

REVOLUTIONARY TEACHERS: WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE CUBAN  
LITERACY CAMPAIGN OF 1961

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## **ABSTRACT**

ANN E. HALBERT-BROOKS: Revolutionary Teachers: Women and Gender in the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961  
(Under the direction of Louis A. Perez Jr.)

The Literacy Campaign of 1961 brought the literacy rate in Cuba from 77 to 96 percent, an increase of nearly one million people, in just twelve months. While this achievement is notable, the Literacy Campaign also proposed a new ideal of womanhood in the wake of the 1959 revolution. Before the revolution, 80 percent of all teachers in Cuba were women and the profession was regarded as a low-status one. The publicity for the 1961 Literacy Campaign, however, presented teaching as heroic, patriotic, and difficult work, frequently drawing on metaphors of warfare and struggle for intellectual empowerment to energize the public. This message was presented in virtually every media outlet—newspapers, magazines, television, movies, and radio—on a daily basis. The women who taught in the Literacy Campaign used this rhetoric to claim greater freedom and responsibility for themselves, even when the reaction of the general public was more ambivalent.

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## Introduction

In the census of 1899 after the Cuban War of Independence, only 43 percent of the Cuban population could read and write. Public figures of the day decried this figure and worked to offer the Cuban people greater access to education. By 1907, the literacy rate had risen to 57 percent, 62 percent the following decade, and 72 percent in the census of 1931. After 1931, however, literacy rates stagnated, remaining almost constant in the 1943 and 1953 censuses.<sup>1</sup> Public opinion uniformly bemoaned these conditions, with newspapers, magazines, and public figures regularly calling for change. Even foreign researchers shared this frustration, such as the American sociologist Lowry Nelson, who observed: “there appears little rational explanation for the apparent neglect of education in recent years.”<sup>2</sup> The problem of illiteracy was particularly acute in rural areas and among the poor, nonwhite population. For example, Oriente, the poorest province in Cuba, only reached a 65 percent literacy rate by 1953 and estimates of rural literacy rates nationwide were just 58 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Fidel Castro and the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement that took power in January 1959 agreed with the general sentiment that the 76 percent literacy rate of 1953 was unacceptable.<sup>4</sup> However, unlike previous Cuban governments, this one proposed to

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<sup>1</sup> Lowry Nelson, *Literacy of the Cuban Population*, n.d. 837.42/3-46, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Lorenzetto and Karel Neys, *Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy* (UNESCO, 1965), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral* (Havana: Tribunal Superior Electoral, 1953), 143.

eliminate illiteracy in a matter of months. In September 1960, Fidel Castro announced the project on his visit to the United Nations in New York, inviting the rest of the world to judge its success or failure. This project, formally called the Literacy Campaign, formally began on January 28, 1961 and concluded successfully on December 22 of that year. More than 200,000 Cubans volunteered as teachers, 105,000 of them young adults between the ages of twelve and nineteen known as Conrado Benítez *brigadistas*. Propaganda materials for the Literacy Campaign frequently described *brigadistas* as members of an army dedicated to the patriotic task of fighting illiteracy and ignorance. These *brigadistas* were assigned to teach illiterate Cubans in the most remote parts of the country, exposing young men and women to extreme poverty most had never seen before.

*Brigadistas* overwhelmingly described their service as a positive experience, with young women particularly recalling their service in the national struggle against ignorance as an empowering one. Unlike previous generations of young women, female *brigadistas* were encouraged to travel far from home without direct adult supervision and occupied positions of authority. Many credited the Literacy Campaign with giving them the confidence to pursue careers of their own, rather than becoming housewives. While individual *brigadistas* found the Literacy Campaign empowering, its effects were more limited in society as a whole. As an institution, the government of Fidel Castro and the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement demonstrated an ambivalent attitude toward the emancipation of women, frequently mobilizing them for specific projects under the direction of groups like the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) while delaying comprehensive changes.

## The Campaign of 1961

In 1961, the new Cuban government printed two million textbooks for its 1.2 million soon-to-be-literate citizens.<sup>5</sup> The first lesson in these slim, cheaply printed black and white books centered on the letters OEA, the Spanish acronym for the Organization of American States. Individually, these three vowels were the first letters many Cubans would read, but together they also represented “an organization joining the countries of the Americas, used by Yankee imperialists to impose their will on Latin American countries.”<sup>6</sup> The government that produced these textbooks intended to communicate a particular message through the written word. That message, prepared and spread by the National Literacy Commission in the Ministry of Education, led by Armando Hart Dávalos, was one of a future with universal literacy, racial and sexual equality, economic prosperity, and political autonomy. In short, the National Literacy Commission promised a revolution far greater than the one that succeeded in 1959. The first major initiative in that continuing revolution was the Literacy Campaign of 1961.

While universal literacy might appear a universally acceptable goal, the work of the National Literacy Commission in Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961 indicated a particularly strong commitment to this goal as it was the first major project of a young and inexperienced government. A mere two years before, Fulgencio Batista fled the

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Fagen, *Cuba: The Political Culture of Adult Education* (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1964), 14.

<sup>6</sup> *¡Venceremos!* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961), 1-5; *Alfabetecemos* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961).



country, forced from power by Fidel Castro and the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement. Their insurgency against Batista began in 1953, centered in the Sierra Madre Mountains of eastern Cuba, and by 1958 insurgents controlled significant territory but still lacked a comprehensive plan for administering the entire nation. On taking power in January 1959, Castro and the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement faced the challenges of governing a country with high rates of unemployment and inequality, albeit with a euphoric populace cheering for radical change. Some of these changes arrived quite soon—in March 1959, for example, legal racial segregation and discrimination were abolished. Reductions in rents and utility rates also appeared in the first months of 1959, increasing real wages for the working class by nearly 15 percent.<sup>7</sup> Expectations remained high into 1960, when polls estimated that 65 percent of Cubans saw themselves as better off than before 1959, and 74 percent expected further gains in the next five years as well.<sup>8</sup> Despite this general optimism, domestic and international opposition to the government remained: supporters of the former Batista dictatorship still carried out acts of sabotage and terrorism, and the United States, traditionally the largest trade partner of Cuba, showed its ever-increasing displeasure with the regime by restricting trade. The government, led by Fidel Castro, responded by seeking alternative markets for Cuban goods in the Soviet Union, further upsetting the United States. Thus, while many Cubans expected and supported change, the government bringing about those changes faced threats to its existence.

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<sup>7</sup> Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 244.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd A. Free, the American author of this study, estimated that his study most accurately represented the 60 percent of the Cuban population living in urban and semi-urban areas. Expectations and support for the government appeared highest in rural areas underrepresented in the study, however, so actual support may have been significantly higher. Lloyd A. Free, *Attitudes of the Cuban People Toward the Castro Regime in the Late Spring of 1960* (Princeton: Institute for International Social Research, 1960), 1.

In this context, literacy achieved relevance through a narrative of intellectual independence in the face of threats from foreign economic and intellectual imperialism.<sup>9</sup> Like civil rights policies banning racial discrimination that disproportionately benefitted the poor, access to education and universal literacy would continue the incorporation of poor Cubans into the modern nation. Given a stake in the future of the country and educated about the political climate, the National Literacy Commission appeared to believe that, with political and literacy education, poor Cubans would choose the government that educated them and provided them with social mobility over a government that bowed to the wishes of “Yankee imperialists” and might close off opportunities. Thus, universal literacy was vital to this vision of Cuban national security and the objective in a special sort of conflict—a war against ignorance. As with many wars, this one sought to unite the county, but in addition it promised social mobility for the “soldiers” and a highly skilled workforce for the organizers.

The textbook written for teachers in this campaign, *¡Venceremos!*, and the accompanying manual for teachers, *Alfabetizamos*, sought to place the Campaign in the context of world affairs and introduce Cubans to their new government in an explicitly political, pro-government curriculum. Just over 200,000 teachers received these materials and were tasked with seeking out and working with illiterate Cubans identified in a census by the National Literacy Commission the preceding year. This census revisited Cubans identified as illiterate in previous censuses, but also asked that anyone who hid their illiteracy come forward as well. Before 1960, Cubans discovered to be illiterate

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<sup>9</sup> This political tradition that combines literacy with armed conflict has been traced as far as the Wars of Independence in the nineteenth century. Cuban insurgents in these conflicts are credited with teaching illiterate recruits and peasants under their authority to read and write. This is particularly emphasized in works of scholars such as Ana Núñez Machín, *La epopeya: Historia de la campaña de alfabetización* (Havana: Ciencias Sociales, 1983), 51.

might be dismissed from their jobs, but now they would be tested and promised help, not punishment.

Small groups of volunteer teachers would live and work among their students, whether in cities like Havana or rural areas like the Escambray Mountains, supervised by professional teachers under the authority of the National Literacy Commission. Most of the volunteer teachers would work in poor areas—while Havana province, site of the capital and largest city, had a literacy rate of 91 percent, Oriente, the poorest province, had barely a 65 percent literacy rate.<sup>10</sup> Literacy plummeted in rural areas as well, ensuring that many teachers would work beyond the range of modern conveniences like electricity and running water, in a world to which few middle- and upper-class Cubans had prior exposure. These conditions made the few resources the teachers brought with them all the more important. The textbooks were such an effective tool for these teachers that by 1962 the literacy rate in Cuba was well above that of most countries in the world, including the rest of Latin America and even, by some estimates, the United States.<sup>11</sup> International observers confirmed the new and unprecedented literacy rate. Observers from the United Nations, for example, consulted throughout the project and declared Cuba to have universal literacy by the end of 1961.<sup>12</sup> The impact of overtly political

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<sup>10</sup> Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, 143-148.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Kozol cited estimates by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the New York Times to draw this comparison. UNESCO estimated the literacy rate in the United States at 6.6 percent in 1973, while the New York Times suggested an illiteracy rate of nearly 20 percent. “A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba,” *Harvard Educational Review* 48, no. 3 (1978): 360-361.

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO generally regards any country with more than 95 percent of its population able to read and write in any language as universally literate. The official UNESCO observers of the Literacy Campaign, Anna Lorenzetto and Karel Neys, evaluated the post-1961 literacy rate at 3.9 percent, meeting these criteria. *Methods and means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy*, 29.

messages in the curriculum was, by many accounts, equally profound, building confidence in the government at a time when its hold on power was tenuous.

Most histories of the Literacy Campaign are the work of educational historians who typically focus on its teaching methods, rather than the social policy implications of mass education and mass mobilization.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars and participants have described the Literacy Campaign as an empowering experience for women and the start of the socialist liberation of Cuban women from their traditional roles. Little scholarship has tested the details of this theory. More recently, historians have examined issues of race in the Literacy Campaign. Until recently gender has been less commonly studied.<sup>14</sup>

The reality is more complex than these analyses would suggest. The public discourse of gender in the Literacy Campaign was grounded in the metaphor of war, which portrayed education, a field traditionally dominated by women, as a heroic, masculine project. This shift in the public discourse might appear to discourage the participation of women, but in fact it provided young women with an opportunity to define acceptable gender roles in their lives. In this regard, the female participants in the Campaign strove to define a New Woman, the female counterpart to the New Man

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<sup>13</sup> Cuban scholars writing on this subject include Núñez Machín, *La epopeya: Historia de la campaña de alfabetización*; Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, *Hacia una escuela cubana de alfabetización* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2007); Luisa Campos Gallardo, Oscar Yanes Álvarez, and Rubén Darío Zayas Montalván, *Yo soy el maestro* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2008); José Suárez Amador, *Maestros de verde olivo* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2009). Educational historians in the United States include Kozol, “A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba;” Mark Abendroth, *Rebel Literacy: Cuba’s National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship* (Duluth: Litwin Books, 2009). The political scientist Richard Fagen also addressed the Literacy Campaign in his works on the early years of the Cuban Revolution. Fagen was one of the few scholars to address the Literacy Campaign as a political and social event, but he did not particularly analyze race or gender. *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education; The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> For the role of race in the 1959 revolution and the years that followed, see for example Devyn Spence Benson, “Not Blacks, But Citizens! Racial Politics in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1961” (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009).

proposed by Ernesto Che Guevara. The Literacy Campaign of 1961 was not a transformative moment for all Cuban women, however; while the Campaign profoundly affected the entire country, its promise of full gender equality did not come to fruition. Feminist themes of empowerment and patriotic service present in the Literacy Campaign did not lead to a comprehensive new social policy; instead, in the years that followed women saw limited gains but became a reliable pool of labor for government projects.

## War on Ignorance

The Literacy Campaign of 1961 was a radical departure from decades of educational policy. Between 1899, when Cuba received its independence from Spain, and the end of World War II, national literacy rates rose steadily from 50 to 73 percent.<sup>15</sup> After World War II, though, literacy rates leveled off, leaving Cuba with a 76 percent literacy rate in the 1953 census; poor Cubans and those living in rural areas were disproportionately represented among the illiterate. The poorest province, which also had the lowest literacy rates, was Oriente. It had a 65 percent literacy rate overall, but just a 50 percent literacy rate in rural areas.<sup>16</sup> Women typically achieved slightly higher levels of education, but frequently worked in lower-status professions.<sup>17</sup> Access to education particularly affected these rates—too few schools and teachers existed outside major cities to serve most Cubans.<sup>18</sup> Combined with the economic difficulties of the 1940s and 1950s, this literacy rate contributed to Cuban underdevelopment and impressions that it had failed to improve at the same rate as the rest of the world.<sup>19</sup> Fidel Castro and the 26<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lorenzetto and Neys, *Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, 143-148.

<sup>17</sup> Anton L. Allahar, "Women, Feminism, and Socialism in Cuba," *Revista Interamericana de Bibliografía* 45, (1995): 58.

<sup>18</sup> Canfux Gutiérrez, *Hacia una escuela cubana de alfabetización*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> This theme is particularly evident in the works of scholars such as Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. Contemporary writers such as Edmundo Desnoes also emphasized this theme of underdevelopment. His novel *Memories of Underdevelopment: A Novel from Cuba*, though originally published in 1965 and set after the 1959 revolution, emphasized the dangers of development and underdevelopment and defined Cuba as an underdeveloped nation that aspired to more. Edmundo Desnoes, *Memories of Underdevelopment: A Novel From Cuba*, trans. Al Schaler (Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 2004).

of July Movement tapped into this disillusionment, promising improvements in education and employment that would reverse this trend of underdevelopment. After the 1959 revolution, however, many teachers formed part of the exodus of middle-class professionals from the island, adding to the labor shortage in education. The new government attempted to address this problem through an intense propaganda campaign that was expected to draw in volunteer teachers. The propaganda campaign to recruit teachers hinged on the discursive metaphor of a war on ignorance.

The metaphor of war deliberately drew upon nationalist sentiments to elicit public interest and support. If the Literacy Campaign was a war on ignorance, teachers comprised the army fighting that war. Fidel Castro summarized this idea of war and liberation, saying: “we prefer teaching to any other service for the Revolution: after we have teachers we will choose between other necessities, but teachers are most frequently requested, and the source of great joy on their arrival in the mountains; possibly more than you have seen in other places. The arrival of a teacher in these corners of the country will be met with true joy by the peasants.”<sup>20</sup> Teachers thus represented a liberating army for the minds of the Cuban poor. Where a traditional army might bring relief from physical oppression, teachers freed peasants and workers from intellectual oppression and ignorance to act in their own interest.

The first task in this war was to change the public face of teaching, traditionally a low-status profession. In the 1953 census, there were nearly 43,000 teachers in Cuba, 80 percent of whom were women.<sup>21</sup> The gender disparity was especially pronounced in

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<sup>20</sup> Fidel Castro Ruz, *El pensamiento de Fidel Castro: Selección temática, enero 1959-abril 1961* (Havana: Editora Política, 1983), 344-345.

<sup>21</sup> Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, 204.

primary and secondary education, where men constituted one-fifth and one-tenth of the workforce, respectively. Media descriptions of teachers, particularly literacy teachers, as members of an army formed a radical departure from the traditional feminine past. The traditionally feminine field of elementary education appeared to have no place in a war zone, at least as it appeared on television, in movies, on the radio, and in print media. This shift was particularly evident among the young people, called *brigadistas*, who formed a large fraction of the teaching force. *Brigadistas* were more than 105,000 young adults between the ages of 12 and 19 recruited in the spring and summer of 1961 to work in some of the most remote areas of the country. On volunteering to teach, each young adult received an army uniform and kit: fatigues, beret, combat boots, lantern, hammock, blanket, and, in lieu of the firearms carried by the regular military, the teaching manual *Alfabeticemos*.<sup>22</sup> Young men comprised 45 percent of all *brigadistas*, an unprecedented level of participation in the teaching profession compared with pre-1959 rates.

The people identified as exemplary teachers suitable for emulation also changed to reflect the higher status of the profession. In 1960, the face of the planned Literacy Campaign was José Martí, the nineteenth-century poet, patriot, and martyr for Cuban independence.<sup>23</sup> Martí was widely regarded as one of the finest literary and political minds of Cuban history, as well as the ideological father of the Cuban nation. His exhortation “to be educated is to be free” thus carried weight when featured prominently in recruiting materials.<sup>24</sup> One characteristic image from this period showed an immaculately attired Martí holding the lamp of knowledge to light the road of liberty for

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<sup>22</sup> Kozol, “A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba,” 347.

<sup>23</sup> Benson, “Not Blacks, But Citizens! Racial Politics in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1961,” 168.

<sup>24</sup> José Martí, “José Martí. Artículos. Maestros Ambulantes #3,” accessed October 20, 2012, [http://www.jose-marti.org/jose\\_marti/obras/articulos/maestrosambulantes/maestrosambulantes3.htm](http://www.jose-marti.org/jose_marti/obras/articulos/maestrosambulantes/maestrosambulantes3.htm).



a *campesino*. In his honor, the Literacy Campaign officially began on the anniversary of



Figure 1: "To be educated is to be free." (*¡Cumpliremos! Temas sobre la revolución para los alfabetizadores*. (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961), 11.)

his birth, January 28, 1961. By identifying the Literacy Campaign with José Martí, the government identified teaching as heroic and in keeping with the highest patriotic ideals.

On January 5, however, a hitherto unknown young man named Conrado Benítez permanently displaced Martí as the face of the Literacy

Campaign. Before January 1961, Benítez was not

particularly unusual. He was the nineteen-year-old son of working-class black parents in Matanzas—his father worked as an agricultural laborer and his mother worked as a washerwoman.<sup>25</sup> Benítez attended public schools in Matanzas, but did not have the money to pursue higher education.<sup>26</sup> In the fall of 1960, he volunteered as one of the first teachers in the Literacy Campaign. Later groups of teachers trained in the seaside resort of Varadero, but these first classes trained in the remote area of Minas del Frío, in the Sierra Maestra Mountains of eastern Cuba. Minas del Frío was one of the least accessible

<sup>25</sup> Flora Lescaille et al., *Conrado Benítez: Tras las huellas del maestro voluntario* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2002), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ana Angélica Rey Díaz, *Conrado: Primer maestro mártir* (Havana: Editora Política, 1987), 6-7.

areas on the island, chosen as a training site in part to accustom teachers to physical labor and hardship. In addition to the teaching curriculum, young people worked to support themselves in Minas del Frío. Contemporaries of Benítez later described him as a model warrior and teacher: serious, of good character, respectful, physically fit, and capable of adapting quickly to the harsh conditions in which they worked.<sup>27</sup> Where Martí was traditionally depicted as slender and at times almost androgynous, photographs of Benítez reflect this desirable image of virtuous, patriotic masculinity even when he did not appear in a military uniform.



Figure 2: One of the most widely circulated images of Conrado Benítez during the Literacy Campaign. (Juventud Rebelde. *El maestro voluntario Conrado Benítez García*, Photograph, n.d., <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/multimedia/fotografia/generales/maestro-voluntario>)

The mountains were also symbolically important as the site of the guerrilla war conducted by Fidel Castro and the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement against Fulgencio Batista. Benítez was younger than most of the men and women who fought alongside Castro, but by training in the Sierra Maestra he and others could symbolically join with the guerrillas of the 1950s in the fight for a better Cuba. After his graduation, Benítez received a teaching assignment in the Escambray Mountains of central Cuba. Before his departure, he became engaged to a fellow teacher, Nancy Nertari. While the Sierra Maestra Mountains were the site of a successful patriotic struggle,

Escambray remained hostile to the new government. Armed opposition groups took

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<sup>27</sup> Lescaille et al., *Conrado Benítez: Tras las huellas del maestro voluntario*, 19-29.

refuge in the Escambray Mountains, attacking perceived government sympathizers. This put Benítez in the middle of a violent guerrilla conflict as well as a war on ignorance.

On January 5, 1961, Conrado Benítez was captured, tortured, and killed by one of these insurgent groups. News reports and government statements charged that

counterrevolutionary

forces targeted Benítez

precisely because he

was poor, black,

educated, and selflessly

helping his fellow

citizens. Oral histories

conducted decades after

the Campaign

frequently echoed these

details. In essence, as

Benson suggests, this

Christlike sacrifice was

presented as means for

the surviving nation to

improve itself by

achieving universal

literacy and defeating



Figure 3: A Coca-Cola ad carried in national magazines in January and February of 1961. This ad is taken from the January 1 issue of *Bohemia*. It describes how "Pauses of Happiness" in the day should be used to teach others to read and write. Coca-Cola, a symbol of hospitality, is described as an ideal beverage to enjoy in these pauses.

imperialism.<sup>28</sup> Benítez quickly came to represent everything good about the new, revolutionary Cuba—virtuous masculinity, youth activism, a firm commitment to accomplishing all objectives for the national good, and harmonious racial equality. Even the name of the *brigadista* units was chosen to honor the slain volunteer, officially making the young adults the *Conrado Benítez brigadistas*. Conrado Benítez, martyred by political opponents of the government, became the public face of Cuban literacy education.

In early January, it was still possible for Cubans to avoid the metaphor of a war on ignorance. Local and national news outlets carried daily accounts of domestic and international donations for the Literacy Campaign, preparations for the arrival of teachers, the printing of textbooks, the census of illiterate Cubans, and even advertisements endorsing the Campaign from American companies like Coca-Cola, but most illiterate Cubans still had not been assigned a teacher.<sup>29</sup> Ideally, the National Literacy Commission hoped to have a two-to-one student-teacher ratio with no more than a four-to-one ratio if there was an extreme shortage of teachers.<sup>30</sup> This also fulfilled a political goal: bringing educated Cubans into close contact with peasants and workers would increase support for radical measures to improve conditions for the poor. Even with a flexible student-teacher ratio, tens of thousands of teachers were desperately needed. On January 23, the day after news of the death of Conrado Benítez appeared in

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<sup>28</sup> Benson, “Not Blacks, But Citizens! Racial Politics in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1961,” 163 and 178.

<sup>29</sup> Advertisements from Coca-Cola and other American companies appeared in national print media through January and February of 1961. While many other companies had been nationalized, Coca-Cola was still privately owned. Nationalized companies employed similar themes, but corporations like Coca-Cola are notable in their choice to engage with the new government even as tensions mounted between the United States and Cuba.

<sup>30</sup> Kozol, “A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba,” 343.

the press, the government announced that all schools would close on April 15 and remain closed for the remainder of the year.<sup>31</sup> The reach of the Literacy Campaign would affect everyone. Teachers in those schools should volunteer to work in the Literacy Campaign, either teaching or supervising new recruits, and older students could join the ranks of the *Conrado Benítez brigadistas*. Communities would organize public daycares with government support for children whose parents worked outside the home. Even so, parents would inevitably be inconvenienced. Disruptions of daily life on this scale should have been controversial, but observers remarked that public opinion overwhelmingly favored the action.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Kozol, "A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba," 357.

## Illiteracy in Caricature

Political cartoons from 1961 offer a particularly concise expression of the ways that the idea of a war on ignorance was intended to achieve resonance in the public imagination. In a compressed format such as a cartoon, conveying meaning depends upon the use of widely recognizable symbols by the artist. These symbols are often caricatures of more complex ideas, but in order to be comprehensible the caricature must reflect something familiar to its audience before it can begin to change or reinforce existing ideas.<sup>33</sup> Even when they are intended to shock or surprise the reader, widely recognizable symbols in media like cartoons are essential in communicating the reasons why one should feel shock or surprise.<sup>34</sup> Thus, cartoons offer a view of popular conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and war through cartoons, since these images of the Literacy Campaign concisely express the most evocative symbols of the day. Furthermore, most print media in Cuba used cartoons as a way to reach a minimally literate population. Since caricatures drew upon widely recognizable cultural imagery, they were uniquely positioned to speak to a wide audience and change its opinions about education.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Scholars of cartoons in Latin American history include John J. Johnson and Louis A. Pérez Jr. A general analysis of these techniques also appears in the works of Gillian Rose. John Johnson, *Latin America in Caricature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Louis A Pérez Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Latin America in Caricature*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Benson, "Not Blacks, But Citizens! Racial Politics in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1961," 42-43.

While the Literacy Campaign was presented as a war, cartoons indirectly acknowledged the contradictions some observers might feel at the juxtaposition of safe, feminine education with armed conflict. For example, in February one cartoon from the national magazine *Bohemia* showed a smiling, charging group of letters. The caption read “Attack, comrades!



Figure 4: "Attack, comrades! Against the illiteracy!" (Pitin, *Bohemia* 53, no. 6 (1961), 112)

Against the illiteracy!” The simple line drawing emphasized the simplicity and universal appeal of teaching others to read while highlighting the way that militaristic language was adopted for peaceful purposes. The cartoonist, Pitin, expanded on that militaristic theme several weeks later, turning books and pencils into weapons in a cartoon titled “Cultural Trench Warfare.” A banner titled “Primer” flew from a rifle above a rampart made of books, while a pencil aimed over the rampart like a cannon. The inaugural issue of *Arma Nueva*, the official bulletin of the



Figure 5: "Cultural Trench Warfare" (Pitin, *Bohemia* 53, no. 8 (1961), 118)

National Literacy Commission, made a similar point in a cartoon of a tank titled “The Great Battle for Literacy.” A later scholar would observe that in the Literacy Campaign “force was replaced by reason. Bayonets were exchanged for pencils, military treatises

for books and writing pads,” but these cartoons suggest that the two could exist together and not replace one another.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the Cuban nation was winning its war.

Illiteracy and ignorance were also personified in many of the cartoons, such as one from July that showed illiteracy as a skeletal creature pushed into a grave by a tombstone shaped like a book. More frequently, however, illiteracy and ignorance appeared under attack from young men. In April, for example, illiteracy was pictured as a terrified ghost fleeing a squad of teachers. By December, with the end of the Literacy Campaign in sight,



Figure 6: "The Great Battle for Literacy" (Ardion, *Arma Nueva*, no. 1 (Jan-Mar 1961), 32)

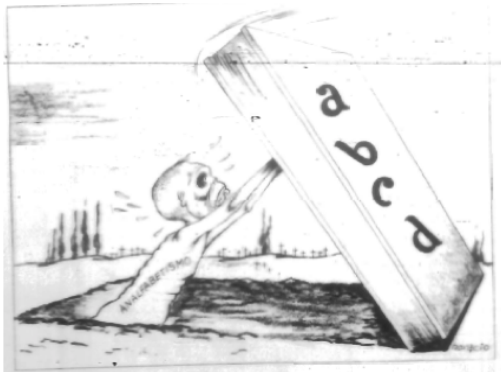


Figure 7: "The Cover of the Grave" (Horacio, "La tapa de la sepultura," *Bohemia* 53, no. 28 (1961), 130)



Figure 8: "I'm out of here..." (Pecruz, *Bohemia* 53, no. 16 (1961), 62)

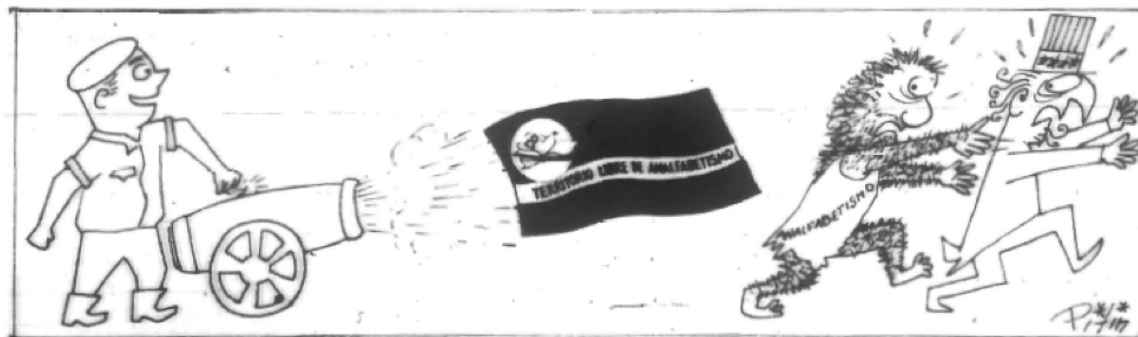


Figure 9: Untitled (Pitín, *Bohemia* 53, no. 49 (1961), 65)

<sup>36</sup> Luisa Eng, *La mujer cubana en la revolución educacional* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1985), 22.



cartoons became celebratory. Pitin, for example, published a cartoon on the success of the Literacy Campaign in the first week of December; a smiling male *brigadista* fired a flag with the slogan “Territory Free of Illiteracy” from a cannon. Uncle Sam and a hairy monster labeled “Illiteracy” ran in terror. Cartoons like this one reinforced the theme of illiteracy as a systemic problem imposed by imperialist powers like the United States. In eradicating illiteracy, Cubans saw themselves defeating the United States. The character Illiteracy returned the following week, throwing up his hands in despair and staring with dread at pages torn from a calendar, remarking: “I am feeling bad.”

Some cartoons avoided the metaphor of war, instead highlighting selfish and even ignoble motivations for learning to read. Unlike cartoons of the War on Ignorance, these images prominently featured women in ways that might demean their motives for participating. One published at the start of the teaching project in January showed a simple cause

and effect relationship: a domestic worker learned to read in the first panel, and in the second received a large paycheck. This was typical of cartoons picturing women; women appeared in the

workforce, but not responding to the same lofty ideals as men. Instead, the



Figure 10: "I am Feeling Bad" (Pitin, *Bohemia* 53, no. 50 (1961), 73)

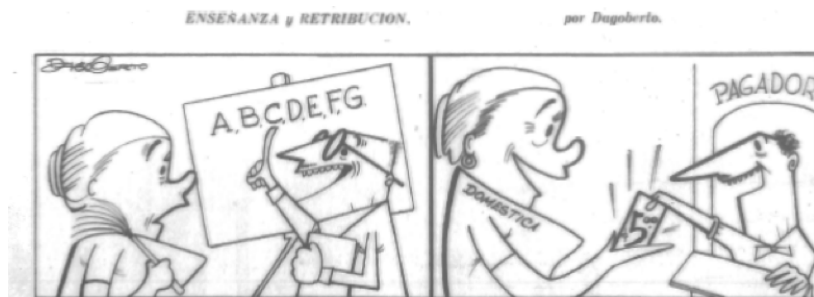


Figure 11: "Teaching and Reward" (Dagoberto, "Enseñanza y retribución," *Bohemia* 53, no. 4 (1961), 62)

educated worker remained in her low-status job, dependent on men to teach and pay her. Even magazines for women, such as the biweekly publication *Vanidades*, emphasized the less-than-honorable goals of women in the workplace. Its regular section “Laugh Along” frequently pictured women as materialistic seductresses who exploited men. One such cartoon, “You’re hired!” showed a buxom young woman sitting demurely in front of the desk of her distracted employer, who seemed to respond more to her charms than the chaos of his office. At least in caricatures, Cuban women failed to exhibit the values for which men like Conrado Benítez died. The 1959 revolution may have proposed a model for a New Man, but the existence of New Women was questioned. Women participating in the Literacy Campaign had to find alternate models for action or ignore these stereotypes.



Figure 12: "You're hired!" ("Riase usted también," *Vanidades*, no. 13 (1961), 130)

## **Women *Brigadistas***

Unlike what the propaganda images of Conrado Benítez and other young men would suggest, men did not comprise a majority of the teachers in the 1961 Literacy Campaign, and the faithful women who supported them at great personal cost were not the only patriotic women in Cuba. Among the *Conrado Benítez brigadistas*, for example, young women were 55 percent of the teaching force. Their absence from publicity materials indicates that the metaphor of war and ideas about a new Cuba did not yet include a symbolic place for women, and echoing their relative physical absence from the front lines of previous violent conflicts. Small numbers of Cuban women certainly fought as early as the Ten Years' War of 1868 to 1878 and some scholars have described this presence of Cuban women in combat as ubiquitous, but this overlooks the fact that they were never a significant portion of the regular army though they were significant in the urban resistance against Batista.<sup>37</sup> Even in the rural insurgency of the 1950s, women formed only a single, segregated brigade named for Mariana Grajales.<sup>38</sup> Women in

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<sup>37</sup> Kathryn Lynn Stoner, "Militant Heroines and the Consecration of the Patriarchal State: The Glorification of Loyalty, Combat, and National Suicide in the Making of Cuban National Identity," *Cuban Studies* 34 (2003): 72.

<sup>38</sup> Scholarship on the role of women in combat during the 1950s has generally supported the idea that women were not equally represented among the rural guerrilla forces opposing the Batista regime, though they were far more involved in the urban resistance of that decade. The women who did participate in the rural insurgency were not representative of Cuban women overall. Margaret Randall, for example, emphasized the role of women in support roles, acknowledging that just a few women were integrated into the ranks of the revolutionary armed forces. Those that were, particularly in the Mariana Grajales Platoon, were highly regarded. Lois M. Smith, writing in 1995, focused her treatment of women during the insurrectionary period on a few exceptional cases, particularly Melba Hernández, Haydée Santamaría, and Vilma Espín. All came from affluent families and were involved in the 26 July Movement before the 1952 attack on the Moncada barracks. Díaz, Dotre, and Dacosta analyzed the broader participation of women in the 26 July Movement, concluding in their 1997 article that female participants in the rural insurrection were generally less than thirty years old, white, unmarried, and well-educated, much like Hernández,

combat were exceptional, not ordinary. The Literacy Campaign increased the presence of women on the front lines of the war for education, but within this metaphor their place was undefined. Unlike Conrado Benítez, a “New Man” in a new Cuba, women were called upon to perform the task at hand, not to fundamentally change what it meant to be a woman in Cuba. Individual women might redefine their positions in society through their literacy work, but the government and the media continued to emphasize traditional roles like that of mother, secretary, or domestic worker.

Since the Literacy Campaign presented the public with a loosely defined “New Woman” who would leave behind traditional gender roles for a few months to teach, all women could be recruited. Propaganda targeted women from virtually all parts of society, promising many paths to patriotic literacy work. While propaganda materials with male subjects focused on a few important individuals—typically young, single, male, and martyred—women in propaganda materials came from a variety of backgrounds. The youngest teacher, a white eight-year-old, and the oldest student, a black centenarian who was born a slave, were women. Today, their pictures hang in the same gallery of the Museum of the National Literacy Campaign as the pictures of martyred male teachers, all young adult men. Female *brigadistas*, like their male counterparts, were a popular subject, appearing as wholesome, attractive representatives of the new government who could express doubts and insecurities more easily than their male counterparts. Mothers,

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Santamaría, and Espín. More recently, sociologists such as Julie D. Shayne have asserted that women participated in the insurgency in far lower numbers than in other contemporary movements in Latin America, and that within guerrilla movements traditional gender roles were reproduced. There have been fewer studies of women in the urban resistance, which was also less commonly invoked in the context of the Literacy Campaign. Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1974); Lois Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Elvira Díaz Vallina, Olga Dotre Romay, and Caridad Dacosta Pérez, “La mujer revolucionaria en Cuba durante el período insurreccional, 1952-1958,” *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* no. 3 (1997): 24-32; Julie Shayne, *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

grandmothers, and unmarried adult women also received attention in speeches and news coverage of the Campaign, with targeted calls to action for each demographic.

Nevertheless, female *brigadistas* were the group most frequently highlighted in news of the Literacy Campaign. While artists depicted young men in cartoons or for recruiting posters, women dominated news of the day-to-day process of teaching. Young, idealistic, patriotic women braving hardship and danger in the wilderness offered much to capture the imagination, or at least more than a housewife teaching her maid to read, in the judgment of many media outlets. Therefore, *brigadistas* were ubiquitous in coverage of the Campaign, or at least ubiquitous in media that needed a name and a face of a living volunteer for the daily update on the progress of the war on ignorance.

The national news magazine *Bohemia* appeared to put forward a new standard of female beauty based on the *brigadistas*, exchanging glamorous movie stars for these uniformed young women. The editors of the magazine, which had the widest circulation of any Cuban periodical, strove to represent the best of the country for the rest of the world to see. To this end, they covered Cuban art, cinema, and literature, the quality of which they believed was equal to that of Europe or North America. While many other Cuban periodicals featured articles on Hollywood actors, for example, *Bohemia* preferred to publicize domestic acting talent alongside short stories by Cuban writers like Dora Alonso and nonfiction pieces on Latin American cultural luminaries like Pablo Neruda. Photographs and cartoons appeared as well, with the intention of appealing even to illiterate Cubans.<sup>39</sup> Before the Literacy Campaign, *Bohemia* consistently featured photo pieces on fair-skinned Cuban actresses or beauty pageant contestants in makeup and

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<sup>39</sup> K. Lynn Stoner, "The Cuban Caricature and National Identity," *The Latin Americanist* 53, no. 3 (2009): 59.

minimal clothing, representing another sort of Cuban excellence that Americans frequently interpreted as promiscuity.

These styles of dress now connoted a decadent, corrupt past to be left behind. Modest dress and patriotic educational work took their place. The leaders of the 1959 revolution proposed to liberate Cuban women from centuries of oppression, just as they had done for other underserved groups like blacks and the poor. Modest attire was one symbol of this move to a liberated but chaste Cuba. For decades, Cuba had been a brothel, a casino, and a bar for U.S. citizens looking to escape Prohibition or cold

northern winters. Celebrities like Ava Gardner, who honeymooned in Havana in 1951, fondly recalled the bright lights of its “gambling houses, whorehouses, and brightly lit cafes” for others seeking vacation destinations, while writers like Graham Greene elaborated on its corruption.<sup>40</sup>

Americans who came to Cuba on the eve of the Revolution particularly remarked on the ways that the women lived up to the promises of publications like *Bohemia*. Brothels were a



Figure 13: Cover of *Bohemia* (53, no. 46 (1961))

particularly appealing way to explore Cuba, and frequently owned by the Mob.<sup>41</sup> The Korean War veteran Neill Macaulay, for example, on his way to fight with the rebels in

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos*, 233.

<sup>41</sup> Carrie Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 26-27.

Pinar del Río, remarked that not only were the prostitutes he saw attractive, but also “Cuban whores were probably the most polite in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>42</sup> Politeness and beauty were certainly compatible with the ideology of the Revolution, but styles of beauty associated with the decadent lifestyle of the 1950s were now unacceptable. Cuban women could be redeemed, and a change of wardrobe was one way to start the process. Even contemporary accounts of social workers trying to help prostitutes better themselves frequently emphasize how “ignorance and necessity” forced them into this line of work, and their potential to be redeemed as virtuous patriots in the mold of *brigadistas*.<sup>43</sup>

The editorial staff at the magazine generally allied itself with the new government, with both institutions holding compatible nationalist sentiments that largely avoided questions of forced censorship. Over the course of the Literacy Campaign, actresses and beauty pageant contestants began to fade out of the magazine and were replaced with equally fair-skinned female *brigadistas* in uniform. On January 22, for example, an anonymous young woman wearing a rosary appeared on the cover of the magazine. She was a teacher chosen to represent “the

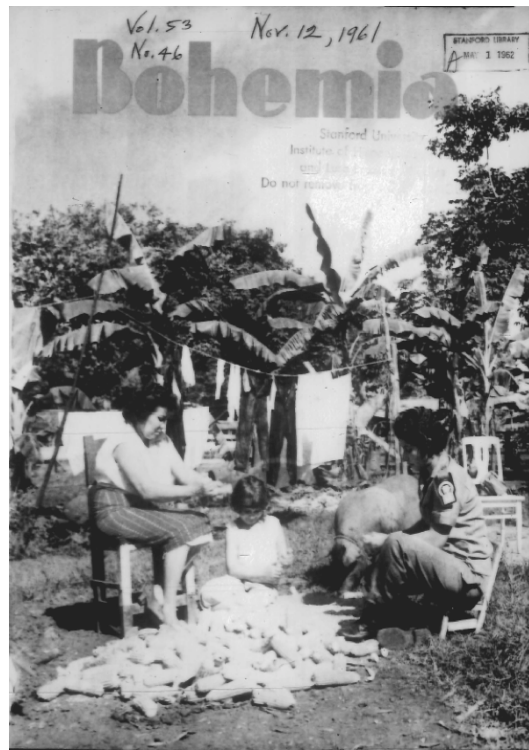


Figure 14: Cover of *Bohemia* (53, no. 46 (1961))

<sup>42</sup> Neill Macaulay, *A Rebel in Cuba: an American's Memoir* (Micanopy: Wacahoota Press, 1999), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Olga Ferrer, quoted in Laurette Séjourné and Tatiana Coll, *La mujer cubana en el quehacer de la historia*, (Mexico D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, SA, 1980), 38.

attitude of the real Cuban woman, present in all the fronts of the new Cuba: production, culture, combat, and social welfare.”<sup>44</sup> Other photographic covers connected to the Literacy Campaign featured a statue of Mariana Grajales on May 14, in honor of Mothers’ Day, and a *brigadista* working with the mother and daughter of her host family on November 12. By December 10, the tone of the coverage became celebratory, with the cover of the magazine featured a collection of *brigadistas*, both male and female, together planting the flag of the Literacy Campaign. The following week, a drawing made the same point. Individual male *brigadistas*, named or anonymous, were never featured so prominently as female ones on these covers.

Women remained a significant presence in news coverage of the Literacy Campaign, which permeated the work of virtually every news outlet. For most of 1961, education was the single largest issue in the



Figure 15: Cover of *Bohemia* (53, no. 50 (1961))



Figure 16: Cover of *Bohemia* announcing the upcoming celebrations for the end of the Literacy Campaign. (53, no. 51 (1961))

<sup>44</sup> “La portada de *Bohemia*,” *Bohemia* 53, no. 4 (1961), 65.



news, on average comprising nearly one quarter of every issue of *Bohemia*. Often, this meant that the Literacy Campaign received more coverage than Cuban relations with the United States and the Soviet Union combined. The Cold War raged everywhere else, with the United States and Soviet Union competing for influence on the island, but in Cuba in 1961 the Literacy Campaign was of paramount importance. The choice to teach or learn offered Cubans a sense of agency in an anxious world, and women were integral to that sense of agency. Even in a country where the government exercised an ever-increasing hold on the media, this dedication was remarkable. At the height of the Cold War, with the United States and the Soviet Union competing for influence around the world and in their own backyard, Cubans were strikingly unconcerned with their place in the drama.

The invasion of Playa Girón on April 17, organized and financed by counterrevolutionary exiles and the United States government was the sole



Figure 17: "Smiling and jubilant, a young and beautiful *brigadista* enjoys the title of the primer [*¡Venceremos!*], confident of success. ("Varadero: Un paraíso para los brigadistas 'Conrado Benítez'," *Bohemia* 53, no. 17 (1961),



Figure 18: "In formation, ready for training in the duties of literary education. The brutal imperialist aggression, valiantly defeated by the nation, does not detain them in their sacred labor." ("Varadero: Un paraíso para los brigadistas 'Conrado Benítez'," *Bohemia* 53, no. 17 (1961), 90)

interruption to the media coverage of the Literacy Campaign. Starting April 17, news coverage absolutely shifted to the traditional Cuban military of men wielding firearms, men who could repel the invaders and prevent the fall of the government that organized the War on Ignorance. *Brigadistas* were not forgotten, though. A new training camp at the beach resort of Varadero opened a few weeks before the attack, and *Bohemia* singled out some of the thousands of young women training there in its coverage. In spite of the recent violence, by April 23 the Literacy Campaign was “business that will never halt because of the crime committed by the invading mercenaries...the Revolution equips *brigadistas* with the physical and spiritual resources to become men and women.”<sup>45</sup> Accompanying photographs emphasized studious young women, as well as groups of young adults.



Figure 19: Onelia Marín (right) with some of her students. (“Las mujeres cubanas, vanguardia de la patria maenazada,” *Vanidades*, no. 17 (1961), 11)

While *Bohemia* was the largest news magazine in the country, it was certainly not the only publication that covered the Literacy Campaign. The biweekly magazine *Vanidades* also covered the role of women in the Literacy Campaign for its main readership, women. Articles and photographs of female *brigadistas* appeared between horoscopes, recipes, and spreads on French fashions until the close of the magazine late in the year. Covers of this magazine

<sup>45</sup> Panchito Cano, “Varadero: Un paraíso para los brigadistas ‘Conrado Benítez’,” *Bohemia* 53, no. 17 (1961), 88.

almost uniformly pictured the faces of young, attractive, frequently nonwhite women, exactly as they had in previous years. Inside, the editors presented the Literacy Campaign and a broader spectrum of Cuban womanhood. Starting with the first pages of the magazine that year, young women appeared in uniform carrying both firearms and books to defend “the threatened *patria*” with lessons they learned in a newly constructed school.<sup>46</sup> In stark contrast to *Bohemia* and even the covers of the magazine, *brigadistas* in *Vanidades* were white, black, and *mulata*, with less rigid ideas about female beauty. The black instructor Onelia Marín, for example, was singled out as a “wonderful instructor, who commands with precision and martial spirit. Her company is one of the best...her colleagues are very satisfied with her, and her superiors admire and respect her.”<sup>47</sup> Marín, like Conrado Benítez, was black, and this emphasis on racial harmony helped reinforce the idea that all Cubans could find fulfillment in an egalitarian Revolution.

Throughout the year 1961, *Vanidades* also published several profiles of young women, particularly teachers, who exemplified different elements of revolutionary dedication. Unlike Conrado Benítez, these women were free to express the doubts and insecurities any patriotic Cuban might harbor. One such young woman was Argelia Aliet, described in one profile as “ardent and firm in her wish to serve.”<sup>48</sup> Like Conrado Benítez, Aliet enrolled in the teacher training program at Minas del Frío in late 1960. Unlike Benítez, however, Aliet spoke openly of her fears at difficulty of the task ahead of her and the remoteness of her placement, as well as the tears of relief she shed on being welcomed into the community where she would teach with open arms. Working with

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<sup>46</sup> Elena de los Santos, “Las mujeres cubanas, vanguardia de la patria amenazada,” *Vanidades*, no. 13 (1961), 10-12 and 123-124.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Nora Lin, “De Bayamo es la maestra...,” *Vanidades*, no. 21 (1961), 31.

members of the community increased her self-confidence, until she could proudly assert that a personal and communal victory was inevitable: “No, I could not permit the failure of those hopes, that enthusiasm, that devotion to going beyond shown by all!...Each morning was a new triumph over my weakness and my selfishness.”<sup>49</sup> In a hostile environment, Aliet forged relationships with her students and worked with them to improve the lives of each participant and the nation, exactly as the government had hoped. Revealing these moments of weakness, followed by triumph over that weakness, offered a more accessible model for aspiring Cuban patriots.

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<sup>49</sup> Argiela Aliet, quoted in *Ibid.*, 119.

## **Adult Women in Education**

Young people like Argelia Aliet and Onelia Marín were not the only women courted through the Literacy Campaign. The new government sought the support of women from all walks of life. Housewives and spinsters would also be mobilized and made virtuous in support of the government. Doing so clearly helped to solidify its hold on power, but also emphasized its confusion about the role of women in the new society under construction. This society had already seen significant changes before 1959—Cuban women only received the right to vote in 1940, well within living memory. However, in the rhetoric of the government and its representatives in the National Literacy Commission, elections were not sufficient to guarantee rights in practice. As with long-enfranchised blacks and mulattoes who suffered discrimination before 1959, all women needed opportunities not available under previous regimes. Unlike the comprehensive legal change for Cubans of color, moves toward full equality for women were slow and sometimes contradictory. Two notable groups whose support was solicited through the Literacy Campaign were educated single women, most notably Cuban nuns, and mothers who might be educated but had dropped out of the workforce.

One of the potential contradictions of the new regime was between religious faith and patriotic devotion. In late April 1961, two women, former Catholic nuns, Nelly and Lourdes, wrote letters to the national news magazine *Bohemia* describing their exit from a Cuban convent. The letters ran in the midst of an article proclaiming religious tolerance in the new Cuba, blaming the intolerance of the Church hierarchy for the departure of

Nelly and Lourdes. Like many of the *brigadistas* featured elsewhere, the former sisters were essentially disposable, with their letters bearing little relation to the contents of the article that framed them. While photographs of Nelly and Lourdes were prominently displayed, the author of the framing article spared only a few sentences on the women who tried unsuccessfully to combine dedication to religious life with service to the Revolution. Thus, the women addressed the Cuban reading public with little mediation, but also little time to communicate their messages.

In the letters, each woman explained why she believed that she owed a great deal to the Church. Nelly, the daughter of peasants, had entered a convent school at the age of thirteen. Life in the Church was a route to a better life for her, giving her access to higher education. Lourdes was orphaned at the age of two, but also found security and personal fulfillment in religious life as a young adult. Unlike many of their colleagues in the Catholic Church, however, these nuns wrote not to express anger at the new government, but rather to praise it. Both women recounted how they had left their Dominican convent in Havana to work as teachers in the service of the Revolution. Lourdes was particularly direct about her motivations. “Fidel only follows the same doctrine as Jesus,” she wrote, “giving water to those who are thirsty, giving food to those who are hungry, and shelter to itinerant workers.”<sup>50</sup> For these women, religious devotion converged with patriotic and humanitarian values to impel them into a new life in the secular world after the institution they loved, in their assessment, failed them. Liberated from their convent, with its counterrevolutionary denunciations of new social welfare programs, Nelly and Lourdes

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<sup>50</sup> From her letter published in the article by Manuel Navarro Luna, “El llamado de las raices,” *Bohemia* 53, no. 20 (1961), 8.

were just two examples of the New Women the Revolution claimed to empower as teachers. Even so, it was unclear if religion and patriotism could coexist.

The role of mothers in society was even more complicated because of the demands placed on families by the Revolution. The ideology of *marianismo*, where women selflessly underwent hardships for the good of their husbands, children, and ultimately their country, following the example of the Virgin Mary, was held to prove their moral superiority and right to be heard in politics on issues of social welfare and the family.<sup>51</sup> Mariana Grajales, who lost nine of her eleven sons to the fight for Cuban independence, and Leonor Pérez, the mother of José Martí, were notable examples of this phenomenon because both derived their importance in Cuban history from the male relatives they sacrificed. Ideally, women were not passive in the struggle for a better Cuba—they pressed their male relatives into the service of the *patria*.<sup>52</sup> Even in peacetime, the moral authority of women as mothers was a driving force in Cuban feminism.<sup>53</sup> In the Literacy Campaign of 1961, mothers remained a galvanizing force, sending sons to fight for the glory of the nation or die trying, but they appeared less enthusiastic about sending their daughters to do the same tasks. Faced with this

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<sup>51</sup> *Marianismo* derives from Spanish Catholic views of women as morally and spiritually superior to men, likening them to the Virgin Mary. Scholars exploring this ideology in Cuba have included K. Lynn Stoner in her history of civil rights for women and Louis A. Pérez Jr. in his history of suicide. In Stoner, this takes the form of twentieth century women claiming the right to vote as a means to cleanse society of its ills, particularly poverty and the detrimental effects of unhappy marriages. Pérez begins his analysis with the nineteenth-century wars of independence, where *marianismo* was used to spur women to greater acts of self-sacrifice in the name of independence. It is not a uniquely Cuban phenomenon. Lorraine Bayard de Volo, for example, explores a similar veneration of motherhood in the Nicaraguan revolution among Sandinistas and Contras. Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2001); K. Lynn Stoner, “From the House to the Streets: Women’s Movement for Legal Change in Cuba, 1898-1958,” unpublished PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1983; Louis A. Pérez Jr., *To Die in Cuba: Suicide in Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> Pérez, *To Die in Cuba: Suicide in Society*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> Stoner, “From the House to the Streets: Women’s Movement for Legal Change in Cuba, 1898-1958,” 6.

reluctance, the new government did not fundamentally destabilize the discourse of *marianismo*, with its emphasis on the family. Instead, parents were gently chided for underestimating their daughters in ways that suggested that the family could remain the moral foundation of patriotic Cuban society.

Over the course of the 1961 Literacy Campaign, seventy-one teachers, students, and other literacy workers died. Only four of these deaths, those of Conrado Benítez, Delfin Sen Cedré, Pedro Morejón, and Manuel Ascunce, were attributed to counterrevolutionary forces. The rest died from accidents and disease that often resulted from living and working in remote areas with little access to medical care. *Brigadistas* comprised a large portion of the fallen, as they traveled to some of the most remote areas of the country. Few of these *brigadistas* left behind extensive documentation of their lives—often the most unique detail about these *brigadistas* was the reaction their parents gave to reporters. Mothers of these teachers publicly expressed pride in the work of their male and female children, describing them as loyal soldiers in an army of teachers. One of the youngest teachers to die during the Literacy Campaign was Héctor Pouton, at the age of twelve. After his death, his mother proudly declared that he “did not abandon his post.”<sup>54</sup> The mother of fifteen-year-old Victoria Vega had a similar statement for the country: “my daughter will continue to the end.”<sup>55</sup> The mother of Manuel Ascunce was similarly committed to the cause of universal literacy. Ascunce was a sixteen-year-old Conrado Benítez *brigadista* who taught in the Escambray in the fall of 1961, the same area where Benítez died in January. Like Benítez, Ascunce was targeted for his work. Counterrevolutionary forces ambushed Ascunce at the home of his host family while he

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<sup>54</sup> Campos Gallardo, Yanes Álvarez, and Zayas Montalván, *Yo soy el maestro*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



was out of uniform, threatening to kill everyone if the teacher did not come forward.

According to the mother of the family, on hearing this threat, Ascunce announced: “I am the teacher,” sacrificing himself to protect his students.<sup>56</sup> His grieving mother encouraged women to keep their children at their teaching placements, “I know that no [mother] will recall their children from their placements, because now more than ever we must stand firm. Cuban mothers; not one step backwards.”<sup>57</sup> In the spirit of traditional *marianismo*, these mothers were ready to see their young sons and daughters die for a worthy cause.

In spite of the danger their children might face, most parents eventually gave their blessing to see their children leave home. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that the parents of young women were less likely to welcome an interest in teaching from their children. Some young women, such as Leonela Inés Relys Díaz dealt with this by forging signatures on permission slips and simply running away. Díaz lived with her grandparents, and first asked for their permission. Years later, she proudly recalled that she “signed the paper for them!”<sup>58</sup> Others, like the sixteen-year-old Lillian Delia Navarro Morán, forged the signature for their permission slips but still wanted their approval before leaving. Navarro registered in secret at first and stored her new uniform and equipment with a friend who supported her desire to teach. Not long before she was scheduled to leave, she confronted her family, insisting that the opportunity was too important to pass up: “I’m going, with or without boots, with or without backpack.”<sup>59</sup>

Even parents who supported the insurgency throughout the 1950s and identified as

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 10.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Matilde Serra Robledo, et al., *El pueblo dice...: Vivencias de la campaña de alfabetización de Cuba*. (Havana: Asociación de Pedagogos de Cuba, 1999) 18.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Rebecca Herman, “An Army of Educators: Gender, Revolution and the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961,” *Gender & History* 24, no. 1 (April 2012), 105.

Communists or socialists often had reservations about the practice of the gender equality they supported in theory, arguing that their daughters were too young to face the risks of life as a *brigadista*. The twelve-year-old Adria Santana was one such *brigadista*. She forged the signature of her father to join, later pressuring him to let her join since “a communist couldn’t say no.”<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, tens of thousands of young women volunteered, earning them praise from the media that in turn encouraged more young women to follow their example. Even young women who forged signatures and lied to their parents to join the *brigadistas* were admired, since the cause was important enough to justify such minor transgressions.<sup>61</sup>

While the role of women was changing and parental authority faced new challenges from young women, the family remained an important component of revolutionary Cuba. Supervisors and organizers tried to ensure that families remained in touch during the Campaign. Contact was particularly important because *brigadistas* were isolated from their families and in unfamiliar surroundings, making them susceptible to homesickness or feelings of isolation. UNESCO observers in Cuba at the time commented approvingly on policy under which “the brigadista, isolated from his usual surroundings, was visited by his family who, if the need arose, had always an automobile at their disposal despite the scarcity of vehicles and the fact that gasoline was difficult to obtain.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, children were never totally cut off from their parents, a fear emphasized by Cuban expatriates discussing the Literacy Campaign.

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-105.

<sup>62</sup> Lorenzetto and Neys, *Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy*, 38.

Officials within the government also emphasized the importance of respecting family even when it led to temporary gender inequality, such as the placement of young men in more dangerous parts of the country. In an address to *brigadistas* on this subject the prime minister, Fidel Castro, sided with the young men and women who advocated complete equality, but effectively deferred to parental concerns: “We sometimes hear protests when we send boys to the most isolated places and girls closer to towns. But by no means does this mean that we have any discriminatory ideas about women. The fact is that we are responsible to your parents, and must take every precaution to put them at ease.”<sup>63</sup> By placing young women in safer, more controlled environments, their safety was protected so they could return to their parents as happy, healthy adults, albeit ones whose agency remained circumscribed.

In each of these models of revolutionary womanhood, a particular type of woman was courted, sometimes in contradictory ways—single young women could be fully autonomous adults, older childless women could be rejuvenated, and mothers could be idolized for the contributions of their children but still be respected if they acted to protect them. All of these promises could not be fulfilled at once. Young women, for example, were part of two of these promises: the Literacy Campaign promised them autonomy from their parents, but it also promised parents continued control over their daughters. Likewise, men who supported the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement did not necessarily want their wives and girlfriends working outside the home, no matter how patriotic the job. These promises made to and about young women frequently came into conflict. In the assessment of the former *brigadista* Cándido Rosa Orizondo Crespo, however, these

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Herman, “An Army of Educators,” 103.

conflicts were usually resolved in favor of the young woman: “in the spirit of the time, the young men made their decisions alone, but the young women had to wait for the consent of their parents and fiancées, some of whom flatly refused. There were engagements broken and wedding plans called off, but the majority obtained permission.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Roblado, et al., *El pueblo dice...: Vivencias de la campaña de alfabetización de Cuba*, 21.

## Victory

The Literacy Campaign of 1961 succeeded in its primary goal: teaching Cubans to read and write. Its promises for women, however, were not uniformly fulfilled. The Literacy Campaign neither guaranteed equality for all Cuban women, nor was it the start of a comprehensive program of reform in gender policy. In oral histories given since the Campaign, individual *brigadistas* recalled their teaching careers as a transformative experience. Popular histories echoed this sentiment, enshrining the Literacy Campaign in the popular memory as a transformative moment for women, but it did not match the reality experienced by Cuban women in the decades that followed. Evidence suggests that women neither achieved full equality with men through the Literacy Campaign of 1961, nor was this a goal expected to be realized through the Campaign. Instead, the government used organizations like the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC) to mobilize women for limited objectives in the service of the Revolution, administratively and ideologically subordinating women to the predominantly male central government even when gains were made relative to other countries.

One part of this continuing problem of inequality was the national federation of women, the FMC, founded in 1960. Fidel Castro is originally credited with the idea for this organization, even to the point of convincing his sister-in-law, Vilma Espín, to be its chief administrator.<sup>65</sup> Espín, a chemical engineer who had studied at some of the best universities in the United States, later claimed to have experienced virtually no bias

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<sup>65</sup> Allahar, "Women, Feminism, and Socialism in Cuba," 60-61.

because of her gender, but acquiesced to lead the organization. This close relationship between the FMC and national leaders highlighted both its strengths and weaknesses; the FMC immediately gained legitimacy through its association with the highest echelons of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement, but because of those same close ties it was frequently unable to act as a critic of the regime. Thus, the FMC had some success in initiatives like the establishment of permanent childcare centers, but women still entered the workforce in lower numbers than men.<sup>66</sup> The FMC also had some notable successes relative to other socialist countries. Unlike the USSR, for example, Cuban women did not face restrictions on their employment in certain industries over health concerns.<sup>67</sup> Particularly when compared to other activists and systems of government in neighboring countries, the Castro government and the FMC offered a relatively comprehensive plan for the betterment of the status of women.<sup>68</sup>

Within these limited gains there were significant discursive limitations that were even apparent in the symbol of the FMC: a uniformed woman carrying a baby in one arm and a machine gun in the other. Women were still overtly associated with maternity and the home, contradicting the discourse that called them from the homes of their parents to serve as *brigadistas*. One reason for this change in message from the government was its initial lack of interest in gender policy. Most important government officeholders were middle-class, white, heterosexual men who can be charged with “[betraying] views

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<sup>66</sup> Maxine Molyneux, “Socialist Societies Old and New: Progress Towards Women’s Emancipation?,” *Feminist Review*, no. 8 (Summer 1981): 7,19.

<sup>67</sup> Maxine Molyneux, “State, Gender, and Institutional Change: The Federación de Mujeres Cubanas,” in *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*, ed. Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 295.

<sup>68</sup> Maxine Molyneux, “Twentieth-Century State Formations in Latin America,” in *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*, ed. Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 59.

associated with the prerevolutionary dominant classes, in particular about the desired roles of women and men and the undesirability of homosexuality.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, the revolution had limits even within the New Men who led it. These limits reproduced themselves in government policy and the daily lives of Cuban women once there was no longer an urge to appeal to every single Cuban citizen for the day-to-day survival of the regime.

What is more, overtly feminist projects were taboo. For decades after the 1959 revolution the capitalist feminism of the United States and Western Europe appeared antithetical to the socialist liberation of women. Where American feminists saw themselves as experiencing a specific type of discrimination, the FMC and the Cuban government generally argued that feminism would not treat the underlying problem of inequality. Thus, while activists might have similar goals, they often opposed one another on ideological grounds. In 1975, for example, the same year that the Family Code went into effect, guaranteeing women total equality inside and outside the home, Vilma Espín stated: “the liberation of women cannot be separated from the liberation of society in general...A woman cannot have any political, economic, or social rights in a capitalist society where she suffers from class oppression and discrimination.”<sup>70</sup> In the view of FMC administrators, feminism as practiced in the United States addressed a single symptom in a broad social malady, and it could hurt the larger cause of universal equality, dividing and weakening the nation. Two years later, Espín still spoke dismissively of feminists, saying “we see these movements in the U.S.A. which have conceived struggles for equality of women against men! That is absurd! For these

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<sup>69</sup> Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Allahar, “Women, Feminism, and Socialism in Cuba,” 62.

feminists to say they are revolutionaries is ridiculous!”<sup>71</sup> Equality between men and women in Cuba was subordinated to the goals of the Revolution. Despite formal rejections of feminism, there were clear parallels in the short-term goals of Cuban women and feminists elsewhere. These similarities began to unite Cuban women activists with feminists abroad in the 1980s, but in 1961 feminism was a questionable ideology because of its imperialist ties.<sup>72</sup>

Regardless of theory or intent, in the lives of individual *brigadistas* service in the Literacy Campaign was frequently a transformative experience.<sup>73</sup> The structure of the Campaign was one reason for these profound effects. Regardless of the political agenda of the government, it placed young women in a position of authority while fostering mutual respect and understanding. Even the UNESCO observers who were usually clinical in their descriptions waxed poetic on this subject, saying “the secret of the success of the Campaign must be found in a very simple fact, one that is very old and foreign to all technical means: human relationships. It must be found in those intellectual, sentimental and psychological chain reactions which arise between one human being and

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Molyneux, “State, Gender, and Institutional Change: The Federación de Mujeres Cubanas,” 299.

<sup>72</sup> Scholars of feminism and gender have had mixed reactions to policies designed to create gender equality. Allahar traces a process of growing disillusionment with Cuba among scholars such as Maxine Molyneux and Carollee Bengelsdorf over the course of the 1980s in “Women, Feminism, and Socialism in Cuba.” More recently, socialist feminists such as Helen Safa and Norma Chinchilla have argued that this disillusionment results from a fundamental misunderstanding of the task at hand, namely strengthening the state to do away with all forms of inequality.

<sup>73</sup> There have been three large-scale oral history projects that touched on the Literacy Campaign, as well as many more carried out by individual scholars. The anthropologist Oscar Lewis began one such project in 1968, but his work was cut short and the project did not achieve its original goals. The writer Gabriel García Márquez conducted more interviews in 1975, but they did not lead to publications. The most recent large-scale oral history project was conducted by a joint Cuban-British team of scholars including Elizabeth Dore, Maxine Molyneux, and Carrie Hamilton between 2005 and 2010. Hamilton drew upon these interviews for her study *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory*.



another.”<sup>74</sup> *Brigadistas* were also guaranteed access to higher education if they requested it on their discharge papers. Many chose to accept the scholarships, which offered social mobility to working-class young adults who could never have afforded college tuition. The pride, gratitude, and enthusiasm described by independent and UNESCO-sponsored observers is matched by that of former *brigadistas* in decades of oral histories.

In the 1970s, the educational theorist Jonathan Kozol conducted a number of interviews with former *brigadistas* for an American audience. Even with male interviewees, Kozol was struck by the religious language and fervor expressed, particularly the way that the Literacy Campaign functioned as “the dying of an old life and the start of something absolutely new.”<sup>75</sup> In interviews conducted by Kozol, interviewees frequently identified this as a conversion to socialism, or at least the beginnings of a conversion process.<sup>76</sup> A female *brigadista*, María, even attempted to expand on the gender norms overtly promoted in the national media: “The literacy struggle was the first time in my life, and I believe the first time in our history as well, that women were given an equal role with men in bringing monumental change. Today we speak of the New Woman and New Man. It is a phrase that first came into common use only in recent years, but it began to be a concrete truth in 1961. As you have seen, it is a concept that is not forgotten.”<sup>77</sup> While María and *brigadistas* like her found the ideal of the New Woman in their own lives, the institutions planning and supporting the Literacy Campaign had no such ideal in mind. Cuban women who did not serve as

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<sup>74</sup> Lorenzetto and Neys, *Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy*, 73.

<sup>75</sup> Armando Valdés, quoted in Kozol, “A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba,” 348-349.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 375.

*brigadistas* were therefore more affected by institutional ideals of womanhood that did not include an ideal New Woman in the early 1960s.

Even after the Special Period of the 1990s, when the fall of the Soviet Union deprived Cuba of one of its largest trade partners and created an economic crisis that lasted until the early 2000s, the Literacy Campaign appears as a transformative moment in many personal accounts. Rosa, interviewed in the mid-2000s, found it particularly liberating in her private life: “I was the girlfriend of that young man who played basketball and was a member of clubs. With the triumph of the Revolution...I had to define myself...The Bay of Pigs was April, I went to the Literacy Campaign in May. We fought. That was the only boyfriend I had. He said to me, ‘Either the Revolution or me.’ And I said, ‘The Revolution.’”<sup>78</sup> Much like the young women who ran away from home to join the Literacy Campaign, Rosa found an escape from traditional power structures in her service.

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory*, 52.

## Conclusion

The symbols of the Cuban War on Ignorance were a lantern, a book, and the face of one young man: Conrado Benítez. By early 1961, the entire country mobilized for this war, and it concluded on December 22, 1961. Teaching a nation people to read and write was just one of its victories, however. The narrative of a military campaign and the face of Benítez, a martyr for the cause, suggested a masculine endeavor. In fact, young men made up just under half of the teachers known as “Conrado Benítez *brigadistas*,” more than double the percentage of men in the teaching profession before 1961. The metaphor of war and the martyr chosen as the face of the army of teachers were carefully chosen and depicted in such a way as to draw young men into the teaching profession, linking it to traditional ideals of masculinity. This effort succeeded, drawing young men into the teaching profession in unprecedented numbers.

However, the true impact of this metaphor is best seen in the young women who worked by their side in the “army of teachers.” These young women went, with or without the permission of their parents, to remote and often dangerous parts of the country. Some died in the course of their duties. Cubans reading newspapers and magazines, listening to the radio, or watching television were confronted on a daily basis with an apparent contradiction: young women defied the old standards of acceptable behavior in order to work in a traditionally feminine field. Ultimately, this contradiction was resolved through a new narrative of revolutionary womanhood, one in which women could be independent actors for the public good. Generations of memoirs by these women

reaffirm that the Literacy Campaign was a transformative moment for its participants, one in which gender was not a handicap.

The success of the Literacy Campaign also highlighted many important features of the new government, particularly its methods of organizing the country and its commitment to exporting education. Mass mobilizations to complete other tasks such as harvesting sugar cane borrowed the structure of the Literacy Campaign. The teaching techniques used in the Literacy Campaign of 1961 have been reproduced in teaching missions abroad in countries such as Spain, Canada, and Venezuela. The ambivalence of the government toward the role of women in society was also reproduced. Officially, Cuban socialism brought full gender equality. Women would no longer be targeted by magazines with titles like *Vanidades*; they would be full adults who participated equally in the betterment of their country. In practice, however, women were still a distinct interest group within the state with their own publications, like the periodical *Mujeres*, and their own organizational apparatus, the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*, which lobbied the government on public policy issues associated with women, such as laws on the family.

## Caricatures

- “Ríase usted también.” *Vanidades* no 13 (1961): 130.
- Ardion. “La gran batalla de la alfabetización.” *Arma Nueva*, no. 1 (January-March 1961): 32.
- Dagoberto. “Enseñanza y retribución.” *Bohemia* 53, no. 4 (1961): 62.
- Horacio. “La tapa de la sepultura.” *Bohemia* 53, no. 28 (1961): 130.
- Pecruz. “Abre que voy...!” *Bohemia* 53, no. 16 (1961): 62.
- Pitin. “Al ataque, compañeras! Contra el analfabetismo!” *Bohemia* 53, no. 6 (1961): 112.
- . “Trinchera de cultura.” *Bohemia* 53, no. 8 (1961): 112.
- . Untitled. *Bohemia* 53, no. 49 (1961): 65.
- . “Me estoy sintiendo mal.” *Bohemia* 53, no. 50 (1961): 73.

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