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Yelvington, Kevin A.

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THE MAKING OF A MARXIST-FEMINIST-LATIN AMERICANIST ANTHROPOLOGIST: AN INTERVIEW WITH HELEN I. SAFA

Kevin A. Yelvington

ABSTRACT

Helen I. Safa is a pioneering anthropologist of Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and Latin America, one who brought Marxist and feminist perspectives to her work and who in her research and administrative duties engaged with progressive and feminist academics and activists in the region. She has maintained a long interest in investigating inequalities along various axes—especially gender, class, and “race”—and locating these in structural conditions and social relationships of dominance and subordination. This article is a life-history interview in which Safa reflects on her childhood and family, her coming of age, her training, and the development of her theoretical approach, as well as on her relationships with her colleagues in her nearly 50 years of anthropological research.

Keywords: Helen I. Safa, history of anthropology, Marxist anthropology, feminist anthropology, anthropology of Puerto Rico, anthropology of Latin America and the Caribbean, critical anthropology, biographies of anthropologists

RESUMEN

Helen I. Safa es una pionera de la antropología en Puerto Rico, el Caribe y América Latina. Integró las perspectivas marxistas y feministas a su trabajo y en sus funciones investigativas y administrativas se relacionó con académicas feministas y activistas de la región. Durante muchos años la doctora Safa se ha interesado en investigar las desigualdades en oportunidades exclusivamente en varios aspectos —especialmente género, clase y “raza”— y ubicarlos en condiciones estructurales y relaciones sociales de dominio y subordinación. Este artículo es una entrevista de historia de vida en la cual Safa reflexiona sobre su niñez y su familia, su transición a la adultez, su preparación académica y el desarrollo de su enfoque teórico, así como sus relaciones con colegas durante cerca de 50 años de investigación antropológica.

Palabras clave: Helen I. Safa, historia de la antropología, antropología marxista, antropología feminista, antropología de Puerto Rico, antropología de América Latina y el Caribe, antropología crítica, biografías de antropólogos

RÉSUMÉ

Helen I. Safa est une pionnière de l'anthropologie à Porto Rico, dans la Caraïbe et en Amérique Latine; ses travaux s'inscrivent dans une perspective marxiste et féministe, ils facilitent aussi les liens entre intellectuelles féministes et progressistes tant d'un point de vue administratif qu'au niveau des investigations. Durant sa longue carrière, Safa a démontré son intérêt pour des études de dimensions divers sur l'inégalité—spécialement sur les questions de genres, de classe et de race—et sa position sur les conditions structurelles, les relations sociales de domination et de subordination. L'article est une entrevue réalisée sur la vie de Safa dans laquelle elle a réfléchi sur son enfance et sa famille, sa transition vers la vie d'adulte, sa préparation académique et le développement de son approche théorique, ainsi que la relation avec ses collègues durant près de 50 ans de recherche anthropologique.

Mots-clés: Helen I. Safa, histoire de l'anthropologie, anthropologie marxiste, anthropologie féministe, anthropologie de Porto Rico, anthropologie de l'Amérique Latine et de la Caraïbe, anthropologie critique, biographies d'anthropologues.

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Introduction

Helen I. Safa's pioneering research and writing on women's work, women in development, women in families, gender politics and ideologies, and the status of women in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States, and on urban anthropology has combined solid scholarship with a political thrust entailing an unbending commitment to social equality and a steadfast belief that scholarship can play a crucial role in making positive societal change come about. In her vast corpus of work, she has brought in Marxist and feminist theoretical perspectives and in her research and administrative duties has engaged with progressive and feminist academics and activists in the Latin America and the Caribbean. She has maintained a long interest in investigating inequalities along various axes—especially gender, class, and “race”—and locating these in structural conditions and social relationships of dominance and subordination. A daughter of immigrants, Helen Icken was born in 1930 in New York City. She later married an Iranian immigrant and helped raise two Iranian-born stepchildren. She was a government major at Cornell University before taking a job in New York City, working with Puerto Rican youth. A fellowship took her to Puerto Rico for the first time in 1954. Turning to anthropology, she entered graduate school at Columbia University where

she earned her Master's degree in 1958 and her Ph.D. in 1962, working with noted anthropologists Conrad Arensberg and Charles Wagley. She took up her first academic appointment in the Maxwell Graduate School at Syracuse University in 1962, and started to publish from her work on poor women, families, and housing in Puerto Rico (e.g., Safa 1964, 1965). Moving to positions in anthropology and urban planning at Rutgers University starting in 1967, she did fieldwork on women garment workers in New Jersey (Safa 1987a). Her important book *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico* (Safa 1974) appeared at this time and addressed not only academic issues but social and political ones as well by its sympathetic but realistic portrayal of San Juan shantytown dwellers and their survival strategies. Safa moved to the University of Florida in 1980 as director of the university's Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS). She was the president of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) from 1983-85, playing an active role in the organization's transformation. Stepping down as CLAS director in 1985, she was professor of anthropology and Latin American Studies at the University of Florida until her retirement in 1997. Her book *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner* (1995), a comparative analysis of women, work, and families in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, is a landmark comparative study that capped a long period of association with U.S. feminist anthropologists such as June Nash and Eleanor Leacock working on women and development in Latin America and elsewhere in the underdeveloped world and with her expanding network of feminist scholars in Latin America and the Caribbean and beyond. In 2007, she received LASA's highest honor, the Kalman Silvert Award, which is given for distinguished lifetime contributions to the study of Latin America and the Caribbean. More close to home, she was awarded the University of Florida's Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research "Uppity Woman Award" in 2006. After retirement from the University of Florida in 1997, Safa continued her research program on women and development in Latin America and the Caribbean (Safa 1998a, 1999, 2002, 2005a, 2006, 2009, 2011), on female-headed households (Safa 1999, 2005a, 2006, 2009) renewing a longstanding interest in "race," ethnicity, and nationalism in the Caribbean (Safa 1987b, 1998b, 2008) with a gender perspective (Safa 1998b, 2005b). Safa married the historian of Cuba John Dumoulin, a former Senior Researcher of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, in 1999. They reside in Gainesville, Florida, from where they remain active in traveling, teaching, and writing.

The Interview

KAY: I was hoping that for this audience you would reflect upon the personal and professional relationships that led you not only into anthropology but which also influenced your personal and professional politics. Because it seems to me that all of your considerable work—from your research and writing, to your administrative and leadership roles, to your scholarship-as-activism, to your legendary networking—bears the particular stamp of your strong personality and strongly-held political convictions. And I was hoping we could do so roughly in a chronological order. You dedicated your first book, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico* (1974), to “my mother and the memory of my father, without whose constant support and encouragement I would never have become an anthropologist.” Would you please tell us about them and the ways they influenced you?

HIS: My parents were immigrants. And I think that has always been a lasting influence that you can see through all my work. I think I became aware of marginality and inequality through that issue. Even though they were German immigrants,¹ which meant that as well during the Second World War for example, we were also attacked by, of all things, the Italian kids in the neighborhood, right, much more by Italian kids than by Jewish kids or others that really might have had more reason. And swastikas drawn on the store. My parents also had a small store—they had a grocery store. I grew up living on top of a grocery store and helping out in the store and things like that.

KAY: Where was this?

HIS: In Queens. In Queens. I became aware of that their politics were fairly conservative. I rebelled against that, but I retained that sense of the immigrants. In fact, my mother had also taken me to Germany as a child. And we lived there for a year. And when I started school in the States I didn’t speak English.

KAY: Really?

HIS: And that was a lasting impression, because when we’d gone there I didn’t speak very much German. And all the kids in the village—obviously the advantage was that I was going back to the village where my mother was brought up—they really went out of their way and I remember one day I started to cry, wanting to go home and no one understood what I wanted and then finally somebody came along and they felt it was their fault that they couldn’t understand what I was trying to say. And when I got back to the States it was just the opposite, you know, “Why aren’t you like us?” and laughing at me and I had to

stay after school for special classes, and that was also seen as a form of punishment or something like that. So I think I've always felt marginal to my own culture. As a result of that background. And that combination of circumstances. But I turned it around and, sort of, instead of trying to re-emphasize my Americanism and digging in, I said, "Alright, I'm marginal but, but let me see what I can do about that" and I think that it's also given me—I would hope—a greater sensitivity to other people's issues.



Figure 1. Helen I. Safa. Photo: Kevin A. Yelvington.

KAY: In many of the autobiographies and biographies on anthropologists, we find this, this somehow feeling on the margin.

HIS: It's certainly true of my step-son Kaveh, who went into it for the same reasons. We talk about it all the time.

KAY: And so you grew up in Queens. Was Queens an immigrant world at that time?

HIS: No. I grew up in a working-class Catholic neighborhood, on the fringes of a black neighborhood. That whole area is black now. But the blacks lived right across Farmers Boulevard, which was where my parents had their store. And there were quite a few blacks in my class. I don't remember having that much contact with them; it was mostly with these sort of Irish Catholic kids, working-class kids. Not that much, not that much I'm afraid, no. But my parents, what small social circle they had, which was not great, was mostly other immigrants, German immigrants.

KAY: You went on to Cornell for your undergraduate degree.

HIS: And that was another issue. I'd always done well in school and I became interested in Latin America—I don't know where that came from, it came partly through the music, through the movies. When I see some of these things now, I think of that. Because it started in high school already. And I just fell in love with it. And, there again, it was so different from what I knew. You know, and it seemed so colorful having a quality of emotional life that I didn't feel was there on other levels, as well. And people being very friendly and very open and things like that. And it started in high school and I was going to go to something called the Latin American Institute and become a bilingual secretary. I'd sort of decided that. And my father went up and talked to the advisor in the high school. I still remember his name, it was Mr. Blatt. And he said, "You know, she should be going to college." And my father said "Yeah, I think I agree." And he came home and he said "You're going to college. Pick one." And it was just that. I was also an only child. These are the whole issues that that involves, right?

KAY: Your father said, "pick one"?

HIS: Well he said I should apply. I started applying. And this was very late, I was already I think in my senior year. And I hadn't applied, I hadn't thought about it. I applied to Cornell mainly because one of my best friends was applying and going there. And I applied to Columbia as well. And I actually was admitted to Columbia first and was going to go there, and then I was apparently wait-listed for Cornell and wasn't accepted there until much later. And my father thought it would be much better—and it was very true—that I needed to get away from home.

Columbia would have been in the city, it would have been very different. It was very difficult for me because I was very close to my mother. But I needed to get away too, and there wasn't so much a push from myself, it was that I needed that.

KAY: And that's when you go to Cornell and you become a government major?

HIS: Right. I had no idea what I was going to do. There again, I just took one class and I really liked it and thought "Gee I could go and work in the State Department and I could go abroad." Again, this interest of working abroad was always maintained. And at Cornell I had lots of friends among the Latin American students, and then again the European students. It was always sort of in-between, and sometimes both. As I was talking last night, I once dated the captain of the soccer team who was a German-Venezuelan. I never joined a sorority—and Cornell was big on sororities and fraternities at one point—mainly on the advice of some people who felt that I should not. I'm very glad I didn't now.

KAY: Why?

HIS: Because I don't think I'm part of that party crowd. Although maybe it would have given me a greater point of identity, because I'm not in touch with any of my undergraduate friends, anymore. From graduate school yes, but not from undergraduate. I still subscribe to the alumni news and I've been back to Cornell actually quite a few times. I did an evaluation of their Latin American Center. I went back to one class reunion and found it sort of meaningless and I left it at that.²

KAY: The beginning of your long association with Puerto Rico begins with a visit there in 1954. Would you please tell us about your early experiences there?

HIS: When I graduated from Cornell, even though I graduated Phi Beta Kappa and all, my idea was to join the State Department. I had actually interviewed and was almost hired. I failed the physical. Which was a peculiar thing. And then there was a change in administration in Washington. They told me that I could reapply. That was when Eisenhower came in with the Republicans and they said I could reapply and at that point I was sort of tired of the whole process. I also almost went to Mexico, because I fell in love with a Mexican. I went to Mexico right after I graduated and fell in love down there and decided I wanted to spend more time there. They wanted to hire me at the embassy down there, but then, as I say, the whole State Department thing sort of fell through. So I was working in New York at a series of very boring jobs. I had to go and learn some shorthand and typing just to be able to get some skills. But then I had a more interesting job—more interesting, but I still

was in a secretarial position at the Institute. I worked at the Institute of International Education for a while. And then finally got this job with the Puerto Rican Study. And while I was working with them—and there again they primarily hired me because I spoke Spanish—I was administering tests. And that was also instrumental in my career choice. I had decided—and I’ve never regretted that—that I wanted to spend some time out in the real world before I went on to graduate school. Because I really didn’t know where I wanted to go. And they were a bunch of educational psychologists. This was the beginning of the huge Puerto Rican influx into New York City. And I helped administer the tests. I did the coding. And we did this enormous amount of coding; it was a massive test. And, you know, I’m sitting there with these numbers all the time, and everybody became a number. And I remember going out to lunch once with one of the senior people and talking about that and then I said “What is anthropology like?” And she said “Oh no, they’re terrible. They’re qualitative and they don’t do any of the statistical stuff.” And I kept saying “Well, maybe that’s for me.” I didn’t like the dehumanizing, everybody sort of becoming a number. But I, on the other hand, I also began to learn something about survey techniques which proved useful later on.

And then when I was working for the Puerto Rican Study (Morrison 1958) I heard about some fellowships that were available to people who were working with Puerto Ricans in New York. NYU [New York University] ran a summer program down there. I think they may still do that. And I applied. They were five-week fellowships. And I applied. Most of these were for teachers working with the Puerto Rican kids in the schools. I came along with these other qualifications and they got interested and so I got one of the fellowships. And I went for a five-week fellowship and I didn’t come back for two years. I literally didn’t even come home. I just fell in love the first night that I was there—I mean with the Island—and the first night I was there and called my mother and said “Send some more clothes” or something.

And I didn’t come back ’til Christmas that year and started looking for a job there. Because by then, actually, my work at the Puerto Rican Study had finished. And I started looking for a job there. I was offered a job initially teaching English as a second language at the university. Puerto Rico was then used as a training ground for what was then called Point Four, which is now [US]AID [United States Agency for International Development]. They were looking for somebody to help administer that program. And that was really why I did it because it worked on development and it would give me an inroad into what was happening in Puerto Rico and so on. And a friend of mine came down, towards the end of my stay, and we traveled to the Dominican Republic and Haiti

together. When I came back, I found out I had gotten the job at the State Department and it was like three days before I was supposed to start teaching, and I walked into UPR [University of Puerto Rico] and said “I can’t take the job.”

KAY: So you took the job at the State Department? What did that involve?

HIS: That involved setting up programs for *becarios* [grant recipients], trainees that would come in from all parts of the world. From public health and education, administration, housing—a whole variety of fields. And that’s how I met my [first] husband, because he was one of the trainees. His name was Manouchehr Safa. He came in ’55. I was working there for a year and he came towards the end of the first year that I worked there. And then I left that job and then went to work at the Social Programs Administration, rural development, and helped them conduct a survey.

For me the important thing is that many of the most critical moments in my life evolved with Puerto Rico. It was there where I developed my interest in anthropology, where I had the first chance to do research. The study that I did for the Social Programs Administration, which was a study of the *parcelero* labor program in Dorado, ended up being the basis of my master’s thesis. I rewrote it as my master’s thesis at Columbia. It’s a form of land reform where, in order to remove what they called *agregados*—they were squatters—who squatted on the *hacienda*’s land. And the government knew that as long as they were on that land, the *hacendado* had the upper hand. And also it was very difficult to provide them with water and electricity and so on. I mean being a part of a whole part of Operation Bootstrap at that point was really exciting and I was convinced this was the way to go—Puerto Rico had found a solution, it was doing all these things at that point. This was before some of the disillusion set in, later on. We did an analysis of the squatter program in one of the communities. And that ended up being the basis of my master’s thesis. I became interested in my career; it reaffirmed my interest in Latin America. It’s where I chose anthropology, I met my husband there. My daughter wasn’t born there but she was conceived there. So for me, Puerto Rico is extremely important and not just a professional point of contact—it’s personal as well.

KAY: So, how did you come to study anthropology at Columbia? You were in Puerto Rico as you just described, doing anthropology before you had anthropological training.

HIS: Exactly. I’d taken one course with Kurt Bach, who was a sociologist, on survey methods. And that was the basis on which I did

the study. In Puerto Rico at that point you could do that. I mean, that wouldn't be possible now, anymore, but at that point you could. And you know it still was a credible study. I had a supervisor, but I was basically in charge of all the field research and analysis. Why did I choose anthropology? Why and why Columbia?

KAY: How'd you get there?

HIS: Well, at that point it firmed up my interest in anthropology mainly because they dealt with people as whole human beings and not just as numbers. Although I've always used survey research as well, and I think it's useful. But it's the holistic approach that I like in anthropology. And also because it's cross-cultural in its orientation and comparative in its orientation. So I had decided to go back to graduate school in anthropology. I'd only had one undergraduate course in anthropology with Allan Holmberg. And so I actually then reapplied to Cornell, and to Columbia. And Cornell actually awarded me a teaching assistantship, but it was for one semester only, to be for the spring semester. But I was going to go there because I had no financial aid from Columbia. And then when I got back to New York, again, just before I was to start school...actually no, I had not applied to Columbia, I had only applied to Cornell. That's right, that's the story, I had only applied to Cornell. The job I had entailed meeting a lot of people, and one of the people I'd met in Puerto Rico was the New York State Commissioner of Housing. And he called me on the phone and said he was starting a study of the aged in public housing in New York City, and was I interested in working on that study? And I said, well, I was supposed to be going up to Cornell. He said we probably could work that out. So I actually walked into the offices at Columbia University a week before classes started again. Didn't know anyone. Asked the secretary, you know, who was there, and I was introduced to Professor [Conrad] Arensberg, who ended up being my advisor.

I talked to him about what I'd been doing in Puerto Rico and that I really wanted to go into anthropology and he just wrote a note and I took it over to the admissions office, now without any financial aid, but then I had the job. And then in the interval, I had also then applied to the University of Puerto Rico. But I think that didn't come through. I'm not sure whether I had that the first year, or it didn't come through. Puerto Rico as well gave me a grant. Because at that point Puerto Rico had no graduate program. And so they would fund their students to go abroad. And I had become such a *puertorriqueña postiza* [honorary Puerto Rican] at that point that they actually paid for my tuition at Columbia. And I had to go back. One of the conditions of the grant was that I had to go back to work for the government for the length of time that I held the

grant. So that was another one of the reasons why I went back to do my graduate work in Puerto Rico. One, I felt I knew it well, and second I had this obligation. And it was a good thing that I did go back because then, shortly after, I married and really have not lived in Puerto Rico except for that period. So I had lived there from '54 to '56 in my initial period, went to do my graduate work, and then went back in '59 to '60, through '60, to do basically my work for the Ph.D.

KAY: What was the atmosphere like at Columbia in the late 1950s, early 1960s? Who were your mentors? You mentioned Conrad Arensberg. Who were in your cohorts?

HIS: Well, I also worked with [Charles] Wagley, of course. He was the leading Latin Americanist and, who again, had quite an influence. He was influential later in bringing me to the University of Florida. He was the head of the search committee that was recruiting. I worked with Marvin Harris, who was then a young assistant professor and he actually substituted for Professor Wagley on my dissertation committee, when Wagley was out of town, he was out that semester. Actually caused me some grief, but we became pretty good friends. And Margaret Mead. I worked with Mead as well. But I never became one of Mead's protégés, I mean I didn't have her as an advisor, but she was extremely supportive and helpful.

KAY: And when did you come into contact with feminist scholars such as June Nash and Happy Leacock?

HIS: That was much later. That was not in graduate school. In fact, feminism was not an issue in graduate school. It certainly wasn't at all then. I would argue that my, my interest in equality and so on in a sense focused on class. If you go back and read my dissertation, it has much less of a class analysis than it did ten years later when I wrote it up [Safa 1974]. One of the reasons it was written much later—I published it in '74, I got my degree in '62—is because as soon as I finished my degree I took a job immediately. I was one of the first urban anthropologists. I was married within six months, had a child, was working and you know I just couldn't get back to all of this material. And it wasn't until I had a sabbatical in one year that I wrote, wrote this up as a book. Some of the people I went to school with were Joyce Riegenhaupt, Zandy [Alexander] Moore, Sydel Silverman, Gloria Levitas—we've actually co-edited a book together [Safa and Levitas 1975].

KAY: In these years, whose work did you admire? What were some of the influences on you? Not just your mentors like Arensberg and Wagley and so on, but, were there other people that you were reading at the time, at the end of the 1950s, early '60s who influenced you?

HIS: I think the greatest influence on me in terms of writing my dissertation was undoubtedly Raymond Smith. And that has been an abiding interest. I had a job at Syracuse—my first teaching job—and I remember bringing him from McGill to Syracuse. It was the first and one of the only times I’ve ever seen him because he doesn’t come to meetings. And I’m still a great admirer of his work, his whole notion of matrifocality. In fact, I had done this work on, collected this data in Puerto Rico, and then I didn’t know quite what to do with it. And then reading his book [Smith 1956], I thought, “This is it, what he’s done in the rural setting for Guyana, I can test that as well with the urban work I’ve done in Puerto Rico” [see, e.g., Safa 1965, 1998a, 1999, 2005a, 2006]. I was more interested in applied work, and at one point I was not interested in going to teach, I was going to do applied work and work with a development agency, maybe work with AID somewhere. But when I married and had a child and so on—that changed things as well.

KAY: How would you describe your theoretical and political orientation to anthropology? Two questions. And the second one is, Do you think feminism and anthropology are an uneasy fit? Marilyn Strathern draws out what she sees as the philosophical conflict between anthropology and feminism:

Anthropology here constitutes itself in relation to an Other, vis-à-vis the alien culture/society under study. Its distance and foreignness are deliberately sustained. But the Other is not under attack. On the contrary, the effort is to create a relation with the Other, as in the search for a medium of expression that will offer mutual interpretation, perhaps visualized as a common text or dialogue. [By contrast, f]eminist inquiry suggests that it is possible to discover the self by becoming conscious of oppression from the Other. Thus one may seek to regain a common past which is also one’s own. Anthropological inquiry suggests that the self can be consciously used as a vehicle for representing an Other. But this is only possible if the self breaks with its own past. These thus emerge as two very different radicalisms. For all these parallel interests, the two practices are differently structured in the way they organize knowledge and draw boundaries, in short, in terms of the social relations that define their scholarly communities [Strathern 1987:289].

What is your take on this? How would you respond?

HIS: If I understand what you’re saying correctly—because I hadn’t read that quote of Strathern’s before—it would argue that feminist anthropology is more engaged with objects of its study than the usual anthropology. There was a whole debate about whether you could be an advocate and be a true scientist, without revealed bias. I would argue that I’ve long been an advocate in my work. I see my work evolving from an interest in class to an interest in gender to now an interest in race.

But there's a common thread that runs through this, the issue of inequality. I was attracted to anthropology because it didn't objectify people as I saw much statistical analysis doing—as psychology or sociology would do. So that keeping a distance was not, I guess, my concern, and yet I felt that if you employed the right methodology you could still analyze. Becoming an advocate doesn't mean that you always just take what the people are saying and say that that's the way it is, it means using that and trying to understand that. And why they're saying what they're saying.

KAY: What role does feminism play? I mean, how would you describe yourself? As a feminist anthropologist?

HIS: I guess I would be. I think I'm probably best known for my work on gender. I guess I would. I've always been described as a Marxist anthropologist—perhaps more so a Marxist-Feminist anthropologist. But the feminism also really didn't start until relatively later, and that basically started through June Nash. And I still remember her calling me one day and asking if I'd be willing to work with her on organizing an SSRC [Social Science Research Council] seminar, which we did in Buenos Aires, and a research and training seminar in 1974. We had a research and training seminar that summer of 1974 in Cuernavaca, which is where Carmen Diana Deere and others came in. I became very interested in this, partly because I felt as being a woman myself and, even though I had not felt particularly oppressed as a woman, you know, I hadn't, but I became interested in it and I felt this was something in which I could be more legitimate than I could be, I was speaking from my own position more than I would on the questions of class or race. I wasn't trying to speak for other people. But maintaining those—because I don't think you can analyze women without looking at class or race and other issues.

KAY: And so you finish your Ph.D. and accept a post at the Maxwell School at Syracuse.

HIS: Right. They were looking for an urban anthropologist and, again, there, I have never in my years in academia been a full-time teacher. I was basically hired to work on a research project, because they were doing a study of housing, basically, in the city of Syracuse. And the way this was reflected, they'd gotten a huge grant and they wanted anthropological analysis as part of that. And that's why I was hired. I'd been offered another job at that point to go to Venezuela. And I didn't take that job basically because I married in 1962. That Venezuela job was with the Joint Center for Urban Studies at Harvard and MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. And I knew Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who then headed the Joint Center, who had brought me to the Joint Center

to speak and so on but I didn't take the Venezuela job again because of my marriage. So I did take the job at Syracuse. I started teaching there, and then gradually got more comfortable. You know I had never even been a TA [teaching assistant] at Columbia, they didn't use that many.

KAY: And then move on to Rutgers in 1967. Tell me about this and, also, your fieldwork in New Jersey among women garment workers.

HIS: I moved to Rutgers in '67 and this was again partly occasioned by the career moves of my husband—my husband had finished his masters at Harvard the first year and then transferred to Syracuse where he was to finish his Ph.D. And he was concluding that, and then his job moved him to New York. So I tried to find something in New York. And then he eventually joined the UN [United Nations] so he stayed in New York for quite a few years. At Rutgers I was also part of a great experiment there—this was the start of Livingston College. It was a brand new college that was opening, that was dedicated to working with white and black working class and inner city youth. So that their interest in me was because of the background I had, again, in urban anthropology. And I was actually hired by the dean at Livingston College, I was hired two years before the college opened—I was part of the planning committee for it. And the chair, who was Robin Fox, hadn't even come from England yet. And then, Robin, as you may know, is a very different kind of anthropologist than I am. He's a sociobiologist basically. He informed me after he came and we got to know each other better that, I remember his saying at one point, "Don't take it personally my dear but I can't support you for tenure." So here I was, I was so caught up in this experiment—for me it was almost like a repeat of the Bootstrap thing—being very attached to the college and very committed to what they were trying to do, at the college. And I was going to be without a base. And then in the interval I had met the chair of Urban Planning, which was one of the new departments. And I had talked to him one day and he said "Why don't you consider moving over to us?" And so I did. I moved in to the urban planning department for several years. I got my promotion to associate professor with tenure. And actually was even promoted to full professor there. And then I moved back to anthropology several years later as what they called the New Brunswick Chair, which was chair of the entire anthropology department, not just at Livingston but of all of the New Brunswick campus.

We got a collaborative grant. That is, Heleieth Saffioti from Brazil and I had gotten a collaborative grant from SSRC to do a study on women industrial workers. And we were interested in women industrial workers because we saw that for many women in Latin America this represented the first formal kind of job that they would have. In other words, not

working as women in the informal sector and not working as domestics or rural workers, but as women industrial workers. And she did the Brazil component and I was to do the U.S. component—it was supposed to be a comparison. I had one hell of a time. I spent six months trying to get into a textile mill, which is what she was looking at in Brazil. I could not get into a textile mill.

KAY: In New Jersey?

HIS: In New York! In the States—anywhere! I went up to Connecticut. I tried, through the south. This was a time when the textiles mills, they were under a heavy union push. And they were also under heavy pressure from OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration]. And every place I went they said well even if I could convince them that I didn't represent the union, or I didn't represent the government in some way.... In Connecticut I thought finally I had gotten in. And they said no, they couldn't see what good it would do them. So I couldn't get entry anywhere to collect the sample. And then finally somebody suggested that I contact the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union], which I did. And they were the ones who helped get me in—to a garment plant in New Jersey. And I did that with Lynn Bolles and with several of the other graduates students that I had—and I moved back into anthropology. And that's what started my whole interest in women industrial workers. It was through doing that study, which I never wrote up as a major piece. That's the study that's published in the [Leith] Mullings book [Safa 1987a].³

One of the things I became curious about was why had they basically not been hiring workers since the 1950s. What had happened to the entire garment industry? And obviously it was moving production to other areas. And that's when I became interested in the whole issue of *maquiladoras* and export processing, which inevitably brought me back to Puerto Rico, because it had been one of the areas where industry had moved the first time.

KAY: During the 1960s and early 1970s, during the time when your first articles appear, the one in *Caribbean Studies* in '64 [Safa 1964] the one in *Human Organization* in '65 [Safa 1965], and then your book, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico* [Safa 1974; translated as Safa 1980], there's a tremendous debate in public discourse, in policy-making, and in academic circles, on the idea of the "culture of poverty." You have the Moynihan Report on one hand [United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research 1965; cf. Rainwater and Yancey 1967] and you have anthropological work such as that by Oscar Lewis, who of course did work on Puerto Rico, on the other [Lewis 1966]. Your work was a critical engagement of this concept during this time period.

HIS: Yes, in fact there was an article that was published called "The Poor Are Like Everyone Else, Oscar" [Safa 1970]. I must admit that I didn't choose the title. That article was published when I was at a conference somewhere and I insisted on seeing it all but I forgot about the title and they came out with the title on it. I actually knew Oscar Lewis, and I knew Pat Moynihan as I mentioned before. And I was actually, initially, in agreement with Moynihan. That was before his written report came out. And I still think what he was saying in that report had some validity. The problem was he wasn't controlling for class, and he was blaming everything on the family. I would invert that. In fact my own current research deals very much with this whole issue of female heads of the household, and how in the current welfare debate we're blaming them as being welfare dependent and being the cause of poverty when I see them as being the consequence of poverty rather than its cause. So that became an issue. And I remember getting a note from Pat Moynihan once that began, "*Et tu, Brute?*" And with Oscar Lewis in the same way. I had liked some of his earlier work on Mexico. We brought him to Syracuse to give one of the big university lectures. And that was when he was starting the work in Puerto Rico. And I actually met him in Puerto Rico and I remember his asking me for the names of some of my families that I had worked with. And I'm actually somewhat glad that I did not give him the names of my families that I have known because, even though I think he had an interesting methodology in terms of what he tried to do, I think that not everyone that reads the books is aware of the editing that goes into that and that he started with a particular focus, that it's very much colored by the issues he was trying to demonstrate. I think that the culture of poverty like the Moynihan report, I think, suffers from a kind of blaming the victim thesis. I think Lewis would disagree with that, and if you read his introduction carefully, he suggests that these people who are in the culture of poverty that it is due to the structural forces. But, on the other hand, there is a kind of fatalism there too that he says by the time children are five or seven, they grow up in this and they can't get out of it. And I don't believe that.

KAY: What about your relationships with other foreign anthropologists and other scholars working on Puerto Rico, like, say, Sidney Mintz, Gordon K. Lewis, and what about Puerto Rican scholars, like Ángel Quintero Rivera, Antonio Lauria, Elena Padilla?

HIS: Well, Gordon Lewis, let me go back to that. Gordon, I had known him from the first time I went to Puerto Rico. And I knew him as well through his wife, a friend of mine, Sybil Lewis, from Trinidad. We traveled by boat together when she and Gordon were not yet married; she was going back to Trinidad and I was going down just as a trip at that

point. And he again was very influential. He was the one always telling me, “Helen, get that writing out.” And “What you’re doing is fine, but you have to sit and write.” And he was the one who made me get *The Urban Poor* out. Sid Mintz, yes, very much. I think of him as a mentor even though I never studied with him. I don’t feel that I’ve achieved his stature within anthropology or as a scholar even, but for me he represents a kind of role model.

KAY: And Puerto Rico has a strong tradition of anthropologists.

HIS: Right. I knew Rafael Ramírez at that time. There’s also a student of mine there in Puerto Rico who studied with me at Rutgers, who is the one who did the fieldwork on the Puerto Rican part of *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner* [Safa 1995; Spanish translation 1998c], which I started in 1980 when I came down here [to the University of Florida in Gainesville], Carmen Pérez, Carmen Angélica Pérez. I also then got to know them well—but that was in years later, that isn’t from my early period—Marcia Rivera and [Ángel] “Chuco” Quintero [Rivera]. At that point they were married, and Chuco’s been an old friend that I’ve known basically from the ’70s—I didn’t know them at the time that I was still living in Puerto Rico.

KAY: You returned to Puerto Rico in 1969 to re-study some of the families you had known well during your dissertation research, which was conducted in 1959. You have returned a number of times, including in April 1996 when a panel was organized in your honor at the American Ethnological Society meetings. Describe your attachment to Puerto Rico and to Puerto Ricans.

HIS: I’ve been back, I try to go back usually once a year. Once every two years at least.

KAY: Can you evoke some of your feelings of your attachment to Puerto Rico and to Puerto Ricans?

HIS: Well its mainly that it’s been just a pivotal point in my life. In fact when I went to do graduate work at Columbia, my intention was to return to UPR to teach. But, you know, marriage and having children and so on changed all that. It’s still a really strong attachment for me. But I also felt a very strong need to move beyond Puerto Rico into other areas, and that’s where I started doing work in the Dominican Republic and then later Cuba. Now, I think Puerto Rico’s also interesting and let me just add that despite the vast Americanization that has gone there, I think it has retained quite a strong cultural identity, despite the heavy migration and Americanization that has taken place.

KAY: Your work has centered on women, work, and the family in



Figure 2. During fieldwork in the Monte Hatillo housing project, c. 1971.
Photo: James Weber.

Latin America. You have looked at the interfaces between these realms. What was your situation like? How did you manage to juggle these during your career?

HIS: Yes, it was very difficult. And I tell that to all my prospective graduate students that come, that it's not an easy way to juggle. I was lucky in the sense that my mother came to live with us when my daughter was born. My father died shortly after Mano and I were married.

KAY: I'm sorry.

HIS: And they still had a business. And I felt that if my mother would try to continue on her own she was gonna kill herself in the same way that my father had—because he was sixty-nine. And so it was a way of convincing her to leave that. But also I needed the help because I had just started teaching and had a full-time job at Syracuse. I'd married a man with two children, both of whom lived with us. And then I had another child on my own. So within one year I had a whole household.

And my mother-in-law came to live with us for three months, from Iran, initially, before my daughter Mitra was born. So I was very lucky that we convinced my mother to sell the business and come and live with us. And I could not have done it without her help. She was there for six years. And so she was there basically until Mitra started school. And then she became very ill in Germany and had to stay, live the last four

years of her life in Germany. And really couldn't come back any more, she was too ill, and couldn't, for the trip and for lots of reasons. She died in Germany in '74—the fateful year of the seminar. There were certain pivotal years in my life and '74 was certainly one of them.

KAY: The book comes out, and...

HIS: The book comes out, my mother passes away, I moved over—I had just become chair of the anthropology department at Rutgers. And in September I get a cable from my aunt that my mother had died.

KAY: I'm sorry.

HIS: So that had been, it had been quite a year. It had been quite a year.

KAY: By 1980 you become the director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. Was it difficult to leave the New York area?

HIS: It was. I had lived in and around New York all my life—it was difficult for me. It was difficult for my family; my daughter Mitra had been in the same school system all of her life. We were moving her ostensibly as a junior in high school and, actually, when we came here, they made her a senior. And she was rebelling and at one point she said well she was going to stay.

One of the reasons for the move is that Mano retired from the United Nations in 1980. And I did not want a commuting marriage. I had had chances for jobs elsewhere and in fact here at UF before that, but I wanted to wait until Mano retired. And Mitra wanted me to wait another year until she finished high school and I said “Look I really can't, and these jobs don't come up that often.” So we moved here in 1980, but I was apprehensive. I was apprehensive because the four years we lived in Syracuse I wasn't very happy. It was so cold in the snow belt in Syracuse. And every time we'd get back on that throughway leaving New York to go back to Syracuse I'd feel like I was being sent to Siberia some nights. I think one of the advantages with coming here is the climate's much nicer and much to my liking—I like warm weather. It's almost like being in the Caribbean without being there. It's about as close as you can get. Perhaps Miami is closer, but Miami poses other sets of problems!

In many ways I liked it, and certainly what that move meant was to solidify my interest in Latin America, which had always been there, had been there since I'd been a teenager. I'd worked more in feminism and gender issues—I'd gone to India in '78, I'd done work in Europe, and other areas, so it wasn't exclusively Latin America—but when I came here that became solidified again. And I had gotten the grant then to do the study in Puerto Rico, and I was trying to do that with my first year

here and adjusting and so on. And fortunately I did have this Puerto Rican graduate student [Carmen Angélica Pérez] who really did most of the data collection. But I went down there with her and we devised the interview schedule together, I selected the sample, I did some of the pretesting with her and then went back and did the in-depth interviews.

KAY: At U of F, you came here and there was already an established Latin American Studies community...

HIS: Right.

KAY: ...and people you had worked with before, Charles Wagley was here at the time...

HIS: That's right.

KAY: ...and Marvin Harris was here at that time?

HIS: Right. Well, he came the same year as I did. We started together.

KAY: In 1983 you become only the second woman president of the Latin American Studies Association [LASA]. What did this mean for you, and for anthropology, and for Latin American studies?

HIS: It was unusual. I certainly was not elected president of LASA because I was an anthropologist. I would say, in spite of being an anthropologist. Because there were very few anthropologists who were active in LASA, as you know.

KAY: Why do you think that is? I'm an anthropologist and I'm a member of LASA. Why do you think that that's the case?

HIS: Why do I think anthropology has been marginal? Paul Doughty and I were talking about it the other day; I don't know. I don't know why. I think they see LASA as being too much interested in international relations and politics. Whereas I'm a Latin Americanist. I've become more of a Latin Americanist and less of an anthropologist.

KAY: You said you were elected in spite of being an anthropologist. What did it mean for you personally, being president of LASA?

HIS: Well that, I think, was really the high point of my career. I'd been active in LASA. I'd been active in an earlier period—I'd been on the Executive Committee, as well, and liked it very much; I think because I've always worked in an interdisciplinary setting. That's another, I think, hallmark of my work. And that was a very exciting time at LASA. That time in the '70s and '80s we were dealing with very critical issues in Latin America. And I think I was elected by what I call a sort of Rainbow Coalition of LASA. I don't think I was elected by the old guard. I think

it was a combination of women, Hispanics, Latin Americans, and the left, obviously—you know the radical group within LASA. At that point, they've now changed their system, but one presided over a congress like a month or two after you took office. They've now changed that, thank heaven. And we were faced with a major crisis at LASA, the CIA and the whole CIA issue. And I think if I had not had my credentials as a leftist that things could have been much, much more difficult. I remember in that business meeting Guillermo O'Donnell getting up and saying to the audience, "We're not going to let the CIA ruin LASA during Helen's presidency." I really had nothing to do with that. And I think the people knew that. And there were people in Mexico as well, Lourdes Arizpe, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, going around to the anthropologists—who were the main group advocating that they boycott the meeting. The LASA meeting was held in Mexico; it was the first time it was held abroad. And we had these two major issues to deal with, you know.

KAY: That was my next question. Maybe you could recount just some background to the whole issue. I know that the CIA took out an ad in the LASA newsletter in 1983 [see Safa 1996:9]. But maybe you could give me some background and just describe the whole controversy.

HIS: I had become president in June. And we had gone to California that summer. And I remember calling Dick Fagan at Stanford, where my daughter was then in summer school, and he was the one who told me about the CIA issue. We appointed a committee of inquiry that Wayne Cornelius headed and that Paul Doughty was on. And they looked into that and much of the blame went on Jorge Domínguez [the previous president]. And while I think he was responsible, I don't think he should have taken all of the blame for it.

KAY: The blame for accepting an ad?

HIS: For accepting. He wasn't the one, it was actually the executive secretary of LASA, or executive director as they now call it, who had accepted the ad.

KAY: The ad was...?

HIS: To recruit people for the CIA. And it was a terrible thing to have come in a LASA newsletter, and particularly on the eve of having our first meeting in Mexico.

KAY: Right. So it was not an accident that it appeared at this time?

HIS: That's hard to say. I mean I find it a little bit hard to think that the CIA would have deliberately wanted to provoke that, but that's hard to know. I think it may have been just stupidity on other people's part to think that that could be published without repercussions.

KAY: Right. And so the controversy that's created in this is when many Mexican anthropologists wanted to boycott the meeting...

HIS: Mexican anthropologists and others. But the anthropologists were in the lead.

KAY: In your retrospective in the *LASA Forum*, you write that, in the early 1970s, "it was sometimes difficult to get women in the region to identify with gender issues. This was a tense political period in Latin America, with the U.S. threatening to undermine the Allende government in Chile and Perón's anticipated return to Argentina, and many radical scholars saw feminism as just another U.S. invention designed to divert them from the anti-imperialist and class struggle" [1996:8]. But that "Although feminism is no longer identified in Latin America and the Caribbean with U.S. imperialism, and the women's movement now includes not only middle-class academics, but women from trade unions, community associations and religious groups, peasants and rural workers, as well as Afro-American and indigenous women, it still has a long way to go" [1996:9]. Even though there may be "a long way to go," what accounts for this change?

HIS: You mean in terms of the way feminism is looked at?

KAY: Is viewed, exactly. And then, what is the importance of a feminist perspective on, and in, Latin America?

HIS: Let me describe the change first. I think that, when we did the seminar in '74 and so on, as I was reflecting on it, there was a great reluctance. But I think what happened—and many Latin Americans will say—that the seminar and the training, the training seminar we did and the conference we did, and the books that came out from that, like *Sex and Class in Latin America* [Nash and Safa 1976], were very instrumental in bringing Latin Americans in contact with each other. And in terms of establishing a certain legitimacy for the field. I think what happened is that it really grew by leaps and bounds. Many of the people who were reluctant at that time, like Marysa Navarro, have now become leading feminists in Latin America. So that I think that what happened is that the Latin American feminist movement is on its own. I mean it has influences from the United States and from Europe as well, but it's very much an indigenous, in-grown movement. And it's not just a movement of middle-class intellectuals, it has grass-roots support as well. And that was very obvious in Beijing.

Actually I came back from that seminar in Cuernavaca saying I was not going to have anything to do with women for the rest of my life. And then on the heels of my mother's death I felt I'd sacrificed the time that I should have been with her for this seminar. There are many conflicts that

can happen among women, but I'm glad that I experienced those at an early stage, so that now I can see them as part of the process of growth, for one's self individually and for part of the movement.

KAY: And the importance of a feminist perspective on and in Latin America?

HIS: Well I think it's important, I think it's important for a U.S. audience, because I think a U.S. audience still tends to go with the stereotype of a Latin American woman as being very passive and dominated by a macho man and subservient, and I don't think Latin American women are like that at all. I don't think that's true among intellectuals and scholars and other middle-class professionals, but I also think it's not true among the grassroots women, the urban industrial workers that I've worked with. And, so I think it's important for that, and I think it's also important because the public world of work and professions and politics was and still is, to a large degree, dominated by men. And I know the feminist movement has helped to prepare more women to enter in, for them to be more legitimized.

KAY: You are known as a tireless networker. Your Latin American network seems to be far and wide beyond belief, encompassing people, mostly women academics and activists, from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, to Brazil, to Argentina and Chile, and all points in between, it seems. Can you tell me about some of these relationships that you have, and the ways in which some of these people influence you?

HIS: Well, they're very old friends. And that's very important. I mean, I have friends all over the world, and the phone rings all the time. And I'm able to see them as well and that, I think, is very important. I think that also having these close personal friends, not only among women but among some men as well, helps me feel that I'm not just the *gringa* working in Latin America or the Caribbean. I demand a great deal but I try to give back. And I think that's part of understanding where I am—I've tried to contribute and to help. Everything from bringing Ximena Bunster up when she was caught in the coup in Chile, to more establishing conferences, to getting a scholarship for some students. A whole variety of measures.

KAY: What did you learn from your work in the Women in the Caribbean Project?⁴ That was your first, I believe, work in the non-Hispanic Caribbean.

HIS: I think there's a fundamental difference between women in the English-speaking Caribbean and the Spanish-speaking world in that they've always had much more economic autonomy [Safa 1986]. But I think, there again, we can see, and this is what I would argue, that even

though women have always had much more economic autonomy and it almost makes no sense to talk about a “myth of the male breadwinner” in the English-speaking Caribbean—that’s been true for many, many years—but their economic autonomy and their control at the household level has not translated necessarily into power at the public level, in terms of politics, in terms of heads of unions, and so on. I think there would be probably a little more than in the Spanish-speaking area, but still not equivalent to what it should be.

KAY: Over the years have you seen a change in academic men’s perspective on gender? Do you think there’s a sensitivity to things like gender studies and that that correlates to a lessening of prejudicial views on the part of men?

HIS: Somewhat, but there’s still a great deal of it left. I think there’s still a great deal left. And perhaps more in Latin America than in the United States. I know that Women’s Studies programs have had a much harder job getting established in Latin America than they have in the United States. I took great pains when I came as director of the Center as well. I think there was a real fear—because I’d worked so heavily in gender issues at that point and had been so identified—that I would try to turn the Center for Latin American Studies into a feminist think tank or something. And so I took great pains. We had no conference that dealt with gender issues during the five years I was director. And that was quite deliberate on my part. Yes, although I retained my interests, I wanted to make it clear that I also had other interests. I think my primary contribution to the Center here has been in terms of the development of the Caribbean program which now has grown into more diaspora studies programs. And my interest in “race” as well stems from those issues [see Safa 1987a, 1998b, 2005b, 2008, 2009].

KAY: A number of your students have gone on to be very successful anthropologists. You have Lynn Bolles, María Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and others. How does one go about training feminist anthropologists?

HIS: They’re aware of inequality and in both their cases—Lynn is an African American, Patricia is Mexican—you’re dealing with not only gender inequalities, but other forms of ethnic and racial inequality as well. I don’t see it so much as converting people to a course as looking at things from a gender perspective. And I think it’s very important that the field has changed from the study of women to the study of gender. One of the most important items coming out of my book on *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner* [Safa 1995] is the fact that it’s not just because of the increase in female employment, but the deterioration in male employment that has contributed to the current myth of the male breadwinner.

I don't necessarily see that as a gain for women, and there as well I may differ from other feminists. I don't think women gain when they have to assume the breadwinner role in the household. I think that, certainly the happiest families that I've known are the ones where both are able to contribute and educate their children, provide adequate health care and so on. But when the woman has to assume the role because the man is not able or not willing to assume that role that can, can lead to conflict.

KAY: I have a couple of Cuba-related questions for you. As president of LASA, and after you left the office, you have endeavored to create and maintain close scholarly links with Cuban scholars. In *The Myth*, where you report on your research in Cuba, you state that "There are virtually no other ethnographic studies of Cuban women during the period when the revolution was still thriving, and I think it is important to analyze its accomplishments as well as its shortcomings, which will undoubtedly be stressed in years to come" [1995:xiii]. A couple of pages later you write "Though socialism is widely discredited, I learned a great deal from working in a socialist country where a genuine redistribution of resources had taken place. I cling to a belief that greater social justice must prevail and that this cannot be achieved without the empowerment of the working class, including women" [1995:xv]. The two questions are: First, what has it meant to have scholarly relations with Cuba? And, what *was*, and what *is*, your opinion of the Cuban revolution?

HIS: Let me preface this by saying that in that quote you will notice that I said "the empowerment of the working class, including women," which again reflects my interests. In other words I don't see women at the expense of the working class as a whole, but I think it's important that we recognize women as part of the working class. I think part of the problem, again, is that we don't see women as working.

I think one of the great accomplishments of the revolution has been, as far as gender is concerned, is to turn the image of Cuban women from mothers to working mothers. Here I disagree with some other studies that have been done, but I think that the women are committed to working. And not just because of their own personal self-gain, but many of them started because they, as most working-class women all over the world, they're doing it because the family needs the extra income. But once they start to work and they see the way it gives them greater confidence in themselves, gives them greater legitimacy to bargain for a greater role in household decisions and control over the budget, they don't want to revert back to a housewife role. So I think that that's important.

KAY: Did you have hopes for the Cuban Revolution?

HIS: Yes I think I had. I mentioned early in the interview my

enthusiasm for [Operation] Bootstrap and by the time *The Urban Poor* was published [Safa 1974] I had become much more critical. I think there was a genuine attempt, in the Puerto Rican case as well, at improving the lives of people. But it didn't reach everyone, although it brought dramatic changes. I would argue the same for Cuba. I think there was a genuine attempt made at not just improving their lives, or alleviating poverty, but at restructuring and redistributing income in the entire society. I think one of the problems with the Cuban Revolution is that it focused too much just on class issues and to the neglect of both race and gender. And then the second is the control of the Communist party for everything that is done in Cuba. And I think that's the struggle that we're witnessing now, that they really did not allow a civil society to emerge under the revolution even though you had mass organizations which could have been the basis of a civil society.

I still admire the Cuban Revolution for the advances it did make, and for being able to survive for all these years, ninety miles off of the coast. I mean I think that's extraordinary. And the time that I was working in Cuba, in the mid-'80s, things were still quite adequate, even in terms of provision of consumer goods, and so on. Now since 1990, since the break-up.... And there again, I don't think the blame can be entirely placed on the Cuban Revolution. I think there was a question of world circumstances with the whole breakup of socialism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

I remain committed to greater equality, and I don't know how we achieve that without some form of socialism. I guess the social-democratic states of Europe come closer to that, but they are now changing as well.

KAY: And you have been very instrumental in creating scholarly links with Cuba. You have brought Cuban scholars here to the University of Florida. And you've worked on the LASA Committee on Scholarly Relations with Cuba.⁵

HIS: Yes, I was the one who initiated the first exchange with Cuba, during my presidency. It was, in fact, in Mexico that we initialed the first exchange agreement between Cuba and in particular with the Centro de Estudios Sobre América and LASA. And we initialed the agreement and I was just determined that that should not remain a piece of paper. So I went to the Ford Foundation for funding for this and got it and it became one of the biggest programs within LASA, with working groups being set up, seminars held on both sides, and it's achieved a tremendous human representation as you know at the LASA meetings. So I think it's been a very important accomplishment.

KAY: You have used the concept of dependency throughout your

work on the situation of Third World women, on urbanization [e.g., Safa 1982], and on the nature of ethnic relations in post-colonial settings [e.g., Safa 1975]. This concept has been under fire. What does dependency mean today? Do you think it's still a viable perspective?

HIS: Oh, I think it is. I think it is, but I think one has to not go back to the simple, relatively simple, notion of advanced industrial countries exploiting the Third World. I think now it's much more done through multinational corporations. I think dependency still operates at many levels. I think that, if anything, now. And I think that's one of the tragedies of the breakup of the socialist regimes, because they did offer some counter, made capitalist countries become more accountable. They had to be more concerned about the welfare of their populations, so they could counter the so-called socialist threat. And I think now that that threat is removed, I think we're seeing a rampant and very blatant and self-serving form of capitalism that I find quite frightening. I think the dependency is there but it's less than a government-to-government basis; as being done much more in terms of corporate board rooms. I've never been one to think of this as conspiracy theory. I think it's simply looking at the balance of power in the world.

KAY: My last question. You write: "I think women of the older generation are eager to be replaced by a younger generation, who already are taking on much of the responsibility" (Safa 1996:9). What message would you send to the younger generation of feminist scholars, especially those interested in Latin America?

HIS: It would depend on where they are. If they're in the United States, I think one of the first things that I'd try to convey is respect for the opinion of Latin Americans, that one has to approach all of these issues with a great deal of modesty; that you don't come on these saying "We have the answers, and we just need to teach you." I think there can be maternalism as well as paternalism. So that would be part of mine, you know, go and find out what's happening first and where these people are coming from before you think you have the answers. And I think there's still a great deal of work to be done in this area. Not only in feminist anthropology but also in recognizing, as the U.S. women's movement is increasingly, the differences of race and class that cut through feminism as well.

KAY: Thank you very much.

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Notes

- ¹ In another life history interview, Safa explains that her mother, Erna Keune, came to the United States when she was nineteen and her father, Gustav Icken, came with he was twenty-three. They met in the United States, but were from German villages no more than 10 kilometers from each other (Morrison 1995:1).
- ² Safa's relationship with Cornell has strengthened as a result of her grandson Nicolas studying there as an undergraduate architecture student. She also attended her fiftieth class reunion.
- ³ Safa published an earlier chapter on this material in Safa (1983).
- ⁴ The Women in Caribbean Project has been discussed in several places. See Massiah (1986a, 1986b) for a collection of findings, and Senior's (1991) book for a synthesis.
- ⁵ In 2009 Safa received an award from this committee in recognition of her efforts.

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