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Conclusion: Enshrined on a Pedestal

Throughout the twentieth century, historians have struggled with two countervailing forces: the magnetic and observable force of nation building and the centrifugal and immeasurable force of micro- and macrocultures extant both within and beyond the boundaries of modern nations. Inherited from the nineteenth century, traditional histories of modernity included works on battles for independence and national survival, nationalist philosophy, governmental actions, economic change and expansion, political groupings and persuasions, scientific inventions, famous personalities, international diplomacy, military technology and strategies, and social organizations. At the turn of the twentieth century, historians turned their attention to the underclasses, the marginalized, and the dispossessed, often employing political/economic explanations of class differentiation and Marxist analysis as their methods of study.¹ Post-World War II historians have recognized that scientific knowledge, modernization, and the objective do not tell the entire story of the human condition. The influence of human sciences such as psychology and anthropology, as well as human rights movements, have encouraged humanists to examine the subjective qualities of human life as well as the objective events that have guided human action. As a result, historians today delve into subjects previously dismissed as unremarkable or useless in explaining national and global events.

In the western world it took the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s to open the way for the new social history. Suddenly, the study of minorities and civil rights, women, sexuality, fashion, environmental and urban history, labor history, ethnographies told by laborers or slaves, cultural phenomena such as rock and roll and cultural mentality found legitimacy. Feminist historians claimed that the personal was political, and they set out to prove it by demonstrating how intimate, nonpublic issues could become the driving force behind public acts. Academic disciplines and research methods blended. Historians studied music, for instance, as a way of understanding the discourse of illiterate slaves. Postmodern historians have recognized that nations, regions, and people are complex admixtures of enclaves, local events, and cultural tendencies. The study of the inner workings of societies, then, has become so prevalent that writing grand design history now seems imprecise, simplistic, and perhaps a little suspect.

If nineteenth-century scholars in the western hemisphere and Europe wrote about nation building, and twentieth-century thinkers deconstructed our sense of national unity, then we must now come to terms with the fact that the Cuban experience has been consistently out of step with events and the historical

record in the West. Take the example of slavery. As the western world was ending the horrendous practice, Cuba began it in earnest. When the Americas were declaring their independence from European colonizers, Cuba remained faithful to Spain. When Cuba did become independent from Spain, it was forced to sacrifice its sovereignty to the United States, and when sovereignty seemed attainable after the 1959 revolution, dependency upon the Soviet Union was the arrangement that curbed U.S. retaliation. When the nation was threatened from within by corruption or dictatorship, a unified, popular response was less likely than mass emigration. In a very real sense, Cuban national identity never settled down long enough, nor were Cubans left sufficiently alone to determine a grand design, a prevailing sense of self, that would later be broken down into its parts. In short, we can ask whether Cuba has ever had its modern or postmodern age, with its concomitant historical writing. It seems more likely that Cuba has been in a perpetual state of becoming, and that has determined the behavior of citizens, women among them, and the historical record.

Cuban women's history must be understood as part of Cuba's unique path. No one can doubt the consistently extraordinary roles Cuban women have assumed in the construction of their island's history. In fact, the purpose of this volume has been to show that crossing gender boundaries, an event that occurs in all cultures in times of emergency, has been commonplace in Cuba because emergency and drastic change has been the rule, not the exception. As a result, Cuban women's history has followed its own logic. Often it has been appropriated by a male-dominated disciplines and male politicians to consecrate a nation. Women themselves have frequently acted to support a monarchy, a dictatorship, or a male-led democracy or revolution. But they have also used their feminine identity to advance women's issues, interpreted either as their own family interests or more broadly as issues of women as citizens or women as members of classes. In short, Cuban women's actions and history have not particularly followed the models flowing from Europe or the United States, although they have not been totally immune to them either. Rather, Cuban history has held to the insular experience of the Cuban condition in its limbo between colonialism and modernist nationalism, and a postmodernist spin is difficult to apply to the feminine condition.

What has become evident in this volume is that Cuban women were always elevated on a pedestal, often for the good of the patriarchy. Their stories, regardless of the period, were predominantly written by men, and when women did write, only in exceptional cases did they deviate from the official patriarchal canon. By collecting these stories, some official, some not, the authors in this volume have shown how the feminine image has been appropriated by the national story and has become part of a cultural profile called *cubanidad*.

But other stories abound, many recorded in oral traditions and others in historical archives. These stories tell a no less heroic tale, but their messages are somewhat subversive. Common women lived in the same environment of constant alert and social and political instability as official heroines did. They, too, had to rise to the occasion to survive, to raise the consciousness of neighbors to change governmental commitments to the poor, to influence political figures, to find sources of strength in Afro-Cuban religion, and even to subvert state structures by placing their families first. Their lives were not relaxed, and for them, as with the heroines, the extraordinary became the ordinary, and the heroic became the expected. Their stories, however, demonstrate the dark side of life. Triumph was not always theirs. Their stories did not always have a moral, but instead depicted a Cuban reality composed of chaos and the absurd. In such a world, power structures, including patriarchy, had a loose grip on a roiling populace, and the powerless established niches of influence and even authority. Some of the authors in this volume have discovered corners of influence and found that they were presided over by women. While these niches and these women have not been part of the official story, they are nonetheless elements of *cubanidad*.

The authors of this volume would like to invite students of Cuban studies to consider how memory has been constructed in Cuba. Since Cuba is a place where issues of race, cultural identity, class division, and association with colonial and imperial powers have challenged a unified sense of belonging, and since the island has always faced the peril of attack, the national myth has been especially rigid. But we have been able to juxtapose official heroines against the protagonists of the daily struggle. Official heroines aggrandized the nation and the patriarchy, while unofficial heroines highlighted women with a rogue vitality, picaresque humor, autonomy, wiliness, and even a ferocious territorial authority. Through the tales of the official and unofficial historical female figures we can see the elements of Cuba's great dichotomy: loyalty and subversion. These qualities better define the Cuban condition than the historical configuration of the nation state and its subpopulations that command the attention of researchers in U.S., Latin American, and European universities.

This collection, then, challenges non-Cuban historians to see that the Cuban historical trajectory does not fit within the modern or postmodern contexts taught in Western universities. Cuban scholarship and Cuban memory, whether belonging to the colonial, prerevolutionary, or revolutionary periods, have been dominated by the island's vulnerability to outside forces and internal strategies of defense. Women have been required to respond to danger and take extraordinary action, and also have displayed surprising authority in unexpected places because they lived in an unstable world. Thus, in Cuba, women have been subject more to the historical moment than to men's tendency to control them,

and women viewed themselves more as part of a grand design than as unique because of their gender.

NOTES

1. Micro- and macrocultures refer to individuals or unique regional groups that challenge positivistic ideals of order, progress, and homogeneous images of national cultures.