But who will do the dishes?
Negotiating socialism with femininity in *Mujeres* magazine
Cuba, 1961-1965
To my father, a real-life revolutionary
Contents

Introduction 4

Chapter 1: Editing historical errors 10

Chapter 2: *The Editors Note*: Revolution and the female tradition 19

Chapter 3: *An Editorial Board Emerges*: A magazine for La Federación de las Mujeres Cubanas 23

Chapter 4: *The Drawing Board*: Mujeres, 1961-1965 27

Chapter 5: *Speaking in Feminine*: Arranging the content of *Mujeres* 31

  Part I. “A more beautiful personal appearance” 33

  Part II. “She does it for the children” 44

  Part III. Love and Socialism 56

Chapter 6: *The last pages*: a conclusion 69

Bibliography 72
Introduction

The first time a humble—and also black—woman’s smile lit up the cover of a Cuban magazine was November 15, 1961 in the first issue of Mujeres. It was the declaration of principles ... based on ethical revolutionary journalism, from and for women, to address the reality of our country and to help communicate and socialize the ideas of equal rights and opportunities between men and women.

Revista Mujeres¹

Illustration, “Miguel,” Mujeres (December 1, 1961), 63

This Cuban magazine—the same one that featured maternity fashion spreads—also imagined itself as a weapon aimed at American imperialism. This cartoon in Mujeres, one of many political jabs from an increasingly vocal Cuban press after its Revolution in 1959, exemplified contradiction, both on the pages of the magazine and in the lives of women struggling to internalize their nation’s new socialist identity.²

Mujeres juxtaposed domesticity and nationalism beyond this political cartoon. Its mission statement, published in its first issue on November 15, 1961, outlined its position as


² Fidel Castro, the Revolution’s most public face even before he officially took power in 1960, did not label his movement as “socialist” until April of 1961. However, his insistence upon social reform originated in the speeches and documents of the revolutionary struggle and emerged in statements predating his official announcement of a socialist agenda. See his speech, “Castro speaks to citizens of Santiago,” January 3, 1959.
the only women’s periodical in print after the Revolution. This monopoly conferred an obligation to the magazine to include all aspects of Cuban life, even as women faced a radical revision of their gendered identity. At first glance, its words seemed anachronistically conservative:

Cuban woman, in opening these pages your very life will be reflected, [including] your daily routine, your concerns, your great contribution to the efforts of all people in building a new nation. Mujeres aims to help, with opportune advice on small problems in the household; to provide you, with the resources at your fingertips, to make a more comfortable and welcoming home, a more varied and nutritious menu, and a more beautiful personal appearance.

In the opening lines of these “Propósitos,” or goals, the magazine echoed the traditional rhetoric that relegated women to maintenance of the household. Just as Mujeres seemed to fulfill the colonial Spanish formula for a female periodical, the editor closed the page-long statement in a different voice:

The pages of Mujeres will be a banner of the militant vanguard in the heroic fight of the people; it will firmly face the economic blockade and will stand erect to defend to the death its invincible Revolution.

With these words, Mujeres reimagined the future of the woman’s magazine in Cuba—not only for its dedication to its readers’ political awareness but because it refused to

---

3 Nelson Valdes, “A Bibliography of Cuban Periodicals Related to Women” in Cuban Studies 12.2 (July 1982): 73-80. Valdes charts the female publications by year and demonstrates that Mujeres shared a space with only two other journals of its category before 1966: Metas, a journal of the Ministry of Social Welfare, and The Cuban Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology (77-78). In her analysis of the magazine, Marisela Fleites-Lear calls Mujeres “the primary study materials for the federada [membership] meetings at the grassroots level for many years.” While Fleites-Lear focuses on later periods of the magazine’s publication (from 1969 onward), I will discuss the grassroots nature of this female participation in its earliest years, in order to capture a less indoctrinated conflation of revolutionary principles and feminine traditions. See “¡Mi cielo, alcánzame las botas!: feminismos, Mujeres y el ‘Hombre Nuevo’ dentro de la revolución cubana,” Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies 14.1 (2008): 49-76, 75.

4 “Propósitos,” Mujeres, November 15, 1961, 50. Courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection, Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Miami, FL.
ignore the domestic realities that pervaded the island only two years after its political upheaval. The periodical, created by a team of politically and socially active women and disseminated among members of the Cuban Women’s Federation (FMC), the primary organization for female participation in the Revolution, employed domestic language and imagery to invite its female readers, many of whom remained embroiled in domestic duties, into a discourse of power previously unavailable to them. By encasing political statements not only in terms of female rituals but also within a genre available only to women, the magazine employed feminine tools to construct a world in which women felt comfortable asserting their new social status. As the FMC gained power through a growing membership, the magazine broadened its circulation and Mujeres reflected the new confidence in its pages.

This shift of the female “script,” a term explored by American historian Nancy Theriot, suggests that Mujeres’s value lies in the evolution of its content and the conversation it facilitates, not in its direct political effects. She theorizes that, “women were active agents in forming and re-forming feminine identity and female bodily experience within historically specific material and discursive traditions.” In the Cuban case, Mujeres provided such conditions, as I will explore further in the magazine’s relationship to beauty, motherhood, and heterosexual relationships. Theriot claims, “Women create a new, altered version of the feminine script out of the contradictions and similarities between their worlds and their mothers’.”

The periodical’s collaborative structure reinforces this historian’s argument, reinforced both cultural and literary theorists and the visual and textual conversations that took place in Mujeres.

---

Theriot’s “script” translates into the “code” of famed semiotician Stuart Hall, who lays the framework for cultural and media studies through his theory of encoding and decoding public symbols. He claims that the relationship between producer and consumer—in this case, editor and reader—communicate differently based on the “frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure” of each “structure of meaning.”\textsuperscript{6} The communicative position through which Mujeres and companion female magazines construct meaning for their readers is that of “negotiated code.” This code applies dominant rhetoric to “local conditions,” or the position of women in culture and society, “logics …sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power.” According to Hall, this code is characterized by its “contradictions,” a common critique of women’s magazines and Mujeres in particular.\textsuperscript{7} This negotiation provides the framework for an analysis of the magazine in a time of social flux, in which the dominant codes—perpetuated by male revolutionary leaders who envisioned egalitarianism with little practical reverberation—failed to convey the multitude of messages that emerged to construct a new culture. Mujeres exploited the creative space enabled by the ecstasy of the Cuban Revolution to negotiate the female role as neither a stubborn adherence to a colonized past nor a radical embrace of a socialist future. It wrote its own code of feminine identity.

Challenging political historians and cultural critics who define female revolutionary participation as a one-dimensional response to institutional pressure, I contend that the magazine operated as a public space between its establishment in 1961 and 1965, when


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 516.
bureaucracy threatened to institutionalize Cuban culture through censorship. Characterized by its “bewilderment,” “patriotism,” and literary realism, the period provided a space of transition for women to debate their roles, and *Mujeres* facilitated that conversation. The magazine granted its readers agency. These women vacillated between old and new—not because of a government statute, or propagandist pressure, but because they saw their lives reflected in its pages and felt compelled to respond.

The dominant approach to the status of Cuban women in the second half of the twentieth century trivializes her—the homemaker, the mother, or the wife—as the unwitting recipient of Fidel Castro’s egalitarian monologues. In their study of the Revolution, historians fail to comprehend the intricate process of internalization that simultaneously rejects, amends, and embraces changes in the feminine role. In our frantic crusade to decipher the female response to the Cuban Revolution, as personified by those women most in need of a change in “consciousness”—those who clung to their responsibilities at home—we have been asking all the wrong questions. The women’s magazine should not show us why, or to what extent, editors and readers interpreted the Revolution, but rather we should

---

8 A pertinent characterization of the conflict between male leadership dictating solutions to female problems appears in *Four Women: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), from Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, who claim, “The idea that Castro understands the problems faced by women in society …may strain the credulity of some women, but … the Cuban women’s movement is not primarily a feminist movement but a movement for equal rights … and it is much easier for a man to comprehend equal rights for women than it is for him to develop a feminist consciousness” (xii).


10 According to Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, in 1969, ten years after the Revolution began, only 17 percent of women worked outside the home. Another 9 percent worked in traditionally feminized jobs like “laundresses, seamstresses, and candy-makers” (xvi).
assess how it changed the way women applied these changes to everyday activities, no matter how ordinary.
Chapter 1

Editing Historical Errors

Historians of the Cuban Revolution struggle to interpret magazines.\(^{11}\) The problem—or, as it bears in the case of *Mujeres*, opportunity—when analyzing a magazine and its role in gender construction is the “open” nature of the text. The magazine is not merely a historical artifact, its quips and cartoons etched into the stony doctrine of the Cuban femininity. Its content, to borrow from legendary literary critic Roland Barthes, functions as “a methodological field and site of interdisciplinary study.”\(^{12}\) The periodical’s short lifespan, both in the hands of its readers and in those of the archivists who struggle to preserve its tattered pages, alludes to the temporality of its ideas. It is logically fallible to shoulder these fleeting ideas with the burden of sexism, as many historians have mistakenly attempted.

Instead of positioning the magazine against the status of Cuban women, we should read *Mujeres* as a textual relationship between women, the country, and the home, visible through images, cartoons, and articles that both generated and interpreted female desires and expectations for a New Cuba. As periodical historian Margaret Beetham attests, the magazine “is a place where meanings are contested and made… It interacts with the culture which produced it and which it produces.”\(^{13}\) This method of analysis reinforces *Mujeres*’s identity

\(^{11}\) Fleites-Lear captures this absence of scholarship in her analysis of *Mujeres*, reiterating that only two scholars have attempted to deconstruct the Cuban magazine, while others mention it in a broader analysis of the women’s movement. While these analyses will be discussed further, their brevity and scarcity should be noted.


\(^{13}\) Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 5. Scholars have applied this Western formula of periodical analysis to other socialist and Latin American publications in times of social change. See Lynne Atwood’s *Creating the New Soviet Woman* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), in which she remarks that “As with the Western women’s magazines … messages were conveyed through a variety of texts; but in the Soviet Union they combined to promote an image of the woman as a confident, self-reliant person with a wide range of abilities … a full, valuable citizen of the new society” (12-13). John Mraz discusses
as collaboration of “contradictions and similarities” that produced a revised Cuban femininity.\textsuperscript{14}

The Cuban woman is an enigma to historians, from scholars of the island’s colonial and republican periods to those of the last fifty years. Whether she is an African slave, a peasant in the sugarcane fields, a wealthy Spanish wife, or a \textit{mulata profesional}, her negotiation of cultural traditions and legal rights provides ample material for debate over her identity as a “free” woman throughout history, especially when the island has so publicly struggled to attain “free” status for all of its citizens.

The historical consensus on the definition of “freedom” for women is their participation in political decision-making. This simplified definition of revolutionary success obscures not only cultural and social changes but also relies upon a highly racialized and classed political status. In \textit{Mujeres}’s earliest years, we should speak of the “woman” in question—indeed, the magazine’s primary reader and recipient of government efforts to “organize” her—as one shaped by her experience in the household, relatively unfamiliar with the ideological conversations of their more politically active counterparts. This female reader lived comfortably and may or may not have been involved in social programs like daycare centers or women’s vocational schools.\textsuperscript{15} As Beetham reminds us in the quest to characterize

---

\textsuperscript{14}Theriot, \textit{The Biological Construction of Femininity}, 2.

\textsuperscript{15}In their diverse interviews of Cuban women of different backgrounds and occupations in the late 1960s, Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon suggest that “for women who have had virtually no relationship to the world outside the home and the extended family except through their husbands, the achievement of integration in the Revolution may require a very personalized kind of guidance and support” (\textit{Four Women}, xiii).
the periodical reader, “there is a dearth of specific information about who historically read these texts and how.”

It is helpful to utilize the demographics of the Cuban Women’s Federation, who produced and disseminated the magazine, to characterize the reader. Initially, the Federation aspired to recruit and educate urban, middle-class women into basic employment and volunteer assemblies that might in turn mobilize their rural counterparts. According to statistics from the 1953 census, the last population survey conducted before the Revolution, 22.5 and 12.5 percent of the urban and rural women, respectively, were considered “economically active.” Almost thirty percent of these working women were employed in domestic service. This depicts an environment for Cuban women that nearly exclusively valued traditionally feminine occupations, and while these numbers shifted with the interference of revolutionary institutions, those changes took time. However, to judge these women as incapable of participation and legitimacy is to silence a vocal majority, a feat that the reigning historiography deigns to commit.

In historical conversations about these women, some scholars claim that “When it came to power, the ideas, perspectives, and experiences of Cuban women simply did not count,” excluding valuable ideas, many negotiated by Mujeres, which shaped everyday experience, especially of those women who, until the Revolution, saw their identities and

16 Beetham, A Magazine of Her Own?, 11.

17 The Federation emerged from a combination of other national women’s organizations before 1960, and one account acknowledges the identities of most of these early participants, stating, “By 1960, the Revolutionary Women’s Union [a predecessor to the FMC] was getting housewives to participate in meetings, conferences, and political rallies.” In contrast, after the rise of Fidel Castro, most upper class women fled the island in response to economic changes and anti-bourgeoisie sentiment, leaving influence to middle-class women who participated in earlier political movements. See Smith and Padula, Sex and Revolution, 35.

those of their households as one.¹⁹ Contradictions, like an example historian Verity Smith calls “a woman with a baby at her breast and a Kalashnikov rifle slung round her hips,” demonstrate conflict—the presence of an alternative to the household—not the feminine backwardness that other scholars suggest.²⁰

Nissa Torrents wrote the first diatribe against the magazine’s cleaning supplies and beauty implements in 1990, opening and closing the door on further analysis of Mujeres. In her study of the magazine’s first twenty-five years, she expands upon what feminist historians only briefly mention in their critiques of the Cuban regime. In reference to articles like “Propósitos,” Torrents claims, “Mujeres shows a split discourse that amounts to schizophrenia, as it is clearly revolutionary in its politics but bourgeois-Victorian in its ethics, even colonized, as it adopts physical and sexual models that are largely white, European, and petty bourgeois.”²¹ After a scan of fashion, motherhood, household duties, and limited political and educational material, she concludes that the magazine “has done a disservice to the revolution.”²² Her negative approach excludes any possibility of female achievement, a difficult argument to maintain in any discussion of human initiative, even in a strict socialist regime.

¹⁹ Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45. These authors have compiled an invaluable account of the successes and failures of policy changes after the Cuban Revolution; this research is indebted to their extensive collection of statistics and analyses.


²² Ibid., 224.
Another female scholar applies Torrents’s argument to the trajectory of female periodicals in Cuban literary history. Evelyn Picón-Garfield compares Mujeres—or Torrents’s analysis of the magazine—to her own reading of Album cubano de lo bueno y lo bello, a periodical published in 1860 by Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, a prominent female writer of the colonial period. The scholar argues that Album also marked a transition for women toward roles of higher intellectual capability, but it too fell to the patriarchal standards that held women in positions of weakness and subservience. “It is a shame,” Picón-Garfield writes, “that between two historic moments in the evolution of the feminine magazine in Cuba, the principal image of the woman has evolved little.”

This argument over the role of the magazine reflects the same argument over the role of the woman: provider or dependant, single or married, silent or vocal, apathetic or involved? Broader historical conversations discuss this issue on similar terms and further reinforce the limited notion that female “empowerment” requires a masculinized notion of power. In the context of the Cuban Revolution, this power is either imagined as socialist, acquired through forms of production; or capitalist, an account of the ability of women to independently pursue a movement for equality outside the institutionalization of socialism.

Historian Lourdes Casal leads the scholarship sympathetic to the Revolution in her discussion of the cohabitation of socialism and feminism. Casal argues that in the transition to a socialist society, the culture must transform alongside the means of production. This requires the institutional mobilization of women to achieve the liberation that Marxist theory

---

23 Translated “Digest of the Good and the Beautiful,” the magazine emphasized female morality and beauty with literary stories and practical advice.

Though Casal and her colleagues provide an adept interpretation of the impact of formal institutions on women’s mobilization, they provide little room for resistance or adjustment of these authoritative policies from below. A consenting historian, Max Azicri, even uses language similar to Torrents’s to call the Cuban women’s movement “a modernizing strategy utilized by the Cuban revolutionary government … [to] pursue the systematic mobilization of the population … through policies and programs.” For these historians, female agency cannot exist in a society governed by a male elite with established notions of productive labor.

Notably, Ilja Luciak, Julie D. Shayne, and Marifeli Pérez-Stable also lament the failure of an independent women’s movement, centered on the elimination of gender stereotypes, to form after the Revolution. For these historians, the problem surrounding the Cuban female enigma lies in her refusal to oppose the socialist regime for its failure to support her growing responsibilities. As Margaret Randall remarks in a reflection of the decades she spent working and raising her children in Cuba, “Radical feminism’s distrust of socialist revolutions, as well as socialism’s failure to consider feminism in its radical


dimension, created a vacuum in which neither side could learn from the other’s insights.”

Even Vilma Espín, arguably one of the most politically visible women in Cuba, echoed this conflict when she famously called her motives “feminine, not feminist.” When framed as a collision between two larger movements, the negotiation of identity among Cuban women—federadas, not leaders—becomes lost.

Other historians use the “failure” of women’s emancipation from oppressive stereotypes to demonstrate the danger of tyrannical socialist rule. These scholars also blame the Cuban political machine for the persistence of gender stereotypes, but they deny the possibility of a socialist alternative. Julie Marie Bunck personifies this perspective when she claims, “Castro was more concerned with augmenting the size of the labor force and with increasing the quantity and quality of goods produced than with achieving equality between the sexes.” Where her counterparts acknowledge Castro’s socialist ideology, Bunck and others condemn his patriarchal dictatorship.

---


30 *Federada* denotes a member of the FMC who, upon inclusion, had to “agree to abide by the FMC’s objectives and regulations, get the support of two members, be accepted by the local delegation, and pay the dues” (Smith and Padula, 50). At the census of the FMC’s First Congress in 1962, the organization had recruited 376, 571 federadas, governed by 59 members of the organization’s National Council (Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 16; Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 49).


Those considered perhaps the most famed Cuban historians echo these sentiments by deigning to ignore women entirely. Mired in statistics, these historians draw generalizations from surveys to garner the social attitudes toward gender equality. Jorge Dominguez writes that “Naturally, behavior was not revolutionary even among all women,” as if these persons should function automatically as a group. He further supports his assertions with employment figures but only devotes a few pages to diverse female experiences, as if women reacted to the Revolution like gendered puppets, following the lead of a charming and eloquent dictator.

A new crop of historians seeks to challenge the male-dominated criticisms of Latin American social movements, as neither group assigns agency to the women who participated in the FMC by recruiting others, from distant peasants to their own neighbors; leading campaigns for literacy and daycare centers; and reading and contributing to Mujeres. These pioneering scholars, worth quoting at length, focus on a distinctly female motivation to join a social movement like Cuba’s 26th of July Movement or the organization that produced Mujeres. In her study of the right-wing women’s movement in Chile, Margaret Power sums up the primary obstacle to a female-centered history, claiming,


34 Jorge Dominguez, Cuba: Order and Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 298. Also see Jaime Suchlicki’s Cuba: From Columbus to Castro and Beyond, 5th Edition (Dulles: Brassey’s, 2002), where he mourns the “undermining [of] the family, one of the most important conservers of the old order.” He claims, “the regime has systematically encouraged these developments, perhaps aware that the only way to develop Cuba’s new socialist man is through the destruction of the culture-transmitting institutions, such as the family and the church” (140). Suchlicki’s aspirations for the island’s political future obscure his analysis of the “woman question,” mimicking Dominguez’s apathy.

35 The 26th of July Movement represents, according to historian Francesca Miller, “an atrocity [committed against the student rebels] was related in a woman’s voice” (141). Haydee Santamaria provided testimony of the cruelty of Batista’s troops after the failure of the attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953. Santamaria lost both
I attribute the lack of interest in these women [who incited social movements] to the mistaken belief that the principal actors during these years were men—as well as to many scholars’ reluctance to study people with whom they fundamentally disagree and whose views they find distasteful.36

Some of these scholars claim that women pursue social justice out of a perceived universal responsibility to nurture and protect the family, while others discuss the collective methods by which women organize. Most agree, in the words of historian Lynn Stephen, that

While constraints of political and economic factors are very real in people’s lives, such factors are not fixed structures and are not all determining. The analytical categories we use to talk about political economy are inadequate …to convey people’s experiences in that process. …We must be equally committed to unraveling how women see themselves, how they experience and give meaning to structural context, how they interpret what happens to them on a daily basis, and how they come together through the process of political activity to form movements that push back on structural conditions of inequality.37

Studying Mujeres in its formative years can unravel the enigma that plagues the masculine-centered historians of the past century and imagine a different experience of social negotiation. This analysis should begin with a contextualization of female activism and experience even before the Revolution.

---

36 Margaret Power, Right Wing Women in Chile (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002), 2.

Chapter 2

The Editor’s Note:
Revolution and the female tradition

_Mujeres_ emerged from a pattern of national struggle and female response. Its function as a space for negotiation is shaped both by the circumstances of revolutions in 1959 and in 1898, since, as Theriot reiterates, “the sexual ideology a woman grows up with becomes the core of her feminine identity; it defines the expectations and limitations of her womanhood.”\(^{38}\) Legendary female participation in combat during Cuba’s independence from Spain established the structure that produced female expectations during the combat and formative years of the Revolution of 1959.

Echoing this link, both historians of the Cuban Revolution and the island’s patriotic tales frequently frame the country’s national struggle in female terms to illustrate the impact of the imperialist domination that shaped its political and social structures. The nation faced corruption during the first half of the twentieth century; U.S. intervention in Cuba’s war for independence left an entrenched cultural presence on the island. While Cuba claimed official nationhood, its “U.S.-imposed constitution” of 1901 reflected Spanish colonial laws and preserved not only the paternalism of the preceding century but also the limited political rights of women. The United States only sought economic investment in what historian Louis A. Pérez calls “a virgin land … a veritable Klondike of wealth,” sending corporations and wealthy businessmen to establish American communities on the island.\(^{39}\) This intimate involvement required political interference, as well: the country’s first governors were

---

\(^{38}\) Theriot, _The Biological Construction of Femininity_, 2.

Americans, and subsequent leaders gained power from North American loyalty, forging a pattern of corruption that attracted popular suspicion and hostility.40

The fight for women’s rights mimicked the confused state of the Cuban political hierarchy. When Cuban women earned suffrage in 1934, it came through provisional president Carlos Mendieta’s decree, not by democratic election. As historian K. Lynn Stoner attests, “Presidents … interested in legitimizing their administrations used suffrage to bolster support and moral approval for their policies.”41 Entangled in corrupt politics, women also faced a negotiation of their rights as citizens of a maturing republic. Much like the journalists who founded Mujeres, these women turned to writing to debate their roles, especially for a female audience. Stoner claims, “It was normal for feminist writers to emerge and present their views to the public through popular newspapers and journals as well as through feminist publications. Feminist writers not only disagreed with traditional attitudes, they also disagreed with one another.”42 This debate conflated women’s rights with national identity in the early stages of Cuba’s cultural formation and designated journalism as the prime vehicle for the continuous destruction and reformation of values.

These intellectual conversations fueled more radical changes at mid-century, when student groups converged against Fulgencio Batista, a politician who seized power in 1952 and rapidly decimated democratic processes. Women participated in the struggle to

40 Historians note the gendered relationship between the United States and Cuba as a political tool, used to encourage American expansionism in the late nineteenth century. This romantic construction further weakened the status of Cuban women and the nationalism necessary to forge a government independent of outside corruption and influence. See Kristin Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), Louis A. Pérez, Cuba in the American Imagination (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), and Emily S. Rosenberg, Spreading the American Dream (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).


42 Ibid., 87.
overthrow the dictator and claimed victory in 1959 at the climax of guerrilla warfare. Historians disagree on the status of these female participants, many of whom gained political power through relationships and even marriages with male revolutionary leaders. Whether as high-profile “first ladies,” like Vilma Espín, wife of Raul Castro, or as mere supporters of the revolutionary movement, women possessed a degree of ownership over the victory and translated that confidence into an expectation of social change.43

Fidel Castro recognized these woman warriors in his victory speech at Santiago de Cuba in 1959 when he observed that “The women are as good soldiers as our best military men and I wanted to prove that women can be good soldiers … they are still the victims of discrimination.”44 Historians compare this glorification of the female guerrilla to the mambisas of the war for independence, another connection between female struggle and national triumph that characterized Cuba’s identity construction.45 Experienced as agents in the physical revolution, women expected the same agency in social revolution, despite the crawling pace of legal reform.

The revolutionary regime carefully mapped its written constitution as an early attempt to revise the discrimination permitted under previous leaders. Officially, the Fundamental Law of Cuba mandated that “any discrimination by reason of sex, race, color, or class, and

---


44 January 3, 1959, Santiago de Cuba, “Castro speaks to citizens of Santiago.”

45 K. Lynn Stoner, “Militant Heroines and Consecration of the Patriarchal State,” *Cuban Studies* 34 (2003): 71-96, 89. *Mambisas* were the rebels who antagonized the Spanish army during Cuba’s struggle for independence. In the spirit of patriotic sacrifice and fervent nationalism, Stoner claims that, “Cuban women were aligning a militant attitude with nationalism and their bodies with national identity” (73).
any other that injures human dignity is declared unlawful and punishable.”46 In addition, it stated that

A married woman has full civil capacity, and does not require permission or authorization from her husband to control her property, freely engage in commerce or industry, practice any profession, trade, or craft, and dispose of the proceeds of her labor.47

This law formed the foundation for women’s incorporation into the Revolution, but true progress transpired from the efforts of government organizations whose goals shifted and formed as the regime institutionalized its socialist beliefs.48 Not until women began to feel the lifestyle shifts that accompanied their incorporation into the labor force did they press for increased protection under the law. Their early years of negotiation, facilitated by social organization, provided a space to explore changing standards of femininity. Now the largest organization of women in Latin American history, the Cuban Women’s Federation took this role.


47 “Fundamental Law of Cuba,” Title 5, Article 23.

Chapter 3

An Editorial Board Emerges
A magazine for La Federación de las Mujeres Cubanas

The imprecision of initial legal reforms under the new regime led to an integration of female consciousness in the form of the government organization that published *Mujeres* at the end of its first year. Fidel Castro appointed Vilma Espín, one of the few women to accompany his band of guerrillas into the mountains during revolutionary combat and his own brother’s wife, to lead the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*, or Cuban Women’s Federation (FMC). Officially established on August 23, 1960, the FMC emerged from a meeting of the Latin American Congress of Women after which seventy thousand Cuban women of varying political groups collaborated to form the organization. “Those were the first steps,” Espín remarks, “steps which established unity, got the women’s organization off the ground, and gave women a consciousness of their force in numbers.”\(^49\) These numbers grew to surpass the membership of any women’s organization in Latin America to date.\(^50\) The strength in numbers translated rapidly into action, as the country faced a slew of catastrophes that challenged its resources and the women who would most heavily absorb their depletion.

1961 presented circumstances that forced the FMC to unify and organize or lose its momentum. In April, a cadre of exiles, backed by the United States CIA, attacked the island at the Bay of Pigs. Days later, Castro declared the Revolution socialist, and in October, the Missile Crisis severed ties with American leaders and, more importantly, ended American


\(^{50}\) Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 33.
trade with the island.\footnote{In addition to covert CIA operations that plagued the country’s production capabilities and foreign communications, the U.S. trade embargo severely crippled Cuban access to resources. During socialist reorganization, the country sought other partners to replace the imports previously contributed through trade with the United States, causing further costs to production. As noted historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr. remarks, “More than 70 percent of total Cuban imports had been from the United States” (263). “Within four years,” he concludes, “Cuban efforts at industrialization and diversification were abandoned” (258). Despite the ongoing economic struggle, including the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s replacement benefactor, my study of Mujeres ends in 1965, for social and cultural reasons. During this early, optimistic period, the economic difficulties reinforced the FMC as a powerful tool in the mitigation of declining resources. For more information on the embargo, see Pérez ‘s \textit{Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).} This plunged the economy into an unfamiliar yet welcomed estrangement from its northern neighbor who, as Espín claimed in her speech to the FMC’s Second Congress, “with their notorious methods, unleashed a campaign of slander, rumors, sabotage, and other types of aggression in order to spread panic and hold back the process [Cuba] had initiated.”\footnote{Ibid., 42.} A month later, the FMC distributed the first issue of \textit{Mujeres} to “educate, orient, and impart wisdom” to the women who cooked, nursed, and taught the population of an evolving Cuban society.

\textit{Mujeres} did not enjoy a wide circulation in its earliest years; the FMC’s infancy demanded cautious growth and the high subscription cost compared to a lower price per issue meant that the magazine traveled among \textit{federadas} as a printed representation of the organization’s beliefs and concerns, rather than a leisurely read for the household.\footnote{The magazine cost $5 for a year’s subscription and 20 cents per issue, cheaper to buy individually than through an annual subscription.} The majority of FMC members worked within the home, despite advances in female labor participation, and the magazine catered to those readers.\footnote{Smith and Padula, \textit{Sex and Revolution}, 51.} Allusions to the “Cuban woman”
refer to this initially middle-class representative, the homemaker. Despite her limited knowledge, the magazine worked to draw its readers attention outside their familiar sphere.

Some famed historians of Cuba degrade *Mujeres* to the status of a “bulletin” that mindlessly heralded the activities and doctrine of the FMC and a Cuban government driven by a “male elite.”\(^55\) The first editors of the magazine disagree. Georgina Duvallón, a founding journalist, compares the publication to *Vanidades*, a women’s magazine established in 1937 that emphasized “parenting, fashion, and marriage” in its pages, but with a radically different twist.\(^56\) She claims,

> We wanted to completely change the conception of this magazine, from one that simply gathered inconsequential material into one that captured Cuban women at their peak, with grand perspectives on the realization of their part in the process of Revolution that, by then, was in full swing.\(^57\)

From its inception, *Mujeres* broke from the traditional formula for the feminine periodical. It Replaced a number of publications marketed to women of high social class, such as *Vanidades, Romances, Cine Gráfico*, and *Ellas*, with its new brand of journalism, a hybrid between politics and lifestyle. *Vanidades*, according to its editor’s son, gained a circulation of 140,000 readers prior to the Revolutions’ nationalization of publishing precisely because of its adherence to an old formula.\(^58\) Like other women’s periodicals of the period, it avoided politics completely.\(^59\)

---

\(^55\) Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 45.


\(^58\) This figure refers to circulation in 1953; with a national population of 5,829,029 people, the magazine reached about 4.8% of Cuban women. See Sergio Díaz-Briquets and Lisandro Pérez, “Cuba: The Demographics of Revolution,” *Population Bulletin* 36.1 (April 1981): 3-39, 5. *Vanidades* ceased publication after the
 Mujeres’s first editorial board refused to succumb to the popular pressures of magazines past, embracing political and professional women and the themes that accompanied their departure from the household. The magazine’s first director, Dr. Elsa Gutiérez, came from a clinic for child and adolescent care. Her intelligence and involvement in the FMC instilled a desire to, as she later claimed, “break molds.” In addition to her role as director of the magazine, Dr. Gutiérez played an integral part in the establishment of the Ana Betancourt School for Peasant Girls, which brought lower-class young women to the mansions of exiled Cubans to learn dressmaking and gain a sixth-grade education. She personified the vacillating conflict between the pre-revolutionary and socialist woman by blending tradition with opportunity in her leadership roles. Led by an influential director and flanked by journalists, sports writers, cinematic critics, and even Korda, famed photographer of Fidel Castro, Mujeres’s mere creation pushed boundaries. Just as the Revolution challenged society on a broader scale, the magazine took full advantage of its pioneer status and the relative freedom that characterized the first half of the 1960s.

overthrow of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, but it reemerged in the United States market in 1960, spearheaded by Jorge Saralegui, son of the magazine’s former editor. Adding “Continental” to the title to distinguish it from its Cuban predecessor, Saralegui targeted wealthy Cuban exiles and, as Endres and Lueck note, “It was an important tie to a life left behind in Cuba” (Women’s Periodicals of the United States, 392).

59 Women’s Periodicals of the United States, 391.

60 Mestas, et. al., “Cubanas en Revolución.”

Chapter 4

The Drawing Board
Mujeres, 1961-1965

*Muñeres* needed a creative space to explore the new embodiments of femininity in a revolutionary context. The magazine’s first four years provided that arena and demand that the issues from this period be analyzed for their vocal opinions and journalistic risks. Onelia Aguilar, head of propaganda for the FMC and founding contributor to *Mujeres*, acknowledged the freedom of the first years, calling the magazine a “laboratory” in its early stages. Aguilar left the magazine to direct the publication of its younger sibling, *Ellas*, in 1966, but she remarked on *Mujeres*’s fluid nature during her tenure, recalling,

> [The team] …experimented with the design and new forms of language; we outlined concepts and had very rich exchanges between journalists, designers, and photographers; really we were very inspired, knowing how crucial this means of communication was to the dissemination of the FMC’s message to the far corners of the country.62

As a new blend of contemporary socialist politics and traditional standards of femininity, the magazine embraced the contradictions that emerged most prominently in its early years. Between 1961 and 1965, *Muñeres* explored the possibilities both for a feminine magazine and its impact on the Cuban woman. This period is significant not only in its stylistic value but also through its status as a literary vehicle, subject to the same censorship as all artists in Cuba, at least after 1965.

In addition to labeling the magazine as a mouthpiece for FMC public relations, critical historians denounce *Muñeres* for its connections to the Cuban government.63 While it

62 Mestas, et. al., “Cubanas en Revolución.”

63 For an example, see Julie Marie Bunck’s “The Cuban Revolution and Women’s Rights.”
did garner financial support from the island’s socialist hierarchy as well as derive its leadership from Fidel Castro’s handpicked comrades, the magazine’s early years provided a more forgiving space for “counter-revolutionary” conversation. The literary community provided a visible example of this freedom. It derived most of its boundaries and regulations from the second half of the 1960’s, and Mujeres reflected the literary flexibility that other artists and writers enjoyed in the decade’s first half.

According to Cuban historian Lisandro Otero, common themes characterize the literary environment in first five years of the Revolution. Between 1961 and 1962—the foundations of Mujeres’s creation—the announcement of socialism dominated political and cultural conversation. The commotion to adhere to the new social doctrine created instability, especially among those writers who espoused characteristics of past artists who now seemed “bourgeois.”64 The powerful Union of Cuban Writers and Artists emerged after Fidel’s speech “Words to Intellectuals” popularized the phrase, “Within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing.”65 Despite bureaucratic attempts to obstruct their creativity, writers and publishers continued to enjoy freedoms on an international scale as they promoted the ecstasy and optimism of the Revolution, much like their journalist counterparts.

64 In Che Guevara’s letter to the editor of an Uruguayan newspaper shortly before his departure from Cuba, he wrote of artistic expression in the construction of socialism that “For a long time individuals have been trying to free themselves from alienation through culture and art. …One defends one’s individuality, which is oppressed by the environment, and reacts to aesthetic ideas as a unique being whose aspiration is to remain immaculate. …Artistic experimentation… is said to be the definition of freedom, but this ‘experimentation’ has its limits, imperceptible until there is a clash… until the real problems of individual alienation arise” (161). His letter and its subsequent publication marked a bureaucratic desire for institutionalization that affected the art world as well as the activities of government organizations like the FMC. See “Socialism and Man in Cuba” in Manifesto: Three Classic Essays on How to Change the World (New York: Ocean Press, 2005): 147-168.

65 Castro was notoriously vague in this speech, “Words to Intellectuals,” June 30, 1961, in Havana, Cuba. He also claims that “The field of doubt is left to the writers and artists who are not counterrevolutionary, but who do not feel themselves to be revolutionary either.” Statements like these obscured the bounds of institutional censorship, granting authority over censorship to the Union for Writers and Artists (UNEAC).
at Mujeres.\textsuperscript{66} The government did not close the final independent publishing house until the end of 1964, preserving the few years of experimentation that provided such fruitful conversation about the role gender would play in the new society.\textsuperscript{67}

Literary and periodical freedom merged briefly in the pages of Mujeres in its first four years; most notably through a young poet named Nancy Morejón. An interview with Gladys Martinez in the October 1962 issue depicted Morejón as a studious young girl with a desire to support her country through her poetry, much like the youthful literary spirit Otero suggests in his analysis. When asked about her future plans, the girl responded, “To expand and improve my literary production; to defend my country against any enemy!” Her enthusiasm continued when probed about her first publication of poems, Mutismos. She referred, smiling, to a group of young writers with whom she published her work, who “studied the origins, characteristics and differences of African-American and Afro-European jazz,” themes that later fell outside the bounds of “revolutionary literature” but inside the content of the women’s magazine.

Her account, frozen in the pages of Mujeres, captured the younger version of the woman who became one of the island’s most prized poets, but only after she survived the dismantling of the group of writers to whom she referred in the article. Ediciones El Puente, the team of young artists and writers who dabbled in Afro-Cuban themes and aesthetic trends of earlier decades, faced censorship by Fidel Castro in 1965. The group experimented both in literature and in sexuality, mistakes that cost some their reputation, but personified a period

\textsuperscript{66} Otero, “Notas sobre la funcionalidad de la cultura,”194.

\textsuperscript{67} For an eyewitness account of the scandal that plagued Ediciones El Puente and led to its dismemberment, see José Mario, “Allen Ginsberg en La Habana,” Mundo Nuevo 34 (April 1969), 48-54; and for a later interview with members, consult Roberto Zurbano, “Re-pasar El Puente,” La Gaceta de Cuba 4 (2005).
of freedom in the early Revolution, affirmed by the grinning photo of an eighteen-year old Morejón from the pages of *Mujeres*.

Fidel Castro and Che Guevara’s speeches on socialism and literature shaped *Mujeres*’s early years and constructed the time period of this analysis, but their influence alone did not dictate the substance of periodical literature. Some writers argued with the government; others adopted a “self-censorship” to remain in favor with an increasingly critical government. However, the growing institutionalization of socialist rhetoric should not end the analysis of the magazine but merely alter it. *Mujeres* deserves the scholarship denied it by contemporary political and social historians of Cuba, and its form and content demonstrate that merit.

---

Chapter 5

Speaking in Feminine
Arranging the content of *Mujeres*

The images, articles, and works of fiction that filled the pages of *Mujeres* reflected a host of complex feminine identities, but the magazine articulated these conflicts in a language familiar to its audience, drawing upon the experiences of its editors and readers, both domestic and political. Reforming female identity began with a confrontation of what that identity comprised, reminding readers of the concepts like natural sexual difference that governed their gender.

These Cuban women emerged from the society into which they were born. An interview with Asteria Perdomo, a middle-aged woman who witnessed the Revolution only years earlier, echoes this tenet of anthropology when asked if girls differ from boys:

> The problem is we’ve lived in a society where things have always been that way. And you’ve got to remember that work isn’t mechanized yet here, and women aren’t accustomed to heavy work from childhood; they’d have to make an effort they’re not prepared for.69

Literary historian Damon-Moore reiterates this “script” metaphor in a periodical context:

> The gender ideology with which a woman grows up is the thesis of her feminine ideology; her life experience sometimes contradicts this feminine ideology, becoming the antithesis of her inherited script; and the woman then forms a synthesis, a new altered script that incorporates both the old and the new.70

69 Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 100.

The gender ideology at the foundation of Mujeres reflected the same conditions that incited the establishment of the FMC: natural sexual difference. This difference emerged from a social structure heavily reinforced by centuries of European rule and American influence. Visual and textual examples from Mujeres, in tandem with the historical circumstances that produced them, create a traditional script that not only empowered women as “other” but also challenged these assumptions in subtle, often playful ways. Beauty, maternity, and romantic love provide sites for this initial negotiation, representing the launching grounds for social change.

The Cuban woman’s first contact with Mujeres occurred the moment she glimpsed the cover, a vision in vivid color and striking photography, printed upon thick paper. A study of her negotiation in its pages should begin there, at the magazine’s most superficial level and the one receptive of most criticism: its appearance. Beneath the stereotypical imagery lies deeper conceptions about the role of beauty in the lives of Cuban women who viewed a glamorous appearance as an indication of personal success and mobility, ideals that transformed from individual aspirations to shared feminine characteristics just as Mujeres published its first issue.71

Part I

“A more beautiful personal appearance”

The conception of beauty, especially in a medium directed toward a female readership, implies a degree of self-scrutiny and objectification anathema to proponents of women’s equality. Nissa Torrents’s scathing critique echoes these concerns, claiming, “*Mujeres* also reminds the superwoman to be well made-up and dressed,” and “Readers are told that women have a ‘natural’ inclination for beauty, an eye for aesthetics.”72 Analyses of this nature reflect contemporary perceptions of femininity and the burden of female maintenance and ignore the connotations of beauty and image as constructed in Cuba at mid-century. This ideal emerged from competing images of American cinema and celebrity and Spanish colonial tradition. Efforts to embrace the glamour of Hollywood collided with the realism of an American embargo in 1961 and complicated media’s relationship with the feminine imagery that mimicked the actresses now associated with selfish imperialism.73 Women brought multiple meanings to their reading of such images, and *Mujeres* both internalized and projected the discomfort that pervaded the ideal of feminine beauty.

Stuart Hall provides a pertinent analysis of this meaning-making that *Mujeres* orchestrates in its formative years. He claims that the media drives a certain preferred reading of signs, “encoding” text and images from a “very limited ideological or explanatory repertoire” constructed to “win consent” of its audience. By employing the familiar and socially reinforced as a foundation for alternate interpretation, the editors of *Mujeres* gain

---


73 For a detailed account of the Cuban reception of American film, see Louis A. Pérez, Jr.’s *On Becoming Cuban*, 299.
control over “the manner in which the receiver of these signs will decode the message.” In effect, the magazine suggests a certain framework for interpretation without demanding a “perfect transmission of meaning.” Hall concludes, “Even when decodings are not made … within the hegemonic framework”—as most critics of the Cuban Revolution insist occurs—“the great range of decodings will tend to be ‘negotiations’ within the dominant codes.”

To elicit meaning from the photography and illustrations that drove the layout of the magazine privileges imagery in creating and reflecting a female identity. While the FMC laid the editorial foundation for Mujeres in the first half of the 1960s, it also navigated the political realm, struggling to mobilize tens of thousands of women with minimal activist experience. This method of inclusion dominated the organization’s early goals and can be found in the pages of its magazine. As legal scholar Debra Evenson attests, “The sole agenda of the FMC at its founding was to strengthen support for the revolution by organizing women into the social organization and productive forces of the new society.” She observes, “The governing statutes adopted by the FMC … do not even mention women’s equality.”

This emphasis on mobilization over equality orients the organization and magazine toward inclusion: they presented a discourse that drew women with traditional images yet allowed them to interpret those images differently and remain loyal to the Revolution. Image functioned as both a language of negotiation and a tool of association to incorporate women into the folds of social activism.

The editors of Mujeres, despite their criticisms of magazines like Vanidades that “only promoted consumerism and reinforced backward stereotypes of women that impeded

---

74 Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” 344.

75 Evenson, Law and Society, 90.
their development,” still embraced traditional standards of femininity.76 The very form of the periodical, with its picture book-like size, full-page photographs, and artistic text arrangements, embodies the ideal of literary beauty, or at least the ideal held by Cuban cultural standards throughout the twentieth century. The magazine echoed the vivacity of 1960’s pop art; it offered a visual space of reflection but also of escapism.77 As a periodical scholar attests, “The ‘montage-style’ organizational structure and variant models of femininity that appeared within, as well as between, magazines offered fluid imaginary spaces in which women could question, negotiate, and inhabit different identities.”78 Mujeres presented these possibilities both implicitly, in its depiction of women through photographs and illustrations; and explicitly, in the articles and diagrams that promoted the personal care that the magazine’s opening “Propósitos” promised. However, even in its adherence to familiar physical stereotypes, the magazine also challenged the perception and importance of beauty in the life of the Cuban woman.

*Speaking beauty*

Upon opening a magazine—which, for female readers in Cuba who could afford them and possessed the leisure to purchase them—the images first draw the reader’s eyes. Cuban women grew accustomed, in the days of *Vanidades, Bohemia*, and *Carteles*, to a certain

---

76 Mestas, et. al., “Cubanas en Revolución.”

77 For an example of the poster art emerging from Cuba in the wake of the Revolution, see *Revolución!: Cuban Poster Art* by Lincoln Cushing (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003).

78 Fiona Hackey, “British Women’s Magazines 1919-1939” in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940*, ed. Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 120. Though a scholar of British magazines from the early twentieth century, Hackney’s work, as well as that of Helen Damon-Moore and Margaret Beetham, is a valuable resource for understanding the correlation between a cultural shift—British and American modernism—in terms of gender roles and negotiation, especially through the periodical.
portrayal of feminine beauty. In her groundbreaking essay on cinema, Laura Mulvey calls this “looking” inherently masculine, constructing “woman as image and man as bearer of the look.” In a 1961 feature in Bohemia, a popular lifestyle weekly that circulated before and after the Revolution, the “Queens of Carnaval” pose for the camera; one smiles coquettishly with a hand on one hip or propped against a doorway, another stands with her back to the photographer, batting her eyelashes over one shoulder. When a woman opened Mujeres, she still saw a beautiful cover model—holding the national flag, coddling her child, or simply smiling at the camera—but she also saw activity and humanity replace the superficiality that dominated previous images.

The magazine depicted domestic duties next to political ones, and sometimes both roles occupied the same photograph. Vilma Espín visits a daycare center, holding the hand of her daughter, Debra. Haydée Santamaria, leader of Casa de las Americas, the national literary publishing house, speaks to large crowds in a photograph. Another set of women pose with rifles for an article about their championship shooting team. Yet another holds the hand of her child, or stirs with a wooden spoon, performing activities familiar to most women. Instead of posing as objects of a male gaze, the magazine crafted subjects of interest that represented the occupations and aspirations of the Cuban housewife, not the young model on the pages of Bohemia. Women decoded these images as suggestions for their own

80 “Queens of Carnaval,” Bohemia, Havana, Cuba, January 29, 1961, 40-42.
82 Onelia Aguilar, “Haydee Santamaria,” Mujeres (June 1, 1962), 63.
83 “Campeonato mundial de egipo,” Mujeres (August 1, 1962), 43-44.
lives; windows into others’ internalization of revolutionary circumstances, not as markers of stagnancy.

*Mujeres* challenged the mainstream media’s presentation of women and avoided depicting its subjects as “bearers of the look.” If the photographer’s angle captured a woman’s entire face in the frame, the reader saw her flaws: a pockmarked complexion, under-eye circles, or a curl out of place. The subject still wore lipstick and plucked her eyebrows, but readers could relate to attempts at beauty that fell short of perfection. Though women faced a host of new responsibilities—political participation, volunteer brigades, agriculture and manufacturing jobs—that stretched their daily schedules, *Mujeres* validated their imperfection. No longer simply a doll to be ogled, the women in the magazine claimed a common bond not only with readers but all fellow women.

In its creation of a visual female community, *Mujeres* strived to cultivate a dimension of multiethnicity reflective of the “sisterhood” mentioned in its opening goals.84 The magazine did rely heavily on a light-skinned, middle-aged model of femininity, as its critics suggest, but it also experimented with age, race, and class in its features. The periodical incorporated black women in some of its articles, as well as elderly grandmothers balancing night classes with sugarcane fields or young girls learning the importance of rationing during the U.S. embargo.85 The early fashion spreads did not even use photographed models but rather relied upon drawings to showcase the patterns, detaching clothing from a realistic depiction of an idealized female physique.

---

84 “Propósitos” includes a message of global female community, stating that the magazine will function as “a message of support and gratitude to its Asian and African sisters that break the shackles of colonial rule that stand in the way of their liberation.” *Mujeres*, November 15, 1961, 50.

The strategy of personal care

Images of personal care also entered the textual conversation in Mujeres and worked to create meaning both through an association with traditionally male zones of activity and the empowerment of exclusively female ritual and community. The magazine justified women’s presence in the revolutionary struggle by emphasizing their retention of female qualities and assured readers that the Revolution needed their participation because it valued the contributions produced through a natural sexual difference. Mujeres also created a world in which this difference conveyed power, a world only women had the knowledge to navigate and could therefore claim some agency in the labor shifts that rocked their social stability.

One of the most explicit texts linking revolutionary rhetoric with a beauty regime occupied the first page of a 1962 issue entitled, “El socialismo es fuente de belleza,” or, “Socialism is a source of beauty”. The article attempts to forge connections between the nationalism associated with male guerrilla warfare and the role of women in producing and maintaining that spirit by remaining authentically Cuban. It claims, “Cuban women of all ages have been distinguished by the care they give to their external and spiritual beauty.” It equates this personal care regimen, an “aspiration” to better oneself, as an innate desire to overcome political obstacles. By virtue of their commitment to personal appearance—an arduous task with which Cuban women, evident in their meticulous beauty regimens, were familiar—readers are qualified to participate in the national struggle toward socialism. It concludes, “What we do on behalf of beauty, whether inside or outside the home, in our workplace or for our own benefit, will contribute to the happiness of all of Cuba.”
Readers observed women whose domestic domain transformed into roles in combat, in politics, and in the fields and factories; some experienced these changes in their own lives. They heard Fidel Castro speak of sexist discrimination as an obstacle to true Revolution. Utopian messages meshed with the identities forged by generations of limiting domesticity, and articles like “Socialismo” navigated that sharp dichotomy.

Passages like this one also offer a remarkable interpretation of the rationalization of personal ritual with collective good. This discourse even preempts legendary socialist texts like Che Guevara’s “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” written in 1965, in which the revolutionary hero denounces aestheticism as an individualistic form of “escapism” that results in alienation from society and denial of the Revolution. Mujeres reconstructs aesthetic beauty to reflect sacrifice for nation instead of the narcissism that plagues common conceptions of femininity in its own version of Guevara’s “Man”.

While physical femininity marked women as collaborators in the construction of revolutionary society, it also carved out an exclusive space to create for women to create their own community, sharing ideas and information about practices with which their male comrades were unfamiliar. Some of the magazine’s most frequent and enlightened conversations revolved around health, especially sexual and maternal welfare. These articles reflected the surge in the availability of healthcare that accompanied the Revolution. The growing number of medical professionals included a rise in female doctors and nurses, with a participation increase of eight and fifteen times in the second half of the twentieth century, respectively. The establishment of the Rural Medical Service extended care to the

---

87 Smith and Padula, Sex and Revolution, 57.
countryside in 1960, while the U.S. embargo robbed hospitals of medicines and supplies soon thereafter. This led to a rise in the practice of preventative medicine, and women, as primary caregivers, shouldered the responsibility.88 While care for children and families claimed much of the magazine’s editorial space, *Mujeres* emphasized sexual and reproductive health as a form of physical maintenance and, effectively, beauty.

“*Su mente y su cuerpo,*” or “Your mind and body,” pictures an attractive female face framed by her own mirrored reflections to display a tri-fold identity, a clue to the nature of the feminine interference in the world of medicine. The article discusses physical and hormonal changes that affect female behavior, but the photo depicts more than a moody schizophrenia: the woman’s beauty is essential to her message. Her beautiful image comes encoded with expectations of internal beauty, validating the medical advice to follow. She personalizes the information, as if sharing a secret with her girlfriends. This image equates explicit femininity—long eyelashes, pursed lips, and clear skin—with proper maintenance of one’s sexual health, a deeply personal topic for female readers.

After establishing community in the opening illustration, the text works to depict feminine strength as a physical attribute unavailable to men. It opens with the common conception of the emotional woman, one who “cries at weddings and screams when she sees a mouse,” but asserts, “The major life crises—crises that challenge the will of the more seasoned male—are when many women become pillars of strength.” *Mujeres* suggests that not only do women possess an intimate emotional and physical connection, but also that this connection constitutes their power.89


Part of this power lies in its exclusivity. The second page of the article depicts an imposing diagram of the female reproductive system, an image both alien and mystifying to any man who happens to read over his wife’s shoulder. The physical changes that accompany menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause exist completely outside the male world; to conduct this formerly private discussion in the public pages of a magazine raises the importance of feminine medical issues, both for female readers and the national movement in which they participate.

This discourse entwines stereotypical feminine characteristics—moodiness, excessive emotion, and maternal “instinct,” among others—with the logic of modern medicine. This negotiation legitimizes female struggles as products of biology and not inherent weaknesses. Access to this knowledge granted women power over their conditions within a community in which to exercise that power. The article closes with the assertion that knowledge “can help us maintain our health, to live a happy life, and above all, to rise above our secret fears.” Without a need to question the existence of these fears, *Mujeres* empowered women to address them in its devotion to physical appearance and wellness.

Beauty also represented an opportunity to connect across generations, defying popular notions of ageism. This conversation contextualizes the visual presence of women from multiple generations in the magazine’s imagery to depict both timeless strength and youthful promise. Capitalizing on a broad association of feminine identity, *Mujeres* enabled women to share a discourse of medical knowledge, adapted to their own concerns, with mothers, sisters, and most importantly, daughters. The cartoon pictured demonstrates this emphasis on feminine community, depicting women of all ages welcoming the magazine into their home. Even a young girl proffers her dollhouse as a space for *Mujeres.*
“El ‘paso’ de niña a mujer,” or, “The journey from a girl to a woman,” echoes the medical diction of the adult article, though it appeared two years earlier. It discusses issues like voice changes, the beginning of the menstruation cycle, and mood swings. It also prescribes healthy amounts of activity as well as the necessary nutrients for girls entering adulthood. Before introducing these “secrets” of womanhood, however, the article positions itself as a member of the reader’s family. It claims, “Here’s how you can help your oldest daughter to overcome this delicate stage of female life without problems.” By directly referring to the reader’s oldest daughter, the editors presume that younger daughters might seek the advice of a sister. In the absence of such a resource, the magazine steps in as the wise older sibling, imparting knowledge of the “delicate crisis” in an effort to assuage the fears of youth. This intimate connection characterizes the ideas constructed and reflected in these pages. Navigating personal changes with grace and beauty might empower the individual but it also creates a collective strength that echoes the socialist values circulating after the Revolution.

Inclusive imagery, the politicization of beauty, and the conflation of formerly inaccessible medical discourse with an exclusively female community represent Mujeres’s
textual and visual negotiations of femininity on a superficial scale. The visual collective also applies to another exclusively female realm: motherhood. Discourses of maternity, social justice, and domesticity intertwine to challenge old standards of parenting and construct new models for the revolutionary Cuban family.
Part II

“She does it for the children”

Beneath the façade of beauty explored in Mujeres lies a discussion of motherhood, the “natural” female form of production: a human contribution to the physical and ideological Cuban vanguard. Revolutionary ideas permeated even the relationship between mother and child; soon, the home became the site of human production and the mother, the overseer of this revolutionary education. The magazine’s language recognizes the gravity of its readers’ role, both for the country and for its readers, suggesting that these caregivers create a dream world for themselves and for their children, one

without worries, vices, nor faults; without exploitation and misery, nor children running barefoot, hungry, and abandoned; [a world] that will be, for them, joyful, pure, and simple, where labor and education go along with play and healthy fun; and where, finally, the productive becomes enjoyable and recreational.90

The conflation of motherhood with social good is no new concept for the Cuban society or media, but its negotiation of this idea challenges the tired mantra that proclaims children as the vanguard of revolution, shaped by their mothers’ nurturing care and instruction. While Mujeres published issues dedicated to motherhood outside the month of May, Bohemia worshiped maternal figures annually, with poems and vignettes dedicated to contributors’ mothers. In 1961, the year of Mujeres’s inception, the lifestyle magazine published a story on Mariana Grajales, mother of Antonio Maceo, a brave commander in the Cuban rebel army in the nation’s battle for independence.91 Grajales bore eleven sons who

91 Pérez, Jr., Cuba: From Reform to Revolution, 93.
fought in the struggle against Spain, teaching them to use weapons and encouraging their sacrifice for the *patria* [homeland]. 92 *Bohemia* included a passage from José Martí, famed Latin American patriot, in its mother’s day issue, in which the author conflates the word “Patria” with “Madre” [mother]. 93 She stood as a formidable role model for Cuban mothers; and the admiration she elicited, Mother’s Day after Mother’s Day, reinforced a culture of patriotic maternity.

*Mujeres* faced the task of respecting renowned women like Mariana Grajales while reacting to the expanding role of women in society—Grajales represented an anomaly among Cuban women of the nineteenth century; her legend surpassed any opportunity to realistically imitate her example. In order to imagine a woman both independently valuable yet responsible for the protection and education of the nation’s youngest citizens, the magazine simultaneously explored the notion of “social justice,” or the application of maternal values to rationalize social activism in the form of revolution; and the conception of motherhood as a form of labor to be exercised with proper tools and, eventually, shared among family members and the State. This collaborative concept of “social motherhood” united two social theories to produce a more efficient maternal model.

A number of scholars trace the pattern of Latin American social movements to their female instigation and participation, motivated by the personal sacrifices that define the high stakes of battle. 94 According to these historians, women experienced most strongly the

---


94 “Latin America,” as Francesca Miller observes of the all-encompassing term, “serves more to obscure than to illuminate an understanding of the twenty-eight countries and dozen territories that lie between the Rio Grande in the North and the Tierra del Fuego in the south.” I intend to employ her distinctions of the boundaries of “Latin America” to emphasize the impact of what she calls the “contact,” “colonial,” and “independence”
disparities between rich and poor in many Latin American countries, due to corrupt politics and imperialist intervention. The “reconstruction development model,” claims Miller, “was prescribed for Latin America by policymakers whose main motivation was often their anticommunism rather than the alleviation of poverty as a goal per se.”95 These policies threatened Cuban women, especially those active in the domestic sphere, though the corruption and poverty decimated resources for any women with children.

Temma Kaplan’s theory of “female consciousness” provides a framework for this maternal mobilization. She states, “By placing human need above other social and political requirements and human life above property, profit, and even individual rights, female consciousnesses creates the vision of a society that has not yet appeared.”96 The activism of a group this size, with a shared identification of motherhood, helps to explain its continued prominence in the political language of Mujeres. Mothers saw the transformation of their “occupation” into a political identity as an opportunity to shift other aspects of their femininity into the public sphere as well. “Without trying to change patriarchal ideology or abandon their femininity,” one author reiterates, “[they] produced a transformation of the feminine conscience and its political role.”97 These theories of maternal activism support Latin American democratic movements, however, and reinforce the importance of the

 periods of European colonization, which shaped the social structures of the countries that endured them, with particular impact upon women. See Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice, 14-34.

95 Miller, Latin American Women, 147.


utopian period, directly following the Cuban Revolution, that produced the same mobilizing effects.

In other Latin American nations and in more disillusioned stages of revolution, domesticity did not guarantee adherence to social revolution; the fact that Mujeres comfortably employed content promoting personal involvement in childcare demonstrates its confidence in the woman’s role in socialism. 98 For some women, including those in Margaret Power’s study of the conservative movement in Chile, socialism threatened the institution of the family; as one historian remarks, “These women accepted their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers; and when they believed those roles to be threatened, they were moved to take action.” 99 Power argues similarly that motherhood did not necessarily imply a commitment to social justice but to familial justice, concern for one’s own children and husband. 100 Mujeres worked against these visions of motherhood and aligned the periodical to emphasize community. The form of the magazine, with its how-to sections and advice from experts (most of whom were also women with children, speaking from their own

98 Jane Jaquette’s compilation of perspectives, examined across the 1960s-1980s, on women’s movements toward democracy in Latin America includes examples from Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Nicaragua, and Mexico, all of which opposed “bureaucratic authoritarian regimes” much like Cuba’s (1). See The Women’s Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

99 Miller, Latin American Women, 154.

100 Margaret Power, Right Wing Women in Chile, 5. Also see Temma Kaplan’s Crazy for Democracy, an application of her theories on collective female activism as applied to contemporary social movements.
experiences), embodied a community of mothers who shared the responsibility of child rearing under the banner of socialism.

The communal nature of these movements lends conveniently to burgeoning theories of socialism in Cuba between 1961 and 1965, just as Castro announced the country’s political and economic orientation. Describing a “new concept of Motherland,” Fidel Castro proclaimed in a speech in May of 1961, “We have won the right to decide our destiny, a motherland which will be, now and forever—just as José Martí wanted it—for the well being of everyone and not a motherland for few.” Moments later, he declared the Revolution a socialist one, confirming the suspicions stirred by the presence of Socialist Party members in government positions, the nationalization of U.S. corporations, and the economic support pledged by the Soviet Union. When the FMC published *Mujeres* months later, it employed social motherhood toward a more radical form of government than the democracy pursued by some of its Latin American sisters.

The Cuban version of this maternal activism donned a number of defining characteristics that *Mujeres* worked to inscribe. The magazine emphasized a community of mothers, sharing responsibility for child rearing; it stressed the importance of both an educated mother and a learned child to the internalization of socialist consciousness; and, toward the middle of the 1960’s, began to incorporate the role of the father in its parenting strategies. This period blended the type of social justice championed by more conservative movements with the collective nature of socialism to construct a new maternal landscape for readers.

---

“While Mom works”

One of the most effective projects of the FMC was the establishment of *Círculos Infantiles*, or day care centers, founded by Clementina Serra in the spring of 1961. *Mujeres* published numerous articles depicting children at play at these centers, often constructed in abandoned buildings donated by the government. One center, as described in the magazine’s March 1962 issue, was located “on the eighth floor, which once housed the offices of the partners in an electricity monopoly.” Castro promised that “every town that wanted a day care center would have one,” and fundraising projects sprang up in response to his pledge. “A dream made real,” one article called the centers. These sites not only provided a place for employed women to leave their children while working, but they also engaged former domestic servants and other unemployed women in service, both to the Revolution and to the mothers who needed them.

The article, and others like it, proudly described the “cartoon drawings” that papered the walls, the rooms for different age groups, the toys that littered the yard, and even the soft music playing in the background. It also lists the occupations of the first women to enroll their children in the daycare. “Among the first are the children of a Soviet technician, an Argentine engineer, a mechanic, and a manufacturing employee,” the director stated. “It will be wonderful to see them playing together, in this environment of fellowship and happiness.” This environment echoes the utopian sentiment of the recurring “Los hijos nuestros” [Our children] section and suggests that women have the power to impact children’s lives positively, regardless if these children belonged to them.

---

102 “…Y muy pronto llegarán los niños,” *Mujeres*, March 1962, 70.

103 Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 133.
The duty of childcare remained feminized in these daycare centers, but this femininity implied more of a public duty than the strict domestic sphere allowed. By glamorizing these daycare centers, *Mujeres* de-emphasized the importance of the home and suggested that both children and family benefited from a collective motherhood. Even maternity fashion spreads assumed that women, even those who were pregnant, would pursue activities outside the home and should dress appropriately.104 “Women like you and I,” another article claims, “come and go, enter and leave, labor and read, study and travel,” in addition to carrying a child.105 This discourse emphasizes the identity of the mother, the woman who, “as a pillar and inexhaustible source of strength, has helped with her hands and with her intelligence, her sacrifice and her determination to overcome, to build the foundation of the beautiful reality in which we live today.”106 The magazine’s valuation of female qualities, independent of their duty to biological family, created a network of mothers that helped to ease the increasing burden of responsibilities outside the home.

This communal discourse interacted with the importance of the educated mother. As the prime figure of interaction with the nation’s children, she bore a responsibility beyond her “natural” nurturing instincts to educate herself on proper medical care and hygiene, according to the increasing standards enforced by the rapidly growing population of doctors, nurses, and professionals on the island. Much like the beauty articles that preached a doctrine of personal knowledge and maintenance, *Mujeres* published as much content on sickness, cleanliness, pregnancy, and nursing than it did about makeup.


105 “Modas y modos,” *Mujeres* (March 8, 1963), 16.

“The most beautiful task”

“To love children is not enough,” stated an installment of the monthly “Los hijos nuestros” column. “Children are … the future citizens [of Cuba].”107 The images published in Mujeres, even those that captured female-child interactions from within the walls of the daycare center, depicted a soft-focus, romantic relationship between mother and child, but the magazine’s prioritization of education challenges this ideal of naturalized motherhood. The magazine suggested that the maternal figure take a “tough love” role, in which she instructs her child to be both without “pettiness or ego” and learned in academic subjects, though she must do so in a manner that “guides” him without “punishing” him.108 This duty seemed rife with complexity, and Mujeres set out to demystify what it believed to be the tenets of proper childcare, elevating motherhood from a default occupation into an educated career.

“Los hijos nuestros” appeared in the magazine from its inception and discussed a number of pertinent topics, including ways to properly bathe a child, the importance of protecting children from contagious disease (February 15, 1962), the proper toys for children (April 1, 1962), comforting bedtime nightmares (April 15, 1962), and even the importance of outdoor recreation (August 1962). By 1963, the magazine produced four different columns on childcare per issue, in addition to feature-length stories on public-interest topics such as Fidel Castro’s visit to a daycare center.109 This deluge of information suggests that while

107 “Educar es la tarea mas hermosa,” Mujeres (December 1, 1961), 14.

108 “Educar es la tarea mas hermosa.”

mothers were valuable as independent persons in Cuban society, their proximity to such malleable citizens as their own sons and daughters made their position vital to the Revolution’s success. By transmitting that message to readers, the magazine carved an exclusive place for women to participate without extensive knowledge or training—just a summary of the articles’ advice.

1963 also brought a new series of instructive articles to the magazine: “Clase de madres” [School of Mothers]. These installments took a more official appearance and discursive style than “Los hijos nuestros,” even featuring a form for the reader to complete and mail to the magazine, denoting her “wish to enroll in the ‘School of Mothers’ and appeal for “a folder to keep the lessons for presentation at the end [of the series] to obtain a certificate of the course.”110 This intentional application of an academic structure to the role of motherhood reflects the importance of literacy gained throughout the first years of the Revolution

Castro declared 1961 to be the “Year of Education,” and launched a project that changed the landscape of Cuban readers and their relationship to formal knowledge. According to the leader, “Education is an index of political oppression. …The countries that are the most exploited economically and most oppressed politically are the countries that have the most illiterates.”111 This project mobilized hundreds of thousands of young people, both men and women, to travel to the countryside and educate peasants.112 It enjoyed monumental success; by the end of the campaign, nearly three quarters of a million Cubans

110 “Un centro de vida y salud,” Mujeres (May 1963), 113.


112 Ibid., 46.
gained literacy. These statistics projected the movement into legendary status, and *Mujeres* employed the campaign’s tactics to draw its readers into a similar educated sensibility.

“Under the orientation” of Dr. Marta Morton, a pediatrician, and Marta Vignier, a social worker, the column’s first installment reports from a maternity home, a hospital for ailing pregnant women to deliver safely. The article focuses heavily on the women’s preparation for labor, citing, “courses in sicoprofilaxis are the most important part of maternity education … it is necessary to learn a lot of thing that go ignored in regard to maternity. …These classes and light exercises encourage the mother to control her emotions and to acquire skills that will give her an advantage when faced with the work of labor.” This play on words was no coincidence; *Mujeres* framed childbirth as a task that required skill, just like raising a child required certain knowledge and abilities to ensure their proper social upbringing. The article also explicitly removed the event of childbirth from the home and into a public space—effectively a classroom—it goes as far as to claim that birth in the home “has caused many complications an even death, for not only the mothers but also their children, because of errors in medical assistance.”

---

113 Ibid., 50.

114 The magazine included several feature-length articles on the literacy campaign, including a photo montage from the campaign that depicted young people visiting tourist destinations and taking souvenir photos for their families while engaged in the campaign. See *Mujeres* (January 1, 1962), 71-73.

115 *Sicoprofilaxis, or psicoprofilaxis*, is a practice, more prevalent in Latin America, that prepares a patient for surgery—or, in this case, labor—through a series of psychological exercises that seek to reduce the negative effects of the procedure and facilitate both physical and mental recovery. See María Mucci’s *Psicoprofilaxis quirúrgica: una práctica en convergencia interdisciplinaria* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2004).

116 “Un centro de vida y salud,” 113.

117 Ibid.
“Los hijos nuestros” suggested, and “Clase de madres” confirmed, that being a mother in revolutionary Cuba during the few years of cultural negotiation and uncertainty that followed the overthrow of the “bourgeois” authoritarian regime required an orientation to new medical practices and pediatric behavior. No longer were the activities of motherhood performed behind closed doors; they emerged onto the pages of Mujeres with a commanding fervor and demanded that lest women follow the experts’ advice on topics from avoiding disease to scolding a petulant child, they might fall behind in the community of motherhood to which they belonged. Kaplan offers an apt description of this maternal race when she claims that, “women judge themselves and one another on how well they do work associated with being female.”

This kind of competition suggests that the magazine’s work to establish a code of femininity was self-preserving; it created temporary objectives by which women could construct their identities.

Confronting paternity

“Clase de madres” changed radically in May 1964 and indicated an ideological shift, not only within the periodical, but also in Cuban society. After two years as “School of Mothers,” the editors changed the title of the series to “School of Parents.” In their official statement, the editors claimed,

… We had excluded fathers, yet they are fundamental to the upbringing of their children. In accordance with this principle, we invite fathers, as of today, into a stronger relationship with us. To this effect, we have decided to change the name of this section to “School of Parents.”

Kaplan, “Female Consciousness,” 546.

“Cinco respuestas sobre educación,” Mujeres (May 1964), 84.
This change coincided with the departure of one of the column’s experts, social worker Marta Marton, who decided to return to her native Hungary after two years of service in Cuba. Dr. René Vega Vega, a male psychologist specializing in child behavior, replaced her. The article answered “Five questions about education” and repeatedly traced the well being of children back to the examples of their mothers and fathers, emphasizing the importance of an established family unit.

This language departed from the independent motherhood that dominated the magazine’s first three years. Whether the change came from the addition of a male perspective to the “Clase,” or an editorial shift in ideology, it seeped into other articles in the same issue. Only pages before the inauguration of “Clase de padres” appeared a feature entitled “Who cares for the home, the cooking, and the children in communism?” 120 The article responded to a letter from a man who read an earlier article discussing the emancipation of women who believed that women should continue to “complete their duties in the home … and not forget that it is her to whom [those duties] belong.” 121 Through this article, the debate of woman’s role occurs directly in the pages of the magazine—a feat only implicitly discussed prior to this issue.

After discussing the merits of socialism to detangle the confusion of gender roles in a society based upon equality, the article concluded with a quotation from Vladimir Lenin, who hailed the “liberation of the woman from domestic slavery.” 122 "Mujeres firmemente

120 “¿Quién atiende al hogar, a la cocina, y a los niños en el comunismo?” Mujeres (May 1964), 76.

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid., 77. This quotation comes from an interview with Clara Zetkin, who transcribed Lenin’s perspective on Karl Marx’s The Woman Question (1951) in “My recollections of Lenin, an interview on the woman question,” in The Emancipation of Women: The Writings of VI Lenin (International publishers, 1966). The magazine also
articulated its stance on domesticity in its closing lines, but its readers did not necessarily agree. The question of shared responsibility continued to plague the magazine as it negotiated the imposition of domestic tasks with the feminine identity that accompanied them. This transition, from wife and mother to companion and comrade, intensified in the discourse of heterosexual relationships, where men and women struggled to stand confidently on shifting ground.

published a selection from Lenin’s “The Emancipation of Woman” in its November 1962 issue, 16-17, flanked by a photo of smiling women in headscarves, presumably of Soviet descent.

Johanna I. Moya-Fabregas joins the chorus of historians who note the “double burden” placed on women after the Revolution. In her interviews with Cuban women, she observes that “[the women] made clear that although they worked outside the home, domestic life was still their responsibility” (“The Revolutionary Woman’s Experience,” 74).

Ian Lumsden attests to the invisibility of masculine homosexual women who reject “conventional feminine and machista norms,” stating that “lesbians who challenge and refuse to conform with such oppressive stereotypes are no more party of an integrated homosexual scene than they are anywhere else in Latin America.” See Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 151.
Part III

Love and socialism

The Revolution emerged from a discourse of social responsibility based upon a universal love, even beyond the heterosexual romance discussed in the pages of Mujeres. Che Guevara preached eloquently about the relationship between the love for one another and for nation that fueled the revolution’s success and could lead to its demise. “The true revolutionary,” he claimed, “is guided by great feelings of love. …Perhaps it is one of the great dramas of the leader that he or she must combine a passionate spirit with a cold intelligence and make painful decisions without flinching.”

Mujeres discussed romance in much the same way, emphasizing female intelligence and perspective within an equitable partnership, years before Guevara wrote these words.

Commentator and novelist Nora Lin made clear Mujeres’s position on romance in her article, “Letras y lectoras” [Letters and authors] in October 1962:

[Romance novels] are a jumble of letters, as undesirable as they are harmful; as silly as they are dishonest … [The heroine] tries to pursue the heart of a man gallant, handsome, and rich, useless yet curly-haired like an ostrich feather duster. …Corín, go find the few, faded royal men left in Miami. There you all can conspire against our new socialist world, fighting tooth and nail to maintain your throne.

Lin’s tirade condemned Corín Tellado, a Spanish novelist who penned Atrevida apuesta and is considered a “grand dame” of the romance novel, publishing over four thousand titles.

---


since her first novel in 1946.\textsuperscript{127} While Lin wrote young adult novels in addition to her work in a number of popular Cuban magazines, she took particular offense not only to Tellado’s audience—young, impressionable girls, Lin argues—but to the plotlines of her novels.\textsuperscript{128} These unrealistic, romantic tales in which the impoverished girl falls in love with a wealthy, handsome, and often titled man, only reinforce dependent female stereotypes; not to mention they directly opposed a socialist abolition of hierarchy, which cemented their enemy status in \textit{Mujeres}.

This playful rejection of traditional romance pervaded the magazine in this period. The sarcastic commentaries of Nora Lin complimented a host of comic satires from the cartoonists at \textit{Palante}, the island’s humorist publication. In these ways, \textit{Mujeres} imagined romance in caricature. While it spoke of beauty and childcare as educative processes that created community while empowering women with knowledge, the magazine took a less literal perspective on the relationships between men and women. This allowed for a range of interpretations that characterized the uncertainty surrounding the shift in masculine identity that accompanied the female one.

\textit{Neogtiating compañeros}\textsuperscript{129}

As evident in her diatribe against the popular romance novel, Nora Lin—the penname for Dora Alonso, an author and contributor to multiple popular magazines—spoke her mind.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{128} Dora Alonso is known primarily for her work in children’s literature. Single, with an adopted child, she worked as a war correspondent during the Revolution before writing a number of children’s books and novels. See “Dora Alonso: Su obra,” Cuba Literaria (Accessed March 24, 2011) http://www.cubaliteraria.cu/autor/dora_alonso/index.htm.
  \item \textsuperscript{129} “Companions” denotes both a socialist partnership and general equality between the sexes.
\end{itemize}
Her articles in *Mujeres* transgressed the public silence surrounding the relationships between men and women, and the frequency of her contributions demonstrated the popularity of her opinion. Alonso’s past includes a variety of influential experiences that shaped her opinions in the magazine. She joined *Joven Cuba*, an anti-imperialist group of young Cubans, at age 24. While embroiled in revolutionary activities, she entered a relationship with a fellow activist for a short period while she wrote stories for popular magazines. Alonso is renowned for her children’s books and adopted a child in 1953, but never married. Her socially conscious literature and war correspondence educated her in revolutionary ideology, but her employment of simple language in children’s books and her solitary personal life allude to the kinds of satire she published in *Mujeres*.130

“La hora de verdad” [Moment of Truth], written by Alonso in October 1962, appeared in the magazine between two cartoons: on the left, a group of women—some angry, some confused; on the right, an indignant man, standing upright with arms crossed and chest puffed, lines of anger radiating from his frowning face. Her text reproduced the cynicism of the aforementioned article and stated, “The eternal relations of the man and woman have been touched by the wand that has, without ceremony, revealed secret failures.” Her metaphor positioned socialist consciousness as the magical “wand” that enlightened couples of ignorance of the equality between men and women. These couples pose as “compañeros,” she asserted, but “they didn’t want to see or hear what was revealed to them.”

These opening lines acquainted Alonso with her resistant reader, one of many women who embraced the “equality” that Revolution offered but remained in their domestic roles. Margaret Randall interviewed one example, a woman who claimed,

---

130 “Dora Alonso: Su obra.”
I don’t think it’s my husband’s responsibility to help me wash the dirty clothes he brings home. I think that’s my obligation, as his wife, to attend to his needs as well as carrying out all the other tasks of the Revolution. …We women have a certain talent. …When I get home, his responsibility ends.\textsuperscript{131}

Ana, a middle-aged peasant nurse, internalized the public persona of the revolutionary Cuban woman, but she struggled to articulate her dual role in the home and “the street,”\textsuperscript{132} just as \textit{Mujeres} published both Alonso’s commentaries and installments called “Su hogar” that discussed furniture arrangement and floral displays.\textsuperscript{133}

While Alonso acknowledges the confusion of her audience, she fires with certainty at the object of her blame: the \textit{homo cubensis}, the male Neanderthal, the hypocritical \textit{jefe} who cannot accept the independence of the women closest to him, even though he proclaims the beneficence of “the equality of rights and abilities” heralded by revolutionary thinkers.\textsuperscript{134}

She rattles off a number of characteristics of this “prehistoric” man:

Absolute license is granted for almost all bad habits and failures; the arbitrary power taken to deny direct involvement with his better half, his girlfriend, or his mother in small tasks; or his grudging admission, followed by suspicion, surveillance, questioning, and complaints.

\textsuperscript{131} Randall, \textit{Cuban Women Now}, 45.

\textsuperscript{132} “The street” refers to the public sphere, a common term in the discourse of women’s emancipation. See Randall, \textit{Cuban Women Now} (44) and K. Lynn Stoner’s \textit{From the House to the Streets}.

\textsuperscript{133} “Mi hogar,” \textit{Mujeres} (December 1, 1961) 18.

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Homo cubensis} refers to the “Cuban fossil man,” remains discovered by Fernando Ortiz, who named the archaeological find as a testament to the Asian identity of the island’s first dwellers, supporting a thesis that, as Rafael Rojas claims, “national identity appears as an historical construction of the island’s successive ethnic migrations” (45). Alonso’s reference to \textit{homo cubensis} aims to reinforce the stagnancy of male egoism influenced by the “successive ethnic migrations” to which Ortiz refers. See “Fernando Ortiz: Transculturation and Nationalism” in \textit{Essays in Cuban Intellectual History} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 43-64. \textit{Jefe} translates literally to “chief,” but denotes a man with a heightened sense of entitlement.
Alonso claimed these roles were ingrained—not beyond reformation, but hiding under the façade of equality and “nature.” Her language in this article, employing imagery from romantic fantasy, socialist rhetoric, and Cuban nationalism, spoke to a reader influenced by multiple ideological currents that defined her relationship to a significant other. In a magazine dedicated to the fusion of socialism and the everyday feminine, Alonso’s commentary represented an unforgiving perspective.

Her last column in this period celebrated Valentine’s Day in 1964. In “Valentin socialista” [Socialist Valentine], she satirized a love note sent from one compañero to his compañera. “Love and its manifestations have suffered changes,” she remarked. This new love no longer carries the whimsy of ages past; it is “valid and efficient.” The featured notes only comprised a few lines; their cropped affection pokes fun at the idea of “socialist love,” but Alonso toys with the idea, stating, “On revolutionary soil, revolutionary love.” She questioned the existence of thoughtless, mind-consuming infatuation, though she did not specify whether men or women did the day dreaming that socialism erased.

To Alonso, the tenets of the Revolution, if strictly followed, prevented the man from romancing a female interest, or the woman from growing emotionally involved in her relationship, in the interest of social efficiency. This critical view of romance only allows for interpretation when she concedes, “We are sure that these [lovers] understand that love will always be the same, though there is something new.”

Alonso’s editorial remarks can be interpreted as satirical monologues. This form defines the method through which “the satirist, usually speaking either in [her] own person or behind a mask which is scarcely intended to hide, addresses us directly.” “Nora Lin,” or Dora Alonso, fulfills this role. She “states the view of a problem, cites examples, pillories
opponents, and endeavors to impose [her] view on the public."\textsuperscript{135} Alonso describes the obstacles to true “revolutionary” relationships in which men and women are equal, neither defined by fantastic expectations. She employs satire because the content that surrounds her columns still subscribes to the traditional modes of femininity that Alonso criticizes, even if \textit{Mujeres} also works to challenge those modes, though in less explicit ways.

Alonso did not criticize these structures to overturn them. Her words had little political effect. As a literary critic Leonard Feinberg attests, “even when [satirists] express themselves openly on contemporary issues … they do not have any appreciable effect … except when they are expressing attitudes already strongly held by large numbers of people.”\textsuperscript{136} Much like the rest of \textit{Mujeres}’s content, Alonso only wishes to offer a commentary on her observations about revolutionary culture in the hopes that her fractured audience of female readers might notice those inconsistencies, too. After all, Feinberg concludes, “Satirists have a talent for seeing what is wrong; they have no special ability for seeing how it should be corrected.”\textsuperscript{137} Alonso attempts to awaken her readers to examine their own lives in the wake of Revolution, not to impress a new set of values upon family structure.

\textit{Drawing the Cuban woman}

\textit{Mujeres} employed another form of humor to comment on the changing expectations for heterosexual romance. Cartoons appeared in every issue, often in multiple sites

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[137] Ibid., 274.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
throughout the magazine, shoved into corners or columns to enhance the visual spectacle of the page. The magazine employed the drawings of the Cuban Association of Cartoonists, who primarily published their work in *Palante*, the island’s only outlet specifically for political cartoons. The relationship produced a number of telling representations of dating and married life in Cuban society. The series most demonstrative of Mujeres’s style was *Las Criollitas*, a set of cartoons created by Luis Felipe Wilson Valera, signed “Wilson”.

According to a graphic historian, these cartoons represented

A beautiful, exuberant, and voluptuous woman who expressed the social and personal development available to women in Cuba. Free and proud of her new role in society, she also reflected fashion trends and popular expressions. *Las Criollitas* have been converted into one of the most emblematic characters in Cuban humor.

*La Criollita*’s first appearance in *Mujeres* featured a grinning black woman smashing an American top hat with her rolling pin, clutching a copy of the magazine in front of her apron-covered chest. Her son, clad in the beret and sash of the Cuban Communist youth, huddles behind her calf, carrying a book. In this inaugural image, Wilson defines the relationship between the Cuban woman and her magazine. It functions as both a banner of her new consciousness, displayed through her use of cooking utensils to “smash imperialism,” but the

---

138 Founded on October 16, 1961, an editor called the publication “a school dedicated to cultivating the expressions of general, everyday humor and the political satire in defense of the Revolution and the new society.” “*Palante*” [“Forward”] refers to the cartoonists’ identity as socialist artists from that point forward. For a vivid history of Cuban graphic art, see Arístedes Esteban Hernández and Jorge Alberto Piñero’s *Historia del humor gráfico en Cuba* (Spain: Editorial Milenio, 2007), 108.

139 Valera titled his caricatures “*Las Criollitas*” because, as Adelaida de Juan claims in her anthology, “[the women] were the testimony, the voices didactic yet light-hearted, of the problems and successes of the Cuban woman, immersed in the exuberant atmosphere of a country in revolution,” representative of a mixture of the colloquial and innately Cuban—drawn from the translation of criollo—and the new ideologies that freed her. See *Criollitas* (Havana: Editorial Orbe, 1980), 5.


141 Valera, “Criollitas,” *Mujeres* (December 1, 1961), 64.
image also suggests the periodical-as-guide. In this way, Mujeres internalizes the domestic realities of its reader yet motivates her to employ those realities in a revolutionary way. We can imagine that once the woman fully denounces the influences of American imperialism to embrace socialist empowerment, she may no longer need the apron or the rolling pin to assert her superiority.

Illustration, Luis Wilson Valera (Mujeres, December 1, 1961)

In addition to her empowerment through domesticity, La Criollita takes a superior role in her interactions with the opposite sex, an important characterization of the changing role of the Cuban woman in her personal relationships. When Wilson draws a man into the frame with the female figure, she towers over him in tiny heels, her features carefully outlined while his eyes are often wide and blank, staring up at the resplendent character before him. Whether the pair are at their own wedding or simply sitting on the couch, her coolness contrasts his anxiety in a way that suggests some superior knowledge or confidence.
that, as Wilson once claimed, “broke with earlier humor schemes in Cuba and created characters that made popular the new ways [of Revolution].”

Like Dora Alonso’s use of satire, the comic form of these representations suggests their identity both as reflections of popular culture but also their attempt to forge new caricatures and to rationalize changing expectations with domesticity and familiarity, both among Cuban women but also embedded in national shifts in society. This process is by no means simple and explicit; in this case, political imagery works in conversation, both with its corresponding captions and with the cartoons that surround and often challenge *Las Criollitas*. As historian Roy Porter comments in his commentary on the use of man-made images in history, “The creation, fixing, and ‘normalization’ of stereotypes is an immensely complicated mental process, hinging upon a delicate interplay of words and images.”

Wilson’s creations not only suggest a female superiority through physical stature, but also through the assertive expressions and captions that narrate his comics: *La Criollita* chooses her suitors wisely, she demands her needs in a relationship, and she fails to adeptly perform the duties of a capable housewife.

In July 1963, *La Criollita* wagged her finger at a short, balding suitor, demonstrating her dominance. With her eyes half closed, a lazy smirk upon her face, she tells the man, “Senor, if your aim is to pursue me, you should know that I’m a champion long distance runner.” She not only mocks the man’s obvious frailty but speaks her opinion to a man who, judging by his cane, suit, and dress shoes, probably possesses wealth. Her


statement surprises the man—marked by the telltale sweat beads emanating like bullets from his face—but she stands firm. *La Criollita’s* discriminatory choices support the emerging association of youth with Revolution.

A cartoon published in December of 1961 indicates the importance of a certain revolutionary virility in *La Criollita’s* pursuit of a romantic interest. When another well-dressed man, wearing glasses with his hair combed over a balding head, presents her with a gift, she responds with crossed arms. “It’s all very well,” she says, “but if you’re not in the militia and have walked 62 kilometers, then I don’t want you.” The cartoon not only envisions a new, confident Cuban woman, but it makes a statement about the pressures of masculinity after the Revolution. The mere presence of *La Criollita*, with her exaggerated feminine flamboyance, reflected a growing comfort with female expression.

This expression continued within a committed, heterosexual relationship, especially if that relationship was out of wedlock. Often, *La Criollita* expressed a desire to legalize her union, but these reasons were not ones of dependency. Rather, as she claimed in April 1963, “In this ‘Year of Organization’, *chico*, enough ‘meetings’ at home and let’s ‘organize’ in front of a notary.” Another comic featured a version of *La Criollita* sitting on the couch with her boyfriend, scolding him for framing their relationship in sports terms. She quips, “*Chico*, our relationship is not like a ‘pick and roll’ in basketball! I’m going to leave you ‘off base.’”

---


146 Valera, “Criollitas,” *Mujeres* (April 1963), 96. The “Año de Organización denotes the a government-imposed period of organization that sought to address the economic instabilities that emerged from an economic embargo with the United States and a socialist restructuring of bureaucracy. See Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 234.

leans over her boyfriend with her arms crossed, while sweat flies from his face. In both scenes, the woman employs the language of the male sphere—from a sports field to the politics of revolution—to support her case.

Echoing her support of the “Year of Organization,” the government’s term for its series of reforms in 1963, *La Criollita* displays a desire to legalize her relationship, an inclination depicted even more frequently by other cartoonists featured in *Mujeres*. This trend reflects government incentives of the early 1960s. In the Revolution’s first year, 1959 to 1960, the marriage rate doubled among Cubans—to 32,692 ceremonies—and continued to rise, due to a series of laws and a government campaign called “Operation Family,” which encouraged the legalization of consensual unions. The government clung to legal partnership as a bedrock for increased socialist consciousness in this period, and *La Criollita* operated with that consciousness, not with a helpless dependence that characterized the women of Cuba’s past—and their nation.

Lastly, *La Criollita* displayed a flippant disregard for housework. Contrasted with the detailed descriptions of recipes and sewing that filled the pages of *Mujeres*, the caricature defies yet another aspect of traditional femininity. In one cartoon (June 1963), the bride and her fiancé stand at the altar, moments from marriage, when *La Criollita* asks, “Dear, before we’re married, I have a question: do you know how to cook?” Her husband stares up at her, mortified, while the woman smiles apologetically, unaware of her feminine infraction.

In December 1961, Wilson draws the character knitting, next to a husband wearing a sweater.

---

148 Sonia Catasús, *La nupcialidad cubana en siglo XX* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1994), 56. According to legal scholar Debra Evenson, “Rather than weaken the nuclear family, the revolution aspired to recreate it as the basic unit of the new socialist society” (123).

149 Valera, “Criollitas,” *Mujeres* (June 1963), 47.
that falls to his knees. While he comforts his wife, she shrugs, the needles tangled in her hands.\textsuperscript{150} She offers no excuse for her lack of skill, and her husband seems to accept her inability. These examples display an alternative to the home-focused maternal figure that often distinguishes representations of Cuban women, especially before the Revolution.

While satire and humor shape the presentation of these alternative messages about the opposite sex, they do not obscure the ideologies that lie beneath the witty façade. Framing the contemporary Cuban woman in a lighthearted way demonstrates the discursive nature of \textit{Mujeres}. These subconscious “suggestions” about relationships triggered changes in family structure and legal responsibilities for couples and parents, but not until years later. These institutional changes echoed the textual and visual conversations that \textit{Mujeres} had articulated since its establishment in 1961.

\textsuperscript{150} Valera, “Criollitas,” \textit{Mujeres} (December 15, 1961), 83.
Chapter 6
The last pages: a conclusion

After 1965, male voices began to contribute to the discussion of cultural changes that had taken place in periodical outlets like *Mujeres*. Camilo Torres, a Roman Catholic priest who advocated social justice through guerrilla warfare in Colombia, remarked in his 1965 “Message to Women”:

The Colombian woman, like all women, has more sentiment, more sensitivity, and more intuition. All these qualities must be praised and put to use, not for the oligarchy or for men as such but for a revolutionary ideal converted into the ideal for women. ...[Her] problems can only be solved under a regime which respects the individual’s conscience and individual, familial, and social rights. 151

Torres echoed statements from his comrade Che Guevara, who agreed in “Socialism and Man in Cuba” that “wives, too, must be part of the general sacrifice of their lives in order to take the revolution to its destiny.” 152 However, even when recognized leaders of Latin American revolutions acknowledged the structural obstacles to the full incorporation of women into the ranks of employment, Cuba did not pass legal revisions until 1975. 153

*Mujeres* filled this space of uncertainty with beauty articles that featured black women and older women and tired women; it turned motherhood into an educational class

---


153 The Family Code, according to Evenson, aimed to strengthen the family unit to “contribute to the development an upbringing of children in accordance with socialist values and to provide for the emotional needs of individuals” (127). Article 26 states that, “Both parties must care for the family they have created and each must cooperate with the other in the education, upbringing, and guidance of the children. ...They must participate, to the extent of their capacity or possibilities, in the running of the home and cooperate so that it will develop in the best possible way,” even if the husband works while his wife remains at home. Ley no. 1289 (Código de Familia), Article 26, *Gaceta Oficial*, February 15, 1975. Reproduced in Evenson, 131.
instead of a natural character trait; it laughed in the face of romantic dependency and feminine passivity. The magazine *spoke* when even the most confident male leaders were afraid to discuss a changing femininity. This fear paralyzed the Cuban government in the first years of revolution, leaving the task of creating a female consciousness—an integral part of social reform—to women on the ground: those who wrote for *Mujeres*, edited its content, used it as a tool for revolutionary education, or simply flipped through its pages. Challenging their static characterizations from contemporary historians who attempt to assess the Cuban women’s movement through political efficacy, these female readers received and interpreted the symbols and texts presented to them.

This agency is evident in the contradictions that litter *Mujeres*’s content, both in response to government edicts and in its revisions of socialist ideology after 1961. The magazine nuanced ideas of feminine beauty to favor personal choice over restrictive practice. It glorified the occupation of motherhood while promoting alternative assistance to those women who worked outside the home. *Mujeres* challenged the heterosexual relationship, depicting partnerships in which women claimed power.

These changes did not come without consequence; despite the legal measures of 1975, controversy continues to plague Cuban women of all backgrounds and incomes and alludes to fundamental inequalities in the labor market and the social definitions of gender. However, the goal of this analysis, much like the goal of the magazine, is to acknowledge the argumentative spirit of *Mujeres* and to complicate its current status in the historiography as a mouthpiece of ingrained sexism. Rather, *Mujeres* magazine depicted the realities of its readers in order to imagine a revision of those realities. Its experimental message before 1965
demonstrates to historians the slow pace of social change and the unlikely site where that change can occur.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Bohemia. Havana, Cuba. La Habana. 1910-


Secondary Sources


“Female Consciousness and Collective Action.” Signs 7.3 (Spring 1982): 545-566.


Otero, Lisandro. “Notas sobre la funcionalidad de la cultura.” Casa de las Americas 12.68 (September-October 1971).


