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**“Toward Being a Complete Woman”:
REFLECTIONS ON MOTHERING IN SANTIAGO DE CUBA**

BY HANNA GARTH

Studying women, work, and household life in contemporary Cuba

ON A HOT SUMMER AFTERNOON as I sat in a typical Santiago de Cuba living room sharing the electric fan with five family members spanning four generations, Cori ran up the stairs, burst into the living room, and exclaimed, “You are not an anthropologist!” Everyone in the room looked to me for an answer, but I just had a puzzled look on my face. Cori continued, “Anthropologists study artifacts and bones; they study things of the past that already happened; they try to piece together how the past made us who we are today. You say that you study food and household life today, but that can’t be anthropology. You can’t study the food consumption of today and be an anthropologist.”

Still sitting by the fan, Abuela Carla, a self-identified mulatta woman in her late sixties who has lived in Santiago de Cuba all of her life, said to me, “He is crazy, don’t listen to him,” as she tried to calm down her feverish great grandson, Obalo. Just as Obalo was falling asleep his mother, Abuela Carla’s granddaughter Yaicel, returned from her temporary summer job at Carnival museum to breastfeed him. Her

own mother, Gema, also sitting with us by the fan, moving slowly in the rocking chair shook her head and said:

It is time for that boy to get off the tit, what are you going to do when you have a real job you cant just be coming home to give your babies the tit. He is 18 months old, it's time.

Yaicel looked at me, rolled her eyes, and pulled down her shirt to breastfeed Obalo. Her mother retorted, “Don’t look to her, she comes from a developed country where women work and children learn independence. She doesn’t even live with her mother anymore!” Gema stood up, buttoned her pants, slipped on her house shoes and stomped upstairs to watch the afternoon telenovela.

The connections between development, sovereignty, and women working outside the home are central to the Cuban state ideology since the 1959 revolution, which lifted formal and informal constraints on women’s lives. Fidel Castro described the

changes that were taking place in women’s private and public lives as a “revolution within a revolution.” The revolutionary Cuban government adopted the standard position of Marxism that true sexual equality can be established only through a socialist revolution—thus, for Cuban women gender parity was not gained through a women’s movement but a socialist movement. Although it took some time before there were observable differences in women’s lives, by the mid 1980s there were clearly substantial benefits of the 1959 revolution for Cuban women, especially regarding employment opportunities.

Over the past 50 years the Cuban government has implemented many programs designed to improve women’s rights and expedite women’s participation in the workforce. Article 44 of the Cuban constitution states that “men and women have equal rights in economic, political, cultural and social endeavors as well as within the family. The Cuban state guarantees women the same opportunities and possibilities as men, so that women can achieve

full participation in the development of the country” (Gaceta Oficial). Since the mid 1970s, the government has stressed the nuclear family as normative. The 1975 family code upholds the family as the singular “base cell of society” (Bengelsdorf 1997). An official program to support the proclamation of the family as the base cell of society was established in 1992 to help ease of process childbearing for working women by covering their salaries 3 months prior to and 3 months after the birth of a child. An additional unpaid 6 months of leave may be taken and mothers are guaranteed the right to return to their jobs. Such benefits are seen as part of state efforts to “create conditions that accomplish equality” (Gaceta Oficial; Miller 2002). The state childcare system is another way that the state attempts to create conditions that accomplish equality. Currently there are approximately 1,000 state subsidized, full-day childcare programs in Cuba, providing care for 184,000 children.

Despite these government programs, women have not achieved parity in many arenas of work and household life in contemporary Cuba. While it is true that the role of men in household work varies widely along social and class lines, men are still generally conceived of as breadwinners whose primary work is outside the home. As Pertierra notes, typically the male contribution to the household will consist of “generating income to cover domestic





expenses, organizing house and furniture repairs, and running errands requiring lifting (Pertierra 2008: 746).” Reca and colleagues found that in Havana 81% of women surveyed did most of the household work, a proportion that increases moving eastward across the country, in Cienfuegos it was 83% and in Guantanamo 96% (Bengelsdorf 1997: 231).

In my own research on the daily processes of household food acquisition and consumption, I have observed that women are almost always in charge of the time-consuming household work of standing in line for rations and household goods, going from market to market looking for the most affordable foods, or waiting by the door for street vendors to come by with the day’s fare (Garth 2009). Although the state has upheld the nuclear family as normative, I have found that Cuban families tend to consist of extended kin, and include fictive kin and multiple generations within one household. Rather than the state daycare centers, it is often this extended family that helps to raise children in contemporary Cuba. Grandmothers, aunts, and cousins are charged with the primary caregiving for babies and toddlers while their young mothers work and uncles, brothers, cousins, and neighbors might watch children briefly while mothers or other caregivers run errands and conduct the work necessary to run the household. Children tend to be cared for by kin both because the state-

subsidized services are somewhat difficult to procure and because this seems to be preferred over such services. This is certainly the case with Abuela Carla's house.

On that same hot summer day, after Yaicel breastfed Obalo, Carla put him down for a nap. While smoking unfiltered Cuban cigarettes beside the fan Carla confided in me:

I have worked my whole life. Since I finished the 4th grade, which was the last year of school I did before working as a domestic in people's houses. I worked in houses before the revolution, and after, nothing changed. I always had to come home after cooking and cleaning on the other side of town to do the same thing in my house. I worked for them all day long and then I would sew for extra money at home at night. I raised my own five children without any help, and then I raised all of their children, and now I am raising their children. Their father was in the street. It was really hard, but I worked, I worked for everything. I went to the market, I made the food, I raised pigs and chickens to sell for us. Now I am almost 70 years old and I don't work outside the home anymore but I still do everything around here. The only reason I had to quit doing other work is because of my eyes, my glaucoma; otherwise I would have worked until I died. But you see,

I'm still working, I am raising my grandkids and great grandkids—they are here all the time and do you see their mothers? Even if they [their mothers] were here they wouldn't know what to do. I work and work and work. I am tired, but I know that I will raise these babies until I die.

Carla's story is typical of many of the women from her age range, skin color, and class background who have participated in my research thus far. Her household consists of four generations of women still living under one roof. Carla clearly stresses that her efforts within her household to care for her family should be viewed as work. Indeed she reiterates that the work was hard, enduring, and ultimately tiring for her. Carla's work outside the home, as a "domestic" in the homes of Santiagueros with more financial means has historically been a typical job for women of her background. Through working as a "domestic" she honed the skills necessarily for maintaining a household and childrearing that she would later use to raise her own children, their children, and now their children.

Carla notes that her own children, now grandmothers themselves, and their children, now mothers, "wouldn't know what to do" to maintain a household and raise a family. This reference requires some contextual explanation. Carla's children grew up in the midst of Cuba's transition to





socialism. Her children and grandchildren have always lived under the socialist system that encouraged women's work outside the home and supported this with the childcare programs described above. From Carla's point of view, these efforts to bring women into the workforce were the reason that her daughters never learned how to mother.

A few days later I was walking with Yai-cel from a drum and dance performance in the park back to her house. She had to go back to breastfeed and lamented that she couldn't stay and drink rum with her friends. She and I are the same age but she has two children and two marriages already and I have had none. As we are walking up the hill she sighs and says:

You are so lucky that you get to live on your own with your own apartment. You get to travel, be independent. I wish that I could live alone like you, with just my husband and my children, but I don't think it will ever happen. I will always be like a child living with my grandmother and mother, I will never be a complete woman—just the husband and the kids that's all that I have toward being a complete woman.

She paused and continued:

Why don't you have children yet? I know you said that you wanted to fin-

ish school but you are so old. How do you do it? You must feel so strange.

Yaicel, after thinking through her own desires to become a more “complete woman,” realized that I, the one lucky enough to live on my own, did not have the other elements she considered necessary to be a “complete woman”—a family of my own. By asking, “how do you do it?” she was empathizing with my own situation. I realized that from her perspective we both lacked something crucial to becoming adults, to becoming “complete women.” For her, it was the lack of independence and the lack of a space for her own family in which she could develop her skills for maintaining a household and mothering her children.

Yaicel’s reflections complement Carla’s notion that her own daughters and granddaughters have not been socialized into the same practices of mothering and running a household. However, although they do not share the *same* mothering practices both have their own unique ways of mothering. Nevertheless the local notion of what it means to be a mother and a “complete woman” do not coincide with Yaicel’s practice of mothering. Both of these women tend to foreground the drawbacks of intergenerational mothering, but they would certainly recognize that there are benefits to this arrangement as well. Mothering is not a static, ahistorical prac-

tice and it is true that changes in the state do affect mothering and the status of women, however as this case reveals economic and political changes do not necessarily change local notions of gendered divisions of labor, rights, or social status even from women’s perspectives. Following Sherry Ortner’s (1974) argument that the transformation of the status of women cannot be achieved solely through changes in social institutions, I have shown here that despite strong state efforts toward gender parity in the workplace local sociocultural ideologies of mothering are still conflated with womanhood, it is even seen to be critical to the local concept of “complete woman[hood].”

My work shows how state policy and programming may have achieved the intended consequences—getting more women into the workforce. However, in order to achieve this more household work was shifted onto grandmothers leaving a generation of women with the notion that womanhood is conflated with motherhood but without the skills and space for their own mothering.



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