Voces del Caribe
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Independence and the By-products of War: Women Poets in Late Colonial Cuba

Everyday life for Cuban women during the thirty years that spanned the wars of independence (Ten Years War 1868-1878; Guerra Chiquita 1879-1880; War of Independence 1895-1898) was complex and full of contradictions. On the one hand the war signified an extraordinary opportunity for women from diverse racial and social classes to become actors in the work of the insurgency. Indeed, many actively participated in various levels of resistance in the name of the emerging nation. Whether in exile and aiding the war by raising funds abroad or on the island engaged in subversive actions, Cuban women from all walks of life expressed the hope that separatism at first and later the fuller vision of Cuba Libre for the nascent republic would comprise their release from societal oppression.[1] On the other hand, Cuban families had to endure the by-products of war, which included displacement from the eastern provinces to the western areas of the island during the first war, and in the case of the War of 1895, the destruction of cultivated fields and massive forced reconcentrations from the rural areas to nearby towns and cities (Pérez, Jr., *Cuba Between Empires*, 55-56). Everyday life was fraught with the horrors of an armed struggle carried out in the *manigua*. Women who had followed the men of the family in allegiance to the ideology of the war and to escape the wrath of the Spanish authorities had to endure the abhorrent conditions of the war camps (Prados-Torreira

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67-68; Mora Morales 40). Those who remained on the fringes of armed conflict did not escape the horror, as displacement from the east to the west during the first war brought apprehension and scarcity of resources. Some families faced severe poverty; others went into exile. During the War of Independence of 1895, the almost total reconcentration of the countryside in nearby towns or cities brought famine, exposure, disease, or death (Poumier 152; Pirala 351-355). Indeed, the fate of the *reconcentrados* differed little from the fate of the rebels as the consequences of war engulfed areas far from the fields of combat.

Throughout the war period the term *mambisa* denoted not only women who had joined male family members in the insurrection but also Cuban women sympathetic to the cause. They joined the voices claiming freedom for Cuba from Spanish domination. Mambisa poets recited their poetry in homes, literary athenaeums and clubs, and women-led revolutionary juntas. Their poems circulated among the troops; they were read and recited in the frontlines. Prominent poets were included in the important anthology *Parnaso cubano* (1881) and Sofía Estévez's poem "A Cuba" was featured in Sanchez's anthology *Los poetas de la guerra* (1893). Other collections appeared after the war: Antonio González de Curquejo edited his *Florilegio de escritoras cubanas* (1910-1913) and poet Domitila García de Coronado compiled *Álbum poético fotográfico de escritoras y poetisas cubanas,* which was

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extended to a third revised edition (1868, 1910, 1926). While some of these poets have been the subject of critical readings (Chávez, Chichester, Rodríguez Gutiérrez, Terga Oliva), many still remain in obscurity. Themes of nation, honor, glory, duty to the war, and the hopes for the patria are prevalent in the collective work of these Cuban poets. Indeed, a nation abandoned and betrayed by its ruler is an idea implicit in the Cuban nationalist discourse, which emphasized independence of action and thought from a despotic *madre patria.* In addition, however, women poets exposed the atrocities of war, expressing feelings of loss at the departure of friends and family from the island as much as their own, and giving voice to the plight of mothers and children left hungry, homeless, or orphaned by the many decades of armed conflict.

Certain thematic threads connect these poems: one is the anxiety of the (impending) conflict as the winds of separatism magnetized Cubans across the island, and displacement to other provinces (from Oriente and Camagüey to the western provinces) created anguish and division among families. A second theme is the trust in the noble spirit of Cubans who will come to the aid of the hungry and desolate women and children who became the victims of war. Furthermore, solidarity among women appears in the poetry of Cuban *mambisas* as a motif that reveals their faith in the transformational promise of a new nation for all Cubans.

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The by-products of the war appear in the work of Cuban women poets in a manner that might be called a "poetics of destruction" bearing witness to the calamities of war (Yáñez 179). These poets were almost entirely white women from the upper and middle classes; most had received scant formal education, in particular those who were members of families that became impoverished as the years of war continued. Without exception, these poets descended from liberal families committed to the idea of separatism from Spain; some spent time in exile returning to the island at the end of each conflict (e.g. Sofia Estevez, Aurelia Castillo), while others remained on the island throughout the thirty years of war. Displacement to the western provinces began to take place intensively in Oriente after *El Grito de Yara* in 1868, later extending to Camagüey and some portions of Las Villas. Even prior to the start of the Ten Years War and fearing the inevitability of armed struggle, some wealthy families abandoned the eastern provinces and sought refuge in the provinces of western Cuba, where separatist sentiments had not yet gained strength. As the war failed to expand beyond the eastern provinces "due to the success of Spanish military operations [which confined] the conflict to the east, away from the rich sugar zones of the west," the capital city of Havana received these self-exiled Cubans from the regions in conflict (Pérez, Jr. 123-124).

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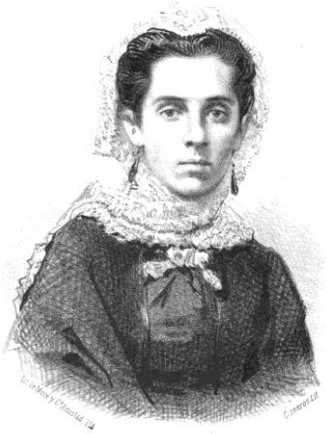

Martina Pierra de Poo
Del *Album poético-fotográfico de las escritoras cubanas*,
por Domitila García de Coronado. Imprenta Militar de Viuda e Hs. de Soler, 1868

Martina Pierra de Poo (1833-1900), in her poem "La Habana y el Camagüey," dated 1868, captures the feelings of sorrow and trepidation associated with the departure from the provinces:

Mas ¡ay! Que la desgracia batió sus negras alas:
Rugiendo en torno mío, bramó la tempestad;
Cubrióme de natura las refulgentes galas
Tras un velo densísimo de inmensa oscuridad.
…….
Cobrando nuevo aliento, alcé mi frente mustia,

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Fijé la vista en ella, y de su lumbre en pos,

Dejé mi amado pueblo, mas con mortal angustia

De eterna despedida le di mi triste adiós. (84-85)

Pierra de Poo alludes to the war in terms of a devastating misfortune in her poem. Her sadness is tempered by possibility of a more peaceful life in areas of the island more distant from war. In expressing her gleeful arrival in Havana, the poet reveals the personal conflict involved in a war between Creole and peninsular Cubans. Her ambivalence toward the armed conflict is easy to understand, as she is the daughter of a Spanish military officer and a Cuban mother, and a member of a Camagüeyan family that sacrificed several men in the war.

Sofía Estévez y Valdés de Rodríguez
Image source: https://www.ecured.cu/Archivo:Sofia.jpg

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Sofía Estévez (1848-1901) expresses a similar sentiment in "Al llegar a La Habana," where the poet employs images of violence that evoke the urgency of the moment and speaks of displacement to strange areas of the island:

> Cual la pobre avecilla a quien aleja
> Del cañón el mortífero estampido,
> Y lanzándose al aire, caer se deja
> En bosques ¡ay! … donde no está su nido;
> ¡Así del campo que nacer me viera
> quiso auyentarme la desgracia impía, [sic]
> y que a curarme mis heridas fuera
> a otra selva, ¡gran Dios, que no es la mía! (177)

Displacement to the western provinces did not mean escaping from Spanish authorities. Cubans who favored the separatist goals of the Ten Years War were persecuted in the cities; many sought exile in the United States or Europe, many others were deported.[2] News of the misfortunes suffered by family members who had remained in the war zones followed displaced and exiled Cubans.

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Úrsula Céspedes Orellano de Escanaverino
Del *Album poético-fotográfico de las escritoras cubanas*,
por Domitila García de Coronado. Imprenta Militar de Viuda e Hs. de Soler, 1868

Several poems by Ursula Céspedes Orellano (1832-1874), a member of the same family as the prominent leader *of El Grito de Yara*, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, speak of impending sorrow and loss. Ursula and her husband, the poet and educator Ginés de Escanaverino, had moved from her family home in Bayamo shortly after their marriage. Céspedes' early poem "La muerte de una tórtola" (1859) envisions the adversity and pain the impending war would cause, framing the pain of "exile" (a term that Cubans from Oriente used to speak of the displacement to the western provinces) and death as expressions of a mother's loss:

Ella que junto a sus hijos
Miró con gran regocijo

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Sus ojuelos despertar,

¡infeliz!, y el mismo día,

la noche eterna y sombría

el sueño eterno los volvió a cerrar.

……..

Sí, tórtola, yo me río,

Porque este dolor impío

Que te destroza al morir,

Es tan sólo en lo que creo,

Es lo que en mis sueños veo,

Es mi negro y siniestro porvenir. (Céspedes 55-56)

Céspedes' poem is a disturbing projection of the devastating casualties of the war. The tone of this poem is unusual in its imagining of a dark and sinister future, and in the reaction of the poet herself to this eventuality. Indeed, her future brought the death of her father and four brothers in the Ten Years War, followed by others of her immediate family including her sister and children (Remos 14). Her's is a deep sadness, but it is devoid of sentimentality. In identifying with the fate of mourning childless mothers, Céspedes anticipates the loss of her brothers in the war. One can

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assume that public opinion may not have been too favorable to this branch of the Céspedes family. In a later poem dedicated to her mother, Céspedes recognizes the valor and dignity with which her mother endured criticism: "Has sido aborrecida y calumniada/ por los que vieron mejorar tu suerte,/ y tú, dulce, paciente y resignada,/ ni contra el débil te volviste airada,/ ni tu voz levantaste contra el fuerte" (Céspedes 113). Céspedes' mother had not followed her sons and husband to the war but, like many landowning *orientales,* had sought refuge in the western provinces, moving her household to Cienfuegos. Ursula and Ginés had moved from Havana to San Cristóbal de los Pinos (Pinar del Río) and later (around 1870) to Santa Isabel de las Lajas to be near her mother's home in Cienfuegos (Remos 13-14). One would have to conclude from this stanza that fellow *bayameses* might have received with scorn the flight of the Céspedes-Orellano family to the peaceful regions of the west, a criticism that caused them to defend their exile amidst public discredit.

The reality of the war diminished the spirits of many poets but its horrors propelled the work of others. As members of the upper and middle classes, Cuban women poets of this period had been encouraged to write of love, charity, faith and other subjects deemed appropriate for their sex. The onset of the separatist ideology followed by, toward the end of the century, the developing vision of Cuba Libre provided Cuban women the defiance and courage to participate in political

discussions although not without facing public resistance. While Cuban patriots and patriarchs tolerated women's recitals and readings in literary spaces, their participation in political meetings was not received with the same degree of acceptance. After noting the attendance of women who occupied "seis palcos del primer piso y tres grillés" of the Otero Theater in Cárdenas during a meeting of autonomists, the local newspaper published this opinion:

> A nosotros no nos parece oportuno que á esas reuniones, en donde se trata de política, exclusivamente, asista ese delicado sexo que, en nuestro sentir, debe estar alejado, en absoluto, de toda intervención en aquellos asuntos que no le incumben, porque la Naturaleza ha señalado ya los deberes de la mujer, creada para el hogar, y de ellos no debe apartarse. En las veladas literarias, nos explicamos la presencia de la compañera del hogar; pero en las veladas políticas, no." (*Diario de Cárdenas,* 10 May 1892)

Nevertheless, as a consequence of their intellectual engagement in social and political debates, women poets began to explore these and other subjects in their writing. Many addressed the devastating effects of the war, often in terms of their own individual circumstances, but just as frequently also in terms of the collective suffering of Cuban women and children. Their poetry echoed the desperate voices of orphans and

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beggars. Catalina Rodríguez de Morales, "Yara" (1857-1884) gave voice to the sorrow of a young woman orphaned and abandoned. Although devoid of direct references to the war, the poem is significant for its tone of desperation and anguish, and for the prominence of its references to death and dying. For Rodríguez, piety and charity are values absent from a society of hardened men, as the poem makes clear by singling out male contempt. Rather than a general indictment on a neglectful community of people, the accusation is stated in gendered terms: "El hombre muchas veces desprecia mi tormento, … (176). As the poem ends, however, the poetic voice seeks solace and understanding from virtuous women. This shift away from the world of impious men gives the poem a meaning beyond the adversities of war as it points toward solidarity among women as the source of liberation from poverty and need. Seeking comfort in the female world, the poet accentuates their commonality as a source of hope:

> Piedad, graciosa niña; piedad, matrona hermosa,
> El hambre me consume, mirad mi desnudez,
> De lo que os sobra, un poco, con pena dolorosa
> Os pide de rodillas, llorando una mujer. (176-177)

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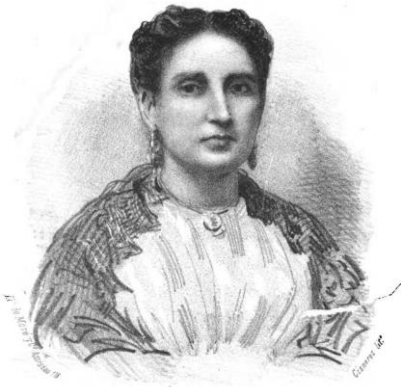
As a commentary on the real lives of impoverished women (a very real consequence of the wars), this poem reveals the extreme vulnerability of families in areas of the island where life was a constant struggle. It is also a reminder of the importance of the attribute of wealth for white women as a prerequisite to marriage and happiness in Cuban colonial society (Martínez-Alier 89) and at the same time places great emphasis on philanthropy and good deeds. But the poem reaches beyond the mere hope of female assistance to denounce a hardened (male) world. As a testimony of the increasing numbers of Cubans who suffered the by-products of the war, homelessness and hunger foremost, the poem exemplifies a shift from the first-person poetic subjectivity to a depiction of the realities and needs of the other.



Francisca González Ruz de Montoro
Del *Album poético-fotográfico de las escritoras cubanas*,
por Domitila García de Coronado. Imprenta Militar de Viuda e Hs. de Soler, 1868

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The connection between woman and country is reinforced in the stanzas that compare lives without a distinctive history or memory. In Francisca González Ruz de Montoro's poem "A una huérfana," the orphan condition may be read as an abstraction, a metaphor for neglect and denial. The poetic voice reminds the reader of the oppressed masses left without the hope of forging their own destiny, as indeed many Cubans felt was the fate of their continued dependency on the metropolis. As the poem closes, the two voices (subject and object) join in unison:

Esa es tu vida y la mía,
Por el destino ligadas,
Y por tierna simpatía;
Cual dos ramas enlazadas
Dentro de la selva umbría. (221)

González Ruz de Montoro's poem underscores the commonality of the two subjects. The allusion to a parallel destiny implicit in the image of intertwined branches is clearly one that seeks to unify the voices across multiple boundaries. More to the point, it is one that echoes the *mambisa* aspiration that upon liberation the new nation would be founded on the idea of equality as a moral right applicable to all Cubans. The vision in González Ruz de Montoro's poem reaches beyond the making of the

transracial nation envisioned by Maceo and Martí to one that would transcend inequality between the sexes, as Ana Betancourt de Agramonte had proposed to the delegates to the Constitutional Assembly gathered at Guáimaro.[3]

There is an evident change in the tone of *mambisa* poetry after the 1880s. One principal reason was the forewarning of another war following the surrender at Zanjón and the failure of the subsequent Guerra Chiquita (1879-1880). After the inception of the War of Independence in 1895, conditions in the war camps as well as in areas removed from the battlefields, such as towns and cities, grew to desperate levels.

The cause was the decree of reconcentration, a military tactic enacted in earnest in 1896 following the arrival in Santiago de Cuba of Captain General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau (1838-1930). Weyler was already known to the Cubans for his tactics of terror at the end of the first war (1869-1870). General Camilo Polavieja y Castillo (1838-1914) himself, who had led the effort to rid the Cuban countryside of an outbreak of *bandolerismo* in the years between the wars, denounced the appointment of Weyler as commander of the Spanish army in Cuba. Citing Weyler's known abuses during the first war in Cuba, Polavieja reports incidents witnessed by Spaniards regarding Weyler's treatment of detained *mambisas*:

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> [Weyler] las hacia bailar hasta que desvanecieran y así la doble fila de españoles sensuales, gozaba del aspecto. Cuando un grupo había caído al suelo los mandaba entregar á los soldados para su recreo y mandaba traer otras hasta que todas las mujeres del pueblo atadas, habían sido forzadas á tan inicuos atentados. Por fin las criaturas atormentadas fueron libradas de sus sufrimientos partiéndolas literalmente en piezas con los golpes de los afilados machetes cubanos" (Polavieja).[4]

Weyler's cruelty preceded him and Polavieja contends that Cuban men and women received news of Weyler's reappointment with fear:

> Un pánico se extendió en Cuba de un extremo á otro del país á la mera mención de su nombre. No solamente empiezan los revolucionarios á temer, sabiendo que ahora tiene que luchar con el más riguroso Jefe militar de los tiempos modernos, sino que por centenares y millares, mujeres jóvenes y matronas tiemblan, al recuerdo de los actos de este hombre en los últimos tiempos y del inmenso terror que causaría aun nuevamente cuando vuelva á chocar con ellos (Polavieja).

Army soldiers and officers forced women to drink and dance until they fell from exhaustion, later to be raped and killed by the troops, a practice condoned by Weyler

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who had become known as "el carnicero" (the butcher) during his assignment in Santo Domingo (Polavieja). The ruthless Captain General was convinced that to defeat the Cuban Ejército Libertador, Spanish soldiers had to destroy the rural communities that supported the insurgency. "So long as the *pacífico* population remained at liberty to move between the cities and the countryside, to transport medicines and supplies, and to relay intelligence and information across government lines, so long as peasants remained free to cultivate their crops and tend to their livestock," Spain was fighting a war "against insuperable odds" (Pérez, Jr., Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform,* 165).

After Weyler decreed the reconcentration of thousands of peasants who had not followed the insurgents into battle, families were housed in urban camps. The consequences of the reconcentration on the rural population were horrific. Compounding the famine was the Spanish army's destruction of the countryside as "each movement of the troops was accompanied by the indiscriminate burning of cultivated fields and different buildings and homes" (Poumier 38; my translation).

The near total civilian population of the rural areas crowded the cities to the extent that "people had the impression that the countryside, unique source of national wealth, was waging war on the cities" (Thomas 330). *Campesinos* who had not joined the war "went to overburden the towns where their death from hunger was not

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unheard of," a crisis that affected a disproportionate number of women and children (Poumier 38; my translation). Although there were no official accounts of the number of people who died in the urban camps, it is believed that the reconcentration policy "affected the urban population as a whole" (Helg 85, n165).

The decree had been designed to curb the work of informants who took news and gave information to the rebels regarding the movement of the Spanish troops, to prevent further defections to the war, and to break up associations between the rebels and their families in the countryside. To carry out the policy, Spanish officers looked the other way as soldiers victimized Cuban women.

Cuban women wrote of cruelties of war, in particular of the plight of impoverished families forced to beg for food and shelter. Poor women were left at the mercy of society's least honorable men –an occurrence recorded in a poem by Mercedes Matamoros, who expressed her contempt for a rich Spaniard's victimization of homeless women:

¡Cuánta virgen cubana sin pan ni asilo
A la casita aislada temblando llega!
¡Cuántos nidos se quedan sin sus palomas!
¡En las garras del lobo cuántas ovejas!

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El viejo alza la copa y exige el beso,

Y el brindis por España también ordena … (106)

Despite its portrayal of women as helpless lambs, the poem is an outcry against the exploitation of women by a patriarchal colonial system. Violence against Cuban women became a rallying point for *mambisa*s on the island as in exile. This is evident in a statement by Sofía Estévez rejecting the notion of a political compromise with Spain that fell short of full independence. In a direct reference to what Cuban women on the island had endured, Estévez decries:

> too much innocent blood has been spilled … The country has been devastated. *Most of all*, too many Cuban women have been brutally offended.… These women, *above all*, are especially aggrieved by the outrages inflicted on many of our sisters: we spit in the face of the tyrant and his autonomy and any pact that could leave Cuba in any way tied to Spain." (Quoted by Pérez, Jr., *To Die in Cuba* 103; original emphasis)

Once again as in the first war, families who could escape went into exile, as the scenes of horror engulfed nearly the entire island. Those in the reconcentration camps endured untold hardships. Outbreaks of disease that had plagued the cities even before reconcentration contributed to the calamities; many children in Oriente died

during an epidemic of cholera right after the outbreak of the war (Poumier 152). No one could avoid the merciless reality of the moment as the reconcentration policy "filled the cities with distant sounds of women wailing, children shrieking, and men praying for deliverance, or else swearing vengeance on their tormentors" (Pérez, Jr., *Cuba Between Empires,* 55).

As the number of the displaced population increased, children (many of whom had been left orphaned) were forsaken as "desperate mothers abandoned babies to charitable institutions, [and] girls were reportedly taken into prostitution" (Helg 85-86). Contemporary accounts and diaries of the war focused obsessively on disease, hunger, and death.

Víctimas de la Reconcentración de Weyler – Madre e hijo
Image source:
https://gestindelamemoria-felix.blogspot.com/2010/02/el-primer-campo-de-concentracion-de-la.html

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Poetry depicting beggars offer a testimony of the desperation affecting the population on the island. Accounts of the war make frequent reference to extreme measures adopted by the rebels, such as the looting of Spanish army camps in search of food and the slaughtering of horses to eat. The description of the Spanish soldier Collazo provides a glimpse of the harsh conditions in the eastern region:

> La vida del cubano era allí excesivamente dura, pues se carecía de ropa y calzado, no había carne (desde mediados de 1870 se comían caballos) y, para surtirse de vianda, era preciso hacerlo en los campamentos enemigos, pudiendo asegurarse que cada boniato que se comía había costado sangre. Además, la carencia de caballos obligaba á hacer la guerra á pie, lo que hacía más terrible la situación. (Quoted by Pirala 351)

The situation of the war camps is of particular importance as a subtext to the poetry of Manuela Cancino (1851-1900) who along with her two sisters (Mercedes and Micaela) endured both the Ten Years War and the early part of the War of 1895, until she was denounced and imprisoned in Havana's Casa de Recogidas .[5] She remained in the *manigua* after the death of her father, husband and several of her children (Cartaya Cotta). During her imprisonment in Havana and later in Pinar del Río,

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Manuela "contracted grave illnesses from which she would never recover" (Rodríguez Lavielle; my translation).[6] Her patriotic poetry is interspersed with poems that reflect the conditions of the camps, and her long and heroic faith in the cause of the wars. In the poem entitled "Sin hogar," Cancino writes to her daughter, María, the only one of her children born in the war camps who survived disease and violence. Likely written in the decade of the 1890s, Cancino's dejected tone of loneliness and misery is exemplified in the following stanza:

> ¡No tenemos hogar, hija del alma,
> no tenemos hogar!
> ¡Vamos así, por el erial del mundo,
> Sin asilo y sin pan.
> Sin una mano cariñosa y tierna
> Que apoye tu orfandad,
> Vamos tan solo recogiendo abrojos
> En el pobre cendal. (265)

Cancino reveals the plight of a woman facing insurmountable obstacles in her everyday struggles. From a desperate tone of gloom, the promise of a better future is heightened as the poem reaches its end. In the last stanza, Cancino shifts to a

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depiction of hope and trust in the collective good: "Aunque vamos asidas de las manos/ Sin asilo y sin pan/ En cada corazón noble y sensible/ Tenemos un hogar!" (González Curquejo, v.2, 266). The poem speaks of harmony in the very personal image of mother and daughter united by misfortune ("unidas de las manos") yet connected by the forceful desire to survive the dreadfulness of the war. More than an individual longing, Cancino's poem envisions the values distinctive to the independence movement on the island, that is, an unrelenting commitment not just to end colonial rule, but also to fully carry out a revolution that would transform Cuban society. Sacrificing the safety and health of her family was a price Cancino paid with great sorrow and regret. However, as another stanza makes clear, carrying out the work of the insurgency was not a question of choice but a duty: "Y enjugo el llanto que mi rostro baña/ Y de nuevo, mi bien, quiero luchar/ desafiando intrépida y resuelta/ La negra adversidad" (González Curquejo, v.2, 266). In her resolute allegiance, Cancino echoes the commitment and abnegation of heroic *mambisa* mothers and wives.

In their portrayal of the role of women, *mambisa* poets did not challenge traditional principles. For example, poets portray values such as the heightened sentiments of motherhood inherent in Hispano-Catholic traditions. The mourning of mothers who have lost their children is the theme of a poem by Clotilde del Carmen

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Rodríguez (no dates known), "¡Un socorro tardío!" in which the voice of an indigent mother seeks the piety of another woman: "Señora, por piedad, una limosna,/ que el hijo de mi amor muere de hambre,/ que sus manos se hielan con el frío,/ y mis besos no pueden reanimarlo" (García de Coronado 211). The voice of the beggar in this poem speaks of motherhood in the expected terms of nurturing and love, thus confirming a belief in traditionalist views of women's bodies and the role of women. Clearly, some of these poets did not remain relegated to the domestic sphere, having joined the armed struggle and raised their families in the *manigua* or aiding the cause of independence as activists and couriers. *Mambisa*s viewed mothering in terms of personal responsibility, a value not at all discordant with the cause of independence, but on the contrary deemed exemplary of *cubanidad.* While mothering and feminism have been sometimes at odds, it is useful to remember that motherhood has been employed as a powerful strategy to bring about political change.[7] Pointing to the complex relationship between Western feminism and motherhood, Chase and Rogers have stated:

> At different times, in different contexts, and from differing social locations, feminists have treated motherhood *as an oppressive and an empowering experience*; a source of alienation from and connection to their bodies; a form of work that is

enervating and rewarding; a relationship that constrains women's autonomy and invites their personal growth; a cause for distance from and a bridge to other women; a motivator of conservative and progressive political action (Chase and Rogers 2001: 9; my emphasis).

Oppressive in its demands and empowering in its promise, the centrality of motherhood to the Cuban wars of independence cannot be overstated. *Mambisas* came to be heralded as exceptional women willing to surrender their children to fight for the ideals of the nascent patria. Mariana Grajales Cuello, mother of Afro-Cuban war heroes and patriots Antonio and José Maceo became the supreme example in the iconography of the *mambisa* mother. Grajales died in exile in Jamaica after having surrendered her four sons to the war (Miguel and Marcos in addition) and lived the entirety of the Ten Years War running hospitals and provisions for the war camps, becoming known as the 'woman who does not cry' (Henderson 142). After her death, she developed into a revered image of *mambisa* sacrifice, patriotism, and self-abnegation, a symbol of motherhood that encompassed "total and selfless dedication to a cause, sacrificing home, husband and children to war" (Stubbs 313). Recognition of the sacrifice of mothers to the war appears in a long poem by Rosa Krüger (1847-1881) entitled "Después de la victoria" (1872), in which the poet adopts a male voice, specifically that of a soldier returning home. Here, the mother's misery in seeing her

son off to battle is depicted in traditional terms, that is, as women's ambivalence towards war:

> --¡Oh, madre! –prorrumpe --¡oh, mísera anciana!
> No burló el instinto tu fiel corazón:
> Al marchar tus hijos, dijiste: --Mañana
> Moriré, y un hombro mi cabeza cana
> No hallará en su apoyo, ni dulce calor. (84)

Krüger's poem is of unique interest to an understanding of the sacrifice the war demanded of women, mothers in particular. In Krüger's poem, the doleful mother's ambivalence offers a contrast of sorts to the commitment and obligation of *mambisa* mothers to provide sons to the war. Overtones of feminist resistance appear in Krüger, for whom the cause of the war may not have been as clear as to women who were on the frontlines (literally in many cases), such as Afro-Cuban *mambisas* who undoubtedly even more so than their white counterparts, sent their sons to war and fought on their own to gain emancipation for themselves and the nation. Theirs was a motherhood committed to action due to their belief that independence would result in political and social transformation. In the last stanza of Krüger's poem, the male voice of the soldier expresses the gratitude of the nation. This recognition is the greatest

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reward that befalls the mother's sacrifice: "Llegaron, señora, tus horas de duelo;/ la patria te adorna de hermoso laurel/ … "(Krüger 84). It is significant that the expression of glory comes from the male poetic voice rather than the voice of the mother. It points to the reality that while women were heralded as patriots of the wars, their visibility was associated foremost with the services they provided to the war effort as mothers, wives or daughters, nurses, couriers, and the like –that is to say, within the conventional roles of nurturing.

Ultimately, motherhood came to define not just the role of *mambisas* but their merit and essence –they were viewed "as women whose bodies were physically incapable of producing anything other than Cuban patriots" (Ferrer 127). Cuban mothers were vital to the success of the war as Cuban rebels sought and expected the unwavering support of family women when they took arms and disappeared in the *manigua*. Indeed, many did, but Krüger's hesitant mother provides a dissenting image of the steely *mambisa* mother that Grajales came to represent. In her pain and ambivalence, Krüger's mother is suggestive of a kind of resistance, unspoken of or perhaps even suffocated.

Mambisa poets paid homage to duty, glory, and sacrifice. Theirs was a collective voice that captured the hopes of a generation of women who linked their own liberation to that of the nascent patria. Reaching beyond the grand discourse of

nation, they depicted the reality of war as they denounced violence and injustice, and gave voice to the dispossessed, displaced, orphaned, and impoverished masses the war created. Written by women with very diverse histories and circumstances, these poems are personal testimonies as well as statements of resistance to the domination of the *madre patria*. The frequent focus on the plight of mothers and orphaned children in the work of mid-to-late century women writers asserts the responsibility and duty of Cuban women to a war that would herald social and racial equality as its ultimate goal. Their voices call for solidarity among women and envisage the potential for social change inherent in such a unity. More importantly, this group of poets gave testimony of the dire realities of war and recorded the devastating cost of national freedom to the individual and collectively to all Cubans.

Ana Garcia Chichester,
University of Mary Washington

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Notes

1.Ana Betancourt Agramonte (b. 1834) appeared before the first Constitutional Assembly of the Cuban Republic in Arms gathered in Guáimaro in 1869. There, Betancourt spoke to the assembly hoping to promote a unified political and ideological direction for the insurrection. She raised her voice to demand that the Constitutional text being prepared by the delegates to the Assembly include, in addition to Cubans of African descent, the liberation of Cuban (white) women. In her speech to the Constitutional Assembly, Betancourt denounced the subjugation of Cuban women, demanding that their liberation become a part of the *mambí* vision for the new nation. She hoped that Cuban men, who had eradicated "the enslavement of

birth and race, will dedicate their generous spirits to gain the rights for those who are today, in the war, their sisters in faith" (Rodríguez de Cuesta; my translation).

2.Later in the century, Sofía Estévez also wrote poems dealing with her exile abroad; there are many examples of the theme, as for example in the work of Mercedes Matamoros (1851-1906), Nieves Xenes (1859-1915) and Aurelia del Castillo (1842-1920), all of whom lived in exile during the last war and continued writing after the establishment of the Republic.

3.See note 1 on the speech by Betancourt to the Constitutional Assembly at Guáimaro. The inclusion of women in the ideology of the mambises was not to be realized. The liberation of women was left out of the constitutional text in Guáimaro and it did not find its way into the constitutional text of the first Republic (Díaz Vallina 2-3).

4.General Polavieja distinguishes between Weyler, the masterful strategist, and his reputation as a "butcher" of his enemies. He makes clear Cubans have reasons to fear both facets: "No es solamente á Weyler, el soldado y habil estrategista (porque habile [sic] es, el hombre, maestro en el arte de desenvolver tropas) sino á Weyler, el bruto,

el devastador de haciendas, el destructor de familias y ultrajador de mujeres, á quien temen" (*El maldito machete*).

5.The Casa de Recogidas was a mental asylum as well as a prison for female prostitutes and delinquents. Conditions in the Casa were abhorrent as *mambisas* had to share space with sick women and septic conditions prevailed. During the wars it would become "one of the principal establishments where Cuban women who were detained due to their revolutionary participation in the wars of 1868 and 1895 would be held" (Alvarez Estévez 71; my translation). Conditions in the Casa were abhorrent as *mambisas* had to share space with sick women and septic conditions prevailed.

6.Though less notorious than Evangelina Cossío's captivity in Havana, Cancino's imprisonment did capture the attention of a U.S. reporter. A *New York Times* article dated Jan. 5, 1896 ("Tactics of the Cubans") contained this note: "Another woman is in chains in the castle at Santiago de Cuba. She is Señora Manuela Cancino, whose husband was killed in the last war. She has taught at a girls' school in Canafechuela [Campechuela] for many years. Recently she made a flag for the rebels, and her scholars made badges. She sent medicines to the wounded rebels. She claims to be an agent of the Red Cross Society, but the Government insists that no society has the

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right to aid Cubans." Spanish authorities moved Cancino from Santiago de Cuba to Havana's Casa de Recogidas and then later to Isla de Pinos. The end of the war found her living in poverty with her daughter María. She died in 1900 (Cartaya Cotta).

7.An example from the past century is the case of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina during the 1980s. On the dichotomy between political action and the Madres, critics maintain that by defining the group's identity in their shared role as mothers, the Madres reinforced the assumption that childrearing and nurturing were exclusively the responsibilities of women (Howe). As evidence of the conflicting values inherent in motherhood, the Madres exploited the values of motherhood to challenge the authority of a military *junta,* while at the same time, feminists contend, their tactic promoted the concept of motherhood as a set of "'universal, immutable, and eternal values … forever fixed'" (Taylor cited by Howe 45).