ACADEMIC ARTICLE

TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE HISTORY OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION OF 1959

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Abstract

The article claims that most historiography of the Cuban revolution of 1959 has omitted women, people of colour, and to some extent student youth and labourers. The shorter first part of the paper presents reasons of historical context and dominant Euro-male mindset that help explain why histories of Cuba’s and other revolutions omitted women and people of colour until recent scholarship. Then, excerpts from oral testimonials of three activists in revolutionary movements of the 1950s give a livelier picture of how Afro-Cubans, women and youth provided the backbone and vast networks that kept alive and pushed forward the more highly celebrated guerrilla forces that came to power, led by Fidel Castro. Twentieth-century Cuban revolutionary context and continuity is evident in the quotes from Aida Pelayo, a leader of the civic coalition Mujeres Martianas in the 1950s, about her student days in the 1930s.

Keywords: revolutions, historiography, revolutionary directorate, Afro-Cuban, women, Cuban oral histories.
INTRODUCTION

“Distinctions between the past and present were drawn without difficulty, with almost celebratory unanimity” (Pérez 1988: 315), when six million Cubans ushered in a victorious revolution in January 1959. The what, when and where have been well established by several historical accounts.1 WHY people were involved in bringing down the Batista regime is also established, although the reasons are not unanimous. But WHO were the most involved and HOW they carried out a massive revolution are far from settled questions in Cuban historical studies. Scholarship on race and gender offers hopeful shifts toward a more inclusive history of the 1959 revolution, as well as for other periods of Cuban history, other regions of Latin America, even the rest of the world. This article offers, first, some historical background that helps explain why the histories of Cuba’s and other revolutions have omitted women and people of colour until more recent scholarship. Second, it presents excerpts from oral histories (testimonies) of three activists in revolutionary movements of the 1950s to give us a livelier picture of how Afro-Cubans, women and youth provided the backbone that kept alive and pushed forward the more highly celebrated guerrilla forces led by Fidel Castro.

Historical Change – Some Background Notes

We remind ourselves of the evolving nature of historiography, which changes more quickly in times of social radicalisation. There are many reasons why earlier versions of history of the 1959 revolution were so exclusionary. The explanation goes back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and the beginnings of Cuban nationalism. The very first European considerations of women as part of the body politic, and of slaves and their descendants as human beings with rights, began in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, women and African-descended peoples would be seen throughout most of the Western hemisphere for another two centuries as appendages or property of primarily white European-descended men.

The very concepts of the “Rights of Man and Citizen” were written with a vision of two spheres – the public and the private household, with men in the former and women in the latter. Among Rousseau, Montesquieu, Condorcet and others, many asked, “Was it even possible for women to be enlightened?” They asked that question, while making the intellectual arguments for education,

1 Pérez-Stable (2012), as well as sweeping narratives by Pérez (1988), Thomas (1971), Domínguez (1978), and more recent accounts.
liberty, legal status and political rights for all men as equal citizens. Three centuries ago, some argued that, if a woman were educated and participated in public life, she quickly would become masculine. Yet the Enlightenment laid a foundation for change in Locke’s First Treatise on government, in which he used the biblical phrase Honour thy father and mother to include women in the discourse of social theory. In the Second Treatise, he considered the first social contract to be a voluntary compact between men and women. (Kerber 1997).2

Almost simultaneous ways of thinking about human rights and nationhood were voiced by Felix Varela and others who were developing similar ideas in Spain’s largest Caribbean colony. In Britain’s largest colonies in North America, new ideas were also emerging. And those ideas were developing alongside the radicalisation that led to the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century. Cuban nationalism and other anti-imperial sentiments travelled quickly throughout the Western hemisphere, where revolts and revolutionary wars uprooted Spanish, British and French colonial powers, challenged the Portuguese and altered the possibilities for self-emancipation and abolition of slavery (Andrews 2004: 40–84).

Nevertheless, human equality seemed a long way off. The North American colonies in their 1787 Continental Congress decided for reasons of both taxation and Congressional representation that each enslaved African-descended person would be considered worth three-fifths of a vote for her or his property owner, in a lopsided compromise politically favouring plantation-dominated states over small farming states. At that time, however, no women were included as voting citizens, and it would take a massive civil war to enable men to elect Black representatives to the US Congress.

Yet an idea of men and women voluntarily making a contract loomed in the background of philosophy. Other thinkers began to deal with the question of women’s roles and with the idea that slaves were human beings whose “inalienable” rights (and the massive fruits of their labour) had been forcefully stolen from them. But women had one way to be considered part of the body politic.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideals of women emphasised the ancient Greek example of Spartan madres de sacrificios, mothers who raised their sons to sacrifice themselves for the good of the polis. We find this in the Cuban patriotic mother Mariana Grajales, who raised and lost nearly all her sons to the cause of Cuban independence from Spain. Thus, women were important for the political advancement of all, but only as mothers and

2 See Kerber 1997: 41–5 on Locke; see other chapters of Part I that deal with women in revolutionary times and politics in the US.
indoctrinators of patriotism in their children. These sentiments of ideal womanhood still exist in parts of today’s world.

However, something far different began to arise in the late eighteenth century, when women helped lead the French Revolution. On 5 October 1789, someone began beating a drum at the market in eastern Paris. She was calling to arms the women of Paris for the famous March to Versailles for bread, one of the most prominent and early actions of the French Revolution. The women picked up thousands more people as they passed the City Hall.

With their kitchen knives and pitchforks, they acquired more deadly weapons like swords and muskets, and they were given enough food for the day. But they wanted an end to food problems in general, not only for one day, so 15,000 of them (with some men) marched on to the palace at Versailles. While King Louis XVI’s queen, Marie Antoinette, uttered the infamous phrase, “Let them eat cake”, the king became convinced, after armed demonstrators entered the palace rooms, that he had to return to Paris and carry out the reforms he had agreed to earlier.

This action, the March on Versailles, has long been recognised by French historiography as a key turning point in the 1789 revolution. In the course of the next four years of revolution, women continued to be active, including in political mobilisations and in clubs for self-improvement in the new republic. The year 1793 saw the execution of king and queen, the insurrection against more moderate forces and the rise of Robespierre and the Jacobins. Unfortunately, the male leadership became paranoid that women would be manipulated by the conservative clergy of the Church, so they outlawed all women’s clubs in October 1793 (Hunt 1984). 3 Apparently, they never realised what a bad mistake that would be for themselves.

The revolutionary government outlawed slavery in all French colonies in February 1794. However, by 9 Thermidor (new calendar), or 27 July 1794, the excesses of egalitarianism took their political toll, and Robespierre was arrested. This time, there were no women’s clubs to organise opposition to closing the Jacobin clubs and dismantling the radical laws against the privileged. After a few tumultuous years, Napoleon Bonaparte came to power on 18 Brumaire, or 9 November 1799, and he would later be credited with stopping both the radicals and the counter-revolutionary wars of the Vendee (Tilly 1976). 4 But the enlightened ideas that had inspired the revolutionaries travelled far from Europe to

3 She also illuminates the gender symbolism of “Lady Liberty” in the early years, compared to Napoleon’s later symbol of Mars, the god of war.
4 Tilly explains the counter-revolution in this work.
regions where self-emancipation and revolts had been increasing in scope for more than two centuries.\(^5\)

The French colonies saw a series of uprisings, plots and other actions in which women would have had to be active, especially in the slave revolts – and women also suffered the severe repression that followed those efforts. In the Caribbean, with the Revolution of Saint Domingue in 1791, it was clear the former slaves had freed themselves through rebellion against the French planters. They took seriously the French revolutionary messages of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Napoleon, however, sought to reinstate slavery and his troops tried several times, unsuccessfully, to defeat the free soldiers, who were finally victorious. In 1804, they declared their new, free country “Haiti, the proud Black Republic” (Helg 2019).\(^6\)

As the Haitian revolutionaries fought French troops, we can assume, based on other Caribbean history, that former female slaves also helped fight off Napoleon’s invaders. In the English-speaking Caribbean, legends still abound of Jamaican Granny Nandy, a leader of Maroon fighters and societies. Nanny Grigg, the historically documented literate enslaved woman of Barbados, helped instigate a major action, the Bussa Rebellion in 1816, with some estimates as high as 3,900 participants (Beckles 1985, cited by Helg 2019: 256–8).

Many strong women resisted British colonial rule, and their stories are still being uncovered by historians. Not only during the 1765 Morant Bay Rebellion, but also from the beginning of slavery in the Western hemisphere, Maroon societies had been formed by people of colour who had run away from the plantations and mines. By self-emancipation, via marronage, revolt or other means, Africans and Amerindians sought freedom from the earliest years of slavery. The *quilombos* were large-scale in Brazil, and many smaller settlements arose throughout the mountainous islands of the Caribbean. While it is true that some women were kidnapped from plantations by free fighters, it is also true that Maroon communities were protected by defence involving both female and male fighters. Women also helped enforce a strong ethic of silence to authorities and other strangers (Shepherd et al. 1995).

In twentieth-century Russia, the February revolution, like the classic French Revolution, began by *women leading* the first major actions. The opposition parties had thought it was too early to challenge the Tsar’s rule, but on

\(^5\) Miranda (1989) discusses political and social philosophy during the movement for Cuban independence, which arose in the global context of ideas surrounding the French Revolution.

\(^6\) For a longer historical view including the horrors of the Middle Passage, slavery and rebellion, see James (1963).
International Women’s Day, 23 February 1917 (8 March, Gregorian calendar), women textile workers of St Petersburg went from factory to factory calling out others, then brought men from the steel mills into their giant march – also for bread, which had grown scarce during the gruesome “Great” War between European monarchs (Trotsky 1932: 78–135).

But most historiography of both these major social revolutions left out half the social component. Similarly, in the North American fight for independence from British rule, women were both supporting and active fighters, as were many African-descended people in the eighteenth-century battles against British colonialism. However, all but a few individuals disappeared from most written history of the “American” Revolution against British rule. “History Can do it no Justice”, lamented historian Elizabeth F. Ellet in 1848 (Kerber 1997: 73).

In the Mexican Revolution of 1910, large numbers of soldaderas participated not only as cooks, nurses and domestic supporters of their husbands in battle. Some were fighters with guns, and others helped in the loading of rifles and took the guns of the wounded to fight on (Salas 1990; Arce 2018).

Summarising these notes on the histories of previous revolutions, we explain the omissions by attitudes held before Enlightenment ideals considered all human beings as having equal and inalienable rights.

Jumping over four centuries of glorious history of slave revolts, active Cuban women, student martyrs and the often heroic lives of Afro-Cubans, we arrive at the 1990s, when Cubans began rescuing their own history from obscurity. By the late 1990s, women and Afro-Cubans were raising social criticism of continuing inequalities and racist practices – despite the formal legal elimination of discrimination. Looking to the history of the 1959 Revolution, we find that so many, perhaps the majority of participants, have been little more than a footnote in mainstream historiography. Fortunately, there are new trends to find and publish the heretofore virtually hidden dynamics.

This report is one little step of the many taken by scholars seeking to discover how a revolution was made victorious, and by whom, in mid-twentieth-century Cuba.

Methods

Questioning more than 40 participants in the 1990s, four decades after their days of youthful activism and risk-taking, I aimed to answer the two questions WHY and HOW they became active revolutionaries in the years 1952–9. I asked open-ended questions, interjected follow-up questions for clarification and let participants talk as much as they liked. I sought an idea of WHO was participating and HOW they struggled to rid their country of dictatorship. Selection for
interviews was only partially by recommendations from other interviewees. My Cuban mentor, (the late) Dr José Antonio (“Pepe”) Tabares del Real, historian, selected and approached a cross-section of people with the political and gender variety I had requested. Here, I present answers from three people to discover WHO were the participants, and HOW they helped make the revolution. I selected only three interviews for this article in order to convey richer detail.

Women, Afro-Cubans and Youth

Until the last two or three decades, the role of large numbers of women was practically obliterated from the histories of the Revolution, while a few top personalities were held up as female examples to emulate. Even the published pictures from the Sierra Maestra kept in the state archives reflect this view (Sweig 2002). These few were real leaders, truly excellent (Randall 2015), but they were not representative of the thousands of women who participated in vital, numerous ways all over the island.

Successful revolutions, especially social revolutions, by definition, involve enormous numbers of people (Skocpol 1979; Foran 1997). The networks of opposition had to include women to succeed, and future analysis of their pivotal place connecting networks may help explain the crucial roles of women in past revolutions. Val Moghadam (1997) helped explain the relation between gender and scholarship on revolutions. Kampwirth (2002) compared women in various guerrilla movements, Maloof (1999) compared Cuban and Chilean women’s...
activism, and Klouzal (2008) reported research on Cuban women active in the revolutionary forces of the 1950s. Serious supporters of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions had begun to raise questions on women and revolution (Randall 1992).10

“Youth make revolutions” is a truism, and my readings and interviews do show that was the case in Cuba between 1952 and 1959. Students, educated youth, were often privileged because they did not have to go work from early to late, nearly every day of their lives. Less privileged young people, including some dynamic leaders from communities of the oppressed, joined with students to break whatever restrictions were holding them down. Another truism, “the future belongs to the youth”, is more obvious during revolutionary upheaval and change. However, the mobilising and organising role of Cuba’s youth-based, mostly student Revolutionary Directorate has been downplayed or missing from many accounts of the revolution’s success in coming to power.

Similarly, the massive numbers of Afro-Cubans, especially in eastern Cuba, have been somewhat unseen until historians searched deeper for the facts about Cuba’s revolutionary movements. This article presents accounts, first, by a seemingly higher level armed struggle activist and commander of revolutionary forces in Santiago de Cuba and in the larger Oriente Province. Second, we introduce from Trinidad a skilled clandestine activist and member of the Revolutionary Directorate. Both of them were very young; he was a high school student when beginning revolutionary actions, and she was 14, a young worker with a sixth-grade education, who paid for private lessons in typing, shorthand and English.

The third person, an older woman, had been active since 1930, when she fought against the Machado dictatorship. Two decades later, as a leader in one of the most active civic organisations, Mujeres Martianas, she represents the continuity of Cuba’s revolutionary heritage, women activists in it and the large number of people in civic organisations. The interviews ranged from 90 minutes to more than three hours each; here, we present only excerpts.

We’ll begin with Dr Luís Alberto Clergé Fabra, who was born and raised in Santiago de Cuba. He is the light-skinned Afro-Cuban son, in his own words, of the executive in the justice system of the Audiencia (Court of Justice) of Santiago de Cuba ... with supposedly independent judges. None of them could belong to any political parties but, of course, all the judges had their personal connections with different tendencies or political parties...
My mother was a housewife. After the triumph of the revolution, she worked. The philosophy was *machista* – everywhere. Although my father was very progressive in many ways, he was *machista* in this sense that she should not go to work. . . .

The [Batista] coup d’etat was in 1952 and it created, first, the students’ struggle to make a movement. We made a fairly large student organisation with a cultural facade but it was revolutionary. We called ourselves the *Bloqué Estudiantil Martiano* (Student Bloc of Martí’s Followers). Later, I contacted Frank País, a neighbour and a close friend; we lived near each other in 1954. He had a girlfriend at the Baptist Church, and he had to go to Church every Sunday for the service. . . . The church was around five blocks from each house, so we could go there in minutes. I lived less than 100 meters from Frank . . .

One day, he said, “I know what you’re doing, organising the resistance, not the political resistance, but the armed political resistance.” Not everyone was for the armed resistance. . . . Not all those who *said* they were for the armed struggle really joined it. But nobody wanted to return to the status quo before the coup. To get rid of Batista, they wanted to make a revolution – but maybe not so radical. . . .

The robber-officials physically, literally, carried away money from the National Treasury. One was a Señor Alemán, who I believe was Vice Minister of Education. In terms of that epoch, some US specialists calculated a fortune of 80-100 million dollars missing from the Cuban Treasury. The Cubans who had the most property in Daytona Beach [Florida] were Batista and this Alemán.

My involvement in the movement was [first] in the student movement, taking buses or going on foot, and getting hit with police clubs on student demonstrations. I remember some of the SIM (Military Intelligence Services) were very regimented. They came to a student demonstration and got out of a jeep to stop the demonstration. One had a truncheon in his hands. There is a bamboo tree . . . They made clubs of them and these sticks can put out an eye. I was very young –

I saw them trying to hit all the students. One of those times, I was hit in the head and it was cut open. This kind of thing occurred a lot. The students often received such “courteous” treatment from these “gentlemen”.

Francie [Frank País] had a distinct understanding: If you are going to struggle against the military, you can’t do it with roses. There was a need to organise a military movement.11 The student struggle was conceived as an open public

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11 See Hart Dávalos (1997: 58–62 and 87–101). Indeed, Frank and his organisers built such a force that Armando Hart Dávalos, a central national leader, first of the student federation and later of the Cuban revolutionary state, says of Oriente, “In this province was where the organization [26 July] was the most advanced.”
struggle. It led to arrests, and many of these students were proud to have their photos taken and have their names appear in the newspapers as student leaders, they liked it a lot – for their egos.

This is not compatible with clandestine work. The first thing you have to do as a clandestine fighter is to leave behind the regular activities. . . . With your picture in the paper, the police will be looking for you, or will see you, and take you prisoner. To be in clandestine action, [one had to go unnoticed] to attack a torturer, or to attack a property of the very rich, who were supporting the government – not all of them but most of them did – and the government was very dictatorial. But it had an economic base that sustained it to last longer.

At that time, Cuba had a one-crop economy, it lived on [sales of] sugar. The harvest was very important, so to attack a part of the harvesting was to weaken the economy and the sustenance of the government. Finally, the US government at that time helped Batista’s government in a very, very big way . . .

When Frank brought me into the clandestine movement, I brought him people that I had recruited, and he began to talk with them, to assess their views. . . .

There would be a cell or group of six, seven to ten people, and the leader of that cell was subordinated . . . to the leader of a larger group that included 40 or 60, but I am speaking of an earlier time, before 30 November 1956.12 My cell was very heterogeneous; we had students, workers, and we were eleven. . . . The principal groups were [then] directed by [a teacher] Pepita Teis, the second in command after Frank. Infante also was a teacher. Nearly all the [larger] groups were headed by teachers.

Another big group was led by two brothers, whose last name was Alvarez Alemán. Another very good group, the best one to me, was led by Miriano Díaz Fontaine. His brother had been assassinated by the Army. All these groups were led by Frank. . . .

Parallel to the clandestine structure of the 26 July movement, these groups that were working on 30 November 1956 – those that I mentioned earlier – created similar structures in all the country but primarily in the main centres of Santiago de Cuba and Havana. Of course, Havana was the capital and the largest. But in terms of strength, it was not as strong as Santiago. . . .

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12 The date of 30 November 1956 was when people of Santiago were to make a large action to divert attention from the landing of Granma, a boat bringing Fidel and other fighters back to Cuba.
Santiago de Cuba had suffered a very, very strong shock with the assault on the Moncada military barracks on 26 July 1953. It is an enormous structure with sturdy walls four or five blocks squared. The odour of cadavers you could smell for 100 metres away from the walls – about 60 of the attackers were victimised; 62 of them were shot, tortured – all those horrible things. Santiago de Cuba saw all this, a surprise because . . . of the brigades of youth who participated in the 1953 assault on Moncada and Bayamo, only three were from Santiago. An even bigger surprise for Santiago was the participation of women.

Something very important developed in Havana – the groups for action and sabotage. Frank was the national director for all the clandestine actions in the country. He was named by Fidel, who had enormous confidence in Frank, whose objective was to militarise these groups. From the struggle against Machado, and the revolution of 1933, there had been little discipline among the revolutionaries to assume their role as guardians. . . . Many of those combatants later were converted into gangsters, with no discipline to guard the conquests that had been made.

A revolution that does not have the capacity to defend its conquest or gains is condemned to die. It will not survive. And Frank was thinking about this future, that there would be no lynching, no vandalism by any of the groups, and that they would be committed to the cause. So, he wanted to convert these groups into a military organisation. He began this work, but it was interrupted by his death [30 Jul 1957] . . .

By the end of the last third, that is the last three or four months of 1957, a structure existed throughout the country: the squadrons of the urban militias. Already, these groups were no longer just “groups”. They had been converted into a military organisation. . . .

Santiago had four squadrons of about 1,000 fighters, with one commandante over all. The rest of the province had eight or ten squadrons and I was the commander of those, until I left for the Sierra [Sierra Maestra where Fidel had his troops]. In Oriente, there was no problem with creating the squadrons.¹³ In Havana, the leadership of the groups of acción y sabotaje did not like very much this idea of organising the groups into military squadrons. Finally, they accepted the idea and became part of the national organisation. At the triumph of the revolution, there was no vandalism; no blood was shed and nobody was killed extrajudicially. The militias immediately took and maintained control of the city, of public order. Why? Because they already had been organised. . . .

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¹³ For one of the many stories corroborating this view of the revolutionary struggle in Santiago, see Hart Dávalos (1997: chapter 7).
One squad had six men each. But they knew only themselves and perhaps a few others, but not the rest of the platoon of 20 or 21. Nor did they know who was in the larger company. Well, a squadron had hundreds (like a battalion of US troops). Each battalion had structures of a little more than 200 men. In Santiago, there were militia, organised in squadrons, with a well-defined leadership. There were around 1,000 men. Santiago was a much smaller city than Havana but it had a much stronger organisation. “The most heroic city” is an honorific title for Santiago.

Dr Clergé said a squad (or cell) was composed of six to ten men. I had interviewed earlier in Havana two women who each had been in charge of nine cells of eight or nine women each. Such a female structure extended with many other cells across the city and its suburbs. So, I asked him about women’s participation. Dr Clergé pointed out that women had many roles – and in many cases, only the women could have carried out some very important insurrectional activities.

**It Happened All Over the Island**

Regarding hiding fighters in their homes, he said,

Many, many . . . hid them in the foundation of the house. But the young women, they incorporated themselves into the armed struggle; they went on actions with us. For example, two actions I know well were repeated often in Santiago de Cuba, because I lived there. In Havana, I imagine they had more or less equal types of actions. Well, it happened all over the island. If we were going to have an armed action, with dynamite or something like that, the young woman would hide it under her skirts, and go with her “boyfriend” to plant it . . .

I went over all the province of Oriente searching for the arms that Fidel’s first group of 50 men needed – Frank sent me on that mission. There were only twelve trained fighters who had survived the landing of the *Granma*! But others arrived later and they needed arms. I was very lucky that three young girls accompanied me – later, I married one of them. When I found the armaments I was looking for, they protected me, because they’d begin to joke around and the guards would let us pass [through checkpoints on the roads].

The other thing is that we did not have a source of financing, nor opportunities to buy arms. What did the women do? They went to Miami, where there were groups of the 26th who were working to find arms. In those days, the fashion was the very large skirts [with stiff petticoats underneath]. On the inside of the skirts,
there were kangaroo bags, and they would carry the guns, in parts, and the bullets. For example, one time I went to pick up four young women, and three or four women had in their skirts 24 pistols — 24! And they had 72 magazines! [A 1950s *magazine* might have been the size of today’s clip for a handgun.]

The women were truly heroic, but not just for these actions. Women came on an airplane from Miami, headed for Veradero, a beach and tourist vacation area, including North American tourists, so it was under heavy military control. The women got off to change planes in Havana and had to wait to board another for Santiago de Cuba, where they arrived around midnight. With all this weight they were carrying, they could not go to the bathroom, not even to pee, in all that time — seven hours or more. And women did this many, many times . . . So, the women were not only “useful,” they took great risks, their safety was often compromised, and they were respected very much.

Another thing about the women is that some were mothers, married with families, who assumed these risks, including *facing more danger than many combatants*. Sometimes an older woman hid four to six young fighters in her house. She would share the family’s food with them, which was a tremendous help. Other times, the mother could not do that.

These women who were hiding those six, four, or two young men with guns, were assuming the exact same risks as the fighters. If the police or rural guards came in and found them, they would have killed everyone there. So, although these women were called and appeared in history as “collaborators”, for me they have always seemed to be combatants. And they had to conceal their participation.

When asked about the participation of Black Cubans in the revolutionary movement, he answered,

You have to analyse deeply this question.14 In the first place, racial discrimination in the country had separated the Black and a good part of the mestizo population, and relegated us to a secondary role in the society in general. The way that Blacks could gain access to a profession was not easy. For example, in Santiago there was only one Black medical doctor, a very good cardiologist. I remember him, and I don’t remember any other. So, they did not have access because of their class,

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because they came from very humble [poor] parts of the population. They could not finish their studies because they had to go to work.

The dictatorship utilised a lot that weakness . . . up to the year 1957, they managed to use this. When they captured a Black person who was a militant, they would say, “But what are you doing with these scoundrels? These are terrorists, they’re white, you’re black. If you think they care about you, you are crazy.” But this thing exploded somewhat.

Day by day, in the development of the struggle, consciousness began to change. For example, I was head of one of the four squadrons in Santiago . . . and in my squadron, I had various Black leaders – heads of groups, later the head of a company, or of a platoon – Mestizos also . . .

The revolution brought Black people equal opportunities. Sometimes people were mistaken a little about “equality.” It is not the same to say that because you can do very good things, you are equal. No, no. Equality means that because of your colour, you are not refused the opportunity to enter into a place, a social circle, a profession, or have access to enter the university. Of course, always, there remain some subliminal residues of discrimination, including that one is not conscious of the person. It is not that, formally, one is excluded because one is Black. Two examples: 1) the hair of a white person is pelo bueno (good hair), but the hair of a black person is pelo malo (bad hair) and 2) “You don’t know that person? That engineer? He wrote an article. He is skinny, black, but a very good person.” But? But?!

When asked about possible support for Batista because he had some degree of racial mixing, Dr Clergé responded:

If Batista had African blood, it was very far removed. He was not close to any Afro-Cuban community. His mother and father – I don’t know of any black person in their lives. This story was exploited to eliminate support for the revolutionary movement, to prevent more solidarity. 15 But . . . already, by 1958, we had many people of colour, who joined individually the revolutionary forces. Some person, maybe, was a little backward about having a black person marching next to him, but people of all colours were marching side by side. Here in Havana, Gerardo Abreu, well-known as “Fontán”, was head of all the clandestine forces of action here; he died – tortured and assassinated. He was head of everything, and he was Black! (Clergé 2018)

15 Dr Clergé’s views are supplemented by Benson’s (2016: 39) research concerning Batista’s efforts in the late 1950s to show a public link to Black social clubs and to selected Black professionals.
Breaking New Ground

In Cuba, Alejandro de la Fuente was one of the first major researchers to challenge the myth of equal opportunity and equality in Cuba. His ground-breaking work, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* shows how racism and racist violence had been used to systematically frighten whites up to the point of their frenzied massacre of thousands of black women, men and children in 1912.

The quotes from Dr Clergé have dealt mostly with the formation of the clandestine movement, aspects of racial participation, continuing racist attitudes, and the heroic actions of women. We saw that, at one point, he had been shifted from his post as commandeer of many clandestine units in Oriente province to go to the Sierra with Fidel’s forces. He is one of many (mostly male) activists of the clandestine urban underground who went to the mountains, especially when it became highly dangerous to remain active in a city. Interviews revealed that women continued to be active in the cities, although many of them also suffered arrests and terrible interrogations.

Michelle Chase (2015) is correct in her challenge to the concept of “the woman question” – as was Shayne (2004) – and in her call for a profound “reassessment of the insurrection and the earliest years of the revolution” as crucial for understanding the role women played in the revolution, and the processes by which they affected the outcome. Her linking of race, gender and class offers an important way to approach new research.

Position of Women in Cuba, Now and Then

As a global women’s movement challenged governments to have a higher percentage of women as top legislators and policymakers, Cuban women were outstripping men in their numbers in professional and managerial occupations. Politically, by 2019, 49 percent of the elected National Assembly were women.

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16 The tradition continues and deepens with excellent work, such as *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (Benson 2016), and *Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952–1962* (Chase 2015). The trend is very encouraging.

17 Sometimes, somehow, fighters were alerted when their names appeared on a hit list of Batista’s police or military intelligence.

18 Cushion (2016) raises the idea of the Cuban working class as a hidden force in making the revolution.
One-quarter of Cuba’s 22 ministries were headed by women, and a woman was one of five vice presidents of the Council of Ministers. In the smaller eight-member Council of State, headed by the President, three members were women (CIA 2019).

Feminist ideals have inspired Cuban historians to do research and write more about women activists. Gladys Marél García-Pérez (2005) has done a serious study of women fighters in western Cuba, complete with photos. Women were quite active in revolutionary armed warfare throughout the western part of the island. For broader discussion of twentieth-century women in Cuba, see Elvira Díaz Vallina (Díaz Vallina et al. 1997; Díaz Vallina and González Pages 2000), a leader in both the student and underground organisations, and now a retired professor from the University of Havana.

The research agenda needs to include the histories of these and other Cuban women activists, to see how they may or may not have been active in bringing about change, as they gained higher education, training and positions of greater responsibility. Enrique Oltuski, a key participant in the urban underground of the 26 July Revolutionary Movement, as it was named in the 1950s, commented about Aleida March (who is mostly known as Che Guevara’s wife),

She was one of many young women who were so crucial to the revolution. Someday I would like to write an entire book about Cuban women, because they played such an important role, not only during these days, but in all of Cuba’s history. (Oltuski 2002: 126).

Some of the oral histories I recorded with revolutionary activists suggested the breadth of female participation, although most of the women interviewed were living in the city of Havana and its suburbs. I have been told that the research on women’s participation in the revolution is still ongoing in Cuba. I hope so, because many of the older generation have reached the end of their lives, and only their personal archives, photos, news clippings and medals for participation will remain as evidence. How many “collaborators” were active “combatants” is a gendered question due to women’s vital and secret responsibilities (Clergé 2018). The latter title would have brought a monthly monetary bonus during the hard times of the 1990s and beyond for the dwindling number of female survivors.

19 For more statistics on Cuban women’s achievements, see an older posting by the American Association of University Women (AAUW 2011).
“La China” of the Revolutionary Directorate

One of the most interesting women I met outside Havana was called “La China de Trinidad”. In her story, we see the combination of class background, contact with students of the Revolutionary Directorate that she joined, and the influence of her Chinese-Cuban family.20

Former members of the Revolutionary Directorate suggested I go to Trinidad and interview “La China” (Alminda Alberd). The family with whom I stayed in Trinidad knew of her as the historian of the nearby village of Casilda.21

Born on 2 December 1939, Alminda Alberd was the first child of three. Their father was a fisherman, and her grandmother owned a coffee shop in Casilda. She attended the public elementary school for six years, which she described as a good education. Then, at age 13, she began to study English, typing and shorthand with a private teacher. He had lived in the United States, then settled in Casilda. Unable to find work after the coup by Batista, he rented a house and turned it into a private academy. Alminda credits that teacher with explaining the military golpe de estado (coup d’etat) in 1952 and many other events of those years.

He influenced my way of seeing the things that came after the coup d’etat. Although I was only 13 years old, I listened to my teacher. He really was an influence on me throughout my lifetime.

We had a free press, and I learned about the coup, all that was happening at the university, and what the students were doing. I read El Mundo, El País, Diario de la Marina – all these arrived here at Casilda. And Bohemia, too, a very good magazine. The figure José Antonio Echeverría was very well-known at the time. I knew of the special attack on Moncada [military barracks] led by Fidel Castro, who tried militarily to break the tyranny.

At 15, I was working in a cafeteria owned by my grandmother. I worked but at the same time I was still studying English and typing with the private professor. I worked and I paid the teacher who gave private classes, and I was learning to type and write shorthand, and he gave me a little English because I liked it.

20 See Choy et al. (2005) and López (2013), two books on Chinese Cubans, a segment whose histories also have been coming to light in English.

21 Casilda sits between the southern coast and the colonial-era town of Trinidad, where cobblestone streets stretch around the foothills that mark the southernmost beginning of the Escambray mountains.
When asked if any opposition or leftist press arrived in the area, or if any political parties opposing Batista were active there, she answered,

No, for example there was *Hoy* [daily paper of the Popular Socialist Party or PSP] but not in Casilda. In Trinidad, there were local newspapers with good editorials against the way things were going. There was no Orthodox Party, but there were civic organisations dedicated to fighting against things. They had distinct tendencies but not always political parties, at least not in the tiny town of Casilda. The best was in the periodical called *Vocero Cívico* [Civic Voice] that I read the most.

Nor did we have many other relations because we were young people. But always in the cafeteria where I worked young people would come, and that influenced me . . . In my house one could hear José Pardo, an *Ortodoxo* who had a radio hour. My father listened, so in my house there were conversations about the Orthodox Party, which was the hope of people who wanted a cleaning of the administration, which had many thieves, but that change did not arrive . . .

It is a thing that required us to make a revolution, so that was influencing me, and I read more issues of *Bohemia*, which was denouncing the crimes of Batista, week after week that passed, so I began to know about Fructuoso [Rodriguez] and José Antonio [Echevarría], through the press because they were national leaders, logically closer by way of their youthfulness. That was how . . . we formed a little cell and made contact with this organisation [the Directorio Revolucionario] – this was around 1957 – and so we began.

We began with some tasks, work of carrying letters . . . carrying out small actions of sabotage, or putting flags. To collect money, I sold *bonos* in the cafeteria. I sold them for both the 26 July and the 13 March movements. In reality, there was much unity in that there were assassinations of the youth of both the 26 July and the Revolutionary Directorate. In the Escambray, the DR were all professionals – even lawyers! – because their members came from the university. They [DR armed fighters] arrived late in the Escambray area.

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22 “Bonos” were a type of bond. People bought them as a way of helping the revolutionary movements buy uniforms, guns, ammunition, gasoline, whatever was needed to topple the dictatorship. They had a range of prices, from 1 to 20 pesos each, and they were sold for dollars in Florida and New York, and in foreign currencies in Bolivia, Caracas and elsewhere.

23 The DR was/is often referred to as the “13 March,” (trecce de marzo) after its 1957 attacks on the Presidential Palace and the main radio station on that date. Many of its leading members, including the charismatic José Antonio Echevarría, were killed, in part because the backup of arms they were expecting from allies did not arrive.
The Directorate, after the [1957] attack on the Presidential Palace, sent Eloy Gutierrez to the Escambray with the arms they had after the 13 March attack. They created the Front of the Escambray, then created the bases of Guanayara, a zone right here, with boundaries near these mountains. They created their base . . . near the mountains. Eloy was there and in this zone was Alfredo Peña [or Peño], who had been held as prisoner for six years by the army of Batista. He had been accused of corruption.

There also was a youth organisation called the Young Catholic Workers, who played a role. The people of the church seriously supported them, and supported combatants in the struggle . . . there were distinct pastoral leaders . . . They are religious and they have their line, but the Catholic youth were active. I know because I had contact with them, as they played a role in the clandestine struggle. And they supported the combatants . . .

Because of traditional family roles, inherited from Spain, the husband and father was dominant within households. The question of girls’ participation (such as going out alone at night, or going on a mission with a young man) posed a great challenge to the old values and practices. When asked if she as a young woman had any problems with her father, Alminda answered:

Yes, of course I had problems with papa, and I was developing social norms for myself, because it was not usual for a girl or young woman to go into the mountains with so many men, that was what people believed.

I didn’t fight with arms, I didn’t form a nucleus there, given that my [local] nucleus [already] had reached seven young people. There was an action here in this zone and afterward I was taken prisoner. They had a member of the Navy to watch the southern coast, and they grabbed and arrested me there in July 1958.

My family had to go to Santa Cruz del Sur, a tiny town . . . In 72 hours, my father, and my family there, who had relations with the army people, contacted them and, thanks to this, they released me. But they told my father that he had to keep me out of there, that I could not be there. So, I came home. I had made contact, and already Cubela [Rolando Cubela, a major commander of the Revolutionary Directorate’s forces] and Faure [Chomón, General Secretary of the Revolutionary Directorate] had come. Through a cell in Trinidad, I made contact with the Directorio, specifically Lorenzo Martinez Soler, a furniture mover who went up into the hills and back down again. So, I was able to go up and back in a clandestine network.
When I went up the mountain, Faure interviewed me when I arrived, and I explained everything to him. So they sent me to the Estado Mayor [high command of the opposition forces] and I began to work with mail, carrying various mail and messages up and down the mountains, and from the mountains, to Camaguey, to Placetas. The compañeros who entered the Escambray went up and down the mountains. And I had tremendously good luck because I landed in an organisation, the Revolutionary Directorate, that was an organisation of the University of Havana, which had an historical base . . .

Unlike some other participants, Alminda had not gone on to secondary school. When I asked if she had studied Martí, she replied,

I studied Martí more after going into the mountains. I had only a sixth-grade education and some rudimentary English and typing. But, really, after the triumph of the revolution, there was a great opening to study, and I studied history to become a teacher of history. Before I had worked, but after I could study, including Martí. Marx was unknown to us at the time of the revolution.

In the mountains, we knew of Martí, Agromonte, Máximo Gómez, the predecessors and fighters for Cuban independence, which served us well as examples for making a revolution, to make ourselves opponents of the tyranny. But in no moment were Marx and Engels mentioned. I never heard of them, let alone read anything by them.

There is an anecdote that is almost incredible: A young man who was studying medicine – his name was Ramón Gonzales Coro and he died in the armed struggle. He was a charming person and one day he told me he was teaching people how to arm and disassemble a 45 pistol. Then he said, “China, I’ll show you how.”

“Why,” I asked, “to bring down Batista?”

He answered, “No, China, not to bring down Batista, but to make a revolution.”

Then he began to explain, to give me a class about what was a revolution, why people make revolutions. He began . . . telling me things about Martí, equal to many of the classes given to many peasants and illiterate people who united around the struggle. So, revolution was explained, but I do not remember his ever speaking about a Marxist, nothing of that.

When asked, “With your role carrying messages, were you a leader of a cell or a group of youth?” Almida responded:
No, women were never heads of cells because, really, this society was a little machista; we [women] did the work but they tried to protect us from taking a bullet. We had other types of work that were no less risky, and over the passage of years, there was agreement on that. . . . [Today] it is possible that a woman would take a rifle and go into battle like a man, but in those days, no. No, they were not ready, not mature enough for that, a little of how we saw ourselves then.

Yet, she had formed, or helped form, the first cell in her town, and had made contact with the Revolutionary Directorate. She seems to downplay her role as leader, but her comments further on reveal that, as the revolutionary forces were coming to power, she was made a commander of the strategically significant marina of Casilda. Others certainly considered her a leader who had served with distinction in the insurrectionary period.

The Revolutionary Victory was a Very Rapid Surprise

Asked about her contact with the different groups, she answered, “Yes, with the 26 July, with the Catholic workers’ youth, and with those groups of the civic resistance.”

Did she have any contact with Mujeres Martianas [Women of Martí] in Havana?

No, because my work was not in Havana, my work was in this region, in the Escambray Mountain region and in the Rebel Army. For example, I did not know José Antonio [Echevarría], or Fructuoso [Rodrigez], because I was not a university student. I had the good luck of knowing Luís Blanca who is one of the founding members of the Directorio, a person very innocent, an excellent person, marvellous. Another good person I had some activity with was Tony Santiago García, a Commander of the Directorio, who died after the triumph of the revolution. I believe . . . that he was trying to infiltrate the CIA. He was a very valiant man, a man who had fought in the War of the Pacific, a very great person. And Raúl Diaz. Msarina García . . . was the first woman of the Directorio that came here to the Escambray, and so we were a group of compañeros . . . . Then, I didn’t know . . . that the Directorio was formed by the flower of the future of this country, people who were uncorrupted, people who believed in the revolution and tried to improve the destiny of this country.

All the time from July through December [1958] I was taking mail. During the time in which compañeros went up to the mountains, I had to go down and climb

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24 I believe she means what is now referred to as the Second World War.
up to carry things and bring money and other things. I left with Tony so that he
could go to the United States with the money to buy some arms. Tony’s arms we
divided in two. What arrived was a cannon and we took it almost — almost! [to the
Front] — when they were taking Santa Clara, a part of Trinidad because the
Directorio took Trinidad, Placetas and Fomentos, in combination with Che’s
troops, the combined forces of the organisations.

And the role of the women, I believe, was important because the women were
able to travel more easily, fool the authorities a little more, because they would
never suppose we were active as revolutionaries. Furthermore, we received much
help from administrators at the sugar mills, from doctors and others. We had a
clandestine structure that really ran dangerously but included many . . .

There was a telephone that went from here to the national leadership, creating a
state within a state.

The organisation of the Directorio helped the farmers because they [the
Revolutionary Directorate] had doctors. Right there, in this small town, they saved
seven children. All these things led people to reject the old regime.

The Directorio had Dr Humberto Castelló who created an Educational Front that
was guided by Gilberto Mediavilla, because the [regular] teachers were in the
occupied zone. So, we gave classes in the school for the children. I helped in a little
school that would be the way to form an organisation.

The revolutionary victory was a very rapid surprise. Really, we underestimated the
degree of help to the forces of resistance by people to whom we had provided
clothing, medicines, health supplies; and there was a strong sympathy for us
because the regime had committed so many assassinations.

I think there was terrible corruption among the armed forces [of Batista] so there
was a very strong support of the people for the armed resistance movement . . . and
they had an economic crisis. Almost all the youth who were with me in the cell did
not have work; there were no jobs. The development was a little behind and I
cannot explain all the causes because I don’t have that information, I haven’t read
enough, but the people were suffering for need of basic necessities. Not like today
really, because [now] there is more food. If you earn some pesos, you are able to

As asked about what she did in December 1958 until the triumph, she remembered:

In December I received orders to bring out a compañero from here to Caibarien so
that he could arrive in the United States, and I brought him here but when I
arrived, already Yaguajay was taken [by the revolutionary forces]. Placetas already
was on the offensive, so I went as far as Yaguajay using the clandestine roads and paths because Caibarien still was not in the hands of the rebels.

I went to the main highway and recognised a patrol of Camilo Cienfuegos who was in that zone. It appeared that they were trying to take Caibarien. I thought to go as far as Yaguajay and from there, on to Placetas. They sent me to Trinidad, which was already taken, and I went as Chief of the post of Casilda, the post of the Marina with eight men under my command, my younger compañeros. They were not younger than I but with less time than I in the Revolutionary Army and less experience with our problems . . .

There was a general desire [to support the revolution] because we received in November [1958] a large number of youth who were arriving in the mountains. It was terrible. The forces of the Directorio expanded; they [the new members] had to become guerrillas with an old stick [not enough guns]. These fresh guerrillas were condemned to live in a little town stuck in the mountains. There was no authority because the rural guards left their barracks. [At that time] Cubela [a top commander of the Revolutionary Directorate] was 25, and I was 18. We were very young . . .

We received guidance [as the revolutionary government was very close to taking power at the end of 1958] to take no prisoners, to not stir up anyone, to kill nobody, to be very careful that there would be no problems with people who might be spies or police provocateurs . . . so that nobody did anything, a very specific orientation that the larger [revolutionary] state had given us . . .

There were political parties and even the bourgeoisie helped the revolution, because to say anything else would be to lie. Economically, too, they helped the new government because, in the last months of the Batista government, there was no control over anything, and the government was isolated. Already in the last months there was great lack of control, communications were cut, and I think that the biggest desire of the population was for change. . . .

That group of the Female Section of the Revolutionary Directorate I knew really [only] after the triumph of the revolution. (Alberd 1994)

**Revolutionary Continuity**

While the 1950s revolution was “made” by youthful activists, there also were older fighters from the 1930s opposition to the Machado dictatorship and the “Revolution of 100 days”, September 1933–January 1934. I interviewed women who had been active against the Machado dictatorship of the early 1930s and
again in the anti-dictatorial movement of the 1950s. Aida Pelayo’s family had been in Cuba for many generations. Aida’s photograph was captioned by another author as being from “a middle-class white family”. However, she said in one of our interviews that she was from a mixed-race family in which she was probably the lightest child. With three of her compañeras, Maruja Iglesias, Rosita Mier and Blanca Mercedes Mesa, all active in El Frente Cívico de Mujeres Martianas, Aida spoke with me over two long interviews in 1994. Most of the excerpts here refer back to her time as a youthful revolutionary in the 1930s. Their collective book, *La Lección del Maestro* (Castro Porta et al. 1990) shows the large, sometimes decisive, role played by women in Cuban civic organisations. She began with the biographical information requested:

I am going to be 82 this year, because I was born in 1912, in Cárdenas, a town in the province of Matanzas. My earlier years were spent there, and I went to a religious school, and afterward I attended a private school. When I was about 8, we moved to Havana.

My father was a pharmacist, and my mother was a housewife. We lived on one salary, and I had only one sister, no more. There were other births... but those children did not survive. So, there were the two of us and a cousin that my mother raised, because my mother had been an orphan from a very early age, so really, we were like three sisters...

We went to the Annex of the Normal School in Havana. I finished the first level and then went to the Normal School for Teachers, and there I began my career as a teacher. That was interrupted in 1930 with the dictatorship of Machado. There, I began to struggle; I am a humble person, someone who studies hard, because it was a career with four years of schooling and practice. I had possibilities to study for the Bachelor’s degree at the university, but a BA was useless. I studied teaching because immediately one could have a title and begin to earn money – that is the truth. There were Normal schools for both men and women, but in teaching there were always more women.

The Machado dictatorship surprised me. I think I had a sense of justice from an early age, because I learned that I have both white and black [in my family]. I saw that the lighter skinned people, like me, white, had more possibilities, than those who were darker. My mother, each time that a darker baby was born, would say:

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25 Maria Luísa Lafita’s parents came from Spain, and some of her story, including her revolutionary activities in the 1930s, was reported in Linger (1993).
“Poor child” and I would ask her, “Why do you say poor when a baby is born?” She said, “Poor child, my daughter, because he is both poor and black! He is lost.” And that began giving me a consciousness of the value attached to this thing of race. And, then, I saw in my town much misery on the one side, and families of ours that we had to help. That also affected me at a young age.

I arrived here [in Havana] and later I began to hear about the situation of the country, to understand that there was a president who did not like the people, but I knew that those things happened in my country. A president goes, and another comes by buying votes, distributing posts, giving money; he would rise, and so it went every four years, and the next one would be the same . . . which gave me a consciousness of the situation of my country. . . .

At the Normal school, I heard of Julio Antonio Mella, a student leader, because already Mella in 1927 had proposed the University Reform. . . . When 1930 came, I went to a big demonstration from the university . . . [on the day] Rafael Trejo died. Then we joined that struggle and organised the Normal Student Directorate . . . our leader at that moment was Esther Borja, a very well-known singer in Cuba.

As we were young, we went to the street to break stained glass windows, and the police took us. Then, in those years, the police moved in three ways . . . When they came walking with a club in hand – what we call a *palo* – to hit us, we had our method of defence – a little salt with pepper that we threw in their faces . . . The one on a bike was easier because he had to manage the bicycle, so he could not take the stick out and we could make him fall off the bike. But, the one on the horse was one animal on top of another.

One time there was a boy in the group who confronted a policeman with a sword in his hand. Well, I forgot the horse and I covered the boy with my body. But later, when they told me that the horse could have kicked me, I began a terrible time of trembling. But these things happened, things that we did because we were 16, 17, 18 or a little more . . .

Then, the struggle was taking another character, was advancing more. We closed all the secondary schools in the country, the main universities, the institutes, and the Business School – all were closed . . . We had already formed groups, and we went through the neighbourhoods, and we painted in big letters, or we put little bombs. The very first bomb I placed was then. There was a student leader named Pio Alvarez, who was extraordinarily valiant . . . I heard that he had experience with dynamite and made all the bombs in the City of Havana. Then he taught us . . . at the Normal School, how to make them. And he brought us to a house where he taught us how to shoot a gun . . . (Pelayo et al. 1994)
Aida’s quest for justice led her to join the Young Communist League, and support a violent workers’ strike in the 1930s. During the Spanish Civil War, she became a hardworking activist of the Socorro Rojo Internacional. Later, she supported democratic reforms and opposed dictatorships in Brazil, El Salvador, Venezuela, Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico. She opposed tyrannies for the rest of her life. Even before the crimes of Stalin became widely known, she had left the old Cuban Communist Party, preferring to work in civic organisations. One of the most important organisations in the 1950s was El Frente Cívico de Mujeres Martianas.

The Civic Front of Mujeres Martianas opposed Batista’s coup from the very beginning (March 1952), as they spoke with students who wanted to fight against the coup. They found the political parties, including the one overthrown, paralysed and unable to defend the Constitution and rule of law. After several student street demonstrations, a small sector of the military carried out an action in April 1953, two months before Fidel Castro’s 26 July attack on the Moncada Barracks. He led the attack as a call to revolution by the people, which he saw as the only way to end the dictatorship.

Mujeres Martianas were in the forefront of organising an international and national campaign for legal amnesty for the surviving prisoners from the Moncada attack. They also went into action in the clandestine struggle, (secretly) organising cars to pick up and distribute (highly illegal) copies of Castro’s major programmatic document, “History Will Absolve Me”. The women’s tactics were dual: “legal y clandestina” (Castro Porta et al. 1990: 31). They advised Castro during and after his release from prison in 1955.

As Batista’s regime deteriorated, its censorship and repression increased; students were tortured and murdered, mutilated bodies often left in the streets as a “lesson”. Civilian shock and opposition were echoed by a protest military action in April 1956, and by a naval mutiny in September 1957. All were defeated by Batista’s armed forces (Dominguez 1978: 126). Nevertheless, throughout the dictatorship, the efforts of Mujeres Martianas connected the underground fighters to the legal groups, which strengthened the overall resistance to the dictatorship that finally collapsed in December 1958.

**Conclusion**

Historians over the last two decades have begun to dig deeper into personal archives, oral history transcripts, diaries, family, state and religious archives to better explain the question of WHO made the revolution of 1959 and HOW they did it. Here, I have presented excerpts from three interviews. Some of their answers explain how they and many others became active in the *Llano*, the name...
for the vast underground structure in cities, towns, and villages, but the interviews also show that some were active in both the Llano and the Sierra arenas of struggle, especially after 1956.

They clarify that youth, women and Afro-Cubans carried out many tasks, including vital ones in recruiting, organising and maintaining networks throughout the massive underground movement of people who (mostly) did not wear uniforms. At great risk, they procured and carried armaments, messages and money for supplies to those who did wear uniforms. Much more historical research and writing is needed to illuminate the thousands of people who pushed their revolution to power. As some scholarship shows, these activists would also be critically important in the consolidation of revolutionary forces into a new state.

To understand why most historiography of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, even as late as the 1990s, overlooked women’s, Afro-Cubans’ and young people’s actions, the latter exemplified by the largely student-based Revolutionary Directorate, we need to take a long view of the historiography of political change.

Considering previous major social revolutions, we can see Cuba’s in the context of a world that had not yet absorbed the lessons inherited from eighteenth-century notions of equality, freedom and inalienable rights. It has taken nearly three centuries for many societies to transition away from the idea that it is impossible for women to be educated or enlightened. Similarly, people of colour faced assumptions about whether they were ready for rights and, if so, how much and what kind? Genuine equality still remains a goal.

It is in this context that we salute the historians trying to enlighten us about Cuba’s real history. Revolutions are made by youth. So is the best history that moves us away from the old straitjackets and narrow-mindedness of past misconceptions and offers us a deeper understanding of where we might be heading. That requires an inclusive view of how all segments of society were (or were not) involved in bringing about social change.

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