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Abstract
The blonde bombshell saunters past two paunchy and balding men in business attire; a filmy low-cut dress hugs her ample figure, shoulder straps falling down to reveal even more tempting flesh. One can almost hear the click of her stiletto heels across the office floor, as her pursed lips and lowered lids send a sultry look that acknowledges the powerfully developed skills for which she was hired.

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Humorismo en Cuba: *Bohemia* Comics from The Year of the Revolution

The blonde bombshell saunters past two paunchy and balding men in business attire; a filmy low-cut dress hugs her ample figure, shoulder straps falling down to reveal even more tempting flesh. One can almost hear the click of her stiletto heels across the office floor, as her pursed lips and lowered lids send a sultry look that acknowledges the powerfully developed skills for which she was hired. One man happily comments to the other, ‘Es lo que necesitábamos aquí: un nuevo rostro’ [It’s just what we needed around here: a new face] (*Bohemia* 51.1 144). Feminist proponents of the Cuban Revolution will be pleased and unsurprised that this comic from the country’s most-read variety magazine — *Bohemia* — never made it to the living rooms across the Caribbean island, as it is one of the eight panels from the *Humorismo* [Humour] page of the January issue 51.1, compiled prior to the changeover and never circulated. After all, one of the tenets of the new political and social agenda was gender equality, based on a respect for the valuable contributions made by women to the insurrection and the building of a new society. Unfortunately, if this image was kept back from mass media distribution, it was replaced by others that offer similarly disrespectful representations of women. Still a principle organ of the state-run media today, *Bohemia*’s depiction of gender roles and sexuality has changed only very slowly; contrary to what the optimistic cubanófila [Cubanophile] might expect, comics from the first year of the Revolution, 1959, show a still-ubiquitous misogynist and patriarchal representation of gender and relations between the sexes. The objective of this essay is to describe and analyse how men and women are depicted in the cartoons of the time, and to discuss how this reflects some of the existing tensions and incongruities of the early revolutionary period.
As an aside, the almost entirely ‘white’ representation of Cubans within the comics of this year makes it difficult to deal very specifically with the issue of race, other than to point out its virtual invisibility. In line with societal representations of the day, non-Caucasian images appear only twice in the 52 volumes under study here (these comics will be discussed more specifically in a later section). A speculation that all of the graphic artists drawing for Bohemia in 1959 are men who identify as ‘white’ is probably not mistaken. Even in the unlikely event that there should be a man of colour contributing to the magazine in this era (no women cartoonists were published in major periodicals in Cuba until quite recently), the official stance that revolutionary Cuba was already non-racist contradictorily meant that Afro-Cubans were inhibited from directly addressing their racial identity for the first decades after the political takeover (González Mandri 65; Howe 159–64). Cuban poet and cultural critic Nancy Morejón makes the point that the issues of racial stereotyping and discrimination still plague Cuba, and that they are cultural elements that affect the entire nation (167). While contemporary scholars such as Morejón, Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, and Flora González Mandri are successful in confronting the legacy of silence and recuperating erased black voices, Bohemia comics from the year of 1959 merely provide fodder for their critical fire. The fact that both racial and gender equality seem to be absent from the cultural imaginary is surprising, given the seemingly heartfelt political stance of the day.

After all, the overthrow of the conservative and U.S.-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, accomplished January 1, 1959, saw an abrupt transition to a liberal, progressive, and eventually Marxist form of government. The architects of this insurrection, Argentine medical practitioner turned armed insurgent Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara and the young Cuban attorney Fidel Castro de Ruiz, increasingly incorporated women and women’s rights into the revolutionary movement. From the earliest stages of Fidel’s challenge of Batista’s administration, women from the middle and upper classes utilised their skills in organising, writing, and networking to support his efforts. When working class women joined in the struggle, as documented by Margaret Randall, the combined effort made the difference in Fidel Castro’s revolutionary drive. Randall asserts that thousands were ‘selling war bonds and producing rebel uniforms, taking part in propaganda work, participating in action and sabotage units in the cities, transporting arms, and fighting in the mountains’ (22). The Women’s Martí Civic Front, headed by feminist activist Carmen Castro Porta, and The Revolutionary Women’s Union (UFR), organised in 1959 by communist activists Elena Gil, Clementina Serra, and Rosario Fernández, began an extensive campaign of door-to-door recruitment and fundraising (Smith & Padula 34).

Moreover, according to Che Guevara, women would constitute a necessary part of the revolutionary corp. In a much reproduced essay on women’s roles in the revolution, he writes that women are capable of doing virtually every task
that a man can do, including bearing arms and firing upon the enemy if need be, and that moreover, due to perceptions of female fragility, women could serve especially well in espionage and transmission of messages, supplies, and even arms (1972 131–32). And participate they did, in surprisingly high numbers, forming a formidable presence among the guerrilla fighters garrisoned in the open air in the Sierra Maestra.

The persuasive powers of a few key women [such as Celia Sánchez and Melba Hernández] convinced Fidel and Che that the fairer sex could serve the Revolution by bearing arms in addition to attending to the more domestic tasks of war. […] During and since the Revolution, fighting women like Celia Sánchez and Haydée Santamaría have been all but canonized, and Cuba’s leading actresses have positively portrayed guerrilla fighters in films like Manuela. (Cooper 135)

In Fidel’s triumphant victory speech the day he entered Havana, he lauds women’s participation in the Revolution and exhorts Cuba to change policy and practices that discriminate against women:

Porque está demostrado que no solo pelean los hombres, sino pelean las mujeres también en Cuba, y la mejor prueba es el pelotón ‘Mariana Grajales’, que tanto se distinguió en numerosos combates. Y las mujeres son tan excelentes soldados como nuestros mejores soldados hombres.

[…] 

Yo quería demostrar que las mujeres podían ser tan buenos soldados, y que existían muchos prejuicios … con relación a la mujer, y que la mujer es un sector de nuestro país que necesita también ser redimido, porque es víctima de la discriminación en el trabajo y en otros muchos aspectos de la vida. (n.p.)

[Because it is proven that not only our men fight, but also our women fight in Cuba; the best proof is the ‘Mariana Grajales’ platoon, that distinguished itself so well in numerous battles. And women are as excellent soldiers as the best of our male soldiers.

… 

I wanted to demonstrate that women could be just as good at being soldiers, and that many prejudices existed … relative to women, and that women comprise a sector of our country that needs to be redeemed, because they are the victim of discrimination in the workplace and in many other aspects of life.]

The official preoccupation with women’s rights did not end with the institution of the new government. In 1960, all existing women’s political groups were conflated into the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), founded and directed for many years by Vilma Espín Guillois de Castro. This organisation was created to develop pro-women laws and programs as well as educate women on their continuing role in the Revolution, which continued to flourish (Smith & Padula 36). The radical refashioning of society brought about by the Cuban Revolution would give women freedoms and responsibilities that they had never experienced, and Vilma Espín, as the sister-in-law of the Commander in Chief, would utilise her privileged position in order to keep Fidel’s original promises fresh in his mind.
With such a background, one expects to encounter a markedly new approach to the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in the revolutionary press, something that would contrast with the sexist, racist, and classist images of the former society. Even in the ‘low-brow’ cultural milieu of cartoons and caricatures, one might see a filtering through of the revolution’s high ideals. Nonetheless, what the attentive critic finds in these early images of the Revolution are tentative and faltering steps toward social changes that are slow in coming. If race seems to be a non-issue, even issues of socio-economic class are addressed inconsistently, and the topics of gender and sexuality receive a decidedly traditional treatment, as shall be seen over the next pages of this study. Before turning to an in-depth look at the cartoons of Bohemia, however, it makes sense first to sketch out the medium in which these images will appear.

PARTS AND PURPOSE OF A REVOLUTIONARY POPULAR MAGAZINE

Bohemia is a popular Cuban weekly magazine that has been running continuously with a national circulation since 1908. Magazine content suggests the wide range of intended audience, from young people to housewives to intellectuals. Regular features of the magazine after the January 1959 change of government include television and radio schedules; political editorials; a society page; international, national and regional news; a feature page on Cuban workers; horoscopes; historical vignettes; a recipe section that in November of 1960 takes a focus on healthy cooking; crucigrams; movie synopses; sports; fashion; short fiction from Cuban and foreign writers (for example, Dora Alonso and Tennessee Williams); news of scientific and technological advances; a self-education section, started in December of 1960; a public opinion page; miscellaneous puzzles, trivia, and jokes; and two cartoon pages containing comic strips and single panels — Humorismo and Humorismo y Revolución [Humour, Humour and Revolution].

The utilisation of Bohemia for the purposes of education of the masses and dissemination of party ideology can be seen in almost every section of the magazine, from the proud announcements of Cuban advances in the sciences and technology to the full page advertisements (starting in 1960) promoting issues as diverse as agrarian reform and recruitment of volunteer workers. The Aquí el Pueblo [Here the People] (historical vignettes) and Cantaclaro [Sing it Loud] (public opinion) sections demonstrate the new positive focus on regional areas and rural communities on the island, a distinct switch from the previous assumption that La Habana was the only important or interesting city in Cuba. The short fiction presented either directly or indirectly pertains to revolutionary ideals, and the new Los Obreros [Workers] page, which celebrates individuals and groups of workers from all industries, certainly strays from pre-revolutionary content.

Especially pertinent to this study, the regular Humorismo [Humour] section that has long been included in the magazine is supplemented by a second page of comics, entitled first El humorismo de la Revolución [Humour of the Revolution] and changing names slightly over the course of the year. For the purposes
of this essay, I will differentiate between the general comics’ pages and the newer ‘revolutionary’ section, without marking a difference among the various titles used in the latter. For simplicity’s sake, I will use the title *Humorismo y Revolución* [Humour and Revolution] or the designation ‘revolutionary comics’ interchangeably. Even these comic strips — in addition to the political cartoons that appear in news or editorial sections — can be seen to change in both overt and subtle ways, so that they become connected to the political and social agenda of the newly instituted government and refashioned editorial committee of the magazine. Some sorts of humour disappear from the comic section, while new topics and formats are introduced. Nonetheless, not everything changes, as underlying truths about national identity and society are much slower to respond to political action than are the legal shifts that reflect official policy.

What is most crucial to understand about *Bohemia* during this era is that this is a popular mainstream periodical that is designed to appeal to a general audience, inclusive of both genders and most social positions. The magazine purports to inform the readers of important events past and present, enrich their social and cultural lives, provide entertainment, and educate them in a range of matters of import — from practical household tips to explanations of revolutionary theories and objectives. This is perhaps the most effective vehicle to influence public awareness and changing values, especially before televisions are found in the majority of Cuban homes. Therefore, I contend that the various images of gender and sex that appear in its pages would have much more impact than changing legislation or public policy.

**IT’S A MAD, MAD (MAN’S) WORLD**

Studying *Bohemia* comics from 1959, one of the salient points that arises is that the goal of gender equity has not yet become reality in popular cultural production. Women are still depicted as sex objects or housewives, and a cynical take on marriage pervades the comic’s pages. The Revolution is shown to be mostly a man’s world, despite the official claims that women’s roles are equally crucial, and despite Fidel’s own admission that ‘lo cierto es que quedan vestigios de discriminación para la mujer’ [what’s true is that vestiges of discrimination against women still exist] and ‘hay mucho que hacer por la mujer’ [there is much to be done for women] (1960 n.p.).

The great majority of the *Humorismo y Revolución* comics feature men only, while the regular *Humorismo* page features both men and women. In the revolutionary comics as in the regular comics, men are depicted as soldiers and revolutionaries, musicians, agricultural workers, country bumpkins, family men, businessmen, barbers (especially in early comics, juxtaposed against the revolutionary ‘barbudos’ [bearded ones]), bums, politicians, coal miners, children in the classroom, and even as the personification of the Cuban Revolution. In sum, men are depicted in a wide range of permutations that illustrate their complexity and myriad cultural roles. As a general rule, the regular cartoons tend to show
men relating to or in the company of women, as will be discussed in the following section. The revolutionary comics, on the other hand, often focus entirely on the masculine sex, and in many ways their rendering offers graphic suggestions as to what a man should be and do to be a legitimate participant in the Revolution.

In contrast with the *Humorismo* page from the uncirculated January 1959 issue, which depicts men as unhappy husbands, gangsters, bar drinkers, vacationers, and the office workers mentioned in this paper’s opening paragraph, the predominant image in the revolutionary comics from January and February is the *barbudo*, that is the bearded and long-haired rebel whose long siege in the Sierra Maestra left him with no recourse to amenities such as shaving and haircuts. In the first issue of the *Edición de la Libertad* [The Liberty Edition], the curly facial hair of Fidel Castro leads a child to herald the arrival of Santa Claus, a visual comparison that of course suggests that Fidel and his company are bringing all good things to those who have been good (51.2). Barbers daydream of getting their hands on the hirsute rebels, a dream that ultimately will be frustrated, as the unkempt look of the revolutionaries comes to provide a counterpoint to the perceived effete decadence of the bourgeois. Although the *campesino* [peasant, country folk] holds a special place in the hierarchy of the revolution, allowing him to keep a beard or not, the city dweller with no facial hair comes to be somewhat suspicious. The first revolutionary issue shows a clean-shaven man with a ‘*complejo*’ [complex] (an inferiority complex, one assumes), and several men with a 5 o’clock shadow are either worried (51.4) or bloodthirsty criminals like the Dominican dictator Trujillo (51.4). Meanwhile, the revered bearded men like Fidel, Camilo Cienfuegos, Faure Chaumont, and Che Guevara are lauded as the ‘Beards of Today’ [Barbas de la actualidad] (51.4). In the same issue a baby boy is brought out of the maternity ward already sporting a full beard (51.4), and another panel has three *barbudos* (one wearing a straw hat, another a soldier’s cap, and the third a beret) marching under the stars as if they were the three wise men (51.4). The informal fatigues worn by the revolutionaries contrasts with the evening wear of the upended elites and the foreigners who hope to reclaim financial and political control of the island (51.4, 51.5, 51.7). The clear message in these and many other cartoons of this year is that the new Cuban man is committed to the protection of his nation’s new-won status and to the fulfilment of the ideals of the Revolution much more than to any previously sacred social standards of appearance.
At the same time, young boys and ‘regular Joes’ are shown supporting the revolutionary efforts and belief systems in many of the *Bohemia* comics. The artist, Pecruz, draws several versions of the revolutionary boy, always shown in the school-boy uniform, a straw hat, and brandishing a Cuban flag. He toasts the New Year (51.4), encourages all to have faith (51.15), praises agrarian reform (51.12), and even threatens the enemy (51.27). Rural workers exclaim revolutionary slogans, compare the revolutionary regime with the capitalist and imperialist powers, discuss economic reform, brandish their machetes, and note with satisfaction the dwindling strength and authority of the formerly powerful large land-owners. In a July panel entitled ‘Reforma agraria’ [Agrarian reform] the cartoonist, P. Fuentes, draws a despondent *latifundista* [big landowner] being watched by two men in *guayaberas* [typical short-sleeved light cotton shirt of the peasant class], one of whom exclaims, ‘Compay, ¡Mira que ese señor ha bajado de peso!’ [Hey buddy, look at how that guy has lost weight!] (51.27). Still, dozens of comics also point to the town dweller who appreciates and supports the revolutionary efforts. The New Man depicted in the comics scorns Batista (‘el que a hierro mata, a hierro muere’ [he who kills by the sword dies by the sword] 51.13), plans to wear a soldier’s cap to the beach (51.19), suggests that dandies be sent to work in the fields (51.20) and welcomes the agricultural worker into his home (51.32).

In seemingly direct opposition to cultural norms as presented in the regular *Humorismo* pages, which present men as singularly fixated on finding access to women’s bodies, the revolutionary comics expect men to transcend the biological imperative in their zeal to comply with an ethical imperative. In a funny comic that appears during the first period of agrarian reform, the cigar-smoking husband stares wide-eyed at his new farm equipment under a crescent moon. His wife combines a curvaceous form with an innocent, ‘country’ aspect, representing all that is assumed to be positive about the Cuban rural woman, yet her charms are not enough to compete with the shiny mechanistic modernism that lures the man from his bed. Her query appears below the comic: ‘Sueño Realizado: — Viejo, ¿Vas a pasar toita la noche mirándolo?” [A Dream Come True: ‘My dear, are you going to spend the whole night looking at it?’] (51.5). Considering the stereotypical self-
representation of Cuban men as very interested in sex, the situation is humourous in itself, as it suggests the lengths to which the Cuban man must go to perform ideal masculinity. The expectations of the Cuban ‘New Man’ will be explained in 1965 by Che Guevara, as summarised here by Fidel Canelón:

Una Revolución sólo es auténtica cuando es capaz de crear un ‘Hombre Nuevo’ y este, para Guevara vendrá a ser el hombre en el siglo XXI, un completo revolucionario que debe trabajar todas las horas de su vida; debe sentir la revolución por la cual esas horas de trabajo no serán ningún sacrificio, ya que está implementando todo su tiempo en una lucha por el bienestar social; si esta actividad es lo que verdaderamente complace al individuo, entonces, inmediatamente deja de tener el calificativo de ‘sacrificio’. (8)

[A Revolution is authentic only when it is able to create a ‘New Man’, who for Guevara will come to mean a twenty-first century man, a complete revolutionary who ought to work his entire life long. He should have a sense of the revolution, for which those hours of labour will be no sacrifice at all, since he is spending all of his time in a fight for the common good. If such activity is truly what pleases the individual, then immediately it stops being a ‘sacrifice.’]

In sum, his loyalties lie entirely with Cuba, the Cuba of a new era that eschews contact with right-wing regimes of neighbouring islands of the Caribbean just as vehemently as it seeks to create a national identity that empowers men of all regions and all stations in life. Ironically, the comics also reflect the incipient erasure of the racial and cultural hybridity that in truth characterise a majority of the Cuban population. Of the two men of colour seen in Bohemia cartoons in this year, one is a barefoot black man dressed all in white, who is greeted by a white man in a business suit. The latter says, ‘Pero usted no es el babalao de Guanabacoa? … ¿Qué hace vendiendo tamales?’ [But aren’t you the shaman of the Guanabacoa region? … What are you doing selling tamales?] The shaman responds, ‘Figúrese … Después que el gobierno inició la operación ‘limpieza’, nadie va por mi consulta……’ [Go figure … After the government started operation ‘clean up’, nobody shows up for consultations with me any more……] (51.19). From this one gathers that if the new Cuban Man is so unfortunate as to be of African descent, he should have the decency to let go of his religion and cultural heritage in favour of the emerging socialist (and white) order.

Enter the Fairer Sex…

In Bohemia comics of this era women, unlike the men, are more often portrayed in roles more directly linked to their gender — in both the Humorismo and Humor y Revolución sections. While this in itself seems culturally logical, one would expect to see at least some acknowledgement of women’s changing roles, of the respect and recognition embodied in Fidel’s speech to the women of the newly created Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). He praises the women and reminds them that: ‘se han unido para trabajar, para trabajar y para luchar; se han unido para todas las tareas que la Revolución nos trae; … se han unido para ayudar a la patria en cualquier circunstancia’ [you have joined together to work, to work
and to fight; you have joined together for all of the chores that the Revolution brings us; … you have joined together in order to help your country under any and all circumstances] (1960 n.p.). Despite the diversification of women’s roles, and the increasing burden they bear of supporting the revolutionary effort, the great majority of Bohemia cartoons present them as extremely sexy ‘objects’ of the male gaze, be they controllable sex kittens or controlling femme fatales, or as sexless housefrau types exhibiting behaviours typically associated with the female gender; in either role the joke is usually at the woman’s expense.

Dianna C. Niebylski’s historical review of women’s place in humour within humour theory and Latin American literature offers an interesting elucidation of this phenomenon. She notes that ‘most classical philosophical treatises assume all expressions of humour to be a form of ridicule, and hence to stem from a sense of malice”; Niebylski counters that while humour may or may not always be linked to harm, it is intrinsically connected to control (15). Like Doña Eufrosina, mother of Quixotita in the eponymous novel by Fernández de Lizardi, ‘aggressive, and outspoken’ women present ‘a serious threat to public and private morality’, so are turned into the ‘laughable female grotesque’ (Niebylski 23). This category of woman includes both those who use their womanly wiles to entrap or manipulate men and those who after marriage refuse the submissive role that society dictates for the female sex. Making fun of such women is a form of psychological violence that in essence hopes to shame them into more socially appropriate behaviour.

On the other hand, even the females who behave as they should are not exempt from gentle mockery. ‘Buxom babes’ who accept male sexual attention, and docile wives and mothers who follow the rules must be kept in line; they must be reminded that they are in some subtle way the inferior sex and had best continue to conform. The common denominator in the Bohemia comics of this era is that women are on the receiving end of masculine wit and humour.

The voluptuous Cuban woman is a regular feature of the regular Humorismo section, providing myriad provocations for laughter. The typical sexy secretary, like the one described at the beginning of this essay, is funny because she is both desirable and presumably available. Shown in the professional environment, she is implied to be nothing more than a sex object, fulfilling her obligations simply by exhibiting her beauty, which is a fringe benefit for her male counterparts. Exemplifying these assumptions is a panel in which a businessman behind his desk stares at the exposed shapely legs of a woman who evidently has come to ask for more work wearing a strapless split-leg cocktail dress that shows her garters. Her confidence in her physical resumé — indicated by her heavy-lidded calm and Mona Lisa smile — is vindicated, as the man eagerly responds, ‘Enseguida le asignaré algún trabajito extra’ [I’ll find you a little extra work right away] (51.8). Women are reminded not to make things too difficult for their superiors in another panel that shows a man racing around a desk, chasing after a woman in heels whose shoulder straps are falling down and skirt is flaring up from her effort.
The man exhorts her to ‘No corra tanto, jovencita; el médico me recomienda que no me sofoque’ [Don’t run so much, young lady; my doctor told me to not overexert myself] (52.3).

Women also are represented as gold-diggers who, despite the emerging socio-political scorn of capitalist mercantilism, are fully committed to trading their wares on the free market. For instance, consider the femme fatale figure shown asking a man, ‘Así que según el contrato no puedo casarme. ¿Ni siquiera por dinero?’ [So according to the contract I’m not allowed to get married. Not even for money?] (51.6). Whatever contract she is contemplating, she is anxious to retain her rights to the sale of her body in the most traditional sense. The idea that sex and her body are the only commodities that a woman has on her side is lampooned in a panel depicting a young man, his parents, and his fiancée in the family living room. The smiling mother is whispering to her concerned-looking son, ‘Creo que tu novia quiere impresionar favorablemente a tu papa’ [I think your girlfriend wants to make a good impression on your dad], referring to the sexy strip-tease the young woman is performing (51.6 176). The sexy woman is desired and appreciated as eye candy, but at the same time suspicious and not to be trusted. Even in the revolutionary pages one finds examples of flirtation and sex within the domestic sphere. A Silvio comic entitled ‘Las cosas claras’ [Everything above board] refers directly to a recent political edict while taking advantage of a sexual double entendre to drive home his point. The drawing consists of one man raising the tablecloth and peering underneath to see the other man’s hand resting on the knee of the woman sitting next to him. The voyeur points out, ‘¡Está bien que jueguen, pero … por debajo de la mesa nada, nada! ¿O es que no oyeron a Fidel Castro?’ [It’s fine if you play around, but … nothing under the table, nothing! Or didn’t you hear Fidel Castro?] (51.5
One guesses that the young woman might be his daughter, which adds to the humorous suggestion that due to the Revolution a father would be more permissive with his daughter’s conduct, as long as it fell within Revolutionary parameters. In this case the joke is not at the expense of the woman, which is a refreshing difference.

Rarer (but still present) are the comics on the revolutionary humour pages that focus on the overtly objectified female body. The last January issue in 1959 has one example of the more blatantly sexist comic that usually is reserved for the regular comic pages. A woman with impossibly large jiggling curves and a wasp waist is startled to hear a man exclaim a revolutionary-themed *piropo*, the common form of compliment issued on the street. Wide-eyed, he asks, ‘*Oye mi’jita: ¿ese movimiento también es del 26 de julio?’ [Hey, baby, is that movement from the 26th of July too?] (51.4). Although the compliment is intended clearly to voice approval of her scintillating stroll down the street, and moreover equates her movement with a positive and important historical event, in the end (pun intended) the woman comes out a loser in the comparison. As the July 26th movement refers to the daring attack led by Fidel Castro on the Moncada barracks in 1953, a purposeful beginning to a national insurrection that will change the political climate of the Americas, this cannot help but overshadow the relative import of a woman’s sex appeal. Worse, the implicit comparison is that men will take the military and political actions on behalf of the nation, while women’s contribution is more limited and aesthetic in nature. Disappointingly, even the revolutionary comics point to the stereotypically sexy Cuban woman as an object, both of desire and of pride, that can help ‘sell’ the revolutionary ideals. A comic by Pecruz has a balding man pointing over his shoulder to a curvaceous young woman in a strapless gown and saying, ‘¡¡Los productos cubanos son mejores, y son nuestros!!’ [Cuban products are the best, and they’re ours!] (51.12). Here he underlines the need to buy domestic products rather than imports, while subtly suggesting that women, like commercial products in the stores, are there for the consumption of the New Cuban Man.

Returning to the general *Humorismo* page, the other prevalent image of women in the family context is the housewife and mother, who may be attractive
or frumpy, but who is not overtly eroticised and as usual tends to be the butt of the joke. In the first uncirculated issue of 1959 a husband remarks to his wife, who sits disconsolate in front of a vanity table covered with ointments and crèmes, ‘Ya no eres tan bonita como eras; no eres siquiera tan bonita como eres’ [You’re not as pretty as you once were anymore; you’re not even as pretty as you are] (51.1). This insulting and disheartening image of married life and aging is particularly ironic in a magazine that in 1959 still runs advertisements for beauty treatments, depilatories, and perfumes. In another panel on this same page, a husband is carrying a bathing shed to his wife, who is stuck in the water, evidently having lost her bathing suit. The message seems to be that her shape would be so horrid that a mere towel would not be sufficient to cover it (51.1). A third panel in this issue shows a pair of newlyweds ready to get into their car, and the wife is saying ‘¡De ahora en adelante, manejo yo!’ [From now on, I’m doing the driving!]. Slightly different from the others, but still treating women in a derogatory fashion, this comic portrays the ‘ball-breaking’ wife who acts passively only until ‘hooking’ her man, then allows her controlling nature to emerge. In two comics from a July issue, I found one just-married bride eating a large piece of cake because ‘ahora no hay necesidad de vigilar la línea’ [now there’s no need to watch my figure], and one henpecked husband who somehow has been forced to dress up as a mouse. He says indignantly, ‘Es mi último experimento. Veremos si me impongo de una vez a mi mujer’ [This is the last time. Let’s see if I can speak up to my wife for once and for all] (51.25). Overall, general Humorismo comics showing married couples reveal a social hierarchy in which men are superior, and women are depicted as overstepping their natural limitations: they are mocked and derided. Such depictions of the married woman — her figure and her personality — make the ubiquitous comics of cheating husbands quite understandable, at least from the masculine point of view!

Married women appear less frequently in the revolutionary comics, and their depiction is most often limited to the domestic sphere, but in contrast with the general comics, here women are not always shown to be departing from socially acceptable behaviour. Rather, the house-bound women in these panels often
remind me of the double standard evident in Che Guevara’s famous words on women’s contributions to the Revolution. Although Guevara lauds the ability of women to bear arms, pass messages, and transport weaponry in combat zones, he places great emphasis on their more feminine gifts to the cause, which should be primary except in cases of dire necessity. He especially mentions cooking, teaching children, sewing, and nursing, for which women’s naturally superior tenderness makes them ideal (‘El papel de la mujer’ [Women’s Roles] 133). Fidel’s words to the women of the FMC also overemphasise their womanly role as mother, which in his estimation is the great unifying force between them, as well as the greatest role they can play. He points to Mariana Grajales as a symbol of women’s greatness, praising her sacrifice of her sons to the cause of independence, and proclaims: ‘Y las une la alegria de hoy, la tranquilidad de hoy, el orgullo de hoy y el honor de hoy. Y basta ser madre para albergar esos sentimientos, y toda madre quiere para sus hijos en el mañana lo mejor’ [You are brought together by today’s joy, today’s tranquillity, today’s pride and today’s honour. And it suffices to be a mother to be filled with these sentiments, and every mother wants for her children a better tomorrow] (1960 n.p.).

These comics, then, exemplify what women should be aspiring toward in order to be of greatest service to the national good. In issue 51.41 for example, three out of five comics feature women as the main focus; in two, the woman plays a gender-stereotypical role of the conforming housewife and mother. In one comic, by Ñico, an older woman in a frumpy housedress explains her savings plan to a man, assumed to be her husband. In the other panel, authored by Silvio, a young boy talks to his mother as she stands in front of the stove, clothed in a dress and apron. He tells her he no longer wants the little brother he asked her to order from Paris, since now Cubans need to reduce imports and save dollars. In a later Silvio comic, a wife and mother looks on with wide-eyed delight as her husband helps their son take his first steps. Her exaggerated bust and buttocks, together with her rather simple expression, make her an attractive and non-threatening female witness to the primarily male triumph; the man exclaims to her, ‘¡Mira, Cuca, ya el niño también es fidelista, ‘dio un paso alante’!’ [Look, Cuca, the boy already is a Fidel follower, he ‘took a step forward’!] (51.21). These comics focus on issues related to the Revolution, presented in
such a way that they either reflect expected feminine characteristics or appeal to the experience of female readers. On the one hand, women are portrayed as being participatory in the Revolutionary process, such as the saving of household funds (thanks to the nationalisation of housing) or raising appropriately educated and socialised children. In the first comic, however, the housewife’s unattractive physical appearance (she is round, dowdy, and has a large and discoloured nose and hair up in a bun) is compounded by her apparent intellectual simplicity, inferred by her wholly redundant plan for household budgeting. In the other two panels, the wife and mother is relegated to the position of passive onlooker, rather than active agent, and again she seems to be less intelligent than her husband — or even her young son. The mother who has been promising her child a sibling imported ‘from Paris’ is subtly linked to bourgeois values, while the little boy shows an understanding of the economic necessities of a newly socialist Cuba. The ironic grain of truth is that in the early years of the new regime, school children were thoroughly inculcated in the ideals and theories of the political system, a knowledge base that their parents (of either gender) did not always share. The importance of the female presence in the Revolutionary humour page cannot be overrated; however, the placement of women in the domestic sphere, and their portrayal as somewhat simple, is troubling.

Marriage in general is seen with a cynical eye, as with four panels from the general Humorismo page of February 22nd, 1959 where the noviazgo [courtship leading to marriage] is portrayed more as a business deal, and married couples engage in mutual violence, either physical or verbal. The typical difficulties experienced with in-laws is the subject of the central panel, where a woman turns the corner in her home to see a saw poking through the wall, emerging exactly at the mouth of a frowning portrait of her mother. The man sardonically laughs, ‘¡Ja! ¡Ja! Fijate lo que el vecino le está haciendo a tu madre’ [Ha ha! Just look what the neighbour is doing to your mother] (51.8). The older woman is now triply silenced, victim of social strictures that approve only of young and tractable women, her vindictive son-in-law’s malice, and the neighbour’s co-incidental remodelling project. The innocently shocked wife who peeks around the corner, turned out nicely in a pretty dress, heels, and modest hairdo, certainly is supposed to learn from the tableau, as is the female reader of
In both the general and revolutionary comics, men frequently insult or complain about their wives because they are nosy and engage in gossip; in one representative example, a rotund man with a furrowed brow complains, ‘Fíjate si se mete en todo lo que hacen los vecinos, que le dicen Senado Americano’ [Just think, she sticks her nose into everything, and now they call her the American Senate] (51.31). The sly political cast to the joke gives a hint of how women are disrespected through humour; since the behaviour of the United States senate is very much under fire at this time, comparing the woman’s behaviour to the number one enemy of the state is a profound statement. Very similar is a panel titled ‘Mala fama’ [Bad reputation] that appears only three weeks later, where a husband chides his modestly dressed and now chastened wife, ‘¡Como sigas inventando chismes con el vecino, te van a llamar la United Press’ [If you keep on making things up gossiping with the neighbours, they’re going to start calling you the United Press] (51.34). Examples of what Niebylski’s concept of the ‘laughable female grotesque’, the humour of these comics arises from ridiculing women who speak out, attempt to exercise their own wit, and in any way exceed their societal and gender limitations (23).

Within the scope of expected behaviour for women is a continued understanding of their husbands’ sexual transgression. If she does not accept his peccadillos, then she bears the brunt of societal disapproval and runs the risk of being mocked. A comic from the Humorismo y Revolución page from April 1959 shows the still prevalent societal complicity with the man who goes out carousing, and perhaps even strays from his wife. The drawing is of a woman angrily shaking her finger at her husband who, only slightly chagrined rejoins, ‘Nada, mujer, es que hay que cooperar con la revolución, por eso traigo la fachada pintada’ [Come on, darlin’, it’s just that we’ve got to cooperate with the revolution, that’s why I’ve come home with red lipstick on my face]. The title of the panel is ‘Ciudadano Obediente’ [Obedient Citizen], both making fun of the individuals who will tout new justifications for old behaviours and yet also underlining the official mandate that all Cubans do need to find ways to be (or appear to be) dutiful revolutionaries (51.16). Francisco Blanco Ávila emphasises that comic artists are aware of their potential influence ‘in creating the new man and in building the new society goals in which Cubans put such great expectations and commitment’ (qtd in Mogno 221). However, cartoonists evidently did not equally espouse all areas of revolutionary ideology; in studying their work one does fear that social change will occur only slowly and painfully in the arenas of gender role expectations and permissible sexuality.

An uncommon representation of women’s sexual agency appears later in the year in a comic that turns the joke around, as a man comes home from work to find his curvaceous wife’s figure is marked with black handprints in strategic places. She blithely remarks, ‘El campesino que quedamos en alojar, ya vino… es un carbonero de la Ciénaga de Zapata’ [The peasant that we agreed to host
is here already … He’s a coal miner from Ciénaga de Zapata] (51.31). Titled ‘Cooperando’ [Co-operating], the comic reflects generalised fears experienced by Cuban men at allowing other males in the home through the campaigns of literacy and agricultural exchange. Although these tasks specifically are mentioned in Che’s treatise on women’s role in the Revolution, they clash with traditional separation of the private and public spheres. This obsession with keeping women safely under wraps is most famously rendered in the tripartite film Lucía, but in contrast to the honest and revolutionary wife in the film, this comic shows the wife to be wily and promiscuous, like most representations of the Cuban woman from this period of Bohemia comics. Although women might find some sense of empowerment from the image, it still provides justification for the argument that women are not truly cooperating with the revolutionary agenda.

A less common vision of marriage, in itself positive and romantic, is presented in a June 1959 comic by Peeruz, which offers fairly direct praise of Revolutionary efforts in its depiction of a country scene in which a man tells his girlfriend that they can wed right away, thanks to the agrarian reform act (51.24). Given the preponderance of cynicism on this topic, one is more tempted to laugh at the future surprises in store for the country maiden who will soon enter the coveted state of matrimony.

In general, comic art spans a range of intellectual content from the puerile to the subtle and insightful. In terms of the representation of gender and sexuality, the Bohemia comics of this time period tend toward a rather childish and reductionist view. To the extent that this is true, Cuban comic art functions as part of the widespread cultural discourse commented upon by Judith Butler. Rather than merely reflecting reality, or even one perception of that reality, the comic is part of ‘a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field [and] performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalises the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption’ (43 [emphasis in original]). Thus the revolutionary comic depicting a family that sits around the radio and hears an announcement that public employees will receive a raise in pay not only applauds the economic
impact of the political changeover on the normative family, but also suggests how the members of that family will respond. The joke is visual in nature, in that each figure is shown to have a stereotypical desire for spending the money, as shown in the thought balloons above their heads: the dog imagines a bone; the baby an ice cream cone; the woman a pair of shoes and matching purse; and the man a sexy brunette (51.1). It is difficult to say which wish is the most frivolous, but quite easy to determine how the wishes conform to a simple division of gender role expectations.

Although men are not always dealt with lightly, the comic representations of women in the entire set of 1959 issues of *Bohemia* more directly and consistently objectifies, mocks, or at least underestimates the fairer sex. During this year, graphic artists prompt the reader to laugh with them at the wiles of the vamp and the mental limitations of the housewife. In this time period the Cuban woman is shown in a positive light almost exclusively when she is performing her traditionally imposed tasks related to motherhood. In this role, she is appreciated as being important to the Revolution in that she contributes to the physical well-being and indoctrination of the next generation of male children, who sometimes are shown to be more verbally astute than their mothers. The relations between the sexes, however, are painted in an extremely cynical light and the institution of marriage is the subject of relentless parody.

**By Way of Conclusion**

I cannot help but think that the inescapably misogynist depictions of women, on their own and in relationships with men, are a function of the same rigid gender role categories that reserve the authorial voice (and drawing) to the masculine segment of the population. Even as the century turns again, women still remain almost exclusively the object, rather than the author of humour in Cuban cartooning industry.3 Within a socio-political movement that seeks to establish parity among the sexes, how can this continue to be true? Again Niebylski proffers a realistic, if daunting explanation. Starting with the ancient Greeks and continuing to this day, moralists in countless religions and cultures have suppressed and condemned women’s expressions of humour, out of terror that feminine wit would pollute the female body (18). In more modern times, scientists and philosophers like Darwin, Spencer, and Freud argued that women simply are not as developed or capable of real humour as are men. Indeed, there are those who still argue that women just are not funny. Regardless of the convoluted explanations appearing over the centuries for keeping women from participating fully as agents, as subjects, as authors and artists creating comedic expression, the real reason may well be that humour is at heart aggressive, transgressive, and disruptive of the status quo. Niebylski’s description of work by Latin American women writers like Ana Lydia Vega and Alicia Borinsky surely describes the feared result of allowing feminine humour to seep out of the closet: ‘Often aimed at dissolving fixed limits and borders or poking holes in the pretentious or reductive solemnity of social institutions and cultural
grammars, the practices of gendering humour and embodying excess studied in this volume encourage ex-centricity and uncivil disobedience’ (4). In a nation where rebellion is purportedly the rule of the land, as it is in the Revolutionary society of contemporary Cuba, in reality the administration requires a surprisingly fixed ‘solemnity of social institutions and cultural grammars’.

Even now, and certainly in the first months of the Revolution, a rigid control kept women from straying too far from their standard roles, just as it kept men and women clearly within the established (and evolving) limits of ideology and cultural identity. Despite Fidel’s exhortation that ‘Debe dárselas oportunidad en todos los órdenes, y deben estar preparadas para todas las tareas’ [they should be given opportunities in every sphere, and they should be prepared for all kinds of jobs] (1960 n.p.), women were not to be let loose on society without limitations. *Humorismo* had its assigned role, which was a carefully prescribed shaping and shifting of Cuban behaviour and beliefs within the newly emerging society. With such sweeping changes, some cultural norms simply had to stay the same, in order for daily life to avoid disintegration into complete chaos. Cuban comics played an integral part in counterbalancing the news stories idealising women revolutionaries such as Haydée Santamaría and Celia Sánchez, so that Cuban women willingly would return to (or maintain) their household duties, even as they were encouraged to work outside the home as well. Through laughter men and women were educated in how they ought to think and perform to remain within the Revolution, where in 1959 all was still theoretically possible. Only a few years later Che Guevara would recognise that both social traditions and dogmatic adherence to newly learned Marxist principles were holding back the nation’s progress, admitting that, ‘la culpabilidad de muchos de nuestros intelectuales y artistas reside en su pecado original; no son auténticamente revolucionarios’ [the fault of many of our intellectuals resides in their original sin; they are not true revolutionaries] (‘El hombre nuevo’ ['The New Man']). When revolution finally can be permeated with the true rebel spirit of upending the static and stagnant — not to mention false — dichotomies of the masculine and the feminine, then we can all laugh together.

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NOTES
1 When the regular *Humorismo* page is supplemented by a second page of cartoons with a revolutionary bent, it is first titled *El humorismo de la Revolución* (edition 51.2), then *El humorismo y la Revolución* [Humour and the Revolution] (51.4, 51.13,
134, 51.15, 51.17, and other issues intermittently), *El humorismo en la Revolución* [Humor in the Revolution] (51.11, 51.16, 51.22, 51.23, 51.26 and others). The simpler title *Humorismo y Revolución* [Humor and Revolution] is first used in the 51.47 issue, then in 51.50 and 51.51, becoming the main title for the year of 1960. The question of conjunctions, prepositions, and definite articles is an interesting one, calling to mind the intricate connection between the structure of language and culture. The idea that the Revolution itself is funny, implied by the use of ‘de’ in the first title, quickly shifts to the images of humour happening alongside or within the Revolution, suggested by the conjunction ‘y’ and the preposition ‘en.’ The title that will stay in place for a longer period of time, *Humorismo y Revolución*, hints that graphic humour is a tool, or vital element, of the insurgent soul, rather than being specific to this historical event.

An exceedingly complex text to translate into English, this comic employs a multivalent word play and also could refer to several cultural phenomena. ‘Fachada’ is literally ‘façade’, and can refer to the front of a house, a person’s face, the overall appearance of a person or place, or a façade or cover-up of true feelings. ‘Pintada’ can mean either ‘painted’ or specifically ‘red’, In Cuba, often people would paint the front of their houses even if they couldn’t afford to paint the other sides, to pretend a level of affluence they did not have. Red is also the colour that represents communism. Therefore, ‘La fachada pintada’ could refer to the man’s face being red from having over-indulged in alcohol, or it could have red lipstick marks, and his excuse could be that he is not really drunk or seeing another woman, but rather is coming home ‘red’ to show solidarity with the communist revolution.

John A. Lent writes in 2005 that only three women cartoonists are working in Cuba, including Miriam Margarita de la Caridad Alonso Cabrera (Miriam), Alicia de la Campa, and ‘Ely’ (207). While more women were present at the women’s cartoon and caricature competition awards dinner in December of 2007, none but Miriam Alonso are well known, still.

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