

Oriental imprisonments

Habaneras as seen by nineteenth-century women travel writers

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Upon her arrival in Havana on an extended visit to the Spanish colony of Cuba in 1869, Louisa Mathilde Woodruff, a sentimental “authoress” from the village of Hudson, New York, whose novel *Shiloh* had enjoyed moderate success a few years before, declares herself “unprepared to find Havana so thoroughly Oriental,” so “Moorish” in its aspect. She describes it thus: “The same narrow streets, roofed with awnings—the same one-storied houses, built around a court—the same shallow shops, on a level with the pavement, and all open in front, exposing their entire contents to the view—the same long files of cumbrously laden mules, tied together, and with a gaily-dressed muleteer in charge—and the same bright-turbaned, stately-stepping negresses, with heavy burdens poised on their heads” (1871, pp. 20–21). The reader may well wonder if Miss Woodruff, “the most harmless and insignificant little woman in the world!,” as she introduces herself, had ever ventured into that part of the world then known as “the Orient” in her travels, or whether the striking orientalism that meets her at every turn in Havana is but a rather conventional writer’s strategy to make sense out of Havana’s foreignness, its otherness, the disharmony between her familiar surroundings in the Hudson Valley and a region that had come to epitomize the exotic. Having placed Havana closer to her experience by equating it with a land more often read about—that of the *Arabian Nights* as she constantly reminds us—the comparison will permeate her description of the city, becoming the metaphoric translator of exotic and foreign reality onto familiar discourse. On seeing the *volantes*, a sort of barouche that was the most common mode of transportation in Havana at the time, she will wish that one could be transported to Central Park, where she was sure this conveyance of “barbaric splendor” would create “a greater sensation” than “Cleopatra’s chariot, with the beautiful Egyptian Queen therein” (p. 27). Cleopatra, we can safely assume, she had never met.

I do not mean to deride the guileless Miss Woodruff, who pours into her occasionally giddy account of her six months in Cuba, *My Winter in Cuba*, all her wide-eyed astonishment before a country where, as she puts it, “[l]ife becomes continuous picture and poem, through which you drift so inevitably into dreamland” (p. 296). Her orientalist strategy is but an example of the ways in which women travelers to the Caribbean in the nineteenth century—confronted with the unfamiliarity of a region whose landscapes and cultures appear in their eyes as alien as those

of Africa and Asia—attempt to bring them into the realm of their, and their readers', experience. Her orientalism, it is fair to point out, is neither rare nor perhaps very original: it will be one of the most common textual strategies when approaching the Spanish Caribbean in English and American women's travel narratives. Eliza McHatton-Ripley, arriving in Havana to become a sugar planter after her cotton plantation near Baton Rouge had been invaded by the Union Army during the Civil War, found Havana to be a city of Oriental opulence, Moorish in design, a city "fairly drunk with the excess of wealth and abundance" crowned with "Oriental quintas and pleasure gardens" (1889, p. 126). Julia Ward Howe, the well-known American feminist and author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," on first visiting the famous Dominica café in Havana, describes it as "deeply Moorish" in aspect: "I see the fountain," she writes, "the golden light, the dark faces, and intense black eyes, a little softened by the comforting distance" (1860, p. 110). It will be extraordinarily easy for these travelers to see themselves, as Miss Woodruff does, "walking under the vast tent of Peri-Benon, of Arabian Night's fame, if there were only a few turbans and caftans about to help the illusion"; there will be, to many of them, "an almost ridiculous incongruity between the quaint, Oriental aspect of Cuban architecture and manners, and the [then] modern French fashions—stove-pipe hats and close-fitting pants" (p. 72). There is in Woodruff's assessment of Havana's exoticism a distinct consciousness of the cultural and architectural syncretism that typifies colonial societies and which becomes—for lack of a better term—"oriental." Many of these writers—amateurs for whom descriptions of travel provide an excuse for an incursion into professional writing—cannot escape the colonial imperative. Like Miss Woodruff, who marvels at the perceived incongruity of the juxtaposition of an exotic urban landscape and French fashions, they will be unable to transcend their perception of themselves as belonging to the imperial center and therefore authorized to interpret the periphery.

There is an extraordinary richness and variety in the extant accounts of travel to the Caribbean region by men and women in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time of interest particularly because it represented both the apogee of the British empire and the period of American apprenticeship in imperial ways that followed the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 with its declared opposition to European interference in the Americas. Their importance to our understanding of the stresses and clashes of that process are just beginning to be explored.

My focus here is on a handful of English and American visitors to Cuba in the second half of the nineteenth century and then again very narrowly on some of the ways in which they seek to "understand" Havana, its customs, and more tellingly, its women, ways that often result in misunderstandings at once amusing and disturbing for what they reveal about the tensions between imperial centrality and colonial marginality. The more than thirty such accounts published by women I have come across in my research include texts by Julia Ward Howe, Fredrika Bremer, Julia Newell Jackson, Rachel Wilson Moore, Jenny Tallenay, and the Countess of Merlin. I am particularly interested in English and American women because they constitute the largest and most homogeneous group, similar enough in outlook and approach

to be seen as a group. The well-known accounts of non-English European travelers like Fredrika Bremer (the Swedish Jane Austen as she came to be known) and the Countess of Merlin, on the other hand, defy easy classification. Miss Bremer's *The Homes of the New World*, for example, rich in domestic detail gathered from close observation, anthropological in its careful reconstruction of folk celebration, religion, and dance, proto-feminist in its nuanced discussion of women's relationships across race and class, belongs to a category apart.

English and American women travelers, unlike the *sui generis* Miss Bremer, seem to fit a classic profile. They will be educated Protestant women of the middle and upper-middle classes, democratically or parliamentarily scornful of Spanish tyranny, secure in the solid power of their burgeoning empires, rarely speaking more than the most rudimentary Spanish, and above all, white; their representations of *las habaneras* will be truly "oriental," cast often in the mold of the pre-conceived, dependent on missed encounters, resting frequently on language misunderstood, habitually overshadowed by Anglo-American notions of race. Anglo-American women's assessment of Cuban society and its women will often rest on a transference of English and American notions of relationships between ruler and ruled in the context of empire. Spanish women (particularly those of the nobility), for example, will appear as individualized, speaking, often named subjects; while Creole women of the middle and upper-middle (but still colonized) classes will appear in groups, as generic *cubanas* or *habaneras*, the words appearing in Spanish, signaling their subordination by their group appearance and establishing their distance from empire-bound observers through their generic name in Spanish. It will be on the *habaneras* or *cubanas* that the burden of orientalism will fall.

Julia Newell Jackson, in *A Winter Holiday in Summer Lands*, the account of her travels in Cuba and Mexico circa 1890, offers a characteristic description of upper-middle-class Cuban women as:

Ladies evidently belonging to the most low-necked, therefore the highest, circle of society, powdered until their olive skins had turned to ivory, with great shadowy black eyes and wavy, dusky tresses—there are enough drops of African blood flowing through Cuban veins to add a wave to the tresses pretty generally, suggestive of Cleopatra and the Orient. (pp. 33–4)

In their particular version of orientalism, these visitors will struggle with ways to approach the question of race, exposing their discomfort with a society in which race is not perceived as falling on one or the other side of a black/white divide but covers a wide spectrum that cuts across classes. Lacking a language adequate to address their astonishment at the racial continuum they encounter in Havana, they will conflate Africa and the Orient, seeking examples (Cleopatra being a particularly popular one) that can help them approach the unfamiliarity of the racial classifications prevalent in Cuba. One can glimpse in their fixation with the degree to which they are willing to acknowledge any beauty in Cuban women the specter of racial prejudice—the *habaneras's* beauty and taste in clothing becomes the gauge through

which we can measure the degree of opening to different perspectives on race on the part of the visitors. Woodruff, for example, alludes to *habaneras'* being called "white, by courtesy ... for there are really only degrees of dark in Cuba" (p. 94). The famed "extraordinary beauty" of Cuban women, however—their resplendent and brilliantly dressed hair, "their eyes!, their figures!, their manner of walking!," usually described as something so exquisite that no woman of more northerly climes would venture to compete with them—rarely succeeds in pleasing the foreign female visitor. Upon first meeting them, Mathilde Houston confessed herself "terribly disappointed," finding them too pale for her taste, not doubting that the pronounced yellow tint of the skin was due to the excessive heat, their particularly graceful walk a mythical trait since they were too indolent to move (Araújo, 1983, p. 168).¹ Houston, meeting several young English beauties when invited to a dinner at the British consulate, is gratified to find that their rosy coloring had not paled under the influence of the tropical sun and contrasted pleasantly with the sallow beauties of the island (1884, p. 176).² Louisa Woodruff, almost invariably delighted by everything she sees, is particularly severe on the subject of the famed beauty of Cuban women:

The ladies, according to their wont, are bareheaded and decolletés, with their long, showy skirts hanging out of their *volantes*; and one look at the combinations of colors in their toilets would go far to make a French *modiste* a candidate for the mad house. Yellow and scarlet, blue and purple, green and orange, seemed to be the favorite combinations; and though the dark eyes and complexions of the Cubanas carry off these astonishing contrasts with a far better grace than their fairer sisters to the north could do, still they give them a look undeniably "dowdy"—not to say vulgar—to those unaccustomed to such gaudiness of attire. Perhaps this was the reason why so very few of them seemed anyway pretty to me. After a little, I came unwillingly to the decision that my cherished ideal of Cuban beauty could never stoop to incarnate itself in any of those fat, fussy, overdressed matrons, nor those thin, sallow, lifeless, and likewise overdressed maidens. (p. 47)³

Much emphasis was placed by visitors on the richness of apparel of upper-class Cuban women, particularly when describing the "most animated and bewitching sight imaginable in those affluent days of Cuba," the *paseo*. In the cool of the evening, ladies would sally forth in their *volantes* and victorias, with coachmen in full livery, to take the prescribed fashionable drive and be seen in their full regalia. Magnificently dressed in full evening costume,

their trailing robes, of brilliant colors and light, gauzy material, arranged to float outside the open vehicles, with shoulders and arms bare, and raven locks crowned with flowers, among which were tiny birds mounted on quivering wires, made a display of striking and unusual elegance. (McHatton-Ripley, p. 136)

The visitors' isolation of the *paseo*, which centers primarily on an open display of women's beauty and goods, as a cultural oddity of somewhat questionable taste, underscores their lack of awareness of its function as a source of relief from the unrelenting heat of the Cuban climate. This inability to connect cultural practices to what is appropriate to the location and climate emerges with particular irony in their discussions of clothing. The *habaneras'* colorful, gay, and luxurious apparel contrasted sharply with demure Anglo-American Victorian fashion, of which the bonnet—"so important a part of a lady's costume in Europe and America," an item rarely worn by Creoles—was a centerpiece. Cuban women rarely donned hats and were content to venture out with a lace mantilla or gauzy veil over their faces, thrown back on their shoulders, if absolutely necessary (Moore, 1867, p. 56). Bonneted foreign visitors hazarding a walk on the streets of Havana "with the latest fashion of this ever varying article" were regarded with the deepest curiosity and subjected to mocking stares (Woodruff, p. 27). One British visitor felt intimidated enough by the gawking to stop wearing hers, substituting it with a cap and black veil. Julia Ward Howe saw them as "audacious bonnets" which, together with "more assertive stares and louder laughs attracted stares in the few public places that tolerated the presence of foreign women."⁴ When it comes to bonnets—the priority of which is taken as a matter of fact by the visitors—the item's inappropriateness to the climate does not enter the discussion.

In nineteenth-century Havana, historian Luis Martínez-Fernández has argued, "clearly established social rules designed to both 'protect' and subdue women contributed to keep white *Habaneras* under seclusion"; they were the object of society's apparent obsession with female virginity and chastity, which had led to "legislation obstructing interracial marriages [in an effort to protect] white women and their race—and by extension their class—from what was perceived as 'racial pollution.'" The prevailing Cuban etiquette forbade Cuban ladies from walking on the streets. In Cuba, Julia Howe discovered, "[t]hey of the lovely sex ... undergo, with what patience they may, an Oriental imprisonment"; a few days' acquaintance in Havana with "the little rabble who could not be trusted in the presence of the [other] sex," make clear to her "the seclusion of women in the East, and its causes" (p. 43). Of all Cuban social habits, none will be so irksome to foreign female visitors than this social edict which confined them within doors, forbidding them to drive or ride about with any male other than a husband, father, or brother, and debarred them from walking, except to church, and then only if chaperoned. Miss Woodruff, impatient with her confinement in a stifling hotel room, able to walk only up and down the hotel corridors, throws care to the wind and decides to go shopping "after the American fashion" in "a daring breach of universal custom" that attracted many disconcerting stares (pp. 69, 70).

Much will be made of female "imprisonment" in travelers' descriptions of Havana, particularly by male writers seemingly titillated by the thought of these beautiful caged women. Woodruff described *habaneras* as forever standing behind the iron grates protecting them from the outside world: "If you are passing outside, you

often see [them] ... gazing at the outer world through the iron bars; with so much the aspect of prisoners, that, at first, it makes you melancholy to look at them" (Woodruff, p. 125). She imagined them forever suffering from "the tyrannous restraints of their social customs," but deeper acquaintance disabused her of such notions, leading her to conclude that the desire to "get out," except in a *volante*, "[n]ever enters the Cuban feminine mind" (Woodruff, p. 125). The iron grille, an apparent prison gate, however, did not succeed in isolating women from the world beyond their homes. Windows were always kept wide open, allowing women to chat freely with passersby and receive the attention of admirers and suitors. Eliza McHatton-Ripley described how at night, door and windows of houses were flung wide open, "showing a vista of rooms, from the brilliantly lighted salon through bedroom after bedroom, until the line of view vanished at the kitchen." In long rows of rocking chairs, in neverceasing motion, "the señoras gayly chatted and sipped ices; while idle strollers in the streets paused to admire and audibly comment upon the elegant ladies or listen to the light nothings that were being uttered with so much spirit and gesture" (McHatton-Ripley, p. 136). One visitor recalls attending a music entertainment where the daughter of the house played exquisitely, her audience not confined to those in the *sala* but encompassing the appreciative group that had gathered outside the grille, listening attentively to the end.

Despite the impression of female vivacity implicit in these architectural and domestic arrangements, the *cubanas* or *habaneras* of these texts will be primarily silent. Accounts of conversations between travelers and Cuban women are most infrequent; the absence of a shared language being the greatest barrier to communication. Throughout these accounts, the burden of knowing the other's language is placed consistently on the native woman, who is then chastised for the inappropriateness of her knowledge of English. British abolitionist Mathilde Houston tells of watching a group of Cuban ladies sitting in a semicircle, "never uttering a word," opening and closing their fans "with great perseverance." (She does not stop to consider that their silence may be the result of a polite reluctance to hold an animated conversation in Spanish that would perforce exclude their guest.) Discovering by accident that her neighbor spoke a bit of French, they entered upon a conversation which, "with the aid of her incessant questions and my patient responses," they managed to sustain desultorily for a few minutes, thus killing time. Only Miss Woodruff's account and that of Eliza McHatton Ripley, both of them women who spent extended periods in Cuba, report extensive dialogues between visiting and Cuban women. In contrast to the typically silent *habanera* of most travelogues, Miss Woodruff will describe Creole women's conversation as "a storehouse of vivid imagery, an inexhaustible fount of graphic and animated narrative of home incident and daily routine," self-deprecatingly referring to her Spanish, "having chiefly been used for book intercourse hitherto," as "not sufficiently at [her] tongue's end to carry [her] through a sustained conversation with a roomful of strange people" (p. 91). Her book, *My Winter in Cuba*, contains the only report of a substantial, meaningful dialogue between a foreign visitor and a Cuban woman. Woodruff, prefacing her brief description of this exceptional conversation, frankly confesses that prior to meeting Doña Angela, her gracious hostess during a visit to the provinces, she had not found "the Cuban ladies

and myself entirely in harmony." Their education, religion, habits of life, and thought were "so dissimilar that the maintenance of a certain degree of reserve had seemed a wise precaution against uncomfortable jarring of sentiment." Doña Angela openly avowed "all manner of Spanish prejudice and misconception," to which Miss Woodruff parried with "many rude Americanisms."

She was very severe on our civil war, had a holy horror of "filibusteros," and could be especially eloquent about the length of our tax-list. I predicted the speedy adoption of republican institutions in Spain, the ultimate absorption of Cuba by the United States ... She ridiculed the squeamishness of American women, alleging that it was currently reported in Cuba that they never confessed to a pain in any organ lower than the throat, even to their family physician. I retorted that it was universally believed in the United States that all Cuban ladies smoked. She animadverted upon the flippancy, free manners and flirtations of our young ladies; and I commented on the vacuity and inefficiency of her countrywomen. Privately, however, I more than half concurred with Doña Angela in her last stricture. (pp. 260–2)

This account—suggestive of a well-informed, self-assertive, intelligent, thinking Cuban woman—sharply contrasts with the image of the mute upper-middle-class *habanera* of most English and American women's travel narratives; a *cubana* cloistered behind the bars of her Moorish abode, kneeling in fervent prayer with fingers clasping a rosary in church, objectified in self-display as she is driven through the Paseo in her *volante*, furiously fluttering her eyelashes (her only organ of communication) behind the faster flutter of her *abanico*. The unreal, silenced middle-class Cuban woman of most travel narratives seems to be the product of a silence imposed on the traveler herself by her inability to communicate, an inability that emerges in these texts as a source of protection against the intrusion of the Cuban otherness into the sheltered sphere of white American and British middle-class womanhood.

Julia Howe, restricted upon her arrival in Cuba to communication through the reading of facial expression, sees "all the hatred of race [in the Spanish officials'] rayless eyes."

Is it a crime, we are disposed to ask, to have a fair Saxon skin, blue eyes, and red blood? ... the first glance at this historical race makes clear to [her] the Inquisition, the Conquest of Granada, and the ancient butcheries of Alva and Pizarro. (p. 43)

The eyes—those behind the fluttering fans as well as the insolent ones of Cuban *caballeros*—will be silenced in turn, muted, by the traveler's refuge in the cocoon of her Spanishlessness. Sitting at the Dominica on one of several visits described in *A Trip to Cuba*, Julia Howe will caution, the foreign woman will feel every black eye directing "its full, tiresome stare at [her] face, no matter how plain that face may be." And she continues: "But you have learned before this to consider those eyes as so many black dots, so many marks of wonder with no sentence attached; and so

you coolly pursue your philosophizing in the corner ..." (p. 106). An American woman's propriety is safely defended by her ability to silence the Cuban male's impropriety through her incomprehension of any possible offending language. Her ability to look at Cuban men's eyes "as so many marks of wonder with no sentence attached" restores the imperial balance: Cuban men of doubtful racial origin cannot and will not penetrate the sphere of white American womanhood, since she cannot be made to understand his words. Rachel Wilson Moore, a preacher for the Society of Friends visiting Cuba for health reasons, similarly describes how, despite the interdictions against ladies walking in the street, she ventures out with some friends, "her republican habits could not be circumscribed by such arbitrary rules" (1867, p. 37). "The people looked at us in astonishment," she reports, "and made their remarks as we passed along; but not understanding them, we took no notice of them." Julia Newell Jackson will go as far as to deride her companions' efforts at learning some colloquial Spanish as counterproductive and unnecessary. A companion she calls Herr Professor, having made "rapid strides in its acquisition," is portrayed as beginning to understand it "too well."

"We fail to find the market," she writes: though we have been there more than once. Herr Professor goes into a bookstore to inquire. When he has asked in his colloquial Spanish and pantomime, a map of Cuba is offered him by way of answer. He next tries a drug-store, and in reply to his question receives a sticking plaster. We find it at last, but it is not done by inquiring.

(Jackson, 1890, p. 125)

Another visitor confesses that sometimes she is

fain to pass off my knowledge of Spanish for something less than it is, in order to escape from the weariness of being civil and sociable in a foreign tongue, and to be free to use my eyes and ears to the best advantage.

(Woodruff, pp. 126-7)

The latter's reluctance to communicate, coupled with Jackson's conviction that her objective could best be reached without inquiry, underscores the foreign subject's confidence in her ability to form opinions about Havana, its environs and citizens, without the benefit of the latter's input. It is more comfortable indeed to see the native other as incapable of the undesired communication.

Given the class- and race-bound assumptions that pervade these texts, the black and mulatto Cuban woman of the lower classes, when not entirely absent from the text, will more often than not be cast in the "blackest" light, either sharply contrasted against the brilliant sunlight in all her idleness and sauciness or fading into the walls of the dark corridors, lazy, stupid, sullen, unwashed—the Other's Other, triply separated from the traveler by virtue of her race, class, and language. They will never be referred to as *habaneras* or *cubanas*; as slaves and servants they will have no claim to nationality.⁵ The black housekeeper that Eliza McHatton Ripley meets upon

her arrival at her freshly purchased plantation, *Desengaño* (Dissappointment—only someone unfamiliar with Spanish would have ventured to purchase such an inauspiciously-named plantation), is characteristic of the portrayal of the black Cuban servant in these travel narratives:

When the black woman, in a dirty, low-necked, sleeveless, trailing dress, a cigar in her mouth, and a naked, sick and whining child on one arm, went about spreading the table, scrupulously wiping Royo's plates with an exceedingly suspicious-looking ghost of a towel the prospect for dinner was not inviting. (p. 151)

Miss Woodruff describes a servant "belonging to the African tribe of the Lucumís" with almost ferocious scorn. "I am sorely puzzled to decide what nice degree of upward or downward gradation would place her on a level with the baboon," she writes (p. 104). If called, Woodruff asserts, she answers "with the harshest, most guttural, most unintelligible jargon conceivable, resembling more the cry of a bird of prey than the human voice" (p. 104). If the upper-class *habanera* is reduced to silence, the lower class, unmistakably black Cuban woman is reduced to animal-like grunts and comparisons with baboons—her humanity vanished.

Women of color enjoyed, on the other hand, greater liberties than those of higher social status. Unlike white or light-skinned ladies, they walked about as they pleased, sold goods from house to house, "and frequented places like cockpits which were completely barred to white women."⁶ This freedom seems to have attracted to them an even greater degree of disdain. The Countess of Merlin, in her account of her visit to the homeland she had left many years before, scorned the jauntiness with which *habaneras* of color walked the street, "cigar in mouth, almost naked with their round shining bare shoulders" (p. 107). One visitor was struck by the figure of a "massive negress" planted solidly upon a street corner, "with a gigantic cigar in her mouth, and a broad, unctuous aspect of the serenest satisfaction" (p. 192).

In foreigners' accounts we catch only glimpses of the subtle intricacies of the relationships between upper class Cuban women and women of the lower classes—servants and peddlers in the city, field hands and house servants in the countryside. Servants were numerous, and were often seen moving leisurely about, "but there was no running to do one's bidding." Female servants lived in very close intimacy with their mistresses and were charged often with the most delicate of tasks, from selecting items of clothing and jewelry to serving as their most trusted messengers. They were in constant attendance on their ladies, always ready to pick up a dropped handkerchief or rearrange a stray ribbon. A lady's maid did not serve more than one lady, a nurse cared for only one child, an arrangement that fostered intimacy. Mistress and servant were often to be seen through their iron grilles toiling and spinning together. Servants would occasionally work as sellers of sweetmeats in the streets, by the preparation and sale of which many decayed families supported themselves. Eliza McHatton Ripley was struck on first arriving in Cuba, by the complete dependence of upper-class women on their servants, and by the latter's apparent

devotion and unceremonious relationship to their mistresses, which she reports unquestioningly. Invited to a dinner at the home of their country neighbors, she tells of being waited upon by “a score of darkies, in various stages of inexperience”:

There was no attempt at style or ceremony, no whispering of orders or sly hints as to duties, no gestures or winks; everything was free and open, every order given in an unmistakable key; so that there was an abandon at one of these country festivals absolutely bewitching. (p. 231)

Amelia Murray, a British aristocrat and lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria, in her *Letters from the United States, Cuba, and Canada*, is oblivious to the subtleties of these relationships, and sees only the idleness of Cuban female servants:

While I am writing, I see two mulatto women with cups in their hands, standing at the great, wide, coach-house looking door opposite; they are sharing their breakfast with a negro; and now two or three more come to gossip with them. . . . for three hours this morning these women have been lolloping and gossiping in my sight, and there they will be until they find the heat too great for this kind of enjoyment. (1856, 2:176)

Her letters from Cuba provide one of the most bizarre examples in these texts of the projection of otherness onto the black Cuban woman—in a narration of an incident in which no black woman had an actual role. Having returned from an outing, the botanist and naturalist Miss Murray sees something in a little basket on her dressing table which she mistakes for a fossil.

I touched it with an exclamation, when a maid (fortunately not black) saw what it was, caught up the basket, and carried it at once to a man a few yards from my door, who killed the creature instantly. A negro woman would have laughed and stared, and have allowed it to sting me, before she would have remembered that a scorpion is an ugly customer.

(Murray, 2:237)

The gratuitousness of the narration, where the Negro woman is found guilty *in absentia* of an imagined crime, guilty by comparison with a maid “fortunately not black,” emphasizes the recurrence in these texts of pre-conceived, pre-determined, pre-judged accounts, forcing us to remember that travel narrative as a genre, despite its ostensibly objective, factual, descriptive nature, is at heart ideologically biased, and in these cases, imperially bound. Even the kindly Miss Woodruff, in her rose-colored account of her Cuban dreamland, tinted with her devoutly Christian naiveté, will distort the vision to fit her aims. She will portray black and mulatto women as devoted shadows to their mistress, describing them at the Havana railway station as “gloriously turbaned” but dressed as a “broad caricature of their mistresses,” or depicting a little black girl as so devoted to her young mistress that she follows her

everywhere, sharing her playthings, candies, scrapes, and punishments, accepting her caresses and her blows with the same placid satisfaction, and never making any moan or murmur “till bedtime brings the one thing unendurable—namely, separation—whereupon, it sets up a howl that almost raises the roof” (p. 114). Underscoring these notions of blissful servitude is a tradition of imperial writing, chiefly produced by British writers, that underscores the colonial subject’s gratitude and devotion to the colonizers, a fantasy of harmony that was one of the major “selling” points of imperial dogma. For the honorable Amelia Murray, she of the Victorian nation ruling over India, a nation brimming with pride at their never sunless empire, this notion of servantly devotion would have been comfortingly familiar. Submission seen as voluntary and emerging from the deepest love, from a deep need in the Oriental subject’s own character to be made into the image of the ruling Other, was an intrinsic part of the ideology of empire.

It is the American nation’s embrace of this ideology of empire which allows the sweet Miss Woodruff—a believer in the ultimate absorption of Cuba by the United States—to stand on the airy, shaded balcony of her hotel, confidently surveying the city and suburbs or Havana, “gilded with noontide glory,” as

[s]weet snatches of rare old songs come fitfully to your lips—gorgeous bits of *Arabian Nights* imagery float hazily through your memory—air-castles rise, rose-hued and radiant, on the sapphire foundations of the cloudless sky—existence becomes a luxury, and life a dream! (pp. 78–9)

Many of these writers are, after all, writing barely a decade before the Spanish-American War and are acutely conscious of the raging debate over the United States’ “natural” position of dominance vis-à-vis the Caribbean region, particularly the profitable and vulnerable possessions held by the waning Spanish empire. They are also alert to the possibility that their travelogues can open a space for them as women in the public debate from which their gender otherwise bans them. For the Puritan Miss Woodruff, as for the Julia Howe of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the Confederate Eliza McHatton-Ripley and others, writing with avowed awareness of American designs on Cuba, imbued with the conviction that their nation was poised on the brink of empire, the orientalist metaphor seemed to translate Havana into an exotic locale fit for imperial intervention, after which the society would be shorn of its Inquisitorial roots and thus be made more humane, where women would be liberated from their oriental imprisonment and allowed to walk the streets in Victorian conventionality, where Catholic mumbo-jumbo and a tyrannical government would give way to Protestant ritual simplicity and democracy, where Cuba would become an American land in which the Orient would have no dominion.

Notes

- 1 In sharp contrast, European travelers to Cuba (other than English), will exalt the ravishing beauty of the *habaneras* they came across. Doña Eulalia de Borbón, a Spanish princess on an official visit to Cuba, attested that she had “always heard the beauty, elegance, and

above all, sweetness, of the *habaneras* lauded, but the reality surpassed everything she could have imagined." (pp. 90–1)

- 2 Not all American or British beauties travel so felicitously to Cuban soil. Miss Woodruff tells of a fruit seller vainly tempting her with

a string of small, withered, tough-looking, red apples from my native shores. Vainly—though I really cannot tell whether it was disgust at their uninviting aspect, or mortification at the sorry figure they made beside the fresh and luscious tropical fruits, or a rush of homesick memories, that forced me to turn my eyes away from them as quickly as possible." (Woodruff, p. 196)

- 3 Interestingly enough, just ten pages later, Woodruff will wax poetic about the beauty of Cuban women she observed in church, recanting the sharpness of the criticism she spewed above:

The ladies were nearly all dressed in black—the prescribed costume for church-going—with the graceful Spanish mantilla of black lace covering their heads and falling around their shoulders. I was surprised to see how much prettier, more delicate and more womanly, they looked thus than as I had seen them on the *paseo*; and I remembered half-remorsefully the sweeping criticism on their personal appearance that I there registered against them. The young girl who had made room for me looked positively lovely, with her eyes cast down, her long lashes sweeping her cheek, and her face partly shaded by her mantilla; and just opposite was a lady of regal beauty, whose large, black, steadfast eyes, and statue-like grace and stillness of pose, held me spellbound with admiration. It was melancholy to think that such loveliness should be disguised, degraded, utterly lost, in those tawdry fineries of the *paseo*! (p. 57)

- 4 Luis Martínez-Fernández, quoting Howe's *A Trip to Cuba* (106), in "Life in 'A Male City': Native and Foreign Elite Women in Nineteenth-Century Havana."
- 5 Sympathetic commentary on the plight of black or mulatto *habaneras*, rare as it is, is to be found almost exclusively in the writings of self-avowed abolitionists like Mathilde Houston, who visited Cuba in 1842 and was horrified at her first sight of the marks of a lash on a woman's shoulders, a sight that filled her with dread and disgust at slave-owners, a caste of "miserable beasts" that "could punish a woman thus" (Houston, reprinted in Araújo, p. 154).
- 6 See Martínez-Fernández, "Life in 'A Male City.'"

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