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The Strong Women of Cuba

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Mujeres De Carácter: The Strong Women of Cuba

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Abstract: The concept for this study began after meeting with mujeres de carácter (strong, influential women) during a cultural exchange visit to Cuba. This meeting was followed by a literature review on cultural exchanges and gender relations in Cuba and then by interviews with 16 academic exchange visitors. Sexual divisions of labor and the binary between mujeres de carácter and mujeres típicas emerged as the primary topics of interest. A structural-feminist conceptual framework was used to interpret these issues within the broader scope of gender relations in Cuba. The pro-revolutionary, mujeres de carácter identity was constructed through civil reforms and structural exigencies of the patriarchal socialist state. Recent economic hardships have threatened this identity and progress toward gender equality has been threatened by the reemergence of old sexual divisions of labor in a changing economy.

Key words: Cuba, feminism, gender equity, cultural exchanges

INTRODUCTION

The mujeres de carácter project began with a visit to Cuba in the summer of 2003. On a sultry August night in Habana Veija, we had joined U.S. as well as Cuban academics and students in a discussion of Cuban-American relations. One Cuban woman in the group, an academic, was strong and outspoken. This interpersonal strength was evident in her take-no-prisoners style and in her easy dismissal of Southern male chivalry after one of us (SB) paid her a compliment. We found her to be hospitable, entertaining and, for some of us, a welcome counterpoint to the cigar and mojitos motif of the dinner. She was also influential, which became evident after she facilitated our meetings with university personnel who had been beyond our reach through the usual channels.

This signature event was followed by a woman-only meal with Cuban women who fit the local description of mujeres de carácter as strong and influential. On this occasion, one of us (BL) complained that a Cuban man in a prior meeting had been rude to her. Our lunch companions scoffed at the man's sexist behavior and called it machismo. Their conversation became triumphant and energized as it turned to women's social gains, men's capitulations and the strength of revolutionary feminism in Cuba. The women then revealed that the mujer de carácter mentioned above was, in fact, the man's employer

and they made it clear that they would report this behavior to her. Following this dinner meeting, the man's demeanor towards BL changed appreciably. We were so intrigued by the outcome that we decided to follow up on the mujeres de carácter phenomenon by interviewing other faculty who had visited Cuba under the university cultural exchange program. Our study is the result of this inquiry into strong women as a pro-revolutionary persona in Cuba.

Our inquiry may be understood in the framework of exchange programs between the United States and Cuba. People to people exchanges were an educational exemption to the 1996 Helms-Burton Act which prohibited U.S. citizens from traveling to or trading with Cuba. President Clinton expanded the program in 1999, enabling approximately 100,000 United States citizens to visit Cuba for cultural-educational purposes (Kirkpatrick, 2003). The participants in our study visited Cuba from 2001 to 2003, following in the path of other academics who participated in such exchanges and who reported their experiences after returning to the USA (Manzano, 2004; Henderson, 2001; Lefevre, 2000; Murphy *et al.*, 1991).

The study of Cuban women is often obscured by the geo-politics of the region. The U.S. embargo has had profound effects on Cuba's economy (Skaine, 2004; Henderson, 2001; Smith and Padula, 1996; Lutjens, 1995). Henderson (2001) concluded that the U.S. embargo also

had far-reaching social effects that have prevented Cubans from obtaining knowledge about the outside world. We posit that the reverse is also true: The embargo has been a barrier to academic and cultural knowledge about Cuba for U.S. citizens. In contrast, cultural exchanges allowed academics in both countries to expand their knowledge of each other and their disciplines. This study contributes to the window of opportunity observations of U.S. faculty who participated in the exchange program by seeking to enhance knowledge and perspectives between participants in both countries.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our study presents the observations of academic exchange visitors who reported on women's roles in Cuba from their vantage point as cultural outsiders. In ethnographic terms, these observations are second order interpretations (Geertz, 1973) because they do not represent the lived experiences of women residing in Cuba. The second order approach categorizes much of the published work on Cuban women by émigré or U.S. writers. First order interpretations have their own limitations when it comes to representing the lived experiences of Cuban women. Smith and Padula (1996) write that there is the problem of much that cannot be said that confronts Cuban feminists who may wish to disrupt the everything's fine here rhetoric of official discourse on women's rights. Thus, Cuban feminists (Núñez Sarmiento, 2000, 2001, 2003a, b) chart the progress of women within the officio-legal framework for women's rights in Cuba. The frequent political bias of U.S. publications on Cuban women, together with Cuban feminists' unilateral focus on sexual divisions of labor at home and work, constitute the complex terrain of writing about *mujeres de carácter*.

The bracketing of gender analyses with government-defined goals has led to a disjuncture between Cuban feminists and non-Cubans as well as to claims by U.S. theorists of an intellectual stasis in conceptualizing gender beyond Structural-Marxist explanations (Murphy *et al.*, 1991). This disjuncture led (Henderson, 2001) to lament that: The information embargo has functioned to keep (Cuban) scholars, artists and academics out of touch with contemporary currents of contemporary Western thought. Henderson's view is likely to be rejected by Cuban feminists, or at least tempered by Cubanist advocates of cultural relativity (Lutjens, 1995). Stoner (1991) noted how feminists in both pre-and post-revolutionary Cuba have their roots in national independence, communitarianism and confrontation with U.S. hegemony, thus perceiving themselves to be distinctive from U.S.

feminist pedagogy which emphasizes such issues as the multiplicity of competing narratives. This distinctiveness characterizes literature about Cuban women regardless of cultural or theoretical approaches. Icons of distinction are evident in the portraits of bourgeois *mujeres de carácter* (those amazing women) in pre-revolutionary Cuba who fought for political suffrage for women in sugar plantation society (Stoner, 1991) in the apocryphal images of women heroes of the revolution who fought alongside men revolutionaries and who transformed Cuba into a socialist state (Henderson, 2001) and in contemporary representations of women heroes who have made economic sacrifices, including a return to domesticity for the sake of national solidarity (Lutjens, 1995).

Western and Cuban feminists agree that patriarchy is cited in feminist literature in relation to women's oppression. Socialist-feminist theory has condemned capitalist forms of patriarchy for creating sexual divisions of labor in which men occupy the public (*calle*) sphere while women are confined to the domestic (*casa*) sphere and for appropriating women's labor during times of economic or military need (Safa, 1995; Lutjens, 1995; Retclift, 1988; Hartman, 1981). However, Croll (1986) among others has argued that the sexual divisions of labor occur in agrarian, socialist societies and capitalist economies alike and that patriarchy in its various guises cuts across time and space as a cause of women's oppression. Smith and Padula (1996), Safa (1995) and Fraunhar (2002) provide the conceptual framework for our observations on *mujeres de carácter*, *mujeres típicas* and the complexities of gender in Cuba (Stoner 1991). This analysis incorporates Cuban feminists' civil-legal focus on the sexual division of labor at home and work, but also draws on Safa's (1995) and Smith and Padula's (1996) perspectives of how patriarchal power has shaped women's lives across the trajectory of Cuban history. This thesis takes account of how mobilization of women's bodies (particularly Mulatta bodies) to attract Western male tourists was a signifier of gender inequity in the emergent capitalism of the 1990s (Fraunhar, 2002). How the *mujeres de carácter* identity interacts with this free-floating patriarchy is examined through a structural-feminist perspective that frames the observations of cultural exchange visitors on women in Cuba.

Background: Like women everywhere, Cuban women have struggled to achieve social equality. Prior to the 1959 revolution, women were second class citizens and denied basic human rights in the form of inadequate health care, education and employment (Jennissen and Lundy, 2001). They were also viewed as objects of men's sexual pleasure (Koppel, 2003). Girls were socialized early

into secondary gender roles of the sugar planter patriarchy involving genteel domesticity for the wealthy and peasant or servant status for the poor. Bunck (1994) writes that young boys of the bourgeoisie were taught the rules of machismo that valorized male superiority and aggressiveness, while the counterpart for young girls was to be retiring, attractive, and, of course, virginal until marriage. This gender polarity defined the rightful role for bourgeois woman as raising children. Being a homemaker was the stated ideal for all women; however, poor women had little option other than to take menial employment as domestic servants or agricultural workers (Jenmissen and Lundy, 2001). The eldest daughter often dropped out of school to care for her siblings. In pre-revolutionary Cuba, women were usually illiterate, especially in the depressed rural areas (Safa, 1989).

Under the direction of Castro's leadership and through the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women) the fortunes of Cuban women began to change. Child-care centers were created, technical training schools were established and an educational campaign was credited with virtually eliminating illiteracy (Koppel, 2003). By 2002, women's employment rates had risen to 45% the U.S. equivalent for that year was 60% (Koppel, 2003). Women began to surpass men in educational achievement at universities and other institutions (Núñez Sarmiento, 2000). The positions now held by women are often superior to men's positions in rank and pay, with women comprising the majority of Cuba's doctors, teachers, scientists and researchers (Domingo and Strout, 2001). Smith and Padula (1996) describe Fidel Castro as Cuba's leading feminist during this time because of the militaristic-patriarchal framework that allowed women to move into occupations being vacated by male military draftees. A caveat to such gains for women is that the collapse of the Soviet-dependent economy in Cuba in the early 1990s (referred to as the special period) and the effects of the U.S. blockade, resulted in a sharp decline in living standards for all Cubans (Secado, 1993). Women's workforce participation correspondingly fell to 37% (Núñez Sarmiento, 2001).

Cuban writers (e.g., Núñez Sarmiento, 2001) have noted that gender rights are now enshrined in law and praxis, with women being treated by Cuban law as equal partners in the home and workplace. For example, the Maternity Law of 1974 mandated that women could return to employment after maternity leave. Scholarships are available for women students, day care centers are abundant and school lunches are provided for the children of working women. The right to work is, in fact, guaranteed for university and technical school graduates,

of whom 66% are women (Cuba Solidarity Campaign, 2005). As a result of these gains, Cuban women are often the heads of their households, with one third of women being the main source of income for their families (Skaine, 2004). Cuban authorities expressed alarm at this development, however, after realizing that income redistribution for women meant less reliance on men for economic support and often led to divorce or single-parent households.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study consisted of in-depth interviews of University faculty and professional staff who visited Cuba during 2001-2003. After the project had been approved by the university review board, we contacted each participant by phone for their consent to be interviewed. Six contacts in our original list of 23 declined to participate because of time constraints. The 17 remaining participants (10 men, 7 women) agreed to be interviewed in face-to-face meetings. These participants consisted of faculty from Arts and Sciences, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine, Business Administration, Social Work and deans or associate deans, as well as a photographer, staff attorney and librarian. Each interview was audiotaped, with the interviewer (AO) taking written notes as well.

The primary goal of the University's Alabama-Cuba policy was to foster working relationships between academics and professional staff and their disciplinary equivalents in Cuba. The proximity of Alabama to Cuba provided impetus for the alliance, especially in view of the state's interest in expanding trade opportunities. An Alabama-Cuba conference was convened in 2003 at the University and senior administrators visited Cuba under license from the State Department. The University's Latin American Studies Program was another impetus for the program. The interviewees made contact with disciplinary peers, mostly at the University of Havana, prior to or after traveling to Cuba.

Most interviewees had visited Cuba once for up to two weeks, although four participants had been to Cuba on two or more occasions. One interviewee was of Hispanic origin and several interviewees had traveled extensively within Latin America. Some interviewees had studied Cuban religion, art, history, music, photography, or environmentalism. Participants from diverse disciplines and departments assured us of a reasonable basis from which to assess the perspectives on *mujeres de carácter* and gender equity in Cuba, especially when those perspectives represented a consensus.

The interviews were 30 to 40 min in length and consisted of 19 semi-structured questions on the role and status of Cuban women. The first four questions inquired into the participant's experience of Cuba (e.g., How long were you in Cuba? What were your impressions?). The next four questions assessed the participants' level of contact with Cuban women (i.e., How did the women look, speak and act? What positions did they occupy?). The next 10 questions specifically addressed the participants' understandings of Cuban women, including: What can you tell us about women's roles in Cuba? A final question served the purpose of debriefing by directly addressing the central theme of the study (i.e., *mujeres de carácter*) and by eliciting the participants' observations. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audiotapes. The Glaser and Straus' (1967) constant-comparison approach generated thematic insights and emergent perspectives in this qualitative research.

RESULTS

The results of the interviews are organized according to the main perspectives that emerged. Interview quotes provide a context on the role of *mujeres de carácter* in Cuba. The quotes include views on women in Cuba, but also a broader range of views that emerged. We have identified each speaker's gender in addition to their familiarity with Cuba where appropriate.

Mujeres de carácter: The interviews confirmed our initial hypothesis about the strength and confidence of Cuban women. Some interviewees expressed surprise at how forthright some of the Cuban women were. The following quotes summarize the interviewees' perceptions of the women.

- The women were warm, cordial and helpful (m)
- They're very knowledgeable and proud. Inspiring (f)
- Yeah, they were very professional. Very in charge, very dignified. I was very impressed. (f)
- They are very vocal, assertive. I mean, they run their own lives, basically (m)
- Good sense of humor, confident. They are strong, strong people (m)
- The women were more forceful, dynamic characters than the men (m)
- They have the reputation of not taking any shit from anyone. And that's what I would call independent (m)

Some interviewees wondered if the term *mujeres de carácter* might apply only to the women who had been showcased to them during visits to government agencies and universities. Others felt sure that the *mujeres de carácter* existed in many areas of Cuban life. This strength was believed to exist, in part, in other Latin countries but it was also attributed to the equalizing forces of communism.

The interviewees found the women to be knowledgeable as well as strong. The visitors spoke about how most of the women had traveled extensively outside Cuba and how they had no qualms about expressing personal, social or political views to outsiders. One man recalled his experience with one woman thus, She was very warm-hearted and so happy to have me in her presence. She was incredibly knowledgeable about world affairs, better than anyone I've met. She challenged what we say about our own country being superior, about our human rights record.

Several women interviewees saw cultural and social differences between women in Cuba and the USA. This difference was expressed as; I see stronger women in Cuba and in the rest of the United States than you do here. (Our state) is much more conservative and much more patriarchal than some I've lived in. Another woman, who had visited Cuba twice in two years, recalled how delighted she had been to meet *mujeres de carácter* whom she described as being, Very, very strong. They seemed to know what they want and were proud and confident. They were sure of themselves, from front desk clerks to the head (of the institute). A senior administrator added: I absolutely agree. The women there are very, very strong. They run everything, especially at the universities. It's just completely opposite of what it is in this state, you know, most administrators are male. They're absolutely confident of their place in society.

Machismo/machista: The issue of machismo (defined here as patriarchal rather than manly) (Latino Papi, 2004) emerged in discussions about gender roles in Cuba. At our Cuba week conference, a male Cuban-American visitor publicly derided the women's revolution, calling it an abject failure. At the same time, a senior administrator from our university confided that machismo had marred her visit. When we asked the interviewees about machista behavior and traditions, the responses were more mixed than definitive. Variations on this topic depended upon such factors as being gender aware; on whom the speaker had met in Cuba (that is, mostly men or mostly women); and on whether or not the speaker spoke Spanish or had traveled to Latin America or Europe. The following quotes illustrate these points.

- Machismo in Cuba obviously evolves from Fidel Castro. He is the great patriarch. But I didn't see any kind of overt minimizing or diminishing of women's importance or roles (f)
- Machismo comes into play more than ideology. The husband and wife team, you know, it was just very traditional stuff where he might pose as the Latin man but she was calling the shots. But gender relations are still easier than they are here; there's a greater degree of comfort between men and women (m)
- It wasn't like other Latin countries. I just didn't see it (f)
- There's a certain amount of arrogance, but I've seen more of it in Portugal and Spain. It's no worse than here (North America) (m; Spanish speaker).
- Machismo exists in Cuba. It's true in all Latin societies (m; Spanish speaker).
- I understand that no women are at the top in Castro's government (f)
- I went to a political rally where Fidel spoke. Elian Gonzales was there and there were no women speakers of any high level. All the guys hit the stage and it was all guys. It looked to me as if machismo is still alive and well in Cuba, maybe not as much as in other places, but it's still there (m)
- In most of our formal meetings, men and women occupy comparable positions. The exception was the people who were genuine government politicians (f)

Machismo is still a factor in Cuban society, even if it has been attenuated by decades of communist rule. Gender relations between men and women were nevertheless found to be generally affirming, courteous and relaxed.

The participants' unfamiliarity, even bewilderment, in trying to understand Cuban society, prompted caution in speaking about their perceptions of machismo or gender equity. In the words of one man, Cuba was a complete enigma to me. Things would happen that led me to think that this is an incredible country and then ten minutes later I would just be very upset by what I saw. The political atmosphere also struck some interviewees as surreal or even creepy. The arrogance of Cuban male political powerbrokers (some of whom who were suspected of spying on the visitors), was sometimes blatant. One man recalled that,

- One official who stood there quietly as the woman did all the talking. She was the front person, but it was obvious he was arrogant and had all the power. He had a minder who kept pushing people back. This sort of thing happened several times. It was like they wanted you to believe that the women had the power, but you could see that they didn't (m).

Observations of machismo in the political arena led to comments on class differences in Cuba. One woman remarked that: From what I could tell, there are two classes in Cuba; the communist party and everyone else. There were also comments on the sexual division of labor in top-level government circles.

The interviewees recalled seeing how women in the political arena deferred to the men, especially those men who were vice-presidents and other high-level bureaucrats. For one man, his observation of the military-patriarchal structure meant that, the women were nervous around political leaders. One woman kept interrupting us when we spoke, she was that nervous. Note that women's political participation in Cuba compares favorably with that of the United States. Cuban women comprise 18.0% of ministers and 35.0% of the National Assembly (Cuba Solidarity Campaign, 2005), compared to U.S. women who comprise 22.5 of state legislators and 13.8% of federal legislators (Center for American Women and Politics, 2004).

The interviewees saw machismo in other settings as well. This was especially true for rural areas where, The man did all the talking and the woman served the meal (f); or in wealthy families, where the women would sit quietly, even if she had a more powerful job than he did (m). One man who spoke Spanish and had visited Cuba several times reflected that, There is still a memory of class in Cuba. People still talk about marrying into the right family. And in these wealthy families, the man does all the talking while the woman is at the back calling the shots.

The occupational structure was stratified by gender, with women being clustered in the service, education and health sectors and men working in the police, military and construction sectors. One interviewee asked, Where are all the working men in Cuba? What do they do exactly? I didn't see a lot of men working in anything other than construction (m) Another man, who had met few women in his discipline, remarked that, There seems to be a lot of gender stereotyping in the Cuban workforce. Men and women go into different occupations. I don't recall seeing women with machine guns, but I certainly did see lots of men with guns at the airports and things (m). Smith and Padula (1996) provide a background for this observation, reporting that women entered the civilian workforce after men were mobilized into the military; this arrangement

then became normalized in sexual divisions of labor of the modern workforce. Safa (1989) makes similar observations about the male dominated sectors of agriculture, construction, forestry and transportation. A sexual division of labor also occurred in the burgeoning tourist sector. As noted by one man, From what I could see, the musicians, elevator operators and taxi-drivers were men and the desk clerks and cleaning people were women. Only the restaurant workers were equally men and women. Sexual divisions of labor in the tourist sector were being organized in the classic hierarchy of neo-capitalism that had emerged during the special period of the 1990s.

Mujeres típicas: The *mujeres de carácter* identity could be viewed in counterpoint to the *mujeres típicas* (average women, or the majority) whose iconography appears in portraits of illiterate and downtrodden women on whose behalf revolution was waged. This binary is not to suggest that *mujeres de carácter* and *mujeres típicas* are always mutually exclusive categories: A *mujer típica*, however poor and lacking in political influence, might still be known as a strong woman in her family or social circles; after all, the strong woman identity was a pro-revolutionary persona for all women for the purposes of political solidarity. However, the interviewees observed differences between *mujeres de carácter* and *mujeres típicas* on the basis of demeanor, education and employment status. Many *mujeres típicas* were in low-status jobs or were unemployed. As noted, only 37% of Cuban women are employed and an eight percent decrease in women's total workforce participation has occurred since the 1980's (Núñez Sarmiento, 2001). Unemployment was evident during visits to the countryside and in urban areas where women could be seen on balconies, walking with children, sitting in doorways, or hanging laundry out to dry. The following observations were framed in terms of the visible sexual division of labor:

- On any given day of the week there appeared to be an awful lot of people on the streets doing what appeared to be nothing. It's the economic system that creates so much disparity rather than perhaps gender; (f)
- I would say that I was taken to places where people were more like us and more educated. But I did see a lot of women hanging out laundry to dry. I saw women taking care of household duties. I didn't see any men with their kids; (m)
- I guess I could say there is a class system like I would feel we had back in the 1950's. Women do this and men do that; (m)

These comments point to two realities of Cuban life: First, to a faltering economy in which both men and women struggle to survive and second, to how the burden of childcare falls primarily on women despite the provisions of the Family Code of 1975. Women's unemployment and other hardships during the special period has intensified their domestic roles, but has also been framed in pro-revolutionary discourse as a badge of women's strength. Rodríguez-Calderón (1993) invokes this ethos when she writes that, Cuban women (who return to domesticity) are acting as political beings moved by their ideological convictions. They are shoring up the political consciousness of the majority and their capacity and will to endure. Jennissen and Lundy (2001) and Secado (1993) caution that high rates of unemployment and the retreat into domesticity have actually weakened women's support for the political system, especially for the *mujeres típicas* who feel they have no future.

Comments about *mujeres típicas* usually centered on their work in the service sector. For the most part, the interviewees' observations were made while staying at hotels, on visits to rural areas or sightseeing, or en route to appointments in Havana. Sexual divisions of labor in the workforce were again the focus of attention.

- Male and female roles seemed to be clearly defined. The men did construction and maintenance. The women did the housekeeping; (m)
- One experience that had a significant impression on me was when I was shopping at the linen co-op. We were near a restaurant on an old sugar plantation in the middle of nowhere. There were about 25 women who lived in little shacks surrounding the area where they displayed their work. There were no men to be seen unless you went into the restaurant. It was really stark; (f)

Despite this occupational stratification, women working in the service sector often benefited from the dollar economy through tips or extras for translation or guide services. The most profitable work, however, was in the sex industry. The reemergence of sex work in Cuba has been noted for its risk of HIV/AIDS and its threats to women's wellbeing (McKinley, 2004; Jennissen and Lundy, 2001; Rodríguez Calderón, 1993). The sight of sex workers in bars or on the streets of Havana often clashed with the image of the classless. A woman commented, I saw prostitutes, more than 30, seeking to get money from the men. Our Cuban women contacts spoke about the sex industry with disdain and framed their disapproval in terms of the corrupting influence of capitalism. This class-based sexual division of labor was disquieting for the observers.

Mujeres típicas who worked in factories, stores and hotels often seemed far removed from women met through formal contacts. The interviewees reported that the women in urban areas were well-educated and often spoke fluent English. The interviewees said: We were told that they were better paid than people in academics or government because they worked in the tourist sector (m). The fact that educators, physicians and bureaucrats (mostly women) were moonlighting as taxi drivers or restaurant workers in the service sector was sobering, but as one visitor remarked, The highly educated employees have higher status but lower pay and the lower-paid workers have lower status and better pay. There's an ironic equality when you think of it in those terms (m). However, rural women or those doing the most menial labor did not fit the strong and independent characterization of mujeres de carácter. As described by one man, You could see it in their body language. They wouldn't look you in the eye and they'd keep their heads down.

Gender and ethnicity: One of the surprises (and charms) of the Cuba experience involved racial integration. The goal of racial equality has been a central plank of the communist revolution and discrimination is considered to be both anti-national and counter-revolutionary (de la Fuente, 2001). The word mulatto/a (mixed race) was used unselfconsciously by the Cubans we met to describe citizens of Afro-Spanish ancestry, who comprise 51% of the population (Skaine, 2004). An ethos of racial integration is so central to Cuban revolutionary ideals that, as noted earlier, ethnicity is rarely mentioned by Cubans or writers. A report on women textile workers (Safa, 1989), for example, omitted ethnicity as a demographic variable. The interviewees spoke about racial integration:

- There is a lot of Africa in Cuba-60% of the population has African ancestry because of the huge slave population that was imported in the 18th and 19th centuries to work the sugar fields; (m)
- I was so shocked to see blacks and whites so comfortable in their interacting; it is so equal compared to the (U.S) south; (f)
- There's much less racial segregation in Cuba than in the (U.S) south. People are all shades of black or white and it seemed to be totally acceptable; (f)

Despite this high level of integration the interviewees realized that few Afro-Cubans or mulattos/as occupied higher echelons of power. Further, our formal contacts were all Spanish-Cuban. An interviewee remarked, As far

as I could tell all of the women at the universities and agencies were Spanish-Cuban. There were a couple of artists who I would describe as being Afro-Cuban, but they were men; (m).

Nevertheless, the streets of Havana were filled with men, women and children of Afro-Spanish ancestry, who appeared remarkably comfortable with each other. A few colorfully-dressed, cigar-smoking Afro-Cuban women were the center of attention for tourist photographers. So, too, were the racially integrated groups of musicians who romanced the tourists with salsa, mambo and *son* (an Afro-Cuban musical style).

The following interviewee quotes reveal a more nuanced picture of racial integration, particularly in relation to the history of political power in Cuba.

- There is racism in Cuba, just like us. If you have more Spanish blood, you are considered to be a better person (m; Spanish speaker)
- Cuban society is definitely more blended. I saw more mixed race couples than in the U.S. But I didn't meet many Afro-Cubans because there aren't many in official circles; (m)

Caveats about the racial composition of politics did not detract from the fact that cultural groups in Cuba appeared to be broadly integrated, but the visitors did observe that the political leadership was mostly white as well as male. De la Fuente (2001) argues that the special period has worsened this cultural exclusion, so that, the upper echelons of (government) are actually whiter today than in 1991. We observed that the tourist sector was also stratified in terms of ethnicity, with higher status positions being held mostly by whites. This observation is supported by De la Fuente (2001) who writes that Afro-Cubans are being excluded from higher-paid positions in the tourist sector because: Something strange is happening during the special period. There is the revival of racism.

It is worth noting the role of ethnicity in prostitution as well. The migration of impoverished women from rural to urban areas has led, in part, to Afro-Cubans working the bars or the streets of Havana. The desires of male tourists may be accelerating this trend, if only because: The tourists have their own racialized notions of sexuality and pleasure (De la Fuente, 2001). The interviewees recognized that this aspect of the tourist industry had much to do with the sexual expectations of tourists, but were not aware of how Cuban officials had mobilized impoverished Afro-Cuban women into a sexual division of labor to help support the economy. In referring to this role (Fraunhar, 2002) writes that the mulatta body has

always been a signifier of desire and that this eroticized image has been commodified in the era of global tourism. Such eroticized depictions were recognized by the interviewees, appearing in statements such as: From a Western perspective, Cuban women are considered to be so available and so open and so unguarded about their sexuality (m) Afro-Cuban women engaging in sex work were also tangible evidence of how the economic crisis since the 1990s has been especially difficult for women. Safa (1995) writes that *mujeres típicas* are compelled to scrounge for food, to wait in lines, to retreat to domesticity and to survive as best they can. The reemergence of sex work in Cuba is a reminder of how threats to the economy are often inscribed on the bodies of poor women, particularly women of color and how ethnicity, gender and poverty have been reconstituted in terms of their economic use value in Cuba's neo-capitalism of the 21st century (Fraunhar, 2002).

DISCUSSION

The perspectives on *mujeres de carácter* presented in this paper came from the observations of Cuban women by university employees who visited Cuba over a two-year period. These perspectives were grounded in the academic literature on gender politics in Cuba, especially the structural-feminist literature. The cultural lens of the observer inevitably reveals much about the writer as it does about the other who is being observed (Geertz, 1973). The visitors were keenly aware of how their observations were grounded in their own subjectivity or U.S.-based experiences; nevertheless, they independently presented a consensus on the existence of *mujeres de carácter*, on how socialism had advanced women's rights and on how these rights were being threatened by economic recession.

The presence of *mujeres de carácter* was unexpected for the visitors, particularly when framed in terms of a communist agenda. The fact that the Cuban women were outspoken about their gains caused us to wonder if they might be more committed to Cuba's revolutionary program than the men. Cuban feminist Núñez Sarmiento (2001, 2003b) and Cubanists Jennissen and Lundy (2001) have asserted that this is the case. These writers found a renewed commitment to revolutionary ideals among women during the special period, a trend that may have played out in the strong woman presence. The Cuban men and women differed in their views of socialism as a desirable political system. For example, while the women spoke in pro-revolutionary terms, some of the men were eager to find a way to travel to (or immigrate) to the United States and part of our visit involved arranging

such exchanges or listening to complaints about the hardships of living in Cuba. This philosophical difference between men and women is noted by Aguilar and Chenard (1994) who also claim that, Women are more closely tied to the Revolution than men because they have gained more through it.

The Castro government has been credited with ending compulsory domesticity or servitude for women and for providing a transformative framework for those who aspired to be *mujeres de carácter* as defined by their public role. Women's public loyalty to the revolution is not surprising when viewed in these terms. Smith and Padula (1996) argue that Cuba's decision-makers primarily are men and that the military mobilization of men provides a stepping stone to the military leadership. The pro-revolutionary identity of the *mujeres de carácter* has been constituted through this militaristic patriarchy, which inhibits dissent but which also encouraged women to participate in a wide range of activities that established new, more independent and more militant images of womanhood (Smith and Padula, 1986). This sexual division of labor thus created the opportunity for *mujeres de carácter* to emerge in health, education, business and public administration, while still being marginalized in higher-level politics.

Despite this caveat, it was evident that the *mujeres de carácter* were powerful and were committed to revolutionary change. Two women we met who fit the *mujeres de carácter* description were adamant on this topic, with one saying, They (men) will never take it back now. Women are being trained in everything; they are everywhere. This certainty begs the question of how to resolve the apparent contradiction between pro-revolutionary rhetoric and recent reversals in women's workforce and political participation (Manzano, 2004; Smith and Padula, 1996; Safa, 1995; Murphy *et al.*, 1991). The sexual division of labor thesis outlined in the conceptual framework section of the paper can help resolve this disjuncture. Smith and Padula (1996) write that the majority of Cuban women were positive about their social and economic gains until the crisis period of the 1990s, when the woman who no longer existed (*mujer de casa*, or homemaker) reemerged in the mode of classic capitalism. The triumphalism of *mujeres de carácter* on women's progress can be viewed against their historical gains despite the hiatus of the special period.

We conclude that the strong women motif must contend with the strains of economic hardships which have played out on the bodies of women who return to domesticity, who moonlight to help support themselves and their families, or who engage in sex work for economic

survival. This motif means that while the mujeres de carácter may have maintained their pro-revolutionary ideals, some women (especially non-white rural women) have abandoned their hopes for state-sponsored equality by pursuing tourist dollars through various means or by seeking to leave Cuba. This paradox was evident to the interviewees who attempted to reconcile their images of a classless society with the realities of a transitional economy. Such paradoxes have prompted writers such as Padula (2001) to see irony in Castro's patriarchal government's attempts to reform and improve women's lives, although he states that: The revolution is trying to reinvent itself, to move on to a second stage. This 2nd stage is critical to the future of the women's revolution, but also to the women's continued investment in a society in which the goals of reversing the sexual divisions of labor through redistributive justice have faltered in the economic uncertainties of the last decade.

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