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# QUESTIONS OF RACE AND GENDER: EVANGELINA CISNEROS AND THE SPANISH-CUBAN-AMERICAN WAR

By Anne Fountain\*

At the turn of the century, the name "Evangelina Cisneros" (known in Cuba as Evangelina Cossío)<sup>1</sup> was a household term throughout the United States. Newspapers and books described her daring escape from a Havana prison, and pleas on her behalf flourished—including a request for clemency by Queen Victoria and an eloquent letter from the wife of Jefferson Davis. Although the Cisneros saga has all but disappeared in the general historical references to the eighteen nineties, her prison predicament and her prominence in the press of the times reflect fundamental issues of race and gender that are part of the socio-political climate of the war over Cuba. Who was Evangelina? Why did she become part of the Cuba frenzy whipped up by American newspapers such as the *New York Journal*, and the *World*? And what role did her race and gender play in United States fascination with abuses in Cuba?

Evangelina's story really begins in 1895, the year of the insurrection against Spain waged by José Martí, Máximo Gómez, and Antonio Maceo. Early in this same year, don Augustín Cossío y Serrano, a Cuban rebel who had participated in the Ten Years' War, had been arrested for his support of the 1895 Revolution and slated for incarceration in the Spanish penal colony of Ceuta, was deported to the Isle of Pines. Don Augustín—a widower-- was allowed to take with him his two adolescent daughters, Carmen and Evangelina, and on the Isle of Pines the family was accommodated in sparse but adequate lodging.<sup>2</sup> Don Augustín, because of his history of revolutionary activities, was watched with suspicion by the Spanish command on the island.<sup>3</sup> Before long, however, the gaze of a newly-arrived Governor, Colonel José Bériz, began to focus on seventeen-year old Evangelina rather than her father. Colonel Bériz' unwanted sexual advances toward Evangelina and his insistent and ominous overtures became an acute harassment of the young girl which had her increasingly preoccupied. She sought to avoid contact with the colonel and politely made clear her disinterest in his intentions. But on July 26, 1896, Colonel Bériz--perhaps made more anxious by the pending arrival of his wife--made a nighttime visit to Evangelina's home to fulfill his desires.<sup>4</sup> On a quiet evening, under a bright, moonlit sky, and decked out in full military regalia, Bériz knocked on the door of the house, pushed it open before Evangelina could answer, and proceeded to press for consummation of his love--threatening harsh punishment for Evangelina's father if she did not yield. Evangelina's cries for help brought assistance from other Cubans confined to the Isle of Pines, and these men quickly subdued Bériz and rescued Evangelina. But the detainment of a

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Spanish officer had serious consequences; the Colonel's calls for help brought the weight of Spanish military force against the unarmed patriots, and revenge against Evangelina was certain. She was sent from the Isle of Pines as a common prisoner, and she and Carmen were held in Havana at the Recogidas jail--a notorious prison described as a place for destitute and depraved women and scandalous and incorrigible delinquents.<sup>5</sup>

After three weeks, Carmen was released, but Evangelina remained in confinement. Placed in a common cell, she endured physical privations, the taunts of leering visitors who came to peer at the women through the bars and a regimen of menial work. During this time the privations of the incarceration took a heavy toll; Evangelina, not knowing whether her father was dead or alive, was anxious; her clothing became bedraggled; she lost weight and her large eyes took on a sunken look. According to the Evangelina story prepared and published in the United States, hope first came with the visit of *New York Journal* correspondent, George Eugene Bryson, and subsequently with the attention paid by the wife and daughter of United States Consul Fitzhugh Lee.<sup>6</sup> As Evangelina--in the report of her saga prepared by her U.S. handlers--recounts: "The coming of Mrs. Lee was like the coming of an angel. She spoke to me as she might to her own daughter. She promised to do for me a number of little things, that only a woman could do, and that night, when I said my prayers, I prayed, too, that all happiness might come to the beautiful American lady who had been so kind."<sup>7</sup> Help was indeed forthcoming. Evangelina was transferred to a cell in a different part of the prison where she could cook for herself, maintain better hygiene, and read, and in the new setting, she was in the company of other political prisoners rather than social outcasts and was spared the insults and affronts of the lower-class clientele of the previous ward. In the meantime, events on her behalf were taking place on the world stage. Agents of the *Journal* had mounted a tremendous publicity campaign for Evangelina. The Queen Regent of Spain, María Cristina, had received the petitions of a host of American women seeking clemency for Evangelina and had cabled General Valeriano Weyler, the Crown's Military Governor in Cuba, suggesting that Evangelina be put in a convent. The situation was problematic for Spain: the incident was bringing highly undesirable public attention but at the same time Bériz was one of Weyler's favorites and was a nephew of the Spanish Prime Minister.<sup>8</sup> Evangelina was pressured to withdraw her accusation against Colonel Bériz, and to say that she had invited him to her room--something she refused to do--and Weyler had George Bryson banished from Cuba because of his *Journal* stories publicizing Evangelina's plight. The general's strategy was to accuse Evangelina of plotting Colonel Bériz's death and to arrange pardons for criminals who would testify against her, seeking to prove that she was dissolute and had conspired against Spain. But the description of Evangelina by the *Journal*, making vivid the torments of a young lady of refinement who preferred death to dishonor, made the fury swirling about Weyler all the more intense. With Evangelina sentenced to the dreaded penal colony of Ceuta, world clamor was insistent that she be dealt with mercifully, and the Spanish



ambassador in Washington could do nothing to quell the campaign. At this point the *Journal* decided to take action and sent Karl Decker to find a way to free the young woman who had captured America's fancy and fueled its indignation over Spain. In late August, Decker was dispatched to Havana, where--with Cuban help--he masterminded a daring escape for Evangelina, who arrived in New York amidst great fanfare in mid-October 1897. Versions of the escape story vary as do the accounts of Evangelina's initial misfortunes, but what is certain is that the *New York Journal* scored an incredible newspaper coup with the story.<sup>9</sup> The dramatic arrival of Evangelina in New York and the narratives, drawings, and photographs which helped to tell her tale to the American public were a sensation. A flower-filled suite at the Waldorf Astoria welcomed her; she was arrayed in the finest garments and was guest of honor at a sumptuous banquet at Delmonico's.<sup>10</sup> In the ensuing days, she was presented to a huge rally at Madison Square Garden and was received by President McKinley at Convention Hall.<sup>11</sup> Her appearances helped to raise funds for the Cuban cause, and a novel based on her life was in print by the end of the year.<sup>12</sup> That she quickly became established as a part of the political caricature of the times is revealed in a curious episode involving White House kittens born to the pet Angora cat of President McKinley's wife. Mrs. McKinley apparently consulted her husband about appropriate names for the four kittens and determined that the most attractive one should be called Karl Decker, after the man who had arranged Evangelina Cisneros' escape, and that another one should be baptized with the name of the Cuban heroine. For the two remaining kittens, the McKinleys gave the names Weyler, after the despised general, and De Lome for the Spanish minister to the United States and then had these two kittens drowned in a bucket of water.<sup>13</sup>

While the Cisneros incident may seem relatively minor amidst the sea of propaganda filling United States newspapers at the time, her story does appear to have produced some direct consequences and as one source states "had the effect of spraying gasoline on a flame."<sup>14</sup> Her case certainly intensified resentment against General Weyler and very likely helped precipitate his recall. A series of dates and headlines from the *New York Times* provides a telling sequence of events and indicates American fascination with the topic. October 8, "Señorita Cisneros Escapes"; October 9 "Weyler Recall at Hand"; October 10 "Weyler Ready to Submit"; October 11 "Weyler to Leave at Once"; October 26 "Weyler Awaits Replacement"; October 29 "Weyler Will Sail Today"; and October 31 "Blanco Reaches Havana, Weyler Issues a Farewell."<sup>15</sup>

The Weyler days in Cuba had come to an end, and back in the United States, the whirlwind saga of Miss Cisneros ran its course. In May of 1898, Evangelina married Carlos Carbonell, a Cuban dentist who had aided her prison escape and accompanied her to New York, and after the war the couple returned to Havana. A Key West magazine of July 1898 seemed to provide a storybook ending to the tale with the following lines: "Ya en Nueva York la joven animosa, no olvidó a su galante libertador cubano, ni éste a ella; y por fin el lazo indisoluble del matrimonio estrechó dos corazones que supieron comprenderse en días de prueba."<sup>16</sup> But for Evangelina, in fact, there were additional chapters to tell.

She lived until 1970, when she was buried with full military honors and the rank of *Capitana* and championed as a socialist revolutionary. At the funeral, Captain Antonio Núñez Jiménez, President of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, praised her courage and made note of "la íntegra dedicación de la heroica mambisa a la libertad de Cuba, por la cual luchó dentro y fuera de su Patria."<sup>17</sup>

How did Evangelina Cisneros serve the various purposes to which her story was put? She was many things to many people. She was fire for the flames of the jingoistic press in the United States, a thorn in the side of General Weyler, a troublesome cause célèbre for María Cristina, a Cuban distraction for President McKinley, a heroic "mambisa" for Castro's Cuba, and a powerful symbol for women and for Cuba in the turn-of-the-century days of trials and triumphs. In fact, Evangelina provides a focus for questions about race and gender which were part of the propaganda of her case and which serve as a microcosm of these issues in the eighteen nineties.

Along with the images of *reconcentrados*, highly exaggerated tales of abuse, and a generalized defamation of Spain, the interventionist forces and yellow press of the United States sought to paint the situation in Cuba as especially pernicious for white women, who might be forced to suffer the worst of indignities. A case in point is the *Olivette* incident of 1896, which was played to the hilt by the *Journal* and used for both salacious and sensational effect. Two of the *Journal's* representatives in Cuba, Richard Harding Davis and Frederic Remington, gave an exaggerated portrayal of an incident in which a young Cuban woman of good breeding, Clemencia Arango, was undressed and searched by Cuban officials while aboard the American vessel, the *Olivette*. Remington, famous as the pictorial historian par excellence of the American west, drew the young woman being searched by three Spanish agents as she stood stark naked in a cabin of the *Olivette*, and the *Journal* editorialized, proclaiming: "There are things more dreadful than even war, and one of them is dishonor."<sup>18</sup> Although the Señorita Arango search, was--as later disclosure made clear--done by matrons, not males, the Remington image showing the back of naked white woman surrounded by three men and bearing the caption "Spaniards search women on American steamer" left a vivid impression of Spanish contempt and carnal abuse.<sup>19</sup> Remington proved as unsympathetic to Spain in print as he was in portraiture. On a fourth visit to Havana he wrote that Cuba was: "...time worn, decayed, and debauched by thieving officials and fire and sword. The people are negroes or breeds and they were sired by Spaniards who have never had social virtues since they were overrun by the Moors."<sup>20</sup> Remington's tone and the level of scorn for both blacks and Spaniards was typical for his time and, in his accounts of Cuba, he depicted Spanish affronts to women as well as a condescending attitude toward blacks. The saga of Evangelina--for which Remington contributed drawings--followed a similar pattern.

The alarm which William Randolph Hearst's paper, the *Journal*, was able to generate among the American public--and women in particular--was predicated on both racial fears and gender-specific issues. Karl Decker's account of the Evangelina rescue noted that she was housed among "...half a hundred black



wretches, their torn and tattered dresses draped about them seemingly with no intention of concealing their scarred bodies. Many of these blacks were murderesses, convicted of the most villainous crimes, and from time to time revolts occurred in which they tore and wounded each other in animal-like fashion."<sup>21</sup> The description of Evangelina by George Clark Musgrave, a British war correspondent in Cuba who had also visited the Recogidas Prison reinforces this contrast between Evangelina and her surroundings. According to Musgrave: "There suddenly appeared in their midst (in the midst of the fellow prisoners) a white face, young, pure and beautiful; a maiden of perhaps seventeen was crossing the yard. With her pale features surrounded by masses of dark hair, her simple white dress and dignified bearing, all accentuated by the horrible surroundings, she resembled the Madonna of an old master, inspired with life but plunged into Hades."<sup>22</sup>

Letters written on behalf of Evangelina echoed the dismay of women who were horrified to think of a young and virtuous white woman cast among the vile criminals of a prison in Africa. Varina Jefferson Davis in writing to the Queen Regent of Spain, said: "To you I appeal to extend your powerful protection over this poor captive girl...to save her from a fate worse than death."<sup>23</sup> Julia Ward Howe, in an appeal to Pope Leo XIII, wrote that Evangelina was in danger of suffering "...a sentence more cruel than death--that of twenty years of exile and imprisonment in the Spanish penal colony of Ceuta, in Africa, where no woman has ever before been sent, and where, besides enduring every hardship and indignity, she would have for her companions the lowest criminals and outcasts."<sup>24</sup> In a general call about the case issued by Mrs. Howe, she again hinted at the terrible consequences that might befall Evangelina in Africa: "How can we think of this pure flower of maidenhood condemned to live with felons and outcasts, without succor, without protection, to labor under a torrid sky, suffering privation, indignity and torment worse than death?"<sup>25</sup> And yet another petition--this one to María Cristina--praised the Queen Regent as a mother and devout Christian and requested clemency chiefly on those grounds.<sup>26</sup>

The case of Evangelina Cisneros helps to illustrate aspects of the Cuban situation which particularly stirred American interest. The attack upon the virtue of a beautiful and innocent woman made Spain an easy target for the United States newspapers, and the fact that she--a fair woman from a good family--had been placed among destitute black women and was sentenced to incarceration in Africa made the affront seem especially egregious. Many names were given to the courageous escapee: Joan of Arc, the girl martyr, the Flower of Cuba, Cuban heroine, *etc.* An 1898 American comment invoked the importance of gender in the Cisneros case by stating: "Spanish officials in Cuba have always denied the charge that they made war on women, and have insisted that the tales of persecution of the weaker sex that have reached this country were inventions of the insurgents, published to gain sympathy for their cause. In direct contradiction to this claim is the story of Evangelina Cisneros."<sup>27</sup>

Aside from the conventional gender roles which Evangelina played: dutiful daughter, virtuous maiden, grateful rescuee, and charming companion, she--in

several instances--embodied role reversal as well. In order to escape from Cuba after her rescue from Las Recogidas, she dressed like a young man, piling her luxuriant black hair under a slouch hat, and boarding a ship bound for New York under the name Juan Sola. And, in an interview in Cuba when she was in her nineties, she stated: "Si volviera a ser joven, creo que sí, que combatiría con Fidel pero eso sí, si él me da el mando."<sup>28</sup>

Evangelina may mean even more in terms of race and gender if she is seen symbolically, for as a symbol, her story helps to illustrate the degree to which black Cubans--both male and female--were viewed negatively by many Americans. Part of the initial concern for her rescue rested with the fact that she was being held in a cell with black women; and part of the ongoing fear which prompted her escape was that she would be sent to a prison of black men. Evangelina's fair features are mentioned repeatedly. Julian Hawthorne, the son of Nathaniel Hawthorne, declared upon meeting Evangelina: "No fairy princess could be more lovely than this fairy-like little Cuban maiden; her features have the delicate refinement only given by race; her eyes are liquid darkness, her smile flashes like light, expressions vibrate over her vivid face like the play of colors on the humming-bird; her movements are all grace and charm."<sup>29</sup> Hawthorne went on to say that Evangelina was not the only Cuban woman to suffer Weyler's outrage but that she was the representative of them all, and he made this call to the American public: "In the person of Evangelina Cisneros, Cuba appeals to us. With what grace can we receive the one and repel the other?"<sup>30</sup>

Hawthorne's question can be addressed provocatively by posing a parallel question. If Evangelina represents Cuba, then what does this woman's story tell us about Cuba and the role of the United States in Cuban affairs? Did the United States rescue Cuba as the *Journal* did Señorita Cisneros? For many Americans "Yankee pluck" overcoming "brute force" was the essence of the Evangelina case, and the United States victory in the Spanish-Cuban-American War was a triumph of American might over the dark deeds of Spain. Just as Evangelina was pictured as helpless and in need of rescue, so Cuba was viewed as hapless and in need of intervention--with little or no credit given to the insurgents. But it is possible, if we reverse roles, as Evangelina did, to offer an alternate reading of the story. With gender as a cue, we can look at the time of the Spanish-Cuban-American War and suggest that, if Evangelina symbolizes Cuba, then the eager suitor in the episode is Uncle Sam--a militaristic harasser who would not take "No!" for an answer and pushed passions to the point of crisis.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have used the name Evangelina Cisneros because that is how she is known in much of the literature consulted. Her name in Cuba was Evangelina Cossío (also spelled Cosío).

<sup>2</sup> Mirta Rodríguez Calderón, "Evangelina Cosío: La muchacha quinceañera que protagonizó el hecho más comentado de finales de siglo," *Bohemia* (July 21, 1967), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Nuñez Jiménez, "La rebelión del 26 de julio de 1896," *Bohemia* (May 22, 1970), p. 88.



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<sup>3</sup> Antonio Nuñez Jiménez, "La rebelión del 26 de julio de 1896," *Bohemia* (May 22, 1970), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Rodríguez Calderón, p. 17. It is important to note that there are many different versions of Evangelina's story and details vary widely in the varying accounts. A publicity version was written by the *Journal*, the U.S. newspaper responsible for her rescue; General Weyler posted his telling in his memoirs of Cuba; disparate stories are recorded in the professional literature in English; and post-1959 Cuban sources give a decidedly revolutionary rendering. Thus, in the Castro-era articles in Cuba, for example, the date for the Berriz assignation becomes emphatically July 26--to connect with the July 26 of the Cuban Revolution--and the denouement of the Berriz incident is definitively categorized as an uprising which declared the Isle of Pines to be free.

<sup>5</sup> Nuñez Jiménez, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> Evangelina Cisneros, *The Story of Evangelina Cisneros Told by Herself* (New York: Continental Publishing Company, 1898), pp. 189-190. This book in addition to telling Evangelina's story as written by the *Journal's* agents, contains an introduction by Julian Hawthorne, a section on Protests and Petitions, Karl Decker's account of the rescue, and a brief history of Cuba.

<sup>7</sup> Cisneros, pp. 189-190.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Millard, "El Asombroso Rescate de Evangelina Cosío de Cisneros," *Bohemia* (September 5, 1954), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Brown, *The Correspondent's War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), pp. 98-99. It has been suggested that Decker may simply have bribed prison officials to free Evangelina, but there is much evidence including the protagonist's own tacit confirmation of the *Journal* account to suggest that a true prison escape was effected.

<sup>10</sup> John Tebbel, *America's Great Patriotic War with Spain* (Manchester Center, VT: Marshall Jones Company, 1996), p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Lyndall Dunbar, *A Cuban Amazon* (Cincinnati: The Editor Publishing Company, 1897).

<sup>13</sup> Víctor R. Muñoz, *El rescate de Evangelina Cossío y Cisneros* (Ibor City, Tampa: Establecimiento Tipográfico Cuba, 1897), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Donald H. Dyal, *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish American War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> See front page of the following *New York Times* editions for 1897: October 8, 9, 10, 11, 26, 29 and 31.

<sup>16</sup> "Así Se Forja Una Nación" *Bohemia* (December 25, 1955), p. 118.

<sup>17</sup> "En Cuba," *Bohemia* (May 29, 1970), p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Allan Keller, *The Spanish-American War: A Compact History* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1969), pp. 19-20.

<sup>19</sup> Keller, pp. 18-22.

<sup>20</sup> *The Reader's Companion to Cuba*, Alan Ryan, ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997), p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> Cisneros, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Allan, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Cisneros, pp. 37-38.

<sup>24</sup> Cisneros, pp. 39-40.

<sup>25</sup> Cisneros, pp. 40-41.

<sup>26</sup> Cisneros, pp. 43-45.

<sup>27</sup> Trumbull White, *Our War with Spain for Cuba's Freedom* (Chicago: Imperial Publishing Company, 1898), p. 294.

<sup>28</sup> Rodríguez Calderón, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Cisneros, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Cisneros, p. 27.