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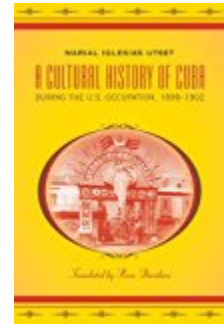
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marial Iglesias Utset. *A Cultural History of Cuba during the U.S. Occupation, 1898-1902*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 256 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3398-8; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7192-8.

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Contested Communities and Quotidian Culture

The history of empire and anticolonial struggle has too often found itself trapped in the overly simplified binary of colonizer against colonized. While the historiography of empire used to focus almost exclusively on the perspective of the imperial conquerors, the most recent historical error has been to write from the perspective of the colonized as though there is one, unified perspective that needs to be recovered. In *A Cultural History of Cuba during the U.S. Occupation, 1898-1902*, Marial Iglesias Utset seeks to disrupt this trend. Utset portrays Cuba at the turn of the twentieth century as a site of fractured and contested political and national identities as the newly freed colony attempted to define itself and trace out a path to nation building. Within the symbolic vacuum created by the rejection of Spanish rule, Utset argues, a battle was waged between strident nationalists, advocates of Americanization, and proponents of Spanish heritage over what it meant to be Cuban in the postcolonial state.

Setting out to recapture the voices of ordinary Cubans, Utset examines an impressive array of sources. Noting that Cuban society at the turn of the century was largely rural and illiterate, Utset uses but does not rely solely on Havana newspapers, diaries, and archival records. To complement these sources, Utset delves into the rich material of municipal records, provincial newspapers, poetry, plays, almanacs, commercial advertisements, and photographs, as well as accounts of fiestas, marches, funerals, and other performance-based rituals

which provide insight into the ways different segments of the Cuban population created their own definitions and meanings of the nation and national identity. By dissecting local ceremonies and celebrations, as well as the day-to-day rituals and practices of nonelite Cubans, Utset presents a nuanced vision of the complicated and contested project of nation building at the turn of the century.

By highlighting quotidian rituals and practices as well as the shaping of the lived environment, Utset demonstrates how intimate, personal decisions took on a political resonance, and also how postcolonial Cuba began to preserve and remember the past as part of the process of creating a unified national identity. The absences left by the overthrow of Spanish authority, from the holes in official papers from which the Spanish coat of arms had been cut out to the empty pedestal from which a statue of Isabel II used to gaze out over her subjects, became contested spaces, as Cuban citizens and American employees of the military government all advocated their own visions of how to fill the void. In the debate over what traditions to preserve and what innovations to embrace, seemingly innocuous practices and individual choices became imbued with new significance. The decision to go to a cockfight, to ride a horse or a bicycle, to play baseball, and to dance the *danzon* rather than the two-step, and even choices about the color of a hatband, all became fraught with political meaning. At the same time, the creation of new parks and avenues, the re-

naming of streets and plazas, and the transformation of military barracks into schools were indications not only of a symbolic erasure of Spanish authority, but also of the physical projection of a new, modern, progressive Cuba.

Rather than focusing solely on the conflict between Cubans and Americans, Utset illuminates the conflict between different groups of Cubans with distinct, and sometimes conflicting, definitions of what it meant to be Cuban. Using clashes surrounding the practice of cock-fighting, the *danzon*, and appropriate public celebration, Utset reveals the conflict between the lower class and elites anxious to prove that Cubans were “civilized.” Utset also demonstrates the ways in which the public memory of the Cuban Army was whitened, downplaying the participation of black Cubans. Using the public commemorations of General Antonio Maceo, Utset illustrates the complicated and contradictory views on the place of Afro-Cubans in postcolonial Cuba, in which Maceo’s memory could be revered even as other black *mambises* were shut out of independence celebrations and dances.

Beyond the divisions in Cuban society, Utset skillfully lays out the complicated relationship between Cubans and members of the American military government. While strident nationalists and those favoring the Americanization of Cuban culture were perhaps the most vocal in opposition to or support of the American presence, Utset argues that most Cubans felt a deep ambivalence about the influence of the American intervention, torn between their admiration for the progress and modernity that the United States represented on the one hand, while simultaneously concerned that American in-

tervention posed a threat to Cuban independence and sovereignty on the other.

One drawback in an otherwise thoughtful and profound work is Utset’s failure to place Cuba in the larger international context of the anticolonial struggle against Spain and birth of American empire. Comparisons to Puerto Rico and the Philippines would have been especially useful, as many of the American-initiated innovations implemented in Cuba were also being tried there, most notably the restructuring of education. Despite the formal nature of empire in Puerto Rico and the Philippines, both places were also engaged in processes of confrontation and accommodation toward the adoption of American customs versus the retention of traditional practices. Cubans, moreover, clearly viewed themselves as part of a global struggle for independence, as demonstrated by Utset’s reference to a Cuban teacher who hoped not only for full independence for Cuba, but also for the “heroic Filipinos” (p. 81).

Ultimately, Utset has made a valuable contribution to the field of Cuban history, as well as to the wider historiography of empire. Through her careful and nuanced approach, Utset weaves an engaging narrative of how tradition and progress, heritage and innovation become intertwined in a country indelibly shaped by the contested and fractured process of nation building at the crossroads of two powerful empires. Hopefully, her work will inspire future scholars to embrace the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the study of colonization and empire.

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