floor. That was our house. That’s where myself and my brothers and sisters were raised. Toward the end of 1959, the beginning of 1960, a brother-in-law of mine began working here in the Habana Hilton Hotel and so I just packed my bags and came up here out of the blue. I was seventeen. I appeared out of the blue and went to look for him, and he got me the job.

The Brothel of the Caribbean

Tomás Fernández Robaina

Havana’s reputation as the “brothel of the Caribbean” attracted foreign tourists as well as Cuban customers, and prostitution employed tens of thousands of women in the prerevolutionary period. In the following extract from interviews with three ex-prostitutes conducted by one of Cuba’s leading historians, Tomás Fernández Robaina, we are given an exuberant evocation of carnival and sexuality.

Carnival was one of the times when we had the most work. Not all of the pimps let their women participate in the comparsas [Afro-Cuban dance group], because the time they spent rehearsing before the carnival began, and during the Saturday and Sunday parades along the streets of the neighborhood, took away from the time they were supposed to devote to their trade. But even so, there were women who, with or without their pimps, joined the comparsas.

But don’t think that all of those joined the congas were people like us. Black women, white women, of all sizes and weights, who worked as maids, ironers in the Chinese laundries, and in many other places, joined the comparsas, either out of tradition, or just because they liked them.

Not every woman in the neighborhood liked to march around Prado, either. Some thought that it was just behaving like a monkey for people to gawk at. Others, on the other hand, really enjoyed it. For some, dancing in the comparsa was something that gave them a certain cachet; especially, if they dressed up as a figura or as a queen, since every conga had a queen with her figuras, or courtiers.

The figuras were dancers whose skill and good looks allowed them to dance more freely than the couples who made up the dance troupe and even than the queen herself. The figuras did not have to follow the dance steps and patterns that had been rehearsed.

The Sultana troupe was the comparsa of the Colón neighborhood. It was one of the most exotic and most peculiar, because it included many “men” dressed up as women, who were generally taken to be women, because they did such a good job at hiding what they really were, with capes, turbans, and
makeup. I remember the Queen of Italy; he was a very well-known santero who did a fantastic job disguising himself as a woman, but I don't remember whether he participated in the Sultana or in the Oxherds.

The Belén Dandys, the comparsa of the neighborhood of San Isidro, were usually quite different from La Sultana and other congas. The Dandys had a touch of elegance, some people thought it a bit contrived, but they weren't like other groups such as the Marquises, from the Ateres neighborhood, the eternal carnival rivals of the Dandys. The Marquises were also a very elegant comparsa, because they tried to imitate the costumes of a king's court with marquises and counts. The Dandys' costumes were always fashionable. What told you that it was a comparsa was not only the fact they all dressed in the same way, but also the canes and straw hats used by the men. The women wore simple long evening dresses, sometimes with a stole. The colors they wore were generally very discrete.

Among the queens in the Dandys' group, I recall two who are still talked about by the older people in the neighborhood: Candida and Teresa. Physically they were completely different, but both had a lot of personality and beauty.

Teresa was one of those typically Cuban neighborhood mulattas, tall, fleshy without actually being fat, narrow waist, a great behind, big and eye-catching breasts, always happy, flashing that special movie actress smile, very nice. She lived in a tenement in Paula Street, just at the corner of Paula and Damas. The rhythmic, majestic way she walked grabbed your attention; she was a real neighborhood aristocrat. The costumes she wore for the festivals sponsored by the Polar and Tropical beer gardens really made you stop, and her husband was proud and thrilled by that wonderful mulatta of his who everyone talked about because she was so gorgeous. When she dressed up as queen during carnival, her poise and elegance expanded as she paraded before the wildly applauding public.

Candida, the other queen who comes to mind, was a completely different type. For me, she was the most elegant of all of them, and she was the one who sported the most expensive dresses that a comparsa queen could have worn. She didn't have Teresa's body, she was more a Parisian type; nothing in front, nothing behind, but when she dressed up as queen and marched ahead of the couples, it looked like she had turned into a real blueblood aristocrat. Her greatest pride was to go out every Saturday, for the four Saturdays that the carnival lasted, with a different costume...

Consuelo la Charme danced for several years as a figuera in different comparsas; she claims that she was once put up for queen, and she even emerged as the favorite in La Sultana, a comparsa that imitated a sultan and his harem, and of course, the main dancer in the conga was his favorite. She said she pre-

ferred being the favorite to being the queen, because she could dance more creatively, while the queen had to keep to the officially prescribed movements and steps. A figuera, like the favorite, could move anywhere among the couples, use intricate dance steps, and grab the spectators' attention more.

Carnival time also attracted a lot of violence; the problems started with the rehearsals. Carnival time was when people took revenge on their enemies. When a man or woman's attention was diverted, they could be slashed or stabbed. When the conga came through the neighborhood, it was also a very dangerous period for robberies because people could snatch your necklace or wallet. It was hard for them to steal our wallets, though, because we didn't use them...

Some men dressed up as women, not like in La Sultana, but in more ridiculous ways. I feel as though I can still see Guillermo, the one they called "the Jamaican," a tall black man, thin, but very graceful and who had good luck with women. He would begin to talk all funny and say that he was looking for his husband, and tell stories with doubles entendres that everybody listening to and watching found very funny. Other male dancers dressed up in grotesque costumes, imitating kings, or just tasteless or crazy people. They danced, and collected money handed out by the residents and businesspeople.

Even though I wasn't really much part of the comparsa, because I was always a bit of a rough peasant, I really enjoyed the comparsas and I even marched behind the congas and La Mojiganga. Then I really believed that the chorus lines sung by Los Dandys were true:

I feel a drum, mamita, they're calling me,
I feel a drum, mamita, they're calling me,
Yes, yes, it's Los Dandys.
Yes, yes, it's Los Dandys.

Translated by Aviva Chomsey
A Prostitue Remembers

Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon


My friend was working in the Province of Pinar del Río, at a bar in Candelaria. At the beginning she didn’t say it was a whorehouse, she only told me, “if you want to earn more money, come and work at the bar with me.” She was almost certainly paid for taking me there—that’s what they always did, and it’s only natural, though I never tried to talk anybody into becoming a prostitute.

When I got to the bar I saw right away it was a brothel, and I didn’t like the looks of it. It was a rundown old house where all kinds of men were allowed. The parlor was cramped, the six or seven bedrooms were tiny, the dining room and kitchen were small, and the furniture was old and shabby. The women were sitting in the parlor, fully dressed, and the men would go in, pick one out, then go to a room with her.

Most of the brothel owners were women or perverts; I never knew a real man to own one. My friend introduced me to the madam. “Here’s a girl who wants a job.”

“Delighted,” said the madam. “Please consider this your home. As for work, there’s plenty of it.”

She explained that I was expected to talk with the men and be pleasant. Then when a man asked me to go to a room with him, I must accept and charge 1.50 pesos, half of which I could keep and the other half turn over to her. Every brothel owner gave a cut of his profits to the police so they’d look the other way.

“No, I’ll have a place to live and plenty of food,” I thought, “and I’ll earn a lot more money to boot.” How wrong I was! I managed to earn enough so my folks could eat, but that was all, and even for that I had to work hard.

I started the very day I arrived. I changed my name to Mercy, thinking it would be easier for me. At first I was terribly depressed and just sat without saying a word to anybody, but the madam soon saw to it that I had customers. When the first man asked me to go with him I went at once, but when we were alone in the room I was paralyzed. “Are you going to stand there?” he said roughly, “I didn’t come here to look at your dress, I came to fuck.” That horrible, filthy word! I wanted to run away—to vanish—but I obediently took off my clothes and did it.

Afterward I told the madam how I felt. “It’s that way with everybody the first day,” she said reassuringly. “It’ll pass. Besides, where else are you going to get a job?” There was no answer to that, and I thought maybe I’d get over my revulsion. But that night was almost as bad as my wedding night. Most of my customers were like Eleodoro, rough and crude, and it wasn’t a matter of education—a lot of cultured men went there. I think they had a morbid desire to humiliate a woman.

I slept, ate, and lived in that house, attending my clients in my bedroom. We closed at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and opened again for business sometime around noon. In between we slept. From the moment I became a prostitute I began to drink. I had to. I couldn’t stand the men and suffered bitterly from shame. Unless I had a few drinks first, I didn’t feel capable of going into that room.

After I became more or less adjusted to the style of life, though, it didn’t seem so bad. At least my daughter had enough to eat and so did my brothers and sisters. . . .

To a girl like me who was not yet seventeen, being a prostitute was terrible, and I drank more all the time. I noticed the other women taking Benzedrine and Akederm pills with their liquor, so I began taking them too. With pills and drink, I was able to face the night. When I was high, though, I’d get into arguments with the men. Any little thing would make me angry. One day a young queer who cleaned the house used some of my new makeup. “You don’t need it,” he said. “It looks better on me.” I struggled with him, and when I saw I couldn’t take it away, I burned my bed and three new dresses. That’s the way I let off steam—I’d burn my clothes. I did it about twice a month, sometimes once a week.

Some of the men thought they could do anything they wanted for the measly three pesos they paid. I fought with them all the time, especially when they wanted anal coitus, and with the ones who were a bit effeminate or who’d had too much to drink and tried to bite me. When I fought and screamed at them, the police would come and arrest me. Now and then men came in drunk and made a scene just for the fun of it, and when that happened, the madam called the police. . . .

Every single day in a brothel was a day of anguish. Once I started at 1:00 p.m.
and worked straight through till 5:00 A.M. the following day. I laid about twenty-five men, one after the other, twenty-five to thirty minutes apart. Drink and pep pills kept me going.

The longest I ever stayed with any client was a whole night, for which I'd get fifteen or twenty pesos. But I had to need the money pretty desperately to do it. If you agreed to spend the night with one man, you had to put yourself out to please him, even if you'd never met him before. Having several clients a night wasn't such hard work because you didn't have to pretend so much. I hated to pretend. . . .

I never went to any of the gambling casinos they had before the revolution, but I went to all the big hotels—the Riviera, the Capri, the Sevilla, the Hilton, the Deauville. Prostitutes weren't supposed to be allowed in places like that, but with money you could buy your way in anywhere.

Once I went to the Hotel Sevilla with an American, but they called up from the desk and told him he could only take a woman to his room if she'd checked in as his wife. "Very well, then," he said. "Bring down my luggage. I'm checking out." Then he took me to the Habana Libre—it was still the Hilton then—and signed me in as his wife. That was the only time I ever got into a big hotel legally, without having to hide.

I was wearing a flowered dress with a plunging neckline and a very tight skirt and looked every inch a prostitute. The man at the desk gave me a look as if to say, "Some wife!" Of course he couldn't come right out and say anything, but what a look!

On the whole, my memories of Americans are very ugly. Oh sure, they'd take me places like the Hilton, but it was as if they didn't want to humiliate me. And there were some who'd threaten you with a bottle if you refused to comply with their whims. Most of our American clients brought drugs along with them. They'd arrive in Cuba loaded with cocaine and marijuana, and they'd pay you extra to take it with them. They'd put cocaine up their noses and sniff it, take it in their mouths, and some of them would rub it on their private parts. I tried not to take drugs but I couldn't avoid it. To refuse was asking for trouble.

As long as I was a prostitute, I hated the guts of every man I went to bed with. I never let a customer hang around afterward—no friendly farewells for him! If he didn't get up right away I'd say, "You got what you paid for. You're through. Beat it!" I loved to flaunt that in a man's face! I always got my money in advance, of course, so I could say whatever I pleased.

I had to be pretty worn out before I'd get any pleasure from sex with a client. The few times I was weak enough to react like a woman, I felt so soiled and degraded afterward that I wanted to die. Not all prostitutes feel that way. I've heard others say nothing is more normal than getting pleasure in bed, even if you don't care for the man. My reaction depended on the man; some are gentle, others are brutes. In a brothel you get maybe a couple of nice men to every ninety-eight brutes. . . .

I dreamed of getting out of the brothel and working at a decent job. I wanted to study. I wanted to be somebody. But that was before the revolution—and there was no hope of any such thing. One time I went to enroll in a school, but the first person I met was a man I'd slept with. I turned around and left.

Another time when I was about seventeen I made a vow to La Caridad to dress in yellow gingham. I kept my vow faithfully but the Virgin didn't help me. Finally in my desperation I went to a spiritist. Not that I believe in them. I think once you're dead and the worms eat you, there's nothing left. But I thought, "What can I lose?"

It was a farce. Like a psychologist, a spiritist knows that if you go there you must have some problem. So first she tries to draw you out to see what's worrying you. The things that woman read in my cards she'd practically dragged out of me first. When she was through I said, "None of this is news to me; after all, I told it to you."