Moral Panics, Viral Subjects: Black Women’s Bodies on the Line during Cuba’s 2020 Pandemic Lockdowns

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Abstract
While Cuba was in a COVID-19-induced lockdown, coleras, women who wait in hours-long colas (lines) to purchase scarce goods to resell, emerged in online state media as “folk devils” responsible for the acute shortages of basic goods. Using an intersectional lens, we combine fieldwork in lines and content analysis of online media to examine the creation and policing of the colera threat during the summer of 2020. Coleras were framed as immoral subjects, gendered and racialized, and often depicted as a virus that threatened the nation’s health. The colera moral panic attempted to obscure class, race, and gender inequalities and structures that have made certain citizens vulnerable in the aftermath of successive waves of Cuban economic reforms. Understanding this moral panic allows us to appreciate the material scarcities and indignities to which poor Black women have been subjected, and widespread concerns about the state’s failure to protect society’s most vulnerable. [Cuba, moral panic, food insecurity, COVID-19 pandemic, race/gender/class]

Resumen
Durante el encierro inducido por el COVID-19 en Cuba, las coleras, mujeres que esperan horas en colas (filas) para comprar bienes escasos para revenderlos, surgen en los medios estatales en línea como “diablas populares”, responsables de la aguda escasez de bienes básicos. Usando una lente interseccional, combinamos trabajo de campo en líneas y análisis de contenido de medios en línea para examinar la creación y vigilancia de la amenaza colera durante el verano de 2020. Las coleras fueron enmarcadas como sujetas inmorales, generizadas y racializadas, y a menudo representadas como un virus
Introduction

In July of 2020, a Black Cuban woman was wrongfully detained while waiting in line outside a grocery store in Havana. She had already been waiting for three hours to buy a few basic products that were highly coveted: spaghetti, tomato sauce, and toilet paper. When she and her sister observed a White woman from the line vacate one of the few benches at the entrance to a nearby building, they were relieved for a chance to sit and rest. An employee immediately came out to demand that they move. Surprised, they asked why the other woman hadn’t been chased off. “This is not a seat for coleras,” the employee barked before threatening to call the police. In the pandemic era, coleras, women who wait in hours-long colas (lines) to purchase scarce goods to resell, have become evil “folk devils” that everyone loves to hate.1 Of course, the sisters knew why they were read as coleras: they were shopping while Black, middle-aged, and female in an area of hard-currency commerce not intended for “people like them.”2 But since they knew that they were not coleras, they ignored the threats and rested, keeping an eye on the barely moving line.

The police arrived and immediately threatened to detain the sisters. Determined not to let the incident get between them and the products they had already waited hours to purchase, they surrendered their bench. At the last minute, the braver sister decided to take a picture, hoping to capture the patrol car number or the officer’s badge. Angered by the attempt, the officer grabbed her and pushed her into the patrol car as her sister watched in horror. On the way to the station, the officers made disparaging remarks about her natural hair texture.

Days later, the woman who had been detained—a long-term research collaborator of Maya Berry—wrote about the humiliating incident on Facebook. As she later explained to Berry, she wanted to call attention to how her experience of racial profiling in the name of protecting the public from coleras was representative of a larger social dynamic of multiple oppressions. Indeed, the demographic
composition of the long lines for basic subsistence items during the COVID-19 crisis, and the state’s regulation of those lines in the summer of 2020, brought into heightened relief the intersection of class inequality and gendered labor with anti-Black racial bias.

The social forces that make certain citizens more vulnerable to various forms of harm predated the exceptional moment of the pandemic. The experience denounced on Facebook also foreshadowed things to come. In the weeks after the post, the Cuban government announced new measures to address the COVID crisis, among them a nationwide offensive against coleros, disproportionately portrayed as working-class Black women, revendedores (resellers), and acaparadores (hoarders). Throughout the summer, these evil folk devils occupied center stage in Cuban media.

Using an intersectional lens, we examine how the Cuban state created and policed the colera threat and how official discourses in online state media about lines and the people in them during the COVID-19 pandemic obscured class, race, and gender inequalities and social vulnerabilities. While our field research was conducted in Havana, the national reach of state media means that this discourse was not limited to the capital. We show how ideologies of race, gender, and morality interacted with concerns around scarcity, labor, and class inequality not openly addressed by the government. The media discourses that targeted Black women in lines during the summer of 2020 reflected changes to the state’s moral responsibility to meet the basic needs of all Cuban households and target support to the most vulnerable.

COVID Comes to Cuba

In the spring of 2020, the state urged Cubans to #quedateencasa (stay home) in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. The Cuban public health system took decisive action, quarantining infected individuals and providing appropriate medical care, while also performing mass contact tracing and testing to quickly identify suspected cases. By mid-summer, these measures had effectively halted the spread of the virus. This early success demonstrated the advantages of Cuba’s centralized system and commitment to health care as a right not tied to economic status.

While the initial public health response was quite effective, the social and economic impacts of the virus proved more challenging to contain. Doing field research in Havana, Hope Bastian observed how the pandemic brought rapid changes in the food system and significantly altered the strategies households employed to deal with shortages of basic food and consumer goods (Bastian and Garth 2020). Transformations in the Cuban food system highlight the new forms
that inequalities have assumed since the economic reforms of 2011–12, and the changing structure of opportunities in the Revolution’s seventh decade (Bastian 2018). Although health care is available to all, the economic impact of the pandemic—and the measures taken to control its spread—was felt unevenly by Cuban families. In July 2020, a group of CUC stores closed and reopened as “MLC stores,” where people could only make purchases using new debit cards in foreign currencies, collectively known as *moneda libremente convertible* (MLC). MLC cards could be recharged by depositing foreign-currency cash or by transfers from abroad (Rodríguez 2020). When they opened, state media reported that only luxury goods would be sold in the foreign currency stores, but soon they became the best-stocked stores in the city (Rodríguez 2020).

**Getting in Lines . . . Women’s Work**

Waiting in long lines for food and household products is not new in Cuba. Moreover, the essential tasks of social reproduction, figuring out how to get food into the home and onto the table, continue to be profoundly gendered. Despite the widespread integration of women into the workforce by the end of the 1970s, enduring patriarchal social norms assign the labor of food preparation in the domestic sphere to women as part of their “second shift” (Hochschild 1989). As an extension, food acquisition is a burden most commonly assumed between generations of women in a household rather than between women and men (Pertierra 2008, 2011).

Over the decades of the Revolution, Cubans have developed norms for waiting in line that reflect shared revolutionary ethics. For example, certain social groups considered vulnerable have been exempted from the lines that are a part of everyday life. The elderly, people with disabilities, pregnant women, and mothers with small children have been afforded special priority, from reserved bus seats to the opportunity to skip the line to enter stores or offices. However, the norms changed in the longer lines outside stores in COVID-era Havana.

Even for Havana city residents used to waiting in line, doing so when you’re supposed to be limiting exposure to disease by staying safe at home was new. The heightened conditions of scarcity and fears of contracting coronavirus seem to have changed the stakes, putting the most vulnerable in the moral crosshairs of the state and fellow citizens. As repeatedly witnessed by Bastian in the long lines outside CUC and MLC stores, since the beginning of quarantine, pregnant women and women with small children—who were previously ushered to the front of the line—were told that they should not leave home. When they did leave their homes, they were forced to wait in the regular lines. In Cuban online parent groups, pregnant women and mothers of small children complained frequently that the police
officers and military officials assigned to regulate lines were not using their power to defend access to opportunities for basic consumption for vulnerable populations. The women expected to be ushered to the front of the lines so they could return quickly to the safety of their homes; instead, they found their presence in public spaces questioned by state agents, store management, and fellow citizens who shamed them for being irresponsible, accusing them of putting their children at risk by waiting in lines. At times they were even barred from entering the stores (for their “protection”).

While women were overrepresented in food lines before the pandemic, performing this essential social reproductive labor for their families during the stay-at-home order made women focal points in the media coverage and primary actors in the moral debates about food access in 2020.

Avoiding Lines . . . Race Privilege

Although many state workers were encouraged to work remotely, for many families, prior systems of social stratification limited their ability to cover basic needs from the comfort of home. Just as before the COVID pandemic, household survival strategies and provisioning practices depended on access to different forms of capital. The group of middle-class and upper-class consumers that grew during the short period of normalization of US-Cuban relations during the Obama administration had access to economic capital that helped them weather the COVID lockdowns. New hard currency stores, online commerce, and premium home delivery services provided novel options for getting food on the table, but these quarantine-friendly options excluded low-income households (Bastian 2020).

Due to the racial demographic of past waves of emigration, White Cubans have disproportionate access to economic capital through remittances (Blue 2007; Hansing 2017, 2018; Hansing and Orozco 2014). Because this economic capital gave them a leg up in the small business world, these families began the COVID crisis with more hard currency savings (Hansing and Hoffman 2019). When public transportation was suspended, they were able to travel across the city, in private cars or taxis, to stock their deep freezers at MLC stores. For the disproportionately Black have-nots, lack of access to new services meant more time spent in lines, sometimes with nothing to show for it after more than ten hours waiting.

After three months of strict quarantine measures in Havana, the reestablishment of public transportation in July brought a short respite, making it easier for those who depend on public transit to travel to the better-stocked stores of Havana’s coastal areas. It was during this time that the colera emerged in the Cuban media discourse as a folk devil at the center of an intense moral panic.
British sociologist Stanley Cohen observed the periodic emergence of moral panics in which “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to. . . . Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough but suddenly appears in the limelight” (Cohen 1972, 9). By definition, the emerging threat is not mundane. It is a threat to the very fabric of the social order. Thus, Kenneth Thompson elaborates that “its perpetrators are regarded as evil ‘folk devils’ and excite strong feelings of righteousness” (1998, 9).

In the Cuban context, Anne Luke’s research examined the moral panics that emerged in the early years of the Revolution around young people who neither worked nor studied (2011, 2018). In the early 1960s, “work was a cornerstone of the new pedagogy, and linked fundamentally to the new value system.” Faced with high levels of emigration, the state was eager to incorporate young people into the workforce. Luke observed that the “connection with work was part of the intimate relationship that was being forged through discourse between la Revolución and el pueblo [the people]” that tied work and morality together (2018, 38). A moral outrage built around young people who “sat outside the new morality of work,” representing a threat to the system (2018, 7). In 1969, there were 400,000 youths under sixteen neither studying nor working (Castro 1969). Their disconnect from the revolutionary project was blamed on the immoral corrupting influences of US and global counterculture movements. To understand these moral panics, Luke analyzed the statements and positions of youth organizations and speeches by revolutionary leaders, often reprinted completely in Cuban media and quoted heavily in journalistic pieces (Luke 2011, 130).

Today, the Cuban state media monopoly continues to recycle content across its media ecosystem: national daily and local weekly print newspapers, local and national television and radio programming, and the online news networks it controls, exposing Cubans to the same messages from multiple sources. The pandemic reinforced the use of online news in Cuba, which has expanded along with growing internet access over the past decade. In order to understand how “moral barricades are manned” in 2020, we performed a content analysis of online state media from May 19 to September 9, identifying thirty-six articles in which the contentious figure of the colera appears. After each reading through a small sample of these articles, selected from different time intervals, we discussed emerging themes and established a common codebook to apply to the complete corpus.
The moralizing texts and images we analyzed conveyed a consistent depiction of the colera as (1) an immoral subject, (2) a gendered and racialized subject, and (3) a virus. Nightly viewing of primetime news broadcasts in Havana allowed us to confirm that the discourses and visuals in online media were replicated across media platforms. Examining how the colera “problem” and its solutions were created in online state media allowed us to understand the central questions of moral panics: the role of the state in its construction, the forces that stand to benefit from it, and the real fears it mobilizes (Hall et al. 1978, viii).

Theme #1: Immoral Subjects

State media discourses directly attacked the coleros’ integrity, as persons with “inappropriate moral and social behavior” (Izquierdo Ferrer and Pérez 2020). This language inculpates coleros for violating hallmark social values of the Revolution: discipline, honesty, labor, and concern for the collective good. The CubaDebate article “Salvar y unir” frames ridding the city of coleros as a moral crusade to save the very soul of the Revolution; ending public impunity toward coleros’ abuses would protect the sanctity of the Revolution in a battle of good versus evil (Perera Robbio 2020). A week earlier in Granma, the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez denounced the people who “take over the lines,” and promised that the state would take action against “those who choose social indiscipline, vulgarities and scornful defiance of authority” (Castro Morales 2020). In these ways, the media attacked the colero as a socially deviant figure whose actions demonstrate contempt of the Revolution.

In these cries from state media to defend morality, emphasis was placed on how coleros offended a key pillar of Revolutionary citizenship: the inherent value of work. Coleros were admonished for not being formally employed; as such, they were at odds with the “labor del Estado y el Gobierno” (Castro Morales 2020; Sifonte Díaz 2020). Coleros’ livelihood strategies were described as an “easy alternative” to work and in that sense directly contrasted with the activities of real workers who do not have the same “free time” to wait in long lines (Pérez Cabrera et al. 2020). These discourses “othered” coleros as amoral pariahs and antiwork social leeches preying on Revolutionary readers.

The idea that coleros were “aprovechando” (getting ahead) at the expense of the honest worker was a persuasive rationale for closing ranks, justifying public repudiation. For instance, an article in Granma entitled “Ali Baba and His ‘40 Thousand Coleros” explained that “it is necessary to put an end to this because they fly the flag of shamelessness and they take advantage of those of us who cannot do our own shopping in stores” (Labrador Herrera et al. 2020). As disrespectful people taking advantage of honest workers, coleros were emphasized as immoral and
unworthy of sympathy. The very title of the article, a play on the story “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” from *One Thousand and One Nights*, draws a direct analogy between *coleros* and thieves.

State media discourses firmly situated *coleros* beyond the bounds of compassion and coached Revolutionary readers to understand that outright rejection was the only appropriate response (Martín González, Lezcano Lavandera, and Oropesa Mecías 2020). Multiple articles actively discouraged readers who may be inclined to interrogate the systemic forces driving these citizens to engage in such activities, arguing that they should not be seen as victims because they are only feigning vulnerability, even resorting to using their babies as props in their con game (Castro Morales 2020; Sifonte Díaz 2020). This discourse was constantly reinforced in other state media and its cumulative effect aimed to build consensus to support an aggressive zero tolerance approach toward these folk devils.

**Theme #2: Gendered and Racialized Subject**

While state media discourses usually referred to *coleros* using a “gender-neutral” masculine ending, specific cases were exclusively presented as female. In the first major exposé on the phenomenon, we are presented with the archetype: “Yanay Toledo is one of those who go to the stores every day to hoard everything she can. Even though she has little experience, she knows the basic routine by heart: go with other *coleras* to find spots in the front, middle, and end of the line” (Sifonte Díaz 2020). The article continues using the feminine, “In each instance, she holds a place for herself and her ‘compañeras.’” The sarcastic use of the word *compañera* (female comrade), emphasized by the use of quotation marks, stresses that the author considers these women unworthy of the Revolutionary honorific.

This pattern of representation is also repeated in the drawings that accompany news articles. In a cartoon published in *CubaDebate*, the *colera* is female, overweight, and dressed in tight Lycra (Sifonte Díaz 2020). In another cartoon published in *Juventud Rebelde* (Figure 1), the presumed *colera* is a woman of African descent with a handkerchief pulling back her frizzy black hair, dressed in cheap fabric that clings to her overweight body (García Santos 2020). “There are ten people with me, *compañero,*” she says to a Black man dressed in blue. In the next frame he hands her a citation, “Well you’re coming with me: down to the station.” In each image the female figure is a deviant lawbreaker, while male figures uphold the law.

While the texts are silent on race and gender, the images of the alleged culprits accompanying the articles speak volumes. The photographs provided of *coleras* “in action” exclusively depict women of African descent. Of the fifteen unique images of *coleras* published online during the summer of 2020, thirteen featured women of African descent. One such picture prominently features a dark-skinned...
overweight Black woman with a scarf around her head leaning against a building, a fan covering her face (Figure 2). The caption reads: “Many coleras avoid explaining their behavior.” Here, the gender-neutral convention falls away, as does the ostensible racial ambiguity of the actors in question. Whether covering her face to protect her identity or to shield herself from the hot sun while queuing for hours, her facelessness allows the image to stand in for all coleras.

Just as the photo squarely positions the Black woman as the culprit, the caption reinforces the framework of personal responsibility. The reader is led to question the woman’s ethics rather than seeking the roots of this social phenomenon within broader structural conditions. This coverage reinforces existing presumptions about what people who engage in immoral activity look like, attributing poor Black women’s actions to moral shortcomings.
The deployment of gender-specific and race-specific visual representations of coleras fits within a broader pattern of color-blind official rhetoric coupled with the reproduction of anti-Black racial bias, which can be traced back to the founding of the Cuban Republic and present at the inception of the Cuban Revolution (Benson 2016). Both racism and antiracism coexisted within Cuban society before and after 1959, but within Cuban nationalism the open discussion of race has been considered divisive and, thus, taboo (de la Fuente 2001).

In Brazil, another postcolonial nation built on the legacy of racial slavery and the myth of racial democracy, João Costa Vargas (2004) has noted similar patterns. In Brazilian news media “the avoidance of race-talk is suggestive of the heightened racial awareness that, dialectically, manifests itself by the negation of such awareness” (454, emphasis in original). He terms this a “hyperconsciousness/negation of race dialectic,” which “energizes how Brazilians think about/repress, interrogate/passively accept, and justify/ignore social hierarchies” (444).

In societies like Cuba and Brazil, there is a paradoxical coexistence of vehement negation of the importance of race in determining social hierarchies and negation of critical race analysis as a valid tool, alongside the widespread use of codes for race in state media. This is suggestive of a heightened racial awareness that must be obscured in service of maintaining social hierarchies and inequalities. In this way, race can operate as central in the formation of social facts, the shaping of
perceptions and actions, and the perpetuation of inequalities, even when it is not explicitly stated (460).

In the Cuban case, the salience of ideologies of both race and gender are simultaneously obscured and reinforced in this way. Building upon a prior scaffolding of anti-Black and sexist hierarchies still operative in Cuban society, the moral panic in the mass media was guided by silent conventions that express the “racial [and gendered] common sense” in Cuba (Omi and Winant 1994). In the incident described in the opening, these ideologies facilitated the employee’s immediate misidentification of the two Black sisters shopping for their families as coleras.

**Theme #3: Viral Subject**

By August, the term “colerovirus” entered official circulation, a portmanteau describing coleros as a virus to be eradicated like the coronavirus. On a daily basis, public health officials entreated citizens to stay at home and maintain social distancing, and the colera was framed as both a moral and metabolic threat to the health of the body politic. Her undisciplined nature was perceived as contemptuous of both the Revolution and public health measures, which good citizens were morally obligated to defend.

Using the same rhetoric as the public health campaign against the coronavirus, the diagnosis was simple. Cubans were told that it was their civic duty to heal the nation by embarking on an “ofensiva contra coleros” (Colero Offensive). In one Juventud Rebelde article (Figure 3) titled “The ‘Colerovirus’ Indeed Has a Cure,” the author argues, “If we have worked hard to control COVID-19, why not do the same with the ‘colerovirus’” (Rosendo 2020). A mass community mobilization was prescribed to impede its spread, enlisting the full force of the law. Instead of doctors, the intervention to combat the “plaga de vividores” (plague of freeloaders) would be led by the police (Perera Robbio 2020). Anyone failing to proactively participate in this moral offensive were considered accomplices (Domínguez Cruz 2020).

Likening the coleras to a virus was one of several ways that state media discourses dehumanized Black women. Coleras were doubly stigmatized: compared to the virus plaguing Cuban society and accused of being vectors of contagion. These discourses bear an uncanny resemblance to nineteenth- and twentieth-century social eugenics theories aimed at improving the nation by ridding society of its undesirables. Cuban political elites trying to prove the viability of Cuban sovereignty had to fight against North American and European views of the inferiority of the “mixed race” nation (Helg 1995). In that political context, social scientists propagated anti-Black notions of undesirability, leading to the disproportionate criminalization of Black people in the Republic (Bronfman 2004; Ortiz [1906] 1973).
Similarly, in 2020, wiping out *coleras* was perceived as much a question of national defense as a public health issue, as expressed in the title of one article: "We Are Acting on Behalf of the People, to Whom We Owe Everything, Not on Behalf of the Annexationist Swarm" (Castro Morales 2020). The specter of US intervention, and the long history of slights against the Cuban government’s fitness for self-rule, formed a not-so-subtle backdrop to the public health effort. State media discourses reinforced that the Colero Offensive had to be led with the same systematic, efficient, and effective discipline as Cuba’s medical system and military. The use of epidemiological and/or militaristic imagery rallied citizens around the need for a “mano dura” (firm hand) approach. *CubaDebate* reported on a speech by the president, emphasizing that “Esta es una lucha sin cuartel” (We will take no prisoners in this battle) (Martínez 2020). Citizens were called upon to fulfill their moral-civic duty to confront these criminals head on (Izquierdo Ferrer and Pérez 2020). True revolutionaries would volunteer for surveillance and aid in police arrests, measures presented by the state as solutions to the crisis. Effectively, this “rallying of the troops” via state media sanctioned the discriminatory profiling of Black women.

Reframed as violators of moral and legal codes, these Black women were criminalized and vulnerable to arrest and public censure. On July 20th, 2020, *Granma* boasted about the conviction of 1,295 citizens since the beginning of the pandemic for crimes “related to illicit economic activity, disobedience, hoarding, and propagating the spread of epidemics” (*Granma* 2020). In the following month, arrests and convictions increased, and journalists boasted about harsh sentencing. By August 20th, *CubaDebate* reported that more than 7,000 people had been arrested in the provinces of La Habana, Granma, Holguín, Ciego de Ávila, Artemisa, and...
Mayabeque for being *coleros*, hoarders, or resellers and for violating health measures (Martínez 2020). Articles on August 27th in *CubaDebate* and August 28th in *Juventud Rebelde* reported that an eight-month jail sentence had been established, and 60 percent of those tried were sentenced to jail time (Juventud Rebelde 2020; Izquierdo Ferrer and Pérez 2020).

Although the statistics on convictions in the summer of 2020 do not reveal the race or gender of those prosecuted, the lived experiences of the two sisters and participant observation in Havana lines during the period suggests that poor Black women, disproportionately vulnerable to food insecurity, became targets for intensified policing. The moral panic about *coleras* propagated in state media came with a prescriptive solution that obscured the longstanding intersectional inequalities that the lines reveal.

The Work That Moral Panics Do; or, What the Moral Panic Obscured

In our content analysis, only once did we find an article that recognized structural causes of the phenomena. “In Cuba, lines and *coleros*, resellers and hoarders are an old problem. Their existence has been motivated by underdevelopment, and by the prolonged economic crisis acknowledged by the Government, as well as by the actions of those who obtain money without work responsibilities. *However, nothing justifies this phenomenon*” (Rodríguez Milan 2020, emphasis ours).

The focus on the *coleras*’ moral deficiencies positions privileged Cubans with hard currency as “innocent consumers” and obscures the reality of unequal structures of opportunity in contemporary Cuba as well as production and supply chain problems behind the shortages of basic goods. Instead of recognizing the state’s hand in fostering inequalities, the state media demonized poor Black women for the scarcity of basic goods and negated the possibility of a state obligation to protect them and other vulnerable members of society. This reporting evades criticism of the state for policies that worsened racialized class stratification or for failing to develop adequate measures so that all Cubans could meet their basic needs while staying at home.

To understand the conditions of scarcity and inequality during the pandemic, and moral rubrics deployed to navigate those conditions, it is important to look at pre-COVID structures of opportunity. Inadequacies in the state provisioning system are generally traced to the period of economic crisis known as the Special Period after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the punitive US embargo aimed at collapsing the Cuban economy to ultimately catalyze change in Cuban governance. The degree to which this hostile geopolitical context can fully explain the Cuban state’s own economic mismanagement and inefficiencies is an ongoing debate among academics, politicians, and ordinary Cubans themselves. There
is broad consensus, however, that since the Special Period new inequalities have emerged and existing ones have been exacerbated, propelling many families to employ strategies that might otherwise be considered “unethical” in order to meet basic needs (Bastian 2018; Garth 2020).

Since the Special Period, ethnographers of Cuba have written about the ubiquity of verbs like resolver (to work out a difficult problem through informal channels), buscar (to search for), jinetear (to hustle), luchar (to struggle), conseguir (to obtain) in common Cuban parlance to describe the ways that they engage in provisioning strategies to meet everyday consumption needs that might otherwise be considered unethical, but are nonetheless deemed normative due to their necessity (Garth 2020; Gordy 2006; Padrón Hernández 2012, 142; Pertierra 2011; Powell 2008, 182–87; Roland 2011; Rosendahl 1997, 43; Weinreb 2009, 65; Wilson 2014).

While taking things from the state was seen as moral, taking things from other people defined immorality. Maria Padrón Hernández (2012) explains that in Havana, the word robear (steal) is only used to talk about taking from a private individual since it implies a value judgment about the immorality of the action. Usually when talking about taking state property, people use the judgment-free verbs llevar (to take) or conseguir (to obtain) (Padrón Hernández 2012). Marisa Wilson (2014), in her ethnography of a rural town she calls “Tuta,” also reports that Tutanos “only take from the state when they feel that the latter is not providing enough for their family or community” (140). In Havana, Bastian (2018) documents the consensus that the moral breach in such situations was made by the state who had failed to keep up its end of the social contract by paying living wages. Taking from the state was seen as justified, a manner of settling accounts. Hanna Garth (2020) writes about “changing ethics of acquisition,” how moral boundaries have shifted since the Special Period as practices of acquisition established under the Socialist ethics of the 1960s have changed in the context of a deeply inadequate state provisioning system that “requires people to contend with conflicting ethical frameworks” (Garth 2020, 113).

In the new normal that developed after the worst years of the Special Period, Cuban household provisioning strategies depended on deploying social, economic, and revolutionary cultural capital (Bastian 2018). As socioeconomic stratification has grown alongside the expansion of the private market, the structure of opportunities for access to consumption has changed and procurement strategies have diversified. For Cubans with privileged configurations of social, economic, and revolutionary cultural capital, basic needs can be met while continuing to appear to abide by shared ethical values (Bastian 2020; Bastian and Garth 2020). Social capital can be leveraged to access opportunities for consumption through informal channels out of sight. As the saying goes, “Quien tiene un amigo, tiene un central” (a friend is a form of wealth in itself). For example, military officials organizing lines might make purchases for friends and family or allow them to enter without
waiting. Someone with contacts in the store might be notified as to what will be sold the next day or have a case of chicken reserved. In short, those with the right social capital may break laws or violate regulations, but their unethical actions happen behind the scenes, hidden from view. Privilege affords their transgressions shelter from public scrutiny.

Although the various waves of economic reforms (early 1990s and post-2011) have put coleras in positions of structural disadvantage due to their race, class, gender, region of origin, and neighborhood of residence in Havana, they were not read as subjects who rightfully violate moral codes in order to survive, something that has been socially accepted since the Special Period. Instead, coleras were perceived to have gone “too far” by reselling the products they buy at high mark ups and “verging into unethical territory by trying to get ahead” (Garth 2020, 136). This “getting ahead” is considered unethical on certain bodies because it “undermines the socialist distribution system, favors individual or nuclear family priorities over community, and signals an orientation to the collective that is not a part of the socialist ideal” (Garth 2020, 134).

Meanwhile, the kinds of practices licensed entrepreneurs regularly engage in to “get ahead” have not been met with the same moral vitriol. Sometimes employing other Cubans at exploitative wages, they have been known to maintain discriminatory hiring practices and harsh working conditions to yield profits. Since the onset of the 2011 private sector expansion, Cuban antiracist activists have vigorously protested the impunity with which employment discrimination is practiced on the basis of race and gender (Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez; Zurbano 2011). These indiscretions were largely normalized as falling within the sovereign purview of the entrepreneur to pursue profit. Despite calls for state intervention by the Articulación Regional Afrodescendiente de América Latina y el Caribe Capítulo Cuba (ARAAC), a regional network of antiracist activists based in Havana, state media rallied around private enterprise as the key to national development (Berry 2019; Zurbano 2014).

In fact, on July 24, 2020, the Cuban state opened a small chain of wholesale warehouses where individuals with specific business licenses could buy products at wholesale prices (Matienzo 2020). This allowed businesspeople to buy discounted products to sell to final consumers at a markup. This special treatment, and the high markups at which the entrepreneurs later resold products, did not meet with public moralizing. These inconsistencies beg the question: Why are certain forms of “getting ahead” deemed unethical over others?

While in other societies moral panics often center around issues of sex, drugs, and personal safety or health concerns, the moral panic around the colera folk devil in 2020 was reminiscent of those channeling the state’s economic anxieties in the early years of the Revolution. Today, the emerging private sector is destigmatized and through the incremental expansion of legal self-employment, ideologies
around work are being challenged. While the once model “New Man” worked for the Revolution, laboring wherever needed to create surplus value for the good of the society, today’s entrepreneur not only works for himself but even employs others to make profit. As proclaimed by the signs allegedly quoting Raúl Castro often seen hanging in small businesses, this new “New Man” is now beyond reproach: “Those committed to demonizing, criminalizing, and persecuting self-employed workers have chosen a path that is, not only petty, but also laughable because it is unsustainable. Cuba depends on them as one of the engines of development, and their presence in the urban landscape is unequivocally here to stay.”

Today when licensed business owners buy discounted wholesale products for resale, their actions are free of stigma and defended as legitimate and legally protected work. Yet when Black women wait in lines exposed to extreme weather for hours, sometimes even waiting overnight to buy products for resale, they are targeted as immoral and a danger to the moral fabric of Revolutionary society. The different treatment of the two groups is only possible because the colera’s labor in lines is not seen as work, although she is using her labor to increase the value of a product, exactly as the largely white male self-employed businessman does.

When moral values are not commensurate with social realities, following Jarrett Zigon’s hypothesis, these breakdowns open a space for ethical reflection, which could create the conditions for rewriting the boundaries of ethical acquisition (2007, 2008). State discourses suggested that colera’s “depraved actions” signaled a breakdown in ethical values among one social sector, while obscuring the ethical inconsistencies taking place at the systemic level. By creating an evil folk devil out of poor black women, the moral panic aimed to diffuse complaints and silence debates about how the ethical choices available to different actors are structured by the classed, raced, and gendered impacts of prior reforms. This disparate treatment of workers is one example of how moral panics obscure state-facilitated intersectional inequalities.

Conclusion: The Race and Gender of Morality in Contemporary Cuba

The pandemic is forcing all nations to assert their ethical priorities. Responses to COVID-19 have allowed nations to showcase their values to the world. What does Cuba’s handling of the crisis say about its own perceived limitations and possibilities? The Cuban state sees itself as a global medical power, sending doctors even to Global North hotspots. In the early summer of 2020, it looked like the fight against COVID-19 on the island was won thanks to dedicated health professionals and a focus on community-based primary care and prevention. Throughout 2020, Cuba consistently boasted the lowest COVID-19 case fatality rates per capita in the Americas (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center n.d.). The problems
for most Cuban households arose where they always appear on the island: in food security.

Rather than being read as symptomatic of inadequacies in the food system, Black women found themselves depicted as responsible for the shortages that affected all Cubans. In a country where naming race is still taboo, moral outrage at coleras became a socially sanctioned channel for underlying misogynoir. Notably, quotidian forms of anti-Blackness also resurfaced during the Special Period, when similar dynamics of extreme material scarcity, racialized class inequality, and gendered labor shaped racialized perceptions of women’s modes of survival and, in turn, disproportionately marked Black women as social deviants (Fernandez 1999; Sawyer 2005).

In this article we have explored three themes in state discourses around the figure of the colera. First, these texts presented coleras as immoral subjects. Placing the blame for shortages on their presumed moral weakness aimed to redirect attention from causes rooted in the state’s own moral recalibrations. Second, our analysis revealed a pattern of racialized and gendered images that reinforced associations between Black women and criminality. Third, these Black women were further dehumanized by framing them as pathogenic subjects. Reminiscent of nineteenth-century social eugenics, the state presented an internal enemy to be eliminated for the health of the Cuban body politic, in defense of national sovereignty. Privileged Cubans mobilized economic and social capital to fulfill their basic needs from home. Meanwhile, rather than receiving special protections, the socially vulnerable were forced to put their bodies “on the line”—literally and figuratively—risking exposure to COVID, policing, and public shaming.

To be sure, the year 2020 intensified preexisting precarities and anxieties at the intersection of race, gender, class, and labor across the region. Recent anthropological work on Latin America has highlighted how neoliberal dynamics shape the precarity of working-class gendered labor (Radovic-Fanta 2017), how middle-class narratives of moral disintegration infuse nostalgia for a lost social order (Junge 2019), and how the policing of public space express racialized anxieties about the urban poor (Leal Martínez 2016). Cuban lines during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal similarities with other nations grappling with the economic and ideological legacies of colonialism and US imperialism.

Latin American domestic workers (largely Black and Brown women) have been more vulnerable to the virus because they lack adequate protections (Acciari, del Carmen Britez, and del Carmen Morales Pérez 2021; Brown 2020). Concurrently, in the United States, working-class Black and Brown “essential workers” are blamed for spreading COVID, while politicians claim that “multigenerational households, lack of PPE, and low testing rates are behind outbreaks in their communities, rather than the unsafe working conditions, limited access to health care, and low incomes that predispose them to COVID-19” (Brown and Pearson 2020, 4). Race and
gender ideologies increase these women’s perceived expendability and inflect the
discourses used to justify their social exclusion.

In the summer of 2021, almost a year after the Facebook post with which we begin, protestors from predominantly Black working-class neighborhoods took to
the streets across Cuba. Reflecting on the protests of July 11, 2021 (J-11), Zuleica
Romay Guerra explained: “As much as it hurts to admit it, the July protests are the
result of the long-term pretention of the socially marginalized, naturalized by the
conformist mentality of the citizenry” (Romay Guerra 2021, 4).

Although this article was completed well before the J-11 uprising, understanding
the colera moral panic allows us to appreciate the material scarcities and indignities to which vulnerable sectors of Cuban society have been subjected since the
pandemic began. Ultimately, J-11 demonstrates that the moral panic was unsuccessful in displacing and neutralizing widespread concerns about the state’s failure to protect society’s most vulnerable both before and during the pandemic. As the state makes calculated shifts from leveraging power to further the egalitarian project upon which the Revolution’s legitimacy was built, the voices of those marginalized by decades of economic and legal reforms may continue to erupt in
new and unexpected ways.

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Notes

1 Although Spanish would require us to use the “gender-neutral” colera to refer to the social phenomenon or a potentially mixed-gender collective, we use the feminine colera to foreground how this subject is most consistently gendered in the Cuban imaginary. Direct quotes reflect original usage. We use the masculine colero in our discussion when it is used by original sources.

2 Two currencies circulate: the Peso (CUP) and Convertible Peso (CUC); the latter is exchangeable for foreign currency and referred to as “hard currency.” Cuba’s dual economy has constituted a major axis of racialized inequality between largely White Cubans with CUC via remittances, tips, or private sector jobs, and the largely Black “peso-poor” with CUP via public sector salaries (Blue 2007).

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