand the psychological composition of her jailers, who brutalized and mistreated prisoners. They not only forced the prisoners to follow arbitrary orders but also insisted upon humiliating them. The guards' actions demonstrated to Ofelia that they were no better than the "criminals" who were prisoners. She discovered that most guards were frightened or embittered widows and single women. Life had been hard for them, and so they channeled their fury against the only people whom they could control, the prisoners. Nothing stopped them from taunting or accusing a prisoner, and on occasion, a prisoner committed suicide following cruel encounters with the guards.

In her darkest moments, Ofelia drew strength from the more seasoned revolutionaries around. Prisoners who were members of the Communist party tried to organize the others so they could protect themselves from abuse. They also got news from the outside and kept in touch with the revolutionary movement. They paid the price for their actions, though, for they were constantly under surveillance and subjected to harassment by the guards.

One evening, a nurse who was their contact informed them that some would be taken to the Isle of Pines. Ofelia was marked to go, and the news was nearly more than she could bear. She had endured this imprisonment with a broken leg, and she was ill and depressed. Her Communist *compañeras* helped her pack her few things and hide her notes. Her misery increased with the knowledge that most of the other prisoners would not know about her move until after she had gone. When the guards came at midnight to take her away, the political prisoners shouted, "Down with tyranny! Long live the revolution!" and sang the "Marseillaise" and other revolutionary songs. As Ofelia followed the guards out of the prison and into the waiting police wagon, she heard from the highest prison galleries the boisterous voices of her *compañeras* singing the "Internationale."

At that moment, Ofelia made the spiritual conversion from an intellectual socialist to a revolutionary whose identity originated in socialist values and community. She ceased to identify primarily with middle- and upper-class intellectuals, choosing instead the solidarity of revolutionaries, for they were at her side during her moments of need.

Although Ofelia thought she was going to the Isle of Pines, she in fact went to the Calixto García Hospital where doctors treated her broken leg and fever. From the hospital, she returned to prison for another two months. She was released in September 1931, after a total of seven months in prison.

From 1931 through the overthrow of President Machado in 1933, Ofelia was a militant defender of the rights of student and labor dissidents. Wherever there was a crisis or a demonstration, Ofelia was present, either as a lawyer or a public speaker. When Communist newspaper reporters were jailed, she took over the editorship of their newspapers. She was jailed again, although briefly, and after her release received a tip from Machado's brother that she was on the Porra's assassination list for speaking at the funeral of a fallen revolutionary, Mirto Miliam, which the government correctly viewed as inciting rebellion.

If Ofelia were to survive, she had to flee. In January 1933 she left for Mexico, the home of her parents, where she remained until Machado's overthrow in September. It was a crucial moment for the anti-Machado forces, and Ofelia wanted to help direct the Unión but to do so meant certain death. In Mexico she spoke to revolutionary student groups and to Cubans in exile, hoping to build support for the revolution and to oppose U.S. mediation and control of Machado's ouster.

From 1933 to 1940 no less than seven men occupied Cuba's presidential palace—men who were essentially appointed and replaced by the new commander in chief of the military, Fulgencio Batista. Batista's abandonment of social reform issues and his groveling for U.S. support repelled Ofelia. She sided with the dedicated revolutionaries who were demanding socialist reform. She was a member of the delegation that brought back Julio Antonio Mella's ashes and buried them in Cuba. She demanded amnesty for all political prisoners. She denounced labor practices and the subsistence wages paid to workers, in particular the female workers

at the ten-cent stores. She protested Cuba's continued subservience to the United States. She encouraged tobacco union members to stiffen their armed resistance to police control, reminding them that they were more numerous and powerful than the rural police. She also encouraged other organizations, such as the needleworkers' union, to join international workers' shops to protect themselves against capital and labor exploitation. Her most continuous battle was with the Emergency Courts originally set up by Machado, and continued by subsequent governments, to try revolutionaries immediately after their arrest. They used no juries, and the judges were political appointees with questionable legal training. In effect, the courts were the government's tool for disposing of political dissidents.

Ofelia went to jail two more times before 1937 for her continued opposition and in 1937 fled again to Mexico. There she observed the reform government of Lázaro Cárdenas. In Mexico, she concluded that reform was possible without armed revolt, but only if socialists and Communists could organize the workers' movement and only if the labor movement had significant access to political power. From 1937 to 1939 she worked in a legal and organizational capacity in Mexico to secure the nationalization of U.S. oil interests and to organize Mexican workers. Throughout her exile, Ofelia wrote for radical Cuban journals, denouncing Nazism and fascism.

Upon her return to Cuba, Ofelia maintained her Communist affiliations, but she also took part in the 1939 Third National Women's Congress. Again she raised the issue of women's rights and of equality for children regardless of the legitimacy of their birth. She published her opinions about women's rights in newspapers and discussed them on a ten-minute radio program on Radio Salas. She also spoke out against Hitler's aggression and the coming world war. And in 1940, only a few days after the death of Leon Trotsky in Mexico, she offered to defend the murderer, Jacques Monnard. Although she could not act as a lawyer in Mexican courts, she helped the defense lawyer prepare the case.

The pinnacle of her international influence came in 1946, when Cuba organized its delegation to the United Nations planning meetings in San Francisco. Ofelia was the secretary-general of the Cuban delegation, a post she held for sixteen years. While a part of the Cuban delegation, Ofelia involved herself in programs for children affected by war

devastation. She also created programs for improved international education.

Ofelia earned international recognition for her work at the United Nations. She also continued her opposition to the United States, a position that was not without consequences. In 1950, while traveling to New York as the Cuban delegate to the United Nations, she was detained, searched, and interrogated by FBI agents at the Miami airport. It was at the height of the McCarthy period, and the U.S. government was taking no chances with spies or Communists visiting the country. The FBI kept Ofelia in Miami for ten days without her luggage or lodgings. She protested her detention to the president of the Cuban delegation, who finally gained her release.

In 1952, when Batista took over the government in a coup d'état, Ofelia protested. But she was no longer a young and vigorous woman, and her actions were not militant. Rather than participate in guerrilla movements, she concentrated on her work in the United Nations. When the 1959 Cuban revolution succeeded, however, she worked with the local block organizations, called the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. In 1962 she resigned her post at the United Nations due to severe arthritis.

Ofelia was a woman of awesome courage, tremendous insight, and honesty. In 1971, when she published her autobiography, she described herself as old but basically at peace with herself. She neither cheered nor mourned the outcome of her struggles. She was grateful that she had maintained the strength to withstand imprisonment, and she knew that hardship had shaped her ideals. In the end, Ofelia rejoiced in a socialist Cuba because her and her nation's struggles had drawn her into international solidarity with other socialists and given her a commitment to humanity. She felt no remorse for losing the wealth that might have been hers nor bitterness for the planned austerity in Cuba's economy that she endured in her later years. She believed that she had lived well. She had been a socialist feminist and a revolutionary, but she was also a bit of a Quixote whose dreams reached beyond ideology.

NOTES

1. Ofelia Domínguez Navarro, *50 años de una vida* (Havana, 1971), 49-50.

2. Ibid., 84.

3. Ibid., 118.

SOURCES

This sketch is based on Ofelia Domínguez Navarro's autobiography, *50 años de una vida* (Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1971), her book about her imprisonments, *De seis a seis* (Mexico City, 1937), and newspapers and feminist publications from the period. To obtain these materials required my traveling to Cuba as well as the assistance of a number of Cubans. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Tomás Fernández Robaina at the José Martí Library in Havana for his support and interest. His excellent bibliography on Cuban women facilitated my research. Margy Delgado, Rita Perrera, and Marta Alberti from the Federation of Cuban Women invited me to Cuba and aided me with my work. Their trust and good faith have made this project possible; I remain in their debt.

*Ligia Parra Jahn:
The Blonde with the Revolver*

Judith Ewell

Judith Ewell first encountered the story of Ligia Parra Jahn when she thumbed through Venezuelan newspapers of the 1940s in search of news of the Venezuelan military dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. For Ewell, reading about Ligia's struggles with the traditional concepts of honor and *vergüenza* (shame) proved a welcome relief from Pérez's reorganization of the General Staff. Finally, Ligia's turn had come.

On one level Ligia's story belonged on a newspaper's last page, the one reserved for tawdry crimes and gory traffic accidents. Yet her respectability, her beauty, and her argument that a woman should be allowed to defend her own honor, vigilante-style, struck a chord among many of her compatriots. Women recognized some of their own lemmas and humiliations in Ligia's plight. Venezuelan men often felt protective toward the young blonde and resentment toward the Basque adventurer who had disgraced her. Traditionalists believed that Ligia's freedom not only caused her tragedy but also threatened the web of custom and decency that binds society together.

This account of Ligia forms part of the mosaic of Venezuelan history during a time of flux that affected politics, economics, and, above all, society. As in much of Latin America, post-World War II Venezuela experienced the rapid growth of cities, a renewed rise in raw material exports, and the reversion to dictatorial regimes. The capital boomed in the late 1940s, flush with economic success, and the few at least, resulting from the well-established oil industry and the new export of iron ore from Ciudad Bolívar. The country experimented with reforms through the government of the Acción Democrática party led by Rómulo Betancourt, which tried to use oil income for national improvements. These reforms included a new constitution in 1947 and the election of novelist Rómulo Gallegos as president in 1948. The program to improve the wages of urban workers and to give land to rural laborers and plans to balance the military with militias resulted in a military coup after only nine months. New provisional president Carlos Delgado Chalbaud had to answer to the military and business leaders. When he was kidnapped and murdered in 1950, he was replaced by Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who established