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**THE COSTS OF *CUBA LIBRE*:
U.S. NEO-IMPERIALISM, TOURISM IN CUBA,
AND THE HABANA HILTON**

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by
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December 2015

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an investigation into North American tourism in Cuba between the “Spanish-American War” in 1898 and the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The research it presents was prompted by a set of photographs taken at the grand opening of the Habana Hilton in March 1958, part of the Bern and Franke Keating Collection, held in the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Mississippi. Many of these photos are also included throughout the text of the paper.

I begin with an overview of the relationship between Cuba and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, since the nation’s military presence and political authority on the island were the foundation for its economic expansion and cultural influence there during the period this paper examines. Early in the century, elite Cubans and U.S. investors led the first concerted efforts to establish a tourism industry in Havana, and I consider both the impact of this development on the island and the North American cultural imperatives it reflected. I trace the similarities between this early boom and tourism’s resurgence in 1950s Cuba under Fulgencio Batista, and I explore the role of tourism in Cuban rebels’ opposition to his U.S.-backed dictatorial regime.

I am also concerned with the particular symbolic significance of the Habana Hilton, suggested by the fact that Fidel Castro occupied the hotel and ran Cuba’s provisional government from it in the months following the revolution. I consider the Hilton Corporation’s international expansion at mid-century, the tourist experience its hotels orchestrated, and the Cold War ideology that underpinned both. If North Americans saw the Habana Hilton as Cuba’s latest and

grandest monument to U.S. superiority and righteousness, I argue, it was a symbol of empty North American promises to many Cubans.

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I owe a huge debt of gratitude to everyone on my thesis committee—David Wharton, Andy Harper, and Katie McKee, who patiently stuck with me even as I took more and more time to finish this project. Special thanks to Dr. Harper for his encouragement at several crucial moments. And thank you to Dr. Wharton, who served as my advisor, for all the indispensable support.

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INTRODUCTION

In my third week as a student in the Southern Studies M.A. program at the University of Mississippi, I was assigned to read Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn's introduction to *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*. In it, the collection's editors outline the premise underlying the work that follows, essays on the South's relationship to the Caribbean and to Mexico, on how postcolonial theory can transform our view of the region, and on William Faulkner as an influential figure in Latin American literature. Scholarship, the editors point out—no less than national rhetoric or popular representation—has tended to treat “the South” as a more-or-less discrete region within the United States, defined mostly by its difference from the rest of the nation. But “what happens,” they ask, “if we look away from the [U.S] North” in conceiving of the U.S. South?¹ According to Smith and Cohn, broadening our view allows us to see that it is not just a place apart. “The very factors” that give rise to claims about its exceptionality within the United States, they argue, make the region “acutely familiar within broader categories of Americanness and postcoloniality.”²

As George Handley observes in his contribution to the same volume, the South's history—and continuing legacies—of European colonization, agricultural economy, and plantation society suggest a “compelling commonality” to much of the Caribbean, as well as to places throughout Central and South America.³ Particularly with regard to these connections, Smith and Cohn urge scholars to “stop speaking of ‘the South’ as if its borders were clear.”⁴ They advocate for work that resists “the pernicious either/or habit common... in the formation of

southernness,” the idea that “either you’re southern (or Caribbean or American—or, for that matter, black or feminine or homosexual) or you’re not.” What interests them, instead, is the fact of the South’s “hybridity”—what is revealed in considering how the region is “*both* ‘American’ and Latin American or Caribbean.”⁵

What follows here is the written component of a documentary thesis that deals, by and large, with North American tourism in Cuba between the “Spanish-American War” and the Cuban Revolution in 1959. It does not deal much—at least not explicitly—with the U.S. South as it has been typically defined. It is conceived of as a “southern studies” project, however, in light of the compelling arguments laid out in *Look Away!*, which have been foundational to my study of the South. The anthology is far from the only work that engages this trans-national perspective on the region—it is, in fact, a major trend in recent scholarship. But it was Smith and Cohn’s collection that radically altered my own view on what makes “the South” and where it is. Such insight has been key to this project, which relates to the U.S. South in significant ways even while focused outside its traditionally “clear” geographic borders.

Beyond Handley’s more general claims, moreover, Cuba in particular has had much in common with the U.S. South across the past several centuries. The region and the island, Smith and Cohn observe, “[share] a history of slavery, a belief in the aristocratic ‘old order,’ and positioning against the political interventions of a North”—all themes in this paper.⁶ The U.S. Civil War and the “War of 1898” were alike, they suggest, as “step[s] in wresting control of this global-southern region’s land, (largely black) labor, and capital from local elite white...men by other elite white men in distant, global-north metropolises.”⁷ And if the South, like Cuba, has been a place of North American imperial expansion and neo-imperial control, its representation in dominant cultural discourse has also been similar to the island’s. Like Cuba and Cubans, the

region and its people have often served as a “primitive” Other, against which national identity and belonging have been defined. At times closely connected to these depictions, tourism is yet another way this study of Cuba bears on places across the U.S. South, where the industry grew tremendously in the twentieth century and continues to expand today.

I do not suggest that commonalities between Cuba and the U.S. South make “facile” comparisons possible, as Handley warns against.⁸ The many ways in which they have been very different places are instructive, as well. The fact that Cuba is not a part of the United States—despite the nation’s authority there—has been important at key moments in the trajectory of tourism on the island, at least. And other circumstances are telling, too. Speculating after the Cuban Revolution on the reasons for its success, U.S. Ambassador Phillip W. Bonsal emphasized the dire poverty in 1950s Cuba—even compared to that in the Deep South. In Mississippi, “the poorest state in the union,” per capita income was fully half that of the North American average, but in Cuba, it was “about one-third that of Mississippi.”⁹ In the case of this project, however, clear parallels exist between Cuba’s and the U.S. South’s historical legacies, cultural representations, and tourism industries. As I see it, greater understanding of these forces in either place is bound to enhance our insight into how they are at work elsewhere.

This project began in the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Mississippi, where I was assigned to re-catalog and digitize a significant portion of the Bern and Franke Keating Collection, donated to the Center for the Study of Southern Culture in 2000. A married couple from Greenville, Mississippi, the Keatings both worked as professional photographers and writers. From the 1950s through the 1980s, they ran a studio in Greenville, making portraits and photographing special occasions for the “who’s who” of local high society. They also contributed regularly to local and national newspapers, as well as to publications like

Life, Look, Time, National Geographic, Smithsonian, and The Saturday Evening Post. In later years, Bern wrote extensively. From early in the 1960s through the 1980s, he published over two dozen books—some in collaboration with others and some under a pseudonym—ranging in subject from the Aztec people to the Northwest Passage to the history of Washington County, Mississippi.¹⁰

If sitting at a scanner for hours on end was tedious, the material was often fascinating. The Keatings worked throughout the Mississippi Delta, across the South, and all over the world. But one set of photographs captured my attention more than any other. In a folder marked “HABANA HILTON,” I found around 700 black and white negatives—a few medium format, but mostly 35mm. No article, captions, or correspondence accompanied the images, only one hand-written sticky note, affixed to a sleeve of negatives. “Hedda Hopper,” it suggested, “Hope Diamond?” A few minutes online was enough to discern that the images had been made at the 1958 grand opening of the Hilton hotel in Havana, Cuba—and the more I discovered, the more intrigued I became.

Finding a few accounts of the inaugural festivities, I soon identified the hotelier himself, Conrad Hilton; Marta Fernández Miranda de Batista, the wife of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista; and, indeed, Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper pictured among other notable guests. I learned that the hotel opened in late March 1958, near the tail end of mid-century Havana’s tourism boom—which the Cuban Revolution would bring to an abrupt end that New Years Eve. By the time of the opening, opposition to the Batista regime was widespread and gaining momentum across the island. In fact, I discovered, Hilton executives were concerned enough about circumstances in Havana that they considered cancelling the opening all together. They proceeded, in the end, on the advice of the U.S. State Department and the Embassy in

Havana—but their anxiety about rebel sabotage explained the conspicuous presence of security guards and policemen in the photographs.

The images alone were compelling, but the story of the Habana Hilton became even richer when I learned that the hotel’s most famous guest was none other than Fidel Castro.

When the rebel leader arrived in Havana in the first week of January 1959, Batista having fled



Hedda Hopper, wearing a large diamond—maybe the Hope?—and other guests at the Habana Hilton opening.

the island, he spent his first night in the Hilton. In the months that followed, he and his revolutionary compatriots made the hotel their home and the headquarters of the new Cuban government. When the hotel was nationalized in 1960, Castro revealed its new name in a speech to the *Gastronómico*, the culinary workers' union that owned the property. "HABANA HILTON," he announced, would no longer light up Havana from atop Latin America's tallest building. From then on, the hotel would be called the "Habana Libre."¹¹

The hotel's apparent symbolic significance made me want to know more. And wanting, as well, to share my archival "find" with others, curating and mounting an exhibition of the photographs from the inaugural weekend became my documentary thesis project. "At the Habana Hilton: Photographs from the Keating Collection" hung in Barnard Observatory's Gammill Gallery from May to August 2015. The show exhibited digital prints of around forty images from the inaugural, made from high-resolution scans of the Keatings' negatives, and included significant wall text. Though they are not discussed explicitly in the text, many of the same photographs are included throughout the chapters that follow, especially the third and fourth.

What this paper reflects most clearly is research prompted by the images, undertaken in order to present them, responsibly, in a broad historical context. It is an investigation into what we see in the photographs and a consideration of what we do not. I am interested in the circumstances underpinning their creation, as well as their contemporary significance as representations of North American tourism in mid-century Cuba. Throughout what follows, I consider how twentieth century tourism discourse sustained longstanding misperceptions among many North Americans about the nation's relationship to Cuba—and, no less, their own. And since the main purpose of my project was to bring the Keating photographs out of the archives, it

has been crucial that it work to disrupt this historical tendency, rather than perpetuate it.

Alongside the images from the Hilton inaugural, this paper seeks to do so by foregrounding what tourism discourse often obscured—the origin, impact, and underlying cultural imperatives of the industry in Cuba.

I begin with an overview of the relationship between Cuba and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. The period is critical due to the North American intervention, in 1898, in nationalist Cubans' struggle for independence from Spanish colonial rule—what we now commonly call the “Spanish-American War.” Granted control of Cuba by the Treaty of Paris, the United States' military presence and political authority were the foundation for its economic expansion and cultural influence on the island from the beginning of the century through the turbulent 1950s. Elite Cubans and U.S. investors led the first concerted efforts to establish a tourism industry in Havana during this period, and its first boom came in the years following World War I. In the second chapter, I trace the early history of tourism in Cuba, considering its impact on the island as well as the North American desires that shaped promotional discourse and determined its character.

In the third, I look at Cuba's second tourism boom, under Batista, from 1952 until the Cuban Revolution in 1959. This period of rapid development, growing tourist crowds, and U.S.-backed authoritarian rule in Cuba had much in common with the 1920s. But while the Great Depression brought the island's first wave of tourism to an end before president-cum-dictator Gerardo Machado's overthrow in 1933, political tensions in the 1950s mounted as the industry in Havana thrived. As tourists partied and the United States increased its official support for Batista, his regime grew more and more severe, and Cuba's economy slumped. For many Cubans, historian Louis A. Pérez claims, “the 1950s were years of deepening crisis.”¹² And in

this atmosphere, “Batista and Uncle Sam were such conspicuous partners” that rebels’ opposition to the dictator increasingly implied resistance to North American neo-imperial authority on the island.¹³

Despite these circumstances, the bright lights of Havana were all that many North Americans could see. Influenced by decades of tourism promotion and representations in popular culture, the island as vacation destination—as a tropical paradise inhabited by Latin lovers and sensuous *mulattas*—had become the primary way they understood Cuba. As a symbol of the corruption and exploitation Cuban rebels opposed, historians argue that Havana’s tourism industry played an important role in fomenting revolution on the island. But the cultural discourses on Cuba and Cubans—and, at once, on North American identity and belonging—that it produced and sustained were crucial, too. Among other things, Pérez argues, the “inability” of many in the United States “to see beyond” their own constructions of the island and its people “created the space in which the Cuban Revolution consolidated itself.”¹⁴ It was “precisely because it seemed to have no chance there,” as Alan McPherson puts it, that such a challenge to U.S. hegemony as Batista’s overthrow succeeded in Cuba.¹⁵

The Habana Hilton and its inaugural celebration are my focus in the fourth and final chapter. By early 1958, when executives considered cancelling the opening in Havana, conditions on the island were finally beginning to erode the sense of surety McPherson describes. As they gained momentum late in the decade, Cuban rebels increasingly targeted tourist establishments for attack. And as they did, “the story out of Cuba” focused more and more on their activities and aspirations, on “Castro and revolution” instead of “casinos and romance.”¹⁶ That, in the end, Hilton went ahead with the opening—despite qualms about guests’

safety, but at the urging of the U.S. State Department and with the expressed support of the Cuban government—reveals what was at stake, and for whom. At a moment of significant challenge to it, the Habana Hilton inaugural was an opportunity to reassert the neo-imperial status quo that had prevailed on the island, by and large, over the first half of the twentieth century.



Members of the press and other guests in the Habana Hilton lobby during inaugural festivities.

A demonstration of Hilton’s confidence and Batista’s control, the opening was also—and not least—an effort to reclaim the authority to represent Cuba, to the U.S. public and beyond. The large and seemingly ubiquitous press corps, as seen in the Keating photos, is a testament to this priority. With this in mind, the photographs themselves must be understood, in part, as artifacts of this joint endeavor by Hilton International, the U.S. government, and the Batista

regime to undermine gains by Cuban dissidents. Though I did not discover, in my research, whether any of these images from Havana were published, many could have been used for this purpose. Photographs of glamorous people sipping cocktails, playing the tables, and enjoying elaborate performances suggested, in the late 1950s, that Cuba was the same enticing destination as ever.



Conrad Hilton poses with a woman historian Dennis Merrill identifies as a former Miss Minnesota.

But other images in the Keating Collection—perhaps those less likely to have appeared in contemporary publications—tell a different story. We see Conrad Hilton posing in a straw hat with a young woman and a bongo drum, but we also see him consulting with policemen on the periphery of an al fresco luncheon. Like the press, security appears everywhere in the photographs. The outsized presence of police escorts and private guards reveal the hotelier’s anxiety about the state of things in Havana at the time of the opening. More broadly, it points to the fact that—despite national rhetoric tracing back to the “Spanish-American War”—U.S. activity and influence on the island did not stem from a sense of “disinterested righteousness.” North Americans’ privilege on the island, as tourists or otherwise, was neither natural nor uncontested. From the turn of the century through the 1950s, it was always underpinned by the discipline of those whose interests it worked against.



Conrad Hilton speaking with security forces during the Habana Hilton’s opening weekend.

The Keating photographs also give a sense for how an actual vacation in Cuba, beyond the island's discursive representation, could contribute to the "ignorance" that underlaid North Americans' conviction in their "innocence."¹⁷ In the second and third chapters, I deal broadly with the character of twentieth century tourism in Havana, from its early promises of aristocratic entitlement to its mid-century license for indulgence and abandon. In the fourth, I explore the nature of the tourist experience orchestrated by Hilton International. As the chain spread across the globe in the years following World War II, Conrad Hilton extolled his hotels as venues for cultural exchange. However, historians agree with contemporary critics that their design worked more truly as "effective insulation" from international locales, even as mediated representations of local cultural life within the hotels offered patrons "an effortless experience" of the foreign.¹⁸

In the Keating Collection, we see Havana as a "vista," either from high above the city or through the windows of a tourist bus passing through it. Cubans, by and large, are waiters or entertainers—though a photograph not included in the exhibition suggests that a bull-driving *campesino* also made an amusing appearance. Hilton has even provided guests' souvenirs, as we see in photographs of a crowd gathered around stacks of straw hats. These images suggest that the "Cuba" inaugural guests encountered—as for most tourists on the island across the twentieth century—was organized for their consumption. Far from reflecting the realities that shaped everyday life for most people on the island, it disguised or distracted from them. Giving insight into visitors' actual experiences, the images suggest how North Americans remained unable to understand their impact in Cuba, even as they traveled there in greater numbers than ever.

Guests choose hats at the Habana Hilton opening.



I also consider the sense of “assurance” scholars and critics identify as central to the Hilton experience. For North Americans abroad, the chain “act[ed] as a balm, a salve, a glass of Alka-Seltzer,” George Bradshaw wrote in a 1965 *Vogue* article.¹⁹ In material luxury, sheer size, and modern design, according to Annabel Wharton, Hiltons stood in remarkable contrast to the built environments of many international cities. For patrons, she suggests, the contrast served as

a marker of their difference and superiority from local cultural life. In the years following World War II, the hotels were symbols, at once, of the United States' "geopolitical hegemony" as well as "the truth, righteousness, and stability of its economic and moral values."²⁰ But if, for U.S. tourists, investors, and government officials, the Habana Hilton was Cuba's latest and grandest monument to North American righteousness, I also consider what the hotel meant to many Cubans.

By the time of its opening, I argue, the hotel towered over Havana as a symbol of half a century of empty North American promises. The height of tourism development on the island, it also epitomized a particular Cold War message equating modern civilization with the apparent material advantages of capitalism. In late 1950s Cuba, however, historians suggest that such promises had lost their appeal. And as they repudiated the "fruits of the free world" on display at the Habana Hilton, Cuban rebels also resisted a key element of North American hegemony.²¹ Since at least the turn of the century, North American discourse on "civilization" had underlain its assertion of authority in Cuba, as elsewhere. But in their opposition to Batista, dissidents made the values implied by the "American way of life" Conrad Hilton believed his hotels persuasively "exemplified" into a "foil" for their own articulation of the ideal.²²

In revolutionary Cuba, Fidel Castro pronounced in a 1959 debate in the *Diario de la Marina*, "unemployment, illiteracy, infant mortality, [and] tuberculosis rates" would replace the number of "automobiles, radios, refrigerators, and televisions" as a gauge of civilization. Reversing the claims of U.S. rhetoric, he implied that the nation's influence on the island had made it a "barbaric" place, where a few lived in luxury while "vast numbers [could not] daily earn enough to live."²³ Seeking a nuanced understanding of the Habana Hilton's symbolic significance, I consider this tension between the corporation's Cold War politics and the

professed ideological commitments of Cuban nationalists in the final chapter. That rebels expressed aspiration to an ideal of civilization defined against North American hegemonic discourse is an interesting place to end the paper not least because it relates so closely to where it begins. That they did so while occupying the hotel at the center of this investigation—conceived as a monument to the North American power and privilege they rejected—makes it even better.

A number of themes run throughout the paper. First and foremost is the relationship of tourism to the United States' broader assertion of neo-imperial control in Cuba, beginning with the "Spanish-American War" in 1898. The two have not been, as I have suggested here and argue in the chapters that follow, discrete phenomena. But if Havana's tourism industry and the cultural discourses it sustained shored up the United States' authority on the island, I also aim to show how they undermined it—often at one and the same time.

Closely tied to the first, another main concern is for North American modes of depicting Cuba and Cubans. As what made the island "apprehensible" to the U.S. public as a natural locus for the nation's "capital, expertise, dreams, and power," Ricardo D. Salvatore argues that "representational practices" have "constituted as much the stuff of empire as the activities of North Americans in the economic, military, or diplomatic fields."²⁴ In the first chapter, I consider how Cuba's depiction in turn-of-the-century political cartoons reflected the United States' justification for military intervention and occupation. But from the 1920s until the late 1950s, as I suggest in the second and third, tourism's modes of picturing the island and its people became dominant in U.S. cultural discourse. Questions of representation—of what, by whom, why?—are central to this project, not least because its ultimate aim is to reveal what we see in a set of photographs that are, themselves, contemporary depictions of tourism in 1950s Cuba.

In dealing with North American representations of Cuba and Cubans, the nature and impact of primitivist discourse are also major themes in this paper. I address, early on, how they have been used, across centuries of Western imperial expansion, “to justify conquest and establish systems of administration and instruction” in places throughout the world.²⁵ But throughout the chapters, I am more interested in what modes of depicting the island and its people—in tourism and more broadly—reveal about North American cultural imperatives across the first half of the twentieth century. “The primitive,” as Mariana Torgovnick argues, is a cultural construction by the West, for the West. Since it “[has told] us what we [have wanted] it to tell us,” to study primitive discourse “brings us always back to ourselves...”²⁶

Torgovnick’s reasoning is central to my consideration of tourism culture in Cuba in the 1920s and 1950s, as well as my attention to the tourist experience orchestrated by Hilton International as it expanded at mid-century. It is also central to the ultimate aim of this project as a whole. I hope that, presented alongside images from the Habana Hilton inaugural, this exploration of their broad historical context educates viewers and readers about the nature of the United States’ relationship with Cuba and the history of tourism on the island. But more than this, I aim to present my research and the Keatings’ photographs so that they are prompted to examine themselves, as North Americans and—more likely than not—as tourists. Such self-reflection is valuable in and of itself, but may prove especially important as the United States and Cuba negotiate, beginning in 2015, the restoration of official relations for the first time since 1961—and tourism promises, once more, to play a pivotal role.

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- ¹ John Smith and Deborah Cohn, "Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities," in *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 2004), 2.
- ² *Ibid.*, 3.
- ³ George B. Handley, "A New World Poetics of Oblivion," in *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 2004), 25.
- ⁴ Smith and Cohn, "Introduction," 15.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8.
- ⁶ John Smith and Deborah Cohn, "Part One: The U.S. South and the Caribbean," in *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 2004), 23.
- ⁷ Smith and Cohn, "Introduction," 3.
- ⁸ Handley, "A New World Poetics," 25.
- ⁹ Thomas G. Paterson, *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1994), 41.
- ¹⁰ I became familiar with the Keating Collection through my work in the Archives at the University of Mississippi during the spring semester and summer vacation of 2014. I also interviewed Susan McClamrock (20 Jan. 2015), who worked with the Keatings to create an initial catalog of their bequest in 2000, and Jane Rule Burdine (28 Jan. 2015), a friend of the couple who worked and traveled extensively with them in later years.
- ¹¹ Dennis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth Century Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2009), 153-172.
- ¹² Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1999), 455.
- ¹³ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 246.
- ¹⁴ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill, NC, UNC Press, 2008), 240-249.
- ¹⁵ Alan McPherson, *Yankee No!: Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 2003), 39.
- ¹⁶ Rosalie Schwartz, *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba* (Lincoln, NB: U of Nebraska Press, 1997), 192.
- ¹⁷ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 244.
- ¹⁸ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 99 and Annabel Wharton, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.
- ¹⁹ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 5.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Christine Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise: US Tourism and Empire in Cuba and Hawai'i* (Philadelphia: U Penn Press, 2010), 4.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 200.
- ²⁴ Ricardo D. Salvatore, "Representational Machines of Empire," in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 1998), 71-75.
- ²⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination, and the discourse of colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 71.
- ²⁶ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1990), 9-11.

I. CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

From the early sixteenth century until nearly the turn of the twentieth, Cuba was a prized possession of the Spanish colonial empire. The island's location in the Caribbean made it a strategic naval base and a natural hub for trans-Atlantic trade. Early crop cultivation relied on the forced labor of the region's indigenous Taíno people, but diseases introduced by Spanish colonists soon decimated their population. As hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans replaced them on Cuba's plantations in the centuries that followed, large-scale agriculture increased steadily across the island. Coffee and tobacco were important crops, but the cultivation of sugar—exported raw as well as through the production of molasses and rum—came to dominate its economy. By the nineteenth century, the island provided Spain with bountiful cash-crop profits and, in Havana, a bustling port city, its harbor “one of the most important in the world.”¹

But even while it was firmly under Spanish rule, the United States had its eye on Cuba for many of the same reasons Spain found it so valuable. “Hopes and fears concerning [its] future abound” in the writings of early national leaders, according to historian Jules R. Benjamin, most of whom “expected Cuba to become either a part of the Union or an appendage to it.”² In 1820, Thomas Jefferson believed the nation “ought, at the first possible opportunity, to take Cuba.”³ Three years later, arguing that “there are laws of political as well as physical gravitation,” John Quincy Adams suggested the island was simply fated to become U.S. territory.

Once “disjointed from its own unnatural connection from Spain, and incapable of self-support,” he wrote, Cuba “can gravitate only to the North American Union.”⁴

At mid-century, many slaveholders in the U.S. South and in Cuba saw the United States’ acquisition of the island as a way to preserve the institution of slavery—the foundation of both regions’ plantation economies—and to expand their own political influence. Anxious that Africans and Afro-Cubans outnumbered those of European descent on the island, they also raised the common specter of a slave revolt to argue that the United States should take control of Cuba before it became “another black republic” like Haiti, “this time just off the shore of Florida.”⁵ Moved by these southerners’ interest—and, more broadly, by the expansionist *zeitgeist* of “Manifest Destiny”—the administrations of both James Polk and Franklin Pierce offered to purchase Cuba from Spain, to no avail.⁶ A matter of concern since nearly the time of the nation’s founding, North American desire to possess the island assumed an unprecedented urgency by the eve of the Civil War. “We must have Cuba,” James Buchanan insisted. “We can’t do without [it].”⁷

Though the abolition of slavery in the United States during the war—and in Cuba in 1878—ended a certain interest in the island, others soon came to the fore. While North Americans’ preoccupation with acquiring the colony had grown throughout the nineteenth century, so had a movement within Cuba for independence from Spain. From 1868 to 1878, in 1879 and 1880, and finally from 1895 to 1898, Cuban nationalists rebelled against Spanish colonial rule. Though led mainly by a landed creole elite, historian Louis A. Pérez characterizes the uprisings as “popular mobilizations.” Their cause, *Cuba Libre*, “passed through several ideological formulations” over the years, but by the end of the nineteenth century had become “a movement of enormous vigor, possessed of elements of nationalism, social justice and popular

democracy.”⁸ In the final struggle of the 1890s, Afro-Cubans made up more than half of rebel forces, as well as nearly forty percent of the movement’s officers. The egalitarian ideals of turn-of-the-century *Cuba Libre* were articulated—and have endured—in the work of contemporary Cuban writer and activist José Martí. Martí advocated a socially and racially inclusive national identity as the basis for Cubans’ independence movement, and many embraced this vision as a central tenet of the rebellion. Though he was killed in the Battle of Dos Ríos in 1895, Martí’s writings remained an “undiminished creed” of Cuban nationalism throughout the twentieth century and are influential across Latin America—and elsewhere—to this day.⁹

A diverse but powerful set of circumstances led to the United States’ intervention in the Cuban struggle for independence in 1898—known now, stateside, as the “Spanish-American War.” As proclaimed by the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the nation ostensibly supported the emancipation of American states from European colonial rule. Though some Cuban rebels strongly opposed any U.S. involvement, others invoked its professed commitment to the ideal of national sovereignty to lobby for military assistance. After nearly half a century of conflict on the island, they believed the nation’s aid would assure a quick and decisive victory over Spain. For jingoist politicians in North America, interceding on behalf of the cause of Cuban independence was an opportunity for the nation to flex its muscles in the service of “civilization.” At once cultivating and exploiting a vein of likeminded popular sentiment, the North American press “converted the rebellion into a modern-day morality play.” In support of intervention, newspapers emphasized “Spanish abuse of liberty-loving Cubans and...Spanish slights to U.S. virility.”¹⁰

Especially by the late nineteenth century, however, historians point out that the nation’s stance on colonialism was less “a way of preventing European interference in the New World”

than “a warrant for spreading North American influence within it.”¹¹ Though its territories stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific by the late nineteenth century, dreams of further territorial expansion were on display at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Asked to envision “America in 1993,” U.S. leaders [at the fair] predicted a “nation stretch[ing] from Alaska to Patagonia.”¹² Martí had no doubt U.S. forces would expel Spain from the island if the nation intervened in the Cuban rebellion. But “once the United States is in Cuba,” he challenged compatriots who sought North American aid, “who will drive it out?”¹³

The amount of domestic capital at stake in Cuba was another reason for the nation’s interest in the conflict on the island. North American investment there had increased significantly in the aftermath of the last Cuban insurrection against Spain in the late 1870s. Twenty years later, U.S. individuals and enterprises held considerable investments in agriculture and mining, but the rebellion had brought both production and trade to a halt. In 1897, a State Department official complained bluntly to a counterpart in Madrid that fighting on the island “injuriously affects the normal functions of business and tends to delay the condition of prosperity to which [the United States] is entitled.”¹⁴ As Cuban forces appeared increasingly to gain advantage in the war, the rebels’ outspoken nationalist commitments heightened North American anxiety about the future of these investments. Historian Christine Skwiot suggests, moreover, that the egalitarianism as well as the nationalism of Cubans’ movement “proved especially disturbing” to many in the United States at a time when the nation was “preoccupied with enshrining [racial] segregation as the law of the land.”¹⁵

“Whether it was by design or accident,” as senator Orville Platt put it, once the U.S.S. *Maine* was sunk in Havana’s harbor in February 1898, “there was no power on earth that could prevent the war.”¹⁶ Although national leaders painted the military intervention as an act of

duty—even magnanimity—historians argue it was prompted mostly by their apprehension about a rebel victory. “Control of Cuba,” Pérez writes, “involved issues of vital national interest.” To enter the war as an expressed supporter of Cubans ensured that its influence in the region would prevail even if Spain was forced out.¹⁷ Cuban forces had, in fact, brought Spain close to defeat by the time North American forces stepped in. The war was over quickly, and Rough Rider Roosevelt—whose charge up San Juan Hill made him a “national hero”—was soon “on the fast track to the White House.”¹⁸ Thus it was, according to Pérez, that “the Cuban war to end one empire precipitated an American war that begat another.”¹⁹

Despite Cuban rebels’ critical role in exhausting Spanish resources over thirty years of intermittent revolt, the United States claimed the victory over Spain, “a feat it presumed”—or at least proclaimed—“the Cubans to have been incapable of achieving.”²⁰ Trumbull White’s contemporary account of the conflict, *Our War with Spain for Cuba’s Freedom*, illustrates a view that became commonplace: “If the Cuban soldier had been the equal of the American, he would not have needed our aid,” he reasoned.²¹ Following from the argument that Cubans could not have defeated Spain without U.S. assistance was the claim that neither could they establish an independent state without the nation’s guidance. With the war’s end, emphasis in North American public discourse shifted from the worthiness of Cubans’ republican aspirations to the implication that they were—as a people—ignorant of and unequal to the demands of self-government.²²

Tellingly, no Cuban signatory was present when North American and Spanish representatives negotiated a treaty in Paris stipulating that the island was, “upon evacuation by Spain, to be occupied by the United States.” The same agreement granted it control over Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.²³ The nation would take charge of the island, President

McKinley announced, only until “it shall appear that there is within [it] a government capable of performing the duties and discharging the functions of a separate nation.”²⁴ But during what would become the first of several occupations over the next two decades, Benjamin claims that the U.S. military government largely “ignored” the leaders and institutions of the Cuban independence movement.²⁵ Imposing property and literacy requirements, U.S. forces disenfranchised around two-thirds of Cuban men—disproportionately Afro-Cubans—and enfranchised Cuban-born U.S. citizens. In 1900, however, even this whiter, wealthier new electorate chose what military governor General Leonard Wood considered “the worst political element in the Island” to draft the nation’s first constitution. Committed nationalists, the representatives would “bear careful watching,” he wrote to President Roosevelt.²⁶

The United States devised a measure for such supervision with the Platt Amendment—named for the legislator and chair of the Senate Committee on Relations with Cuba. Proposed in 1901 as an appendage to the Cuban Constitution, it granted the United States the right of military intervention in Cuba and allowed it to maintain naval bases on the island, subjected Cuba’s international relations to North American approval, and gave Washington control over the extent of Cuban national debt—all in perpetuity. “[Knowing] imperialism when they saw it,” historian Thomas Paterson suggests, the Cuban assembly rejected the proposal.²⁷ “It is next to impossible,” Wood complained to Roosevelt during negotiations, “to make them believe that we have only their own interests at heart.”²⁸ But when the United States made the amendment’s adoption a condition for withdrawing military troops from the island—and even then only “after much threatening and cajoling”—the convention passed it by one vote.²⁹ When the United States relinquished formal control of the island in May 1902, the new Republic of Cuba found

itself “without any institution of its own making” and, as General Wood put it, “little or no independence under the Platt Amendment.”³⁰

In the years that followed, official and informal economic ties between the two nations grew increasingly close. The nation’s first military occupation of the island initiated a flood of U.S. capital into Cuba.³¹ An increase in direct North American investment from about \$50 million in 1895 to nearly or just over \$1 billion by 1924 transformed and “all but overwhelmed” the island’s economy. “Successively,” according to Pérez, “sugar, tobacco, banking, transportation, mining, utilities, ranching, and commerce passed under North American control.”³² The nation’s trade with Cuba grew correspondingly. A 1902 agreement gave Cuban sugar privileged access to the U.S. market—although the industry was increasingly owned and operated by North American enterprises—and, in turn, “practical[ly] eliminate[ed]” tariffs on U.S. imports to the island. By the 1920s, the nation’s trade with Cuba surpassed that with any other country in the Caribbean or Latin America. The island was the sixth-largest international market for U.S. goods, which accounted for three quarters of its imports.³³

“By and large,” Benjamin argues, the expulsion of Spain from Cuba and its subsequent occupation by the United States had served “[to clear] the way for the rapidly expanding U.S. economy to extend itself throughout the island.”³⁴ Strategic and profitable for the U.S. government and North American business interests, this expansion had significant consequences for post-colonial Cuba—social and political as well as economic. While the influx of capital and increase in trade brought tremendous growth to the island’s economy in the early twentieth century, such forces deepened its reliance monoculture and built dependence on the United States into its structure. Capitalist investment also tended to exacerbate existing patterns of unequal wealth distribution. Though many Cubans benefitted from this period of growth, none

prospered more than certain members of an established creole elite, who integrated themselves into the island's economic transformation, often manipulating it for their own gain.³⁵ North American activity in early twentieth century Cuba not only countered—meaningfully, if variously—many social goals of the Cuban independence movement; it also established an economic system on the island organized entirely around U.S. needs, rather than one with the viability of an independent Cuban nation in mind.³⁶

The United States occupied Cuba again from 1906 to 1909—at which time it also established a standing Cuban army—and deployed forces to the island in 1912 and 1917.³⁷ According to the Platt Amendment's mandate “for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty,” military interventions suppressed Cuban protest against two fraudulent presidential elections and helped the government quell a complex Afro-Cuban uprising in Oriente Province, prompted by working conditions in the sugar industry and by a ban against the Partido Independiente de Color, the hemisphere's first black political party outside Haiti.³⁸ Although Washington “did not dispatch U.S. marines to protect the investments of corporate barons or the dividends of Wall Street brokers, *per se*,” historians point to the growing presence of North American capital in Cuba as a significant source of its interest in the region.³⁹ Moreover, the promise of military intervention gave North American businessmen confidence to invest on the island. As General Wood explained, “the United States will always...be in a position to straighten things out if they get seriously bad.”⁴⁰

Far from unique to Cuba, the convergence of North American activity on the island—political, military, business—in the early twentieth century was exemplary of a larger contemporary shift in U.S. foreign policy. President Roosevelt's infamous 1904 corollary to the Monroe Doctrine extended the logic of the Platt Amendment to the nation's relations throughout

Latin America and the Caribbean, essentially “declar[ing] its wishes fiat in the Western Hemisphere.”⁴¹ As North American investment and trade in the region grew rapidly, Roosevelt’s decree served to justify more than thirty armed interventions there in as many years.⁴² Shifting from earlier colonial modes of territorial acquisition and administration, Benjamin argues that by the 1920s, “the contours of the [nation’s] new expansionism were clear.” South of the Río Grande, “dollars and U.S. Marine platoons” became joint agents in “the extension of North American corporate enterprise.”⁴³

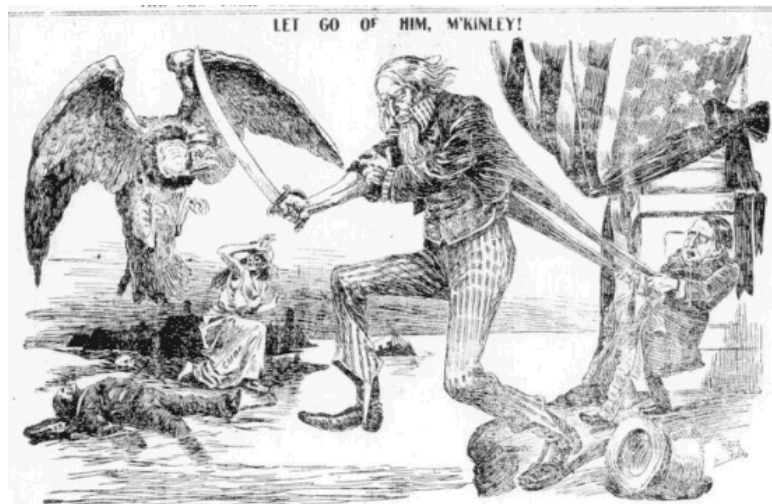
The so-called “Spanish-American War,” Benjamin suggests, “took North American thinking across an important threshold” by putting “the fruit of imperial war...in [the nation’s] hands.” As President McKinley remarked in the conflict’s aftermath: “It is no longer a question of expansion with us; we have expanded. If there is any question at all, it is a question of contracting; and who is going to contract?”⁴⁴ Despite the Monroe Doctrine’s declaration, the United States’ international conduct in these years was not “eminently and conspicuously different” from the exploits of European imperial powers in earlier centuries.⁴⁵ However, North Americans attested that it was—even if, as Skwiot argues, such claims to exceptionalism have been “a hallmark of virtually every empire.”⁴⁶

Nonetheless, its intervention in Cuba propounded as a righteous crusade to liberate the island from oppressive Spanish rule, both the victory and—subsequently—the spoils claimed by the United States assumed a “providential” quality in national rhetoric. “Pure altruism,” according to then-Secretary of War William Howard Taft, had prompted the nation’s interference in Cuba’s rebellion. It was, thus, by “the providence of God that [the island] was put into our lap,” President McKinley proclaimed, “and the American people never shirk duty.”⁴⁷ Like Benjamin, Pérez identifies the war in Cuba as a historical turning point in how North

Americans saw themselves. Beginning with it, he argues, “the deployment of power as a matter of moral discharge gained discursive ascendancy in...narratives of...national purpose.” More and more, in the years that followed, such a commitment came to be “celebrated as an attribute of...national character,” as what “made Americans Americans.”⁴⁸

Popular representations of the U.S.-Cuban relationship around the turn of the twentieth century reflect this claim of disinterested righteousness, reveal a set of beliefs that underpinned it, and illustrate its malleability. In political cartoons leading up to the nation’s involvement in the Cuban rebellion, the island is commonly depicted as a helpless white maiden—often Lady Liberty herself—longing for freedom, but requiring help from her powerful, masculine neighbor to the north. Following Spain’s defeat, however, Cuba becomes a young black child—“an ignorant or unruly brat,” usually

“grotesquely deformed”—in need of Uncle Sam’s tutelage and discipline.⁴⁹ In both tropes, the United States is figured as capable and upstanding, even magnanimous, but Cuba’s representation has shifted according to North American rhetorical needs.⁵⁰



“Let Go of Him, McKinley!” (*New York Journal*, 1898)

In the earlier images, the nation is pictured coming to the aid of a likeminded and light-skinned people with worthy aspirations to national independence. During the United States’ occupation of the island, however, Uncle Sam has nothing in common with Cuba as it is

depicted. In these illustrations, the nation no longer endeavors in cooperation with Cubans, but despite—even owing to—their collective incompetence and recalcitrance. Though doing so required contradictory representations of Cubans, both cartoons upheld the same virtuous North American self-perception, disguising the nation’s pursuit of its own interests abroad by cloaking its overseas activity in avowals of “beneficent purpose.”⁵¹

Moreover, the latter images’ clear implication of Cubans’ difference from North Americans illustrates a fundamental underpinning of the United States’ relationship to the island. That race—in this example as elsewhere—serves as the signifier of this difference reflects a prevailing conviction among many white North Americans in the inherent inferiority of Cuba’s ethnically diverse population. Though expediently set aside at times in political or cultural discourse, the belief was far from new. In the 1850s, President Millard Fillmore had argued before Congress that the island was unsuitable for statehood because it was not, as he put it, “inhabited by a kindred race.”⁵²



UNCLE SAM to PORTO RICO: “And to think that bad boy came near to being your brother!”
(*Chicago Inter Ocean*, 1905)

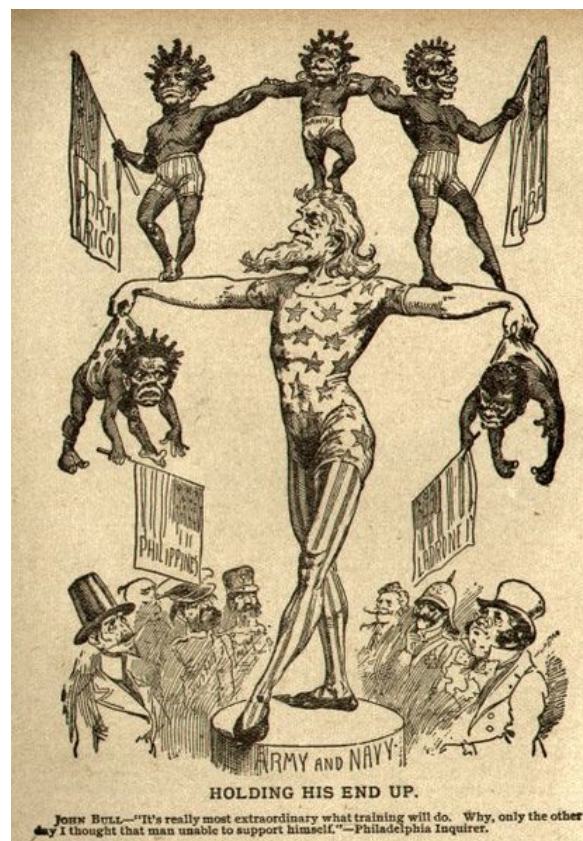
Half a century later, Jane C. Desmond points out that popular compendiums depicting the nation’s newly acquired territories used “classifications based on concepts of race” in evaluating each locale’s “relative merits and potential for civilized development.” The category “mixed race” was applied to the majority of Cubans, “with all its connotations of the time of ‘mongrel.’”⁵³ An army general during the first U.S. occupation voiced a more extreme—but not

altogether uncommon—claim, and one that bore directly on the North American presence there at the beginning of the twentieth century. Cubans, as he saw them, were little better than “savages.” With a “mixture of Spanish[,]...Indian, and negro” heritage, he wrote, “the average Cuban...inherits the bad qualities of all” and “is of a very low order of mankind.”⁵⁴

While this mode of seeing and representing Cubans was most prevalent in cultural discourse, Desmond points out that it treated the island’s creole elite differently. “Associated with the greater racial ‘purity’ of Spanish descent,” these Cubans “were deemed...more attractive and respectable”—more akin to North Americans themselves, as a dominant white society imagined this identity, than their darker-skinned, “mongrel” compatriots.⁵⁵

Accordingly, members of this influential class were granted a provisional “whiteness,” a quality that, though changeable, has been “equated [with] belonging” throughout U.S. history, Skwiot observes. Perceptions and constructions of race, she argues—the “celebration of pan-American whiteness”—“united elite Latin- and Anglo-Americans” in post-colonial Cuba.⁵⁶ If not its basis, according to Skwiot, this rhetoric of racial sameness was at least a crucial factor in the cooperative relationships agents of U.S. imperialism forged with the island’s ruling class, from the turn of the century through the regime of Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s.

JOHN BULL: “It’s really most extraordinary what training will do. Why, only the other day I thought that man unable to support himself.”
(Fred Morgan, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1898)



Not at all unique to North American rhetoric during these years, the army general's disdain reflects a set of beliefs about "primitive" peoples that has been another imperialist "hallmark," to borrow Skwiot's term. "[A] mad array of contradictory goals and fantasies," as she puts it, primitivism has had "deadly serious" consequences throughout history.⁵⁷ Though it has been—and remains—a multi-faceted cultural discourse, it has often been put to use in the West "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin," Homi K. Bhabha writes, "in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction."⁵⁸ As he suggests, this message is precisely what the later cartoon images convey about the United States' military presence and political interventions in Cuba in the early twentieth century. Invoking North American conviction that Latin Americans—racially inferior and culturally debased, according to widespread belief—were incapable of self-government, they cast the nation's claim to authority in the region as natural, even necessary.

Beyond what they imply about Cubans' capacity for autonomy, the cartoons' depiction of the island as an ugly, unruly black child suggests a whole host of differences between Cuba and the United States, personified in the image by white, wise, and well-dressed Uncle Sam. In these illustrations, as in many popular and official representations, North Americans imagined and depicted a Cuban identity in contrast to the way they wished to see themselves. The images draw consistently on "dichotomies of civilization and progress, on one hand, and barbarism and backwardness, on the other," assigning these qualities to white North Americans and dark-skinned Cubans, respectively.⁵⁹ What they betray—at the same time, and at least as much, as an effort to portray Cuba and its people—is one to describe the national character of the United States. "The West," as scholar Marianna Torgovnick writes, "has been engaged, almost continuously, in defining itself against a series of 'primitive' Others in its midst and without."

Alongside more clearly political endeavors, Torgovnick suggests, Westerners' efforts to determine their own cultural identity have been central to primitivist discourses.⁶⁰

As Ricardo D. Salvatore argues, “describing the other in terms of a perennial deficit or vacuum”—repeatedly figuring Cuba and Cubans as undeveloped, uncivilized, and incompetent—“not only legitimated the presence of [U.S.] capital, expertise, ideas and values” on the island, but “ascribed meaning” to the nation’s role there.⁶¹ President McKinley blamed those who questioned the nation’s conduct abroad for having “no confidence in the virtue or capacity or high purpose or good faith of this free people as a civilizing agency.”⁶² Much as it begins to figure in the second set of political cartoons considered here, the “mandate of civilization” became a central theme in accounts of the United States’ overseas activities, in Cuba and elsewhere. More than anything else, Pérez suggests, the notion advanced North Americans’ sense of themselves, not only as paragons of modern progress, but—in their avowed dedication to spreading it abroad—as “a righteous people given to a righteous purpose.”⁶³

Unsurprisingly, Benjamin and others suggest that widespread belief in the national identity described by President McKinley “made difficult any self-understanding of [North Americans’] acts of domination.” In the early and mid-twentieth century, he argues, officials in Washington “never seriously considered the idea that [the nation’s] influence might represent an unbearable political and economic burden” for Cuba or its people. From government leaders to ordinary citizens, Benjamin suggests that most in the United States “only dimly perceived” how their impact on the island worked against the political, economic, and social goals of many Cubans. Unwilling or unable to see the nature of their presence on the island clearly, North Americans likewise “could not readily admit the plausibility of opposition” to it. In consequence, those who protested the United States’ authority there—from the earliest Cuban

legislators who rejected the Platt Amendment to the revolutionary guerilla groups of the 1950s—were routinely characterized as “misinformed or else malcontents,” “hot-blooded,” even “sinister.”⁶⁴

Like Benjamin, Pérez argues that across centuries of relations, neither the government nor the general public of the United States has tended to see “Cuban reality on its own terms,” but, rather, “as a means to fulfill North American needs and accommodate North American interests.”⁶⁵ The depictions of the island in political cartoons discussed here are only two of many that would follow throughout the first half of the twentieth century, in official accounts and popular culture alike. North Americans envisioned Cuba as a “new California,” “our sugar bowl,” “the U.S. saloon,” and “America’s finest playground,” to name a few common tropes that figured the island as it suited them. Many in the United States, according to Pérez, understood the island and its people only as they were commonly depicted in this national cultural discourse. For most North Americans, for hundreds of years—from the nation’s founding fathers to weekly viewers of *I Love Lucy*—he argues, “Cuba” has been “an artifact of their [own] creation.”⁶⁶

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- ¹ Peter Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro: When Cuba was a Tropical Playground* (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs-Smith, 2008), 10-14. Also see Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 25-28.
- ² Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution: An Empire of Liberty in an Age of National Liberation* (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1990), 7.
- ³ Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2009), 19.
- ⁴ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 14.
- ⁵ Benjamin, *The United States*, 10.
- ⁶ Ibid. Also see Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 19.
- ⁷ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 26.
- ⁸ Ibid., 5. Also see Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 3rd ed. (Athens, GA: UGA Press, 2003), xvii.
- ⁹ Benjamin, *The United States*, 23-25; 132.
- ¹⁰ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 16-18.
- ¹¹ Benjamin, *The United States*, 27. Also see Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 5 and Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2012), 2-6.
- ¹² Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 2-3.
- ¹³ Benjamin, *The United States*, 25.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 41.
- ¹⁵ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 52.
- ¹⁶ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 22.
- ¹⁷ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination* 5. Also see Benjamin, *The United States*, 34-39.
- ¹⁸ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 22. Also see Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 17; Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 52; and Benjamin, *The United States*, 61.
- ¹⁹ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 10.
- ²⁰ Benjamin, *The United States*, 61.
- ²¹ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 53.
- ²² Benjamin, *The United States*, 58.
- ²³ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 22.
- ²⁴ Benjamin, *The United States*, 50.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 62.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 63. Also see Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 57 and Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 23-24.
- ²⁷ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 4-5.
- ²⁸ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 24.
- ²⁹ Benjamin, *The United States*, 63-65.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 68. Wood is quoted in Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 24.
- ³¹ Benjamin, *The United States*, 79.
- ³² Louis A. Pérez, Jr., "Dependency," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge U Press, 2004), 172. Investment figures differ somewhat in different accounts; numbers given in the text reflect conservative estimates. See Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 11-12; McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 140; and Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, and Gambling in Cuba from the 1920s to the Revolution*, trans. Russ Davidson (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2008), 5.
- ³³ See Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 11-12; Benjamin, *The United States*, 69; and McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 40.
- ³⁴ Benjamin, *The United States*, 66.
- ³⁵ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 47-50.
- ³⁶ Pérez, "Dependency," 172.
- ³⁷ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 28.
- ³⁸ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 56. Also see Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 11; Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 28; and Aline Helg, "Race and Black Mobilization in Colonial and Early Independent Cuba: A Comparative Perspective," *Ethnohistory* 44 (1997): 60.

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- ³⁹ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 11-12. Also see Benjamin, *The United States*, 76.
- ⁴⁰ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 24-25. Also see Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 8.
- ⁴¹ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 4-5.
- ⁴² Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 1, 5-8. Also see Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 5 and McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 15.
- ⁴³ Benjamin, *The United States*, 28. Also see Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 11-12 and Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 7, 208.
- ⁴⁴ Benjamin, *The United States*, 59.
- ⁴⁵ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 6.
- ⁴⁶ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 207-208.
- ⁴⁷ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 11.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁴⁹ See Benjamin, *The United States*, 58 and John J. Johnson, "U.S. Cartoonists Portray Cuba," in *The Cuba Reader*, ed. Aviva Chomsky, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 2004), 135. Also see Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 6 and Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 51.
- ⁵⁰ For the cartoon "Let Go of Him, McKinley!" see "Crucible of Empire: The Spanish American War," accessed 28 Nov. 2015, http://www.pbs.org/crucible/frames/_resources.html. For the second and third, see Luis Martinez-Fernández, "The Birth of the American Empire as Seen through Political Cartoons (1896-1905)," *OAH Magazine of History* 12 (1998): 54, 51.
- ⁵¹ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 7.
- ⁵² Benjamin, *The United States*, 16.
- ⁵³ Jane C. Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1999), 49-51.
- ⁵⁴ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 22.
- ⁵⁵ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 51.
- ⁵⁶ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 108.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁵⁸ Bhabha, "The Other Question," 71.
- ⁵⁹ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 40.
- ⁶⁰ Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1998), 8 and Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 162.
- ⁶¹ Salvatore, "Representational Machines," 71.
- ⁶² Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 8.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ Benjamin, *The United States*, 3-4; 76.
- ⁶⁵ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 8.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

II. EARLY TOURISM IN CUBA

The development of Cuba's tourism industry and its first big boom, in the 1920s, were part of the influx of U.S. capital there between the turn of century and the onset of the Great Depression. Beginning with the first U.S. occupation, the presence and activity of North Americans transformed the island—especially Havana—physically and culturally as well as economically. At the turn of the century, military forces undertook significant public works projects in the city. They installed an electric streetcar and streetlights; expanded sewage, garbage collection, and telephone services; and created an extensive network of paved streets.¹ While this endeavor to “civilize” Havana benefited ordinary Cubans, scholars suggest it was intended primarily to make the island more attractive and accessible to North Americans. As the sudden increase of foreign investors in the island's economy created demand for accommodations, newly built or renovated hotels in Havana likewise emphasized familiar amenities and services, advertising enticements like “American-made mattresses” and “real American breakfast[s].”² From the very beginning of its development, historian Rosalie Schwartz observes, Cuba's twentieth century hospitality industry was “designed to appeal to...North American[s]”—whether “the steady stream” of businessmen or “the first trickle” of adventurous travelers.³

Though spurred by U.S. investment, the transformation of Havana in these years and the concomitant development of its tourism industry were not exclusively North American enterprises. Pointing to Florida's growing popularity as a vacation destination, Cuban

entrepreneurs and government officials—who were, in many cases, one and the same—believed the island could offer many of that southern state’s same attractions. With an elite North American market in mind, they envisioned transforming Havana into “America’s Riviera.”⁴ They suggested, too, that investing in tourism would diversify Cuba’s economy and lessen the nation’s dependence on agricultural exports.⁵ Proposals lending official support to tourism development failed in the Cuban senate in 1910 and 1911, but its promoters prevailed in the years following World War I. In 1919, after considerable lobbying and “a vigorous debate over the social and moral impact of legal gambling,” the senate passed a bill that approved the construction of various tourist attractions, including casinos; appropriated funds for related development projects; and established a national committee for the promotion of the industry.⁶ Opponents of the bill accused its supporters of collusion. Furthermore, pointing to the recent impact of similar legislation in Tijuana, Mexico, they warned that it would turn Cuba into the United States’ “toilet,” as senator German Wólter del Río put it bluntly.⁷

This objection to tourism’s cultural impact aside, opponents’ allegations of corruption were fair. Characteristically of this and later periods of development in Havana and across the island, illicit cooperation between the Cuban state and private interests marked the bill’s passage. Because of the law’s specifications, the only company positioned to benefit from its authorization of gambling establishments was one owned jointly by several Cuban politicians, including Carlos Miguel Céspedes. A few years later, as President Gerardo Machado’s secretary of public works, Céspedes would earn a reputation as “the Tropical Haussmann.”⁸ And, in return for their support, the bill also granted the family of then-President Mario García Menocal an exclusive concession to operate profitable *jai alai* games and made Senate President Ricardo

Dolz—who held considerable investments in horse racing, one of the industry’s earliest attractions for North Americans—the first head of the new tourism commission.⁹

In the mid-1920s, the national government of Cuba undertook an enormous public works program. Intended on the one hand to “modernize” and “beautify” the city as an enticement to tourists—and touted as a service to all Cubans—it also lined the pockets of the families, friends, political allies, and business partners of Cuban officials.¹⁰ Under the Machado administration (1924-1933), Céspedes controlled several hundred million dollars in contracts and took bids on nearly seven hundred projects. With public funds and significant amounts borrowed from North American banks, the Cuban government dredged Havana’s harbor, channeled rivers, paved city streets, expanded utility services, and constructed a central highway across the island. A national library, a national museum, and a new *Capitolio*—modeled after the neoclassical building in Washington, D.C.—went up in Havana. *La Quinta*, a wide landscape avenue, was built to connect the city center to Marianao, an elite suburb Céspedes called home and a hub of upscale tourism development.¹¹

“If ever a clever fox guarded a well-stocked henhouse,” according to Schwartz, it was Céspedes during this period in Cuba. Through inside real estate deals, construction contracts, lucrative concessions, and outright graft, Cuban political leaders in positions as high as the presidency made Havana’s nascent tourism industry as profitable for themselves as for their North American business partners. The development boom created thousands of jobs and many ordinary *habaneros* benefitted from the services it made available or improved, but “few [Cubans] reaped rewards as substantial as did Machado...[and his] political cronies.”¹² In these years, the nation borrowed tens of millions of dollars from North American banks to finance development projects—as well as the illicit personal gain they promised. A J.P. Morgan

executive visiting the island at the time observed that Machado was “anxious to do a lot of work, and does not, I think, care very much whether he ruins Cuba or not.”¹³

Far from unique to his regime, corruption in the Cuban government had begun under the nation’s first president, Tomás Estrada Palma. It was “institutionalized” in the administrations of those who followed and remained a central component of national politics at least until Batista’s overthrow in 1959. Historians point out that corrupt practices had been rampant in the island’s colonial administration under Spain. They also suggest, however, that increasing North American control of Cuba’s economy, combined with “the lack of real political power” afforded its elected leaders by the Platt Amendment, contributed meaningfully to misconduct in its new republican government.¹⁴ In post-colonial Cuba, Skwiot argues, “the state... became [elite] Cubans’ primary vehicle for accumulating wealth,” and thereby for maintaining the status quo that underwrote their privileged social position.¹⁵ Reflecting, in the 1950s, on patterns of corruption among the island’s leaders, *New York Times* correspondent Herbert Matthews concurred. In Cuba, he remarked, “politics is a career to make money in, and just about nothing else.”¹⁶

Like the North American money that propped up an elite set of Cuba’s colonial society, the culture of early tourism development on the island also perpetuated certain class distinctions and racial prejudices of its pre-rebellion days. In the early and mid-1910s, wealthy North Americans built tourism’s first significant institutions—the Havana Country Club and the Oriental Park racetrack—in Marianao, an area several miles west of central Havana, long distinguished as an exclusive enclave for moneyed Cubans of European descent. From early in the nineteenth century, “affluent *habaneros*, mostly Spanish officials and sugarcane growers,” had summered in Marianao. Removed from the heat and crowds of the city, scholars remark in a

study of metropolitan Havana, they “took their ease by the sea.”¹⁷ In the early twentieth century, the district boasted large private estates as well as the Habana Yacht Club, founded in 1886 and the city’s “principal relic” of the Spanish colony’s “patrician *criollo* class.”¹⁸ As tourism development in Marianao and neighboring Miramar increased during the 1920s, promoters targeting a wealthy, white North American market emphasized this picture of aristocratic refinement and exclusivity.¹⁹

When John McEntree Bowman, president of Bowman-Biltmore Hotels, bought, renovated, and reopened the Hotel Sevilla in Havana *vieja* in 1920, the hotel became a premiere



This photograph shows the Hotel Nacional, presumably as seen from the Habana Hilton. The Nacional opened under the Machado regime in 1930. Much like the Hilton, it was both the height and the last major instance of tourism development during the 1920s boom. Designed by New York architecture firm McKim, Mead and White, its Spanish colonial style is an interesting contrast to the “ultra-modern” Hilton. In their design, the two hotels are indicative of a shifting discourse on “civilization” that was closely tied to the culture of North American tourism in Cuba. In 1955, the Batista regime undertook a major renovation of the Nacional, including the construction of a casino on its third floor. Among his many other ventures in mid-century Havana, Meyer Lansky leased the casino from the Cuban government, and his brother Jake managed it.²⁰

destination for the highest echelons of U.S. society, as well as a handful of genteel Europeans. Over the next few years, “people whose names made headlines...sipped rum on the patio at the Hotel Sevilla or tea on the terrace of the country club,” putting Cuba on the map as the place for a stylish and luxurious getaway.²¹ His first venture a great success, Bowman became a dedicated promoter of the growing industry—no surprise, given that he was also its leading North American investor. Over the next few years, he leased Oriental Park and the newly built Gran Casino Nacional in Marianao from their Cuban owners, Céspedes among them. He also led the multi-national Cuban-American Realty Company in acquiring fifteen hundred acres of undeveloped land, also in Marianao, where it built the Biltmore Yacht and Country Club in the late 1920s.

By the middle of the decade, membership rolls in the district’s exclusive clubs “read like the roster[s] of the transnational power elite [they were],” according to Skwiot. Members included powerful North Americans—a Vanderbilt, an Astor, and a Whitney, “candy man” Milton Hershey, Coca-Cola’s president Robert Woodruff, Robert Barr of Chase National Bank, and the U.S. ambassador—many of whom held considerable interests on the island. Prominent Cubans were also welcomed, like sugar baron Josefa Mariana Tarafa, Vice President Carlos de la Rosa, and Céspedes himself.²² Machado regularly attended races at Oriental Park, where he hosted personal and official guests in his presidential box. He had been the guest of honor at the track’s grand re-opening in 1925, following its renovation, and when Bowman and his associates broke ground on the Biltmore in 1927, the president turned the first spadeful of dirt.²³

In these years, Marianao became “a center of business, cultural, political, and social life,” Skwiot claims, where influential nationals mixed and mingled with wealthy foreign visitors.²⁴ Cuban and North American proponents celebrated the expansion of tourism under



Like Machado, Batista and his associates were a visible presence in the social scene of mid-century Havana's restaurants, hotels, and nightclubs. He belonged to the Biltmore Yacht and Country Club, where Machado had symbolically broken ground thirty years earlier. Here, his wife Marta Fernández Mirada de Batista visits with Hedda Hopper and other guests at the Habana Hilton opening. Despite his personal involvement in its development, Batista himself did not attend the inaugural celebration—it was feared that his presence would be a lightning rod for rebel sabotage. His absence was conspicuous, according to Skwiot, and counted as a “public relations victor[y]” for his opponents.²⁵

Machado “as a project that advanced,” at once, “U.S. interests, Cuban participation in the economy, and public works for the people.” Despite this rosy rhetoric, however, “private and public investments in tourism primarily benefited a privileged white minority,” both in Cuba and in the United States.²⁶ Moreover, as Merrill claims, the trans-national business deals forged in the industry's development on the island—and subsequently in the milieu of its most prominent establishments—“[made] tourism a central feature of the U.S. empire in Cuba.”²⁷

Bringing together “businessmen, diplomats, politicians, and tourists,” Skwiot concurs that Havana's hotels and horseraces “serve[d] as a pivot point upon which the new Plattist

regime revolved.”²⁸ For certain privileged Cubans, they provided access to North American capital and political sway, increasingly crucial resources on the island. And partnerships between powerful Cubans and U.S. investors often worked to make their interests one and the same. In Cuba—as elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America—Mary Louise Pratt suggests, “[socioeconomic] elites were aware, by the 1920s, that their way of life was dependent on North America.” Commonly, this elite comprised a nation’s governing class and “[could reap] considerable benefits from cooperating,” in an official capacity, with U.S. imperatives.²⁹ As influential Cubans came to rely on U.S. support, North Americans with interests on the island likewise counted on theirs. As they bought into sugar production, railroads, utility services, and real estate, investors also developed a stake in the maintenance of a Cuban government to the needs of U.S. capitalists.³⁰

However, historians suggest that reimagining a recent Spanish colony as the “American Riviera” offered wealthy North Americans more than just opportunities for wheeling and dealing. Indeed, although a number of visitors to Havana had business interests on the island, many thousands more were in town just for “the season.” Personal wealth for those at the very top had increased dramatically in the United States in the years before Cuba’s first tourism boom. From around one thousand North American millionaires in 1875, their ranks swelled to fifteen thousand by 1927. If “scarcity...fashioned an American character for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” Schwartz suggests, “abundance gave birth to self-congratulatory materialists with a taste for luxury...[in] the twentieth.”³¹ For these affluent North Americans, Skwiot argues that Havana’s close cultural association with the elite customs of the Cuba’s recent colonial past provided a way “to act out their fantasies of royalty and empire.”³²

Even though national rhetoric denounced the trappings of European colonialism and propounded the virtues of democracy, Skwiot claims many in the upper echelons of early twentieth century North American society “[saw] themselves as modern-day aristocrats.”³³ To spend the winter in luxurious Marianao or at the elegant Biltmore was “[to belong] to an exclusive club”—“an international class of privileged whites racially endowed with the right to rule, and a cosmopolitan order of pleasure for the leisured few.”³⁴ Stateside, she points out, the interwar years were a period of “intense class, racial, and labor strife.” Threatening the bases of elite citizens’ privilege at home, she suggests that such conflict intensified their desire for the kind of experiences Cuba offered.³⁵ As Desmond also argues, “escape from U.S. domestic tensions” has been a central element of the “paradise” certain vacation destinations have promised elite North Americans across the twentieth century.³⁶

As places to which powerful Cubans and North Americans withdrew from the societies they ruled, Skwiot suggests the island’s exclusive 1920s tourist enclaves closely resembled British “hill states” in colonial India. In Marianao, as in these earlier settings, “imperial politics and pleasures converged.” But even as the politics shifted, and the tourism industry in Cuba developed as a crucial aspect of new forms of imperial control, it cast vacationers as the same “pleasure-seekers” of earlier imperial modes. As Skwiot argues, “the logics and legacies of...settler colonialism remained influential long after the United States came to prefer informal, commercial imperialism” over formal, territorial administration.³⁷ In Cuba and elsewhere, the culture of tourism emerged in these years as a powerful means by which an elite colonial culture of power and leisure was carried through into the twentieth century.

Though a different picture gradually eclipsed its early, refined image, Cuba’s appeal for North Americans in the next years and following decades remained rooted largely in the same

promise of privilege, figured one way or another. As the industry in Havana grew, Prohibition and anti-gambling legislation in the United States began to make freedom from restraint and exemption from responsibility central features of tourism discourse. Increasingly, the island became known as a place where North Americans could let down their hair, an idea somewhat at odds with—but not entirely unlike—high society’s dreams of aristocratic entitlement. As Ian Littlewood points out, the indulgences that came to characterize a Cuban vacation in the late 1920s and lasted through the 1950s—“commanding service, eating and drinking to excess, taking sexual pleasure at will”—closely reflect the customary “privileges of the overlord.”³⁸

In appeals to “the horde of moneyed Americans who object[ed] to being hobbled in their pursuit of pleasure,” as the *New York Times* described Cuba’s likely new visitors, promoters began to paint the island as a place where illicit diversions could be pursued without concern for moderation or consequence, even if they were legally banned or culturally taboo stateside.³⁹ As they worked to draw tourists in greater numbers, the island’s representation in advertising campaigns—and, more broadly, in North American popular culture—increasingly reflected this new, hedonistic vision. By late in the decade, depictions figured Cuba “mostly...as a site for fun, adventure, and abandon,” as “a brothel, a casino, a cabaret.”⁴⁰ In these years, in “the [North] American imagination,” according to Pérez, Cuba became “principally...a place of pleasures unavailable at home,” where “one could do those ‘things’ that usually were not done...”⁴¹

Once again, as he points out, cultural discourse fashioned the island “as a function of [North] American needs”—the same dynamic he argues has tended above all else to define both official and informal relations between the United States and Cuba.⁴² Moreover, encouraging the North American public to view the relationship as predestined, tourism promotion aligned

with a long history of naturalizing U.S. dominion over the island. “It might be said,” according to one advertisement, “that nature has purposely placed this Holiday Isle of the Tropics at the door of the great American nation for the pleasure, repose, and health of its inhabitants.” As Pérez argues, “the notion that Cuba existed specifically for the pleasure of North Americans took hold early, lasted long, and was central to the meaning associated with being a U.S. tourist in Cuba.”⁴³

From a few thousand annually in the early 1920s, visitors to Cuba numbered around 45,000 by the 1925-1926 winter season.⁴⁴ As crowds grew and the island’s image evolved, so did Havana. Bars multiplied, their number surpassing seven thousand by the end of the decade. “If there is any city with more,” U.S. consul Carlton Hurst claimed, “I have still to see it.”⁴⁵ And though more discreetly advertised than other attractions, prostitution in Havana also grew steadily as the North American tourist presence increased in the city. *Terry’s Guide to Cuba*, published in 1926, promised certain areas of town where visitors could find “courtezans, varying in complexion from peach white to coal black; 15-year-old flappers and ebony antiques... heavy-eyed and languorous, in abbreviated and diaphanous costumes.” Another guide book, on the other hand, directed men to a street where the prostitutes were “most white or near white.”⁴⁶ At any rate, the *Times of Cuba* advised them, “bringing a wife to Cuba is like bringing a biscuit to a banquet.”⁴⁷ By 1929, when the Great Depression brought its first tourism boom to an end, the promise of indulgence had largely replaced the sedate elegance of earlier years as what drew visitors to the island. In Cuba, as travel writer Basil Woon promised, “you may drink as much as you want...lose as much money as you desire...[and] stare at the pretty señoritas.”⁴⁸

Like most aspects of the larger U.S. presence on the island, tourists’ behavior was naturalized according to primitivist notions of Cubans’ difference from the white, well-to-do

North Americans who traveled there. Newspapers, magazines, and novels—and, in the decades that followed, films and television programs—pictured the island’s people as variously exotic “others.” North American media often depicted Cubans as a carefree people whose lives were ruled by emotion and sensuality, rather than reason and responsibility. A number of stereotypes emerged, unsurprisingly inflected by race and gender. Light-skinned Cuban men, for example, were often imagined as romantic “Latin lovers,” and the sensuous Afro-Cuban “mulatta” figure became a dominant motif in representations of the island. Influenced by such depictions, tourists who came to the island bent on pleasure often perceived themselves as casual participants in ingrained patterns of Cuban cultural life, rather than as crucial actors in the island’s twentieth century transformation.⁴⁹

“When in Rome applies to the tropics,” quipped travel writer A. Hyatt Verrill.⁵⁰ More than a witticism, his claim reveals the perspective underlying Cuba’s promise of abandon. Imagining the island as a place fundamentally unlike the United States, inhabited by an intrinsically different people, suggested that the same things were not at stake in Cuba as at home. At the same time that this attitude divested tourists’ conduct of consequence, it displaced responsibility for their behavior onto what they envisioned as established social customs of “exotic” Cuba. Perhaps most crucially, the idea that Havana’s indulgences were a normal part of Cubans’ way of life freed North Americans from what their vacation implied about their own cultural identity. That is, tourists could “do those ‘things’” one did in Cuba without meaningfully owning up to their desire for such experiences, thereby preserving whatever sense of self prohibited the same behavior at home.

This negotiation, as Torgovnick suggests, has characterized primitivist discourses throughout history. “The primitive,” she writes, “has been... whatever [Westerners] want it to

be.” Defining it “has amounted to a rejection of certain...aspects of the Western self, expressed in the attempt to project them” onto others—either groups marginalized within society at home or those abroad. As certain “patterns of feeling and practice...had fewer and fewer ways to express themselves in the West,” they were exaggerated in representations of these peoples. “The primitive” has served many rhetorical functions, but for Torgovnick it is above all “the sign and symbol of desires the West has sought to repress.” For as long as they have been engaged in defining Western cultural identity and belonging against “primitive others,” however, Westerners have also been enthralled by them—in representation and actuality. At the heart of primitivism, Torgovnick argues, is “a dialectic between...[a] demonizing of certain parts of the rejected Western self and...the urge to reclaim them.”⁵¹

Many historians see this “urge” as an important element in Cuba’s attraction for early and mid-twentieth century North Americans. It appealed, they argue, precisely because on the island, on vacation, they were freed from the constraints of their own society. The promise of tourism, as Desmond points out, is predicated on one of difference.⁵² If her observation suggests the transformative possibilities of travel—the ways that encountering difference can reveal and erode one’s own cultural prejudices—most scholars also concur that such experiences were more incidental than central to the tourism industry in Cuba. Surely they were not absent and, as Merrill argues, should not be discounted. Throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, he emphasizes, twentieth century tourism brought “ordinary Americans from across the hemisphere” into unprecedented contact. Whatever else it has been, to travel is always an opportunity to challenge, influence, learn from, and sympathize with each other.⁵³

But if the allure of cultural difference can give way to new perspectives, Schwartz argues that in catering to North Americans, Havana’s tourism industry “carefully interlaced” the appeal

of the unfamiliar with certain “assurance[s].”⁵⁴ The character of tourism in Cuba did more to reinforce than to challenge common beliefs among North Americans about their identity as such. While transgression was one of its central promises, transformation was not. In tourism promotion and popular culture across the first half of the twentieth century, the “exoticism” of the island and its people was repeatedly juxtaposed with markers of tourists’ “civilization.”⁵⁵

The contrast invoked well-established notions of a cultural—and racial—hierarchy over which elite North Americans believed they presided. Even though a Cuban vacation signaled a degree of revolt against dominant U.S. values, that its illicit pursuits were openly indulged “when in Rome”—but not at home—ultimately affirmed such norms.⁵⁶ Colombian scholar Eduardo Sáenz Tovner compares a Cuban vacation to “an escape valve.”⁵⁷ In other words, North Americans in Cuba could satisfy what Torgovnick characterizes as a “need” for experience and expression that their cultural identity did not allow, even while feeling “assur[ed]” of its superiority.⁵⁸

But despite an apparent investment in believing otherwise, the “impulse[s] behind the development of tourism [in Cuba] originated from...North Americans themselves,” as Pérez argues.⁵⁹ Contrary to popular representations of Havana and its residents, novelist Félix Soloni observed in 1926 that the only locals likely to be out in the city’s early morning hours were street cleaners, policemen, chauffeurs, and insomniac artists.⁶⁰ The tourism industry “create[d] the primitive where it [did] not exist,” Cuban journalist Eladio Secades reflected later in the twentieth century.⁶¹ Like U.S. politicians and business people before them, tourists’ “Cuba” was one of their own construction, its character determined more by North American needs and desires than by everyday life on the island. On this point, Torgovnick echoes Pérez’s argument about the overriding, “self-serving” nature of the United States’ relationship to Cuba, underlining

how tourism discourse has fit within—and carried within it—broader historical patterns.⁶² Since it “tells us what we want,” she writes, “the primitive always brings us [Westerners] back to ourselves...”⁶³

As Soloni’s and Secades’ observations suggest, tourism’s portrayals were a far cry from most Cubans’ reality in the 1920s, especially as the decade progressed. While many North Americans enjoyed a period of unprecedented prosperity following World War I, a post-war slump in demand for sugar exacerbated already precarious economic conditions in Cuba. Moreover, it was becoming clear to many that despite the “fiery flag waving” of his nationalist campaign promises, Machado was “not the representative of a free Cuban people but the *administrator* of American financial feudalism,” as *The Nation* described him.⁶⁴ As his government faced increasing opposition, it met political dissent with violent repression, proving especially brutal in suppressing workers’ efforts to organize. Making matters worse, Machado unilaterally extended his term of office in 1927 by postponing presidential elections scheduled for the next year until 1935. Before then, however, the Great Depression plunged the Cuban economy into even deeper distress and Machado’s opponents gained support. In 1933, a diverse coalition led by labor organizers and leftist university students in Havana ousted the leader.⁶⁵

As it would again during the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s, tourism in Cuba worked to disguise this state of affairs. Though the industry’s first boom peaked in the troubled years between Machado’s *coup* and the Great Depression, North Americans tended “[to see] only a well-run country boasting modern amenities.” In the early 1920s, foreign investment in tourism development had fixed Machado firmly in the presidential chair. Later in the decade, Schwartz argues that—alongside the United States’ official support for his government—tourism played a role in Machado’s authoritarian hold on power, as well. As the island became

established in the North American imagination as a vacation destination, historians suggest, the tourist experience became the main lens—a rosy one, by design—through which many in the United States perceived it. Overshadowing accounts of economic or political circumstances in Cuba, images and reports of contented tourists appeared to demonstrate Machado’s ability and authority to rule.⁶⁶

Even as Cubans’ civil rights were severely curtailed, Skwiot observes, the regime’s supporters on the island and in the United States “deployed narratives of the personal liberties enjoyed by tourists to posit the increasingly dictatorial chief executive as the champion of a free Cuba.”⁶⁷ Her reflection points to an astonishing rhetorical turn in tourism discourse, beginning in the 1920s and carrying, thematically, through the industry’s resurgence and expansion following World War II. For tourists, Vicki Gold Levi and Steven Heller observe, the island “was freedom personified.”⁶⁸ And in advertising this promise of license, promotional campaigns “relentlessly linked the island with the motto ‘Free Cuba,’” or, often, the Spanish “Cuba Libre.”⁶⁹ Thus did Cubans’ rallying cry across generations of popular struggle for national sovereignty come, instead, to refer to the experience of privilege elite North Americans sought in Havana. That the two were conflated, even discursively, demonstrates both the centrality and the reach of the illusions sustained by the tourism industry in Cuba.

As “an example of the hubris and willful ignorance that is an especial privilege of powerful nations and peoples,” Skwiot identifies tourists’ misperceptions—of the United States, of Cuba, of the relationship between the two and, especially, of their own role in it—as another “imperial hallmark.”⁷⁰ But unlike North American visitors, many Cubans were not blind to the facts. Implicated, as it was, in the United States’ neo-imperialist authority in Cuba, tourism was also an early site of its contestation. As tourists appropriated the symbols of Cuban nationalism

for themselves, so did opponents of the Machado regime “[make] tourism a symbol of the corrupt dictator and his allies”—Cuban and North American—“who enriched themselves at the expense of the Cuban nation and its citizens.”⁷¹ While the Great Depression brought this first tourism boom to an end before political tensions came to a head, many of its same circumstances characterized the industry’s resurgence in Cuba following World War II. In these years, crowds of vacationers grew rapidly as opposition to Fulgencio Batista’s North American-backed regime gained support across the island. In such an atmosphere, as Skwiot argues, the culture and impact of tourism “provided a foil” for rebels’ “anti-imperial nationalism.”⁷²

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- ¹ Roberto Segre, Mario Coyula, and Joseph L. Scarpaci, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 1997), 51-52.
- ² Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 169-171.
- ³ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 22.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ⁵ See Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*; Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, 21; and Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 108.
- ⁶ See Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 32 and Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 108.
- ⁷ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 32.
- ⁸ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 97.
- ⁹ See Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 32-34; Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 108; Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 90; and Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, 86.
- ¹⁰ See Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 92 and Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 52.
- ¹¹ See Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 108; Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 56-57; Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 90-92; Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 19-20, 50-52; and Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci, *Havana*, 61.
- ¹² Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 52.
- ¹³ Thomas F. O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission: American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1996), 230-231.
- ¹⁴ Benjamin, *The United States*, 118.
- ¹⁵ See Benjamin, *The United States*, 118 and Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 77.
- ¹⁶ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 54-55.
- ¹⁷ Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci, *Havana*, 23, 46, 58.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ¹⁹ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 80.
- ²⁰ See Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci, *Havana*, 61; Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 223; Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 175-176; and Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 124.
- ²¹ Rosalie Schwartz, "The Invasion of the Tourists," in *The Cuba Reader*, ed. Aviva Chomsky, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 2004), 249.
- ²² Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 48-50.
- ²³ Schwartz, "The Invasion of the Tourists," 249-250.
- ²⁴ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 79.
- ²⁵ See Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 38 and Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 196.
- ²⁶ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 96-99.
- ²⁷ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 108.
- ²⁸ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 78-79.
- ²⁹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.
- ³⁰ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 78-79, 99-101.
- ³¹ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, xx, 5.
- ³² Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 88.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.
- ³⁶ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 140.
- ³⁷ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 6-7, 47.
- ³⁸ Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001), 213.
- ³⁹ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 85.
- ⁴⁰ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 233.
- ⁴¹ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 183.
- ⁴² Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 232.
- ⁴³ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 187.
- ⁴⁴ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 46.

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- ⁴⁵ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 169. Also see Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 44 and Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, 19-20.
- ⁴⁶ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 194-195.
- ⁴⁷ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 85. Also see Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 107.
- ⁴⁸ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 184-185.
- ⁴⁹ See Van Gosse, "We Are All Highly Adventurous: Fidel Castro and the Romance of the White Guerilla, 1957-1958," in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966*, ed. Christine G. Appy (Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 247; Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 120; and Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 4, 124.
- ⁵⁰ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 85.
- ⁵¹ Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions*, 8-15.
- ⁵² Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, xv.
- ⁵³ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 5.
- ⁵⁴ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 80.
- ⁵⁵ Vicki Gold Levi and Steven Heller, *Cuba Style: Graphics from the Golden Age of Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 16.
- ⁵⁶ Littlewood, *Sultry Climates*, 214.
- ⁵⁷ Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, 9.
- ⁵⁸ Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions*, 14.
- ⁵⁹ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 167.
- ⁶⁰ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 82.
- ⁶¹ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 218.
- ⁶² Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 21.
- ⁶³ Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 9-11.
- ⁶⁴ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 51 and Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 31.
- ⁶⁵ See Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 31-36; Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 126-137; and Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 92-95.
- ⁶⁶ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 63-66.
- ⁶⁷ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 108.
- ⁶⁸ Levi and Heller, *Cuba Style*, 16.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁷⁰ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 7.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 129.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.

III. 1950s BOOM

The Great Depression, Machado's overthrow, and World War II brought a sustained lull to Cuba's tourism industry during the 1930s and 1940s. But following the war, circumstances aligned much as they had after World War I to create a boom strikingly similar to the island's first, only much bigger. Like before, a dramatic fall in demand for sugar left Cuba in dire economic straits at a time when post-war prosperity in the United States created more North American vacationers than ever. As under Machado, tourism development in the 1950s expanded with the support of a corrupt and illegitimate Cuban government with close U.S. ties. Although Fulgencio Batista's dictatorial regime doled out significant public funds to encourage its resurgence, North Americans were once again the primary stakeholders in Cuba's mid-century tourism industry. And as it had in the 1920s, tourism's growth in the 1950s coincided with a broader increase in North American investment throughout the island.

Like Prohibition before it, a 1950 Senate investigation and subsequent crackdown on illegal gambling operations in Florida made an activity banned in the United States central to Havana's appeal. Since the earlier boom, a myriad of pop culture representations had kept Cuba alive in the North American imagination as tropical paradise of indulgence and abandon, so the mid-century proliferation of high-stakes casinos was no stretch for the island's tourism culture. Not just gambling, Schwartz observes, but "everything...tourists had enjoyed in the 1920s reappeared in the 1950s, and more."¹ And like before, as the industry enriched Batista's allies

and North American investors by transforming Havana into “[a movie] come true” for growing crowds of tourists, political and economic conditions in Cuba deteriorated.²

Opposition to Batista, whose hold on power relied increasingly on North American support, gained ground across the decade. A symbol of his corruption and his close ties to the United States, Batista’s opponents denounced Havana’s tourism industry and targeted its establishments for attack. Alongside sugarcane fields, U.S.-owned nickel mines, and Guantánamo Bay, Cuban rebels worked to make these sites of North American neo-imperialist control into symbols that mobilized a growing resistance to it. Implicating tourism in their struggle, they brought the conflict of interest that had characterized the island’s industry from the beginning—but was often imperceptible to North Americans—to the fore. As their movement clashed with the Batista regime, it also challenged a set of hegemonic discourses that, for centuries, had shaped the way many in United States saw the island and their relationship to it.

Economic and cultural trends in the United States combined with official policy following World War II to send more North Americans than ever to Cuba in the 1950s. Concerned with maintaining the authority it had exerted in the region during the war, the U.S. government promoted tourism throughout Latin America as part of a larger economic development strategy after the war’s end. Alongside other investments, tourism was seen as a way to direct capital into Latin American and Caribbean nations. This worked, in turn, to protect the wartime expansion of the United States’ own economy by creating new markets for North American-manufactured goods. As Juan Trippe, founder of Pan American Airways remarked, dollars spent abroad would “always fly home,” since they “[could not] ultimately be spent anywhere but here [in the United States].”³

Before the end of the war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had encouraged Trippe to establish a line of hotels in destinations served by his airline, in order to offer North Americans “the comforts of home” while they traveled. With a \$25 million loan from the federal Export-Import Bank, the venture launched as the Intercontinental Hotel Corporation in 1946. By 1950, hotels were underway in Colombia, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. The Hilton Hotel Corporation also began its international expansion in these years, forming Hilton International as a fully-owned subsidiary in 1946. Hilton’s first property opened in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1949, and hotels in Mexico City, Madrid, and Cairo soon followed.⁴

Thus did “vacations not donations” emerge as a component of the United States’ “trade not aid” policy toward Latin America, which stood in for the direct economic assistance it provided in other regions after World War II.⁵ A boon to U.S. manufacturing, the approach also reflected a broad set of economic, political, and cultural ideas that came to characterize mid-century, mainstream North American values. “Faith in free enterprise” and “belief in the beneficence of growth driven by consumption,” as Skwiot puts it, “acquired almost totemic status” during these years.⁶ As Cold War tensions mounted, U.S. leaders believed capitalist development in Latin America would act as a bulwark against the threat of communism within the United States’ traditional sphere of influence. North American investment grew throughout the region. In Cuba, it nearly doubled between 1946 and 1958, reaching over \$1 billion before the Cuban Revolution. U.S. companies controlled public utilities and railway services, petroleum distribution, mining, and forty percent of sugar production on the island. Likewise, North American goods—Ford, Chevrolet, General Electric, Procter and Gamble, Coca-Cola—flooded its market, accounting for eighty percent of Cuba’s imports.⁷

Post-war investment on the island increased dramatically, and tourism development began, after Batista's coup d'état, months before Cuba's scheduled presidential election in 1952. An officer in the Cuban army, Batista had been a powerful figure in national politics since his cooperation in North American efforts—ultimately successful—to replace the populist government established on the island following Machado's overthrow in 1933. After serving as Cuba's elected president from 1940 to 1944, Batista retired to Daytona Beach. But eight years later, he once more announced his candidacy. Historians suggest that when it became clear he did not have enough popular support to win the presidency, he used his influence within the army to seize control of the government. On March 10, he suspended constitutional guarantees, dissolved the Cuban legislature, and announced his intentions “[to assume] the office of chief of state and...[to] take charge of organizing and directing the executive and legislative powers, all their powers and functions resting in me.”⁸

Cuban protest was widespread. Newspaper editorials denounced Batista's actions and students at the University of Havana symbolically buried a copy of the 1940 Constitution. In an open letter beseeching the United Nations to condemn Batista's actions, Roberto Agromonte and Emilio Ochoa described the coup as “an assault through which a group of armed self-seekers has stripped the [Cuban] people of their civil rights.”⁹ Having proven himself attentive to North American interests, however, Batista had been on good terms with the United States since his initial rise to power decades earlier. He had also been a particularly reliable ally during the war, historians point out. When he sought approval for his new regime, leaders in Washington had three demands: a promise that elections would soon be held, the protection of North American investments, and a “tougher stance” on communism. Such assurances received, the United States extended official recognition to Batista's government, despite its illegitimacy in the eyes

of most Cubans. “Over the shoals and into the calm waters of international respectability,” as the Canadian ambassador to Cuba remarked, Batista and his conspirators “breathed a sigh of relief.”¹⁰

Beyond his pledge to protect U.S. interests on the island, Batista actively courted foreign investment. In the friendly atmosphere he created, it increased dramatically during his years in power. Especially eager to capture a greater portion of the hundreds of millions of dollars North Americans were spending each year vacationing abroad—and familiar, no doubt, with the illicit ways it could pay off—his regime expressly encouraged tourism development. In 1953, Hotel Law 2074 granted significant tax exemptions in the construction and operation of new hotels and motels. The government also made generous loans available to investors, whether Cuban or foreign. Under Batista, the Banco Nacional de Cuba and its subsidiaries provided an estimated \$80 million for tourism development, more funding than the state extended for any other industry on the island.¹¹ His regime also initiated an extensive public works program, spending close to \$200 million on improvements to Havana’s harbor, hospital, roads, and airport. It created a new tourism commission, the Instituto del Turismo Cubano, and organized a special police corps to assist English-speaking visitors on the island. Capping its efforts, the Cuban government launched a promotional campaign in the United States, emphasizing Cuba’s “climate, nightlife, colonial architecture, and friendliness to [North Americans].”¹²

When Batista seized power, no new hotel had been built in Havana in nearly twenty years, but his policies “turned a paucity of hotel investment into an avalanche of loan applications.”¹³ In the years from 1952 to 1958, twenty-eight new hotels and motels opened on the island, thirteen of them “ultra-modern,” high-rise properties in Havana. The suburbs of Marianao and Miramar reemerged as tourist destinations, as in the 1920s. But mid-century

development occurred throughout Habana Vieja, as well, especially along the district's western perimeter in Vedado. Alongside the Capri, Riviera, and Hilton hotels sprung a crop of restaurants, department stores, and supermarkets. Retailers catering to North American visitors "introduced not only a new way to shop" in Havana, Pérez points out, "but also...a mass outlet for U.S. products."¹⁴

As U.S. investors hired U.S. architects to envision environments appealing to U.S. tourists, scholars suggest Havana took on an increasingly North American look and feel.¹⁵ More than any other concern, they argue, the possibility of profit drove urban development under Batista. Improvements to services or in areas that did not lend themselves to lucrative ventures went underfinanced, and there was little concern for the environmental, socio-spatial, or cultural impact of the city's transformation. A development plan under consideration by the regime before it was deposed, for example, involved the construction of an artificial island, designed specifically for tourism, in Havana's harbor. The proposal entailed razing a number of city blocks to build parking lots and suggested the establishment of "satellite towns with workers' housing" for displaced habaneros.¹⁶

As hotels went up left and right, the opening of new casinos almost kept pace. In 1950, the U.S. Senate had formed the Kefauver Commission to investigate organized crime networks in the United States. In its aftermath, illegal gambling operations of considerable size were shut down in southern Florida.¹⁷ Not coincidentally, many of the organizations put out of business had well-established connections in Cuba, reaching back to Prohibition. Central to both, it was "the profitability of society's forbidden fruit," as Schwartz puts it, that linked tourism in Cuba with the activities of organized crime networks across the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, she claims, the Batista regime's friendly development policies and lax gaming

regulations “sounded a clarion call” to figures like Meyer Lansky and Santo Trafficante, Jr., among others.¹⁸

Casinos were allowed to operate all night long in Cuba, with no restrictions on how much money gamblers could wager. Especially after 1955, when the government began granting gaming licenses to any new hotel worth \$1 million or nightclub worth \$200,000, casinos proliferated across Havana. They quickly became the city’s most touted tourist attraction, as well as its most profitable. Whereas the hotel business had been the mainstay of Havana’s 1920s boom, hospitality and entertainment establishments in the 1950s counted on gaming revenues to pay their bills. In addition to casino employees, gambling tourists in Cuba paid the wages of hotel employees, restaurant workers, and nightclub performers, among many other habaneros whose jobs supported the booming industry.¹⁹



Inaugural guests place the first bets at the casino in the Habana Hilton.

Casinos made money hand over fist—not only for their owners and operators, but for representatives and allies of the Batista regime, as well. From gambling establishments, the government collected an initial payment of \$25,000, a monthly fee of \$2000, and twenty percent of quarterly profits.²⁰ “Rather than increasing state revenues,” however, Skwiot points out, “these funds primarily increased the personal wealth of high-ranking military officers and government officials.”²¹ And even more money changed hands under the table, according to Trafficante, who managed casinos at the Sans Souci nightclub and in the Commodore, Deauville, Sevilla Biltmore, and Capri Hotels. As he told it, \$250,000 was the *unofficial* going rate for a “lucrative concession,” accompanied by an understanding that any construction contracts would be directed to friends of the dictator.²²

Dishonesty in Batista’s regime was “unparalleled,” according to U.S. diplomat Spruille Braden. “Never before,” he remarked, had corruption in the Cuban state been “so rampant, so organized, and so profitable for those at the top.”²³ Though not its only source of illicit profit, the money North American investors and tourists brought to the island provided Batista and his friends with significant financial gain, which could be realized as personal or political advantage. The take from tourism extended beyond official fees and arrangements like those described by Trafficante. Batista’s brother-in-law Roberto Fernandez y Miranda, for example, held an exclusive concession to operate slot machines. That he helped himself generously to the sizeable revenue they generated in the city’s bars, restaurants, and casinos was well-known among *habaneros*. And like “those at the top,” Havana’s police force—an important ally to the Batista regime—commonly used its authority to collect “taxes” from the city’s nightclubs, brothels, and lottery ticket vendors.²⁴

Like Machado before him, Batista extolled his government's support for tourism development as a strategy for economic expansion and diversification. And though its resurgence in the 1950s attracted growing crowds of visitors who spent tens of millions of dollars on the island each year, it did more to line his pockets and secure his hold on power than to benefit most Cubans. The industry employed thousands of habaneros and did contribute to a period of prosperity for some—not least of all a growing middle class in Havana. However, as in the 1920s, no one benefitted from tourism development as much its North American investors and their collaborators in the Cuban state.²⁵

Moreover, tourism's employment opportunities and the infrastructural improvements it spurred were limited almost entirely to Havana, where standards of living were already much higher than in rural areas of the island. In the countryside, many Cubans lived in extreme poverty without access to basic healthcare or education. And while tourism development had been promoted since the turn of the century as a way to lessen Cuba's economic reliance on agricultural exports, scholars point out that it replicated many of the sugar industry's same problems—namely, dependence on both U.S. capital and a North American market.²⁶ Perhaps above all else, the regime's encouragement of North American investment on the island—in tourism or otherwise—worked to secure the interest and support of the U.S. government, on which it relied more and more as Cuban opposition to Batista grew.

If tourism development during Batista's dictatorship resembled the industry's establishment under Machado in nearly all these ways, its tremendous growth in the 1950s rapidly eclipsed its earlier presence on the island. In the years following World War II, more North Americans than ever had the means, as well as the inclination, to vacation abroad. As promoters targeted the growing North American middle class, advances in transportation

technology made getting to Cuba more affordable than ever. A car ferry traveled to the island from Key West, and hundreds of flights from cities across the United States took tourists to Havana each week.²⁷ From tens of thousands of annual visitors at the height of the earlier boom, over 300,000 tourists traveled to Cuba in 1957.²⁸ That year, the island trailed only Mexico as the hemisphere's most popular U.S. tourist destination.²⁹

In the decades between these two booms, however, North American popular culture had embraced the image of Cuba created by late 1920s tourism promotion. In the 1930s, for instance, Cuban music and dance styles became so popular stateside that “nightclubs and cabarets nationwide reinvented themselves...and for a time ‘Latin’ served as the dominant ambiance of American nightlife.”³⁰ Havana was the setting for romance novels, murder mysteries, and feature films. Even as they stayed home, films like *Weekend in Havana* (1941), *Moonlight in Havana* (1942), *Havana Holiday* (1949), and *Affair in Havana* (1957)—to name only a few—worked to keep Cubans on North Americans' minds as carefree and sensuous, Cuba as a tropical paradise of indulgence and abandon.³¹ As popular culture fixed the island and its people in North Americans' imagination according to the primitivist notions of earlier tourism discourse, the same ideas shaped the character of the industry's 1950s resurgence there.

As U.S. tourists traveled to the island in greater numbers than ever, bars, nightclubs, and brothels multiplied alongside hotels and casinos. Nightlife in Havana “assumed extravagant proportions” at places like the Montmartre, the Sans Souci, and the Tropicana. “Sprawling, multilayered affairs with cocktail lounges, full-service dinner menus, [and] vast dance floors,” these clubs featured “one or two orchestras, dazzling cabaret revues,” and headliners like Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, and Duke Ellington.³² Nightly, elaborate shows featured mostly local performers and tended, according to historians, “[to reinforce] stereotypes of the exotic Cuban



What appears to be a performance by the Tropicana's *corps de ballet*, which Hilton hired for the hotel opening.

other.”³³ Moreover, as Desmond claims, performances like those in mid-century Havana “stage” by their very nature “the ‘us’ in contradistinction to the ‘not-us’ on display.” Hand in hand with the allure of the “exotic,” she suggests, part of spectators’ pleasure is their “experience of themselves as a collective ‘other’ from those whom they are watching.”³⁴

Desmond’s argument evokes Mariana Torgovnick’s claim that, throughout history, what primitive discourses reveal more than anything else is Westerners’ concern with their own identity and belonging as such. As nightclub performances reinforced rather than challenged a set of convictions many North Americans brought to the island—about their cultural, even fundamental, difference from those on stage—they reflected the broader experience of a Cuban vacation. Like a weekend in Havana, the shows offered visitors “a safe encounter with a

different culture, one of limited duration and pre-set boundaries for interaction.”³⁵ For U.S. tourists, Desmond claims, “the message is ultimately the same: this is not who you are, although it is who you might imagine yourself being for the moment.”³⁶



Local dancers perform while inaugural guests dine.

Peter Moruzzi’s description of a 1952 show called the “Sun Sun Babae,”—“based on the mysterious Afro-Cuban Santería ceremony”—illustrates her argument:

Under the spell of rhythmic drumming and the chants of Santería priests, a member of Sans Souci’s audience—a striking blonde in a black satin cocktail dress—would be summoned in a trance to the stage, whereupon she would rip off her dress and join the line of dancers clad only in her underwear. Suddenly, after several dance numbers, the woman would be released from her trance, let loose an ear-piercing scream, frantically gather her scattered clothes, and flee the stage. Audiences went wild and the woman, in reality an American dancer named Skippy, would take her bows with the rest of the cast.³⁷

Commonly, as this skit also suggests, erotic nightclub performances in 1950s Havana drew on the cultural traditions of Afro-Cuban people. The period's biggest craze was the *rumba*, an Afro-Cuban dance that involved elements of sexual pantomime and often featured Afro-Cuban performers. For the white North American audience, Desmond observes—and perhaps for the elite Cubans of predominantly European ancestry who also frequented these clubs—“there [was] an important racialized subtext to [performers'] embodiment of difference.”³⁸

And for many tourists, as Pérez suggests, the perceived racial difference of Cubans, especially those of African descent, was also a marker of their supposed sexual difference. “The promise of sex with the Other,” he writes, “exotic and mysterious, primitive and carnal”—and often signified in “explicitly racial terms”—was a significant “subtext of the tourist narrative.”³⁹

Travel writer Harold C. Lank's description of a *rumba* dancer demonstrates the point:

A high yaller gal swirls out...and melts into an ultra-seductive version of the sensuous rhumba [sic]. A high yaller gal, bathed in colored lights...[N]o costume is as beautiful as bronze skin...High yaller gal! dancing to savage music, the breath of the jungle.”⁴⁰

Though surely, Schwartz argues, many visitors who enjoyed such nightclub performances “gave a wide berth to outright obscenity or purchased sex,” others were less reserved.⁴¹ Promoters like Lank, according to Skwiot, “invoked the figure of the mulatta to imply sexual excess and grant whites sexual license...to sanction their indulgence in commercial sex” and other “erotic pleasures...regarded as desirable yet debased.”⁴² As they did, “pornographic theaters proliferated” in mid-century Havana, according to Pérez, and by the end of the decade, the city was home to around 270 brothels and more than 11,500 women working as prostitutes.⁴³

Although promoters made Afro-Cuban cultural traditions central to 1950s tourism discourse, the expectations of North American visitors had worked across the first half of the century to institute strict racial codes within the industry. From its beginning, Skwiot argues, it

was clear that the presence of Afro-Cubans aroused feelings of “animosity” among white North American tourists.⁴⁴ Consequently, few Afro-Cubans were employed by Havana’s restaurants, casinos, or hotels—except as entertainers. In most establishments, black Americans of any nationality were unwelcome as patrons, and many beaches near Havana were officially segregated.⁴⁵



An Afro-Cuban band at the Habana Hilton inaugural.

Though such discrimination was not introduced in Cuba by U.S. vacationers, as scholars point out, they did play a significant role in the larger North American influence on race relations there. At the turn of the century, the United States had used its authority to disenfranchise a large percentage of Afro-Cuban men and, in 1917, to support the Cuban state in suppressing black political and labor reform movements. “Like that of all imperial powers in the modern

era,” Salvatore points out, “the history of the United States...has been not only a saga of politico-military and economic expansion, but also a history of racial and cultural assertion.”⁴⁶

Like earlier in the century, but perhaps more than ever, the predominant view of Cuba in mid-century U.S. cultural discourse was as a tropical paradise of indulgence and abandon. In the 1950s no less than the 1920s, this view reflected a set of North American desires more than Cuban cultural traditions—let alone the economic and political circumstances that were rapidly



Guests pose with members of a Cuban band at the hotel opening.

deteriorating on the island in the same years that tourism was booming. But if this fantasy “was the reason tourists came to Cuba,” observers and historians suggest it was also more than the lure of a weeklong vacation.⁴⁷ “The masses of people who come here,” complained U.S. ambassador to Cuba Arthur Gardner (1953-1957), “are bent only on pleasure and *never think of Cuba except in terms of fun, rum, and nightclubs.*”⁴⁸ As Gardner suggests, Pérez argues that across the first half of the twentieth century, tourism discourse determined the only way many North Americans could perceive the island and its people, even outside the realm of tourism. “[H]ardly thought about before 1959 as anything more than a place of tropical promiscuity, illicit pleasures, and risqué amusements,” he writes, Cuba “was not a country to be taken seriously.”⁴⁹



Guests pose with members of the police escort that accompanied them when they left the hotel.

And since the industry in Havana was “an environment summoned into existence for North Americans,” their experiences there were unlikely, at best, to dispel their illusions. Especially at mid-century, as tourism infrastructures throughout the Caribbean and Latin America improved, vacationing in the region became an increasingly “packaged” experience, designed more and more to align in all particulars with North American expectations.⁵⁰ Not unlike elite visitors who had retreated to Marianao’s exclusive enclaves decades earlier, 1950s tourists “occupied privileged...spaces[s] that immunized them” from the circumstances that shaped everyday life for most Cubans.⁵¹ What they did not encounter, or could not perceive, was a Cuban economy that had experienced almost no real growth since before the Great Depression, determined opposition to Batista’s illegitimate government, and his regime’s increasingly brutal repression of any and all political dissent. For many Cubans, Pérez writes, “the 1950s were years of deepening crisis, of disquiet and despair, of disappointment and disillusionment.”⁵² As it disguised this state of affairs, tourism also obfuscated the growing strength of Cuban opposition to Batista, as well as his increasingly tenuous hold on power.

The impact of tourism discourse went hand in hand at mid-century with the “imperial hubris” historians argue governed the United States’ official relations with the island. This “combination of...arrogance and ignorance,” as Paterson puts it, gave U.S. leaders such confidence in the security and propriety of the nation’s authority in Cuba that they failed to comprehend the threat posed by Cuban rebel groups until Batista’s downfall was practically unstoppable.⁵³ Gaining support and momentum across the decade, the dictator’s opponents objected not only to his regime’s illegitimacy, corruption, and brutality, but also to its cooperation with the imperatives of U.S. neo-imperialist control.

For North Americans, as Pérez suggests, that the Cuban people would articulate and successfully “assert claim” to interests distinct from those of the United States “was to challenge a paradigm with antecedents early in the nineteenth century.”⁵⁴ Many historians agree that “cognitive dissonance” on the part of U.S. leaders—who tended, like tourists, to see Cuba according to its representation in North American cultural discourse—played a significant role in the outcome of early 1959. It was, according to Alan McPherson, “precisely because it seemed to have no chance there” that such a challenge to U.S. hegemony as the revolution in Cuba could succeed.⁵⁵

If tourism emerged from and, in turn, fostered patterns of North American misrepresentation, misperception, and misunderstanding, Cubans tended to see the industry more clearly. Opposition to the culture and consequences of U.S. tourism on the island were not new in the 1950s. But as tourists, in Merrill’s words, “replaced the Platt Amendment as the most noxious U.S. presence in the everyday lives of Habaneros,” many Cubans’ resistance grew.⁵⁶ They objected to the industry’s modes of representing Cuba and Cubans, to its impact on everyday life in Havana, to the fact that Cuban funds supplied investment capital while profits were directed off the island, and to the ways that tourism bolstered the Batista regime—not least by linking the dictator ever more closely to U.S. political, economic, and military support. “What kind of deal is [this] for Cuba?” one islander remarked about Havana’s tourism boom to a *Life* correspondent in the mid-1950s.⁵⁷ Increasingly across the decade, tourism became an openly contested issue among Cubans, one that “[interlaced] anti-Yankee messages... with grievances against Batista.”⁵⁸ As it contributed to such sentiment, historians largely agree with Merrill’s view that “tourism played a major role in the coming of the Cuban Revolution.”⁵⁹

Alongside sugarcane fields and the U.S. military base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuban rebel groups made the industry a prominent symbol of what their movement stood against. Like those in Machado's administration before them, Batista and his associates "regularly wined, dined, and gambled at greater Havana's hotels, casinos, and country clubs."⁶⁰ Likely by donating \$800,000 to dredge a new harbor, Batista himself became a member of the Havana Biltmore Yacht and Country Club, where Machado had symbolically broken ground in the 1920s.⁶¹ At the same time, as Fidel Castro and his followers emerged as major figures in the insurrection, they "defined themselves, their code of conduct, and their revolution as the antithesis of Batista, his dictatorship, and its corruption." Much of what they opposed, according to Skwiot, "merged in tourism development."⁶² Beyond denouncing the industry's impact, rebel groups began targeting tourist events and establishments in Havana. Trying "to scare North American tourists away," and thereby to undermine the Batista regime, they carried out bomb attacks, kidnappings, and assassinations at hotels, casinos, and nightclubs with increasing regularity beginning in the mid-1950s.⁶³

Late in the decade, the industry reached its peak as a site of U.S. imperialist fantasy at the same time that it became a powerful symbol in Cubans' efforts to overthrow the U.S.-backed Batista government. As Pérez argues, "imperialism creates over time, and often at one and the same time, conditions that subvert as well as sustain continued domination."⁶⁴ What rebel attacks against the industry brought to the fore was the conflict of interest that had been inherent in the culture of tourism development in Cuba from its very beginning, but often made invisible to its North American patrons. Until the months before Batista's overthrow, however, investors and tourists remained mostly unmoved. Like national leaders, they "had a tin ear when it came to the rapidly growing guerilla movement" on the island.⁶⁵ Without clear understanding of the

circumstances fueling the insurrection, most especially with regard to their own relationship to it, Pérez suggests they mostly “mistook their [own] ignorance for innocence.”⁶⁶

Tending to see the mid-century rebel activity as one more instance of the political turmoil commonplace on the island since the turn of the century, they remained confident it posed no real threat to the status quo in Cuba.⁶⁷ As the U.S. government lent more and more military aid and political support to the Batista regime, so did investors and visitors continue to line the dictator’s pockets and bolster his image. Against the background of a political rebellion rapidly gaining momentum, 1957 was the biggest year yet for tourism in Havana—but it was also its last, at least for several decades. The highlight of the winter should have been the spectacular opening of the much-anticipated Habana Hilton—the island’s most luxurious hotel, Latin America’s tallest building, and a veritable paean, in Conrad N. Hilton’s words, to “American life and its achievements.”⁶⁸ But by the time it opened, at the tail end of the season, the North American confidence underpinning tourism in Havana was finally beginning to wane. Staged, in part, as an effort to hold onto the status quo in Cuba, the Hilton inaugural in fact marked a significant turning point. “For the tourist industry and the Batista regime,” as Merrill remarks, it proved to be “one last bright, shining moment.”⁶⁹

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- ¹ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 123.
- ² *Ibid.*, 14.
- ³ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 173. Also see Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 107-108.
- ⁴ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 105-108.
- ⁵ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 170-171.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 171-173.
- ⁷ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 120; Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 220; and Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 35.
- ⁸ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 154 and Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 48.
- ⁹ Carlos Ripoll, "The Press in Cuba, 1952-1960: Autocratic and Totalitarian Censorship," in *The Cuba Reader*, ed. Aviva Chomsky, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 2004), 88.
- ¹⁰ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 49-50.
- ¹¹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 112-113.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 112-14. Also see Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 142; Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 36; and Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 160-161.
- ¹³ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 159.
- ¹⁴ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 123-124, Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 54, quote from OBC 366
- ¹⁵ Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 2.
- ¹⁶ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 123.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ¹⁸ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 142.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 123-144.
- ²⁰ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 54.
- ²¹ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 159.
- ²² Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 133.
- ²³ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 36.
- ²⁴ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 159.
- ²⁵ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 125-132.
- ²⁶ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 146.
- ²⁷ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 123.
- ²⁸ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 52.
- ²⁹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 105-106.
- ³⁰ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 210.
- ³¹ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 106 and Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 132.
- ³² Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 223 and Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 96.
- ³³ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 15.
- ³⁴ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, xvi-xxi.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.
- ³⁷ Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 110-111.
- ³⁸ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 12.
- ³⁹ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 190-191.
- ⁴⁰ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 129.
- ⁴¹ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 127.
- ⁴² Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 120.
- ⁴³ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 193.
- ⁴⁴ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 78.
- ⁴⁵ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 106, 123.
- ⁴⁶ Salvatore, "Representational Machines," 26.
- ⁴⁷ Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 96.
- ⁴⁸ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 56.
- ⁴⁹ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 235.

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- ⁵⁰ Evan R. Ward, *Packaged Vacations: Tourism Development in the Spanish Caribbean* (Gainesville, FL: U Press of Florida, 2008), 1.
- ⁵¹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 4.
- ⁵² Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 455.
- ⁵³ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 10.
- ⁵⁴ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 240.
- ⁵⁵ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 39.
- ⁵⁶ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 135.
- ⁵⁷ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 198.
- ⁵⁸ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 51.
- ⁵⁹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 107, 135. Also see Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 190; Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 8; and Schwartz, "The Invasion of the Tourists," 252.
- ⁶⁰ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 190.
- ⁶¹ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 38.
- ⁶² Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 190.
- ⁶³ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 57 and 99-100.
- ⁶⁴ Pérez, "Dependency," 174.
- ⁶⁵ Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 9.
- ⁶⁶ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 244.
- ⁶⁷ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 150-151.
- ⁶⁸ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 39.
- ⁶⁹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 154.

IV. THE HABANA HILTON

Capping off several years of rapid development under Batista, the biggest, costliest, most luxurious hotels yet in Havana opened during the 1957-1958 winter season. The Capri—owned by Santo Trafficante, Jr. and boasting 250 rooms, a rooftop pool, and a casino—held its inaugural weekend over the Thanksgiving holiday. Meyer Lansky’s Riviera, with over 400 rooms, a casino, and “the swankiest nightclub in town,” opened a few weeks later. But at thirty stories high, with 630 rooms—not to mention banquet facilities, a shopping arcade, an underground parking garage accommodating 450 cars, multiple restaurants, and a casino—the Habana Hilton was “the granddaddy of them all.”¹ Held up by construction delays, the hotel opened in late March 1958. While the Capri and the Riviera cashed in on what turned out to be tourism’s last lucrative season in Havana, the Hilton missed out. A few weeks after its lavish inaugural celebration, the hotel had only forty-four guests, and few more ever checked in.² Buoyed by North Americans’ presumption that the status quo—and their place in it—would prevail in Cuba, the Habana Hilton’s grand opening proved, in the end, to be its last big hurrah.

Construction began on the hotel in 1955, after “considerable wheeling and dealing” in negotiations with the Cuban government and the Sindicato Gastronómico, the national union for culinary and hospitality workers. In an arrangement unusual on the island, but which became standard in Hilton International’s (HI) post-war expansion, the Hilton Corporation did not own the property in Havana. Instead, the Gastronómico invested \$14 million from its pension fund, as well as at least \$8 million borrowed from the Banco Nacional de Cuba, to finance its

construction. Hilton, which put less than \$2 million into the property, was contracted to design and manage the hotel for a percentage of its profits.³ The Batista regime lent key support to the deal, which had a “compelling logic,” according to Schwartz: the union “would not shut down a hotel that its pension fund owned nor set wage rates that would reduce profits needed to repay its loan.” Personally involved in negotiations between the corporation and the union, Batista considered the agreement so significant that he himself announced it to the press.⁴



Conrad Hilton is pictured here with Francisco Aguirre Vidaurreta, an influential figure in Cuban politics under Batista and the president of the Gastronomico. According to historians, records suggest that the widespread corruption typical of tourism development in Cuba also characterized the Habana Hilton’s construction. Charged with embezzling large sums from the union while the hotel was being built, Aguirre Vidaurreta was apprehended and imprisoned in 1959, according to Cuba’s revolutionary government.⁵

Conrad Hilton also publically praised the arrangement. In an address to Hilton executives and Cuban officials during the hotel’s opening weekend, he pointed to it as evidence of capitalism’s capacity for social consciousness. “The usual thing,” he said, “is for employees

to work for employers...but here in the building and operation of our new Habana Hilton, we have reversed the picture: capital is working for labor, the employers for the employees.”⁶

Union ownership of the hotel did, as he suggested, give Cuban workers a stake in the business and promise them some control over its employment policies. But as Evan Ward points out, HI benefitted from the business model, too—in Cuba and elsewhere. As the hotelier took his brand across the globe across the globe in the years following World War II, the corporation “entered new nations with fiscal trepidation.” Leveraging local capital to buy property and build hotels, Hilton was able to operate abroad in profitable tourist destinations while incurring little risk and sidestepping the complications of foreign real estate ownership.⁷



Conrad Hilton began his speech by invoking Christopher Columbus. “Hilton Hotels has come to Cuba,” he proclaimed,” because Columbus was right when he said that this is the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen.” He went on to applaud the agreement reached between HI and the Gastronómico, but he seemed more amused by the irony in private correspondence. “Imagine—me working for the union,” he wrote. “How I wish Joe Stalin had lived to see this.”⁸

HI had struck a deal like this with the commonwealth government of Puerto Rico when it built its first hotel abroad, the Caribe Hilton, in San Juan in 1949. Over the next two decades, the chain established seventeen hotels in locations around the world—Madrid, Cairo, and Mexico City among the earliest.⁹ In the mid-century North American promotion of international tourism, Merrill claims, “Conrad N. Hilton had few equals.”¹⁰ Though surely motivated by the profitability of international expansion, Hilton was outspoken about the ideological role he believed his hotels played in post-war global politics. In his autobiography, he extolled them as venues for cultural exchange, where “millions of people, foreigners and natives” could come together “because they want to know each other better, trade with other, and live in peace.”¹¹ In particular, however, he believed his hotels contributed to the United States’ resistance to communist ideology and government during the Cold War. “An integral part of my dream,” he wrote, “was to show the countries most exposed to Communism the other side of the coin—the fruits of the free world.”¹²

According to architectural historian Annabel Wharton, the siting, scale, modern design, and luxurious amenities of HI hotels worked together in this demonstration. Like “grand hotels” of the colonial era, mid-century Hiltons were built in a city’s “most prestigious site.”¹³ In Havana, the new hotel “lorded over the Malecón.” Not only Cuba’s largest hotel, it was the tallest building in all of Latin America, a fact HI tirelessly highlighted in advertisements.¹⁴ “An imposing tower of steel and glass” designed by the Los Angeles architecture firm Welton Becket and Associates, the hotel was also remarkably modern—as were most Hiltons built abroad during this period of international expansion. Sky-high and exemplifying an aesthetic of technology and affluence, Wharton argues, the hotels stood in “striking visual contrast to the vernacular fabrics” of many foreign cities. As they went up around the world, their grandeur



These performances appear to be part of a dramatic tale of the Hilton corporation's expansion, from the modest Mobley Hotel in Cisco, Texas—the hotelier's first property—to the lavish Habana Hilton. The Keating Collection contains photographs of more scenes like these—staged in front of sets depicting the Hotel Castellana in Madrid and the Nile Hilton in Cairo, hotels opened in 1953 and 1955, respectively.



signaled “the new and powerful presence” of the United States in the post-war era.¹⁵ No less than symbols of the nation’s geopolitical authority, the hotels’ size and design also broadcast the economic and cultural “progress” capitalism purportedly promised.¹⁶

Hiltons’ luxurious facilities and wealthy patrons were also central to the chain’s representation of “the fruits of the free world.” In providing well-to-do, mostly North American travelers with a familiar environment, Hilton created enclaves of a particular, elite way of life. From 1950s “suburbs and country clubs,” Wharton argues, “came the Hilton’s lawns, swimming pools, and tennis courts...its cocktail lounges and rooftop supper clubs...”¹⁷ The Habana Hilton featured not only air conditioning—increasingly *de rigueur* for tourist establishments in warm climates—but filtered ice water, three-channel radios, in-room televisions, and a closed-circuit broadcasting system.¹⁸ Like its counterparts in other cities, Ward suggests, Hilton envisioned the hotel in Havana as a “modern cathedral of comfort beckoning everyone who was anyone to enjoy the trappings of a modern American lifestyle.”¹⁹

The affluence of Hilton patrons often marked their difference from local cultural life as much as from an imagined communist alternative, another contrast Wharton suggests was engineered. Like the hotels’ impressive size and modern design, she claims, “guests were meant to be conspicuous.”²⁰ Following World War II, U.S. policymakers promoted international tourism in part because they believed its economic impact in other nations would expand the market for North American products by creating consumers abroad. But Skwiot suggests Cold War leaders also imagined that “tourists would provide overseas peoples a glimpse of their future as modern nuclear families blessed with an abundance of goods.”²¹ If mid-century Hiltons

resembled “cathedrals” of Cold War cultural values, tourists were likewise seen as “missionaries preaching the twin gospels of free enterprise and mass consumption.”²²

As they displayed a set of North American Cold War values to the residents of cities across the world, HI hotels also engineered a particular outward gaze. As Wharton puts it, Hiltons’ expansive plate glass windows created a “double visibility”—the guest as “viewed object” was also a “viewing subject.” High above Cairo, Istanbul, Athens, or Havana, patrons experienced the city as little more than a “vista,” an exotic background for activity within the hotel. “From an entirely secure site of observation,” the view also offered a sense of “visual control” over the urban landscape, making it “an immediate source of the patron’s status.”²³ Mary Louise Pratt considers the perspective Wharton describes an “imperial trope.” She traces it from European travelogues and oil painting traditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to its still-contemporary equivalent in tourism. In the “post-colonial” world, she argues, “the-monarch-of-all-I-survey-scene gets repeated...from the balconies of hotels in big third-world cities.”²⁴

Wharton’s and Pratt’s observations link the experience orchestrated by Hilton hotels to the elite tourist enclaves built outside Havana in the 1920s, especially considering Skwiot’s suggestion that they, too, resembled the built environments of earlier colonial modes. And just as scholars associate the culture of the first tourism boom in Cuba to social and political unrest stateside, Wharton compares a mid-century vacation at an international Hilton to the same era’s “suburban escape.”²⁵ Like Mariano’s country clubs, the hotels “catered to the traveler who did not want to be in the middle of the city’s action” or “[to] venture out among the locals.” Providing guests with familiar material comforts at a safe remove from unfamiliar peoples, places, and cultures made a Hilton an oasis for wealthy tourists who wished to avoid “the

vicissitudes” of foreign travel.²⁶ While Conrad Hilton professed belief in his hotels as venues for cultural encounter and education, historian and contemporary critic Daniel J. Boorstin disagreed. More than anything, he argued, the design of Hiltons abroad worked as “effective insulation from the place you have gone.”²⁷



Scholar John Urry connects visitors’ “bird’s-eye-view” from hotel balconies to their experience on tourist buses. In both cases, he writes, a tourist is “not one of the crowd,” but “gazes down in safety, insulated from the heat, the cold, the rain, and the smells. It is as though the scene is being viewed on a screen.” Interaction is “precluded,” he argues, as “the gaze... moves serenely over the disorderly other.”²⁸

Throughout the world, Boorstin found the properties so alike he suspected that—“except for the view from the picture window”—the “measured admixture of carefully filtered local atmosphere” was all that reminded hotel guests where they were.²⁹ As Wharton argues, the representation of local culture, typically through interior decoration, was integral to the design of HI hotels. At the Habana Hilton, the rooftop “Sugar Bar” was inspired by the island’s sugarcane

industry, and the lobby was modeled after a colonial era courtyard.³⁰ The corporation commissioned at least a dozen Cuban artists to create paintings, murals, tapestries, and sculptures for the new hotel. As it expanded internationally, Ward observes, this decorating strategy often made the corporation a significant—if one-time—patron of local arts, crafts, and manufacturing. When the hotel was nationalized in 1960, Fidel Castro publically praised the Habana Hilton’s artwork, and the revolutionary government has worked to maintain much of it to this day.³¹ But for 1950s U.S. tourists, Wharton argues, against Hiltons’ architectural modernism, “the ornamental role of the local subordinated it within a hierarchy of an American economy of signs.”³²

At the Habana Hilton inaugural, representations of the island and its people went beyond décor. Local musicians and the Tropicana *corps de ballet* entertained guests, and photographs suggest a *campesino* driving a bull made an amusing appearance during an outdoor luncheon.³³ A “Cuban fiesta” was organized, souvenirs in the form of wide-brimmed woven hats were distributed, and Conrad Hilton posed, wearing one, with a bongo drum. At the same time that Hilton hotels insulated guests from foreign surroundings, Wharton argues, their representations of local cultural life offered “the pleasure of an effortless experience of the alien.”³⁴ Reporting on the opening from Havana and echoing Wharton’s claim, Bob and Shirley Sloane compared the hotel to “a movie set.” In the lobby, they remarked, the “pseudo-sidewalk bar...lacked only Peter Lorre leering from a corner table to authenticate the air of tropic-Latin intrigue it effects.”³⁵

The Sloanes’ account of the Havana opening evokes Boorstin’s observation a few years later that, “right in the heart of Turkey,” the Istanbul Hilton “achieved the subtle effect...of making the experience of Turkey quite secondhand.”³⁶ As for many twentieth century tourists on the island, the “Cuba” its guests encountered reflected North American cultural discourse

more than the realities that shaped the lives of most Cubans. While guests were fêted high above Havana or ferried through it in guarded tourist buses, the inaugural festivities perpetuated ways of seeing the island that underlaid a broad misperception in the United States about its history, its relationship to the nation, and the political rebellion underway in the 1950s. “Few guests,” according to the Sloanes, “were aware...of the powder keg political situation” that surrounded them as they sipped cocktails. “So far as any of us could tell,” they reported, “the only terror in the streets came from Havana’s maniacal traffic, and whatever tension was confined to the dice tables.”³⁷

Moreover, observers and scholars suggest the hotel in Havana promised tourists a sense of assurance based in the same message about North American difference Hilton International endeavored to convey to local people throughout the world. In a 1965 *Vogue* article, “The View from a Tall Glass Oasis: The Subliminal Pleasures of Hilton Hotels,” George Bradshaw claims the hotel chain “act[ed] as a balm, a salve, a glass of Alka-Seltzer” for North American travelers abroad. “Don’t tell me it isn’t a joy,” he explains, “to set down in Iran and discover that you are living at a Waldorf in the wilderness. All you need is a shower in an imperial bathroom for your shakes to disappear.”³⁸ As the hotels stood, worldwide, in remarkable contrast to the built environments of many host cities—in sheer size, modern design, and material luxury—patrons could observe their difference from local cultural life and feel confident in their superiority to it. For North Americans abroad, according to Wharton, the experiences orchestrated by Hilton hotels made them symbols of “the truth, righteousness, and stability of [mainstream U.S.] economic and moral values” in the first years of the Cold War.³⁹

In mid-century Cuba, this contemporary Cold War rhetoric—and the construction of the Habana Hilton—coincided with long-standing North American conviction in the propriety of the

United States' relationship to the island. "[A]ll through the nineteenth century, and deep into the twentieth," according to Pérez, "especially striking" about U.S. discourse was its "capacity to sustain...an enduring consensus about the beneficent purpose of North American power" in Cuba. At least until the Cuban Revolution, he claims, few in the United States doubted the legitimacy of the nation's authority there.⁴⁰ Benjamin argues that, across this same period, even national leaders "never seriously entertained the idea that its influence might represent an unbearable political and economic burden."⁴¹ However, if for U.S. tourists, capitalists, and even government officials, the Habana Hilton went up as Cuba's latest and grandest monument to North American righteousness, the mood in Havana by the late 1950s had become particularly resistant to this message. For many Cubans, historians suggest, the hotel towering conspicuously above the city skyline served as a testament to the emptiness of U.S. promises—political, economic, and cultural.

Especially as opposition to Batista gained momentum, the tourism industry in Havana became emblematic not just of the regime's corruption, but of its close ties to the United States, as well. To the dismay and indignation of many on the island, the nation only reaffirmed its official support for Batista as more and more Cubans mobilized against him. Despite his regime's illegitimacy, failure to uphold Cubans' constitutional rights, and violent repression of political dissent, Washington had always found him a "reliable" ally as far as North American interests were concerned. Since his initial rise to power, according to Benjamin, relations had been better with Batista than with any other Cuban leader.⁴² Influenced for most of the decade by favorable reports from the U.S. Embassy in Havana, officials in the State Department "lined up" behind the dictator.⁴³

This political support was significant for the regime, but as it relied more and more on the Cuban Army and municipal police forces to maintain its hold on power, U.S. military aid became crucial. In the form of equipment, ammunition, and expertise, military assistance to Cuba increased each year of Batista's reign, growing from \$400,000 in 1953 to \$3 million in 1958.⁴⁴ From his *coup* to his last year in power, historians suggest, that the United States openly backed Batista made it clear to a new generation of Cubans that the nation's much-professed commitment to lawful, democratic government did not determine its policy on the island. In their eyes, "Batista and Uncle Sam were such conspicuous partners" in maintaining the neo-imperial status quo in Cuba that grievances against one became closely tied with those against the other.⁴⁵

And though—beyond lining the pockets of Batista and his allies—tourism's post-war revival had created a period of relative prosperity for some *habaneros*, the comparative wealth of North American tourists only emphasized by contrast the dire economic state in Cuba in the mid- to late 1950s. Over half a century since achieving independence from Spain, Cuba still relied overwhelmingly on the production and export of sugar. While the island's economy had neither diversified nor grown significantly since early in the twentieth century, its population had nearly doubled. Already low, especially outside Havana, per capita income fell by nearly one-third in the years 1952-1958.⁴⁶ Speculating, after the Cuban Revolution, on the reasons for its success in overthrowing Batista, U.S. Ambassador Philip K. Bonsal emphasized that the degree of poverty on the island far surpassed that in the United States. In the late 1950s, he pointed out, "the average income in Cuba was about one-third that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the union," where it was about half the average North American income.⁴⁷ In rural areas, where Cubans

were most impoverished, per capita income stood at \$91, compared to over \$2000 for the United States as a whole.⁴⁸

As hundreds of well-to-do North American tourists arrived in Havana each day, this difference was apparent. And as for the “fruits of the free world,” which Conrad Hilton hoped his hotels and their patrons persuasively displayed, Pérez suggests they had lost their appeal for many Cubans by the time Hilton arrived in Havana. Long a significant market for U.S. goods, consumer culture was not new on the island. But as economic circumstances deteriorated in the 1950s, even *habaneros* of more means than most Cubans found themselves unable to pay for goods and services that often cost two or three times as much as they did stateside. Tourists, Skwiot suggests, became “a tangible reminder of the inability of the Perezes to keep up with the Joneses.”⁴⁹ Unlike Hilton and U.S. officials imagined, the conspicuous affluence of North American visitors in mid-century Cuba provoked indignation more than aspiration. Their presence made it clear to Cubans, Merrill claims, that a “chasm” separated them from North Americans.⁵⁰ Like the United States’ professed political ideals, the nation’s economic policies did not serve Cubans as they did the privileged North Americans who vacationed on the island.

Across the twentieth century, according to Pérez, “the concepts of modernity and civilization” were central to Cubans’ developing sense of national identity.⁵¹ And alongside the goods that flooded Cuba’s markets during these years was an influx of North American media extolling consumer privilege and material luxury as markers of these ideals. Historians suggest that many Cubans, especially in Havana, had “adopted” the consumerist lifestyle depicted in U.S. newspapers, magazines, and films “as their own.” Through it, Pérez claims, “vital notions of well-being, status, and security had been derived and defined.”⁵² But in the 1950s, their declining power to participate in U.S. market culture prompted many Cubans to reevaluate its

promises. Even though Havana's middle and upper classes boasted "air conditioners and television sets," two North American journalists proposed, Cubans recognized with increasing frustration that the island's economy and government "seemed more worthy of an old banana republic than a country aspiring to join the modern world."⁵³

As mid-century North American cultural values lost their appeal in Cuba, the equation of modern civilization with "the fruits of the free world" became especially suspect. In opposing the Batista regime and its ties to the United States, political dissidents proposed a new way to define the ideal. A debate between Fidel Castro and José Ignacio Rivero, published in the *Diario de la Marina* following the revolution, gives a sense for this shifting discourse on the meaning of "civilization." Rivero suggests that the new government's tax reforms, which raised prices on imported and luxury goods, "threatened middle-class consumption and, by extension, civilization, in Cuba." Castro counters, in Skwiot's description, that "unemployment, illiteracy, infant mortality, [and] tuberculosis rates" are a better gauge of a society's success than "automobiles, radios, refrigerators, and televisions." By these measures, he implies, half a century of U.S. influence had not—despite the nation's rhetorical claims—brought "civilization" to the island. Under leaders who allowed the privilege of a few to supersede the basic well-being and fundamental rights of so many citizens, Cuba had been "a barbaric country."⁵⁴

While the Hilton went up over Havana, Cuban rebels increasingly articulated a vision of modern Cuban civilization specifically at odds with the North American Cold War values Conrad Hilton believed his hotels "dramatically exemplif[ied]."⁵⁵ If the "driving force" of *cubanidad* in the late nineteenth century was "anti-Spanish" feeling, Pérez suggests, "to be Cuban" in the late 1950s "implied increasingly to be anti-American."⁵⁶ As a paean to "American life and its achievements," in Hilton's words, the hotel in Havana thus stood as a monumental

symbol of a political, economic, and cultural authority more and more Cubans rejected. And at the same time, it was the pinnacle of tourism's mid-century revival on the island. By late in the decade when the hotel opened, insurrectionists had already begun a concerted campaign to implicate the industry in their struggle against the Batista government and its North American supporters.

Seeking to disrupt the lucrative industry and discredit the regime, they called for workers to strike, sabotaged electricity service in tourist areas, and planted bombs in hotel rooms. In 1956, the head of Cuba's military intelligence service, Colonel Antonio Blanco Rico, was assassinated at the Montmartre casino and nightclub, where Batista and his associates frequently gathered.⁵⁷ Late the next year, right before it opened, police discovered and quashed a plot to blow up the Riviera Hotel.⁵⁸ In February 1958, on the eve of Havana's second annual Gran Premio, rebel forces kidnapped the famous Argentine racecar driver Juan Manuel Fangio. Though he was released the next day, unharmed, this incident in particular "claim[ed] headlines," suggesting that "the regime could not protect visitors or maintain order."⁵⁹ Weeks later, just days before the Habana Hilton's grand opening, there were so many explosions one night in Vedado that it became known as the "Night of One Hundred Bombs."⁶⁰

For most of Batista's reign, "bombings, assassinations, and government reprisals [had] shared newspaper space with yacht races, carnival festivities, golf championships, and hotel openings."⁶¹ But by his last year in power, when the hotel opened, rebel groups had largely succeeded in shifting discourse on Cuba from free-flowing rum and carefree *rumba* to political revolution. Beginning in early 1957 with Herbert L. Matthews' front-page *New York Times* profile on Fidel Castro, according to Van Gosse, the U.S. press "[had] a field day in Cuba." In the following months, *Time*, *Life*, *Look*, and a CBS primetime special "lionized" the rebel leader

and his compatriots—who, evidence suggests, understood their portrayal well and utilized it advantageously.⁶² Gosse compares this sympathetic coverage of Cuban rebels and their cause to the turn-of-the-century press campaign to garner support for the Spanish-American War. As he and other historians argue, North American media was crucial to the success of the insurrection, not least as the way many Cubans learned of the movement’s goals and activities. The Batista regime strictly censored the press in Cuba, but U.S. newspapers—often brought to the island by tourists—provided accounts that disputed its official story.⁶³

As it gained more and more support across the island and abroad, Batista insisted that political opposition was confined to the rural Sierra Maestra and “represented little more than a nuisance.”⁶⁴ In truth, Paterson claims, he “had never before been so besieged from so many quarters” when the Hilton opened in Havana.⁶⁵ By this time, many in Washington had begun to doubt his authority, but the United States maintained its official support for his regime nonetheless. “Hegemonic hubris,” according to Paterson, “assured North Americans that this particular Cuban political mess, like others before it, would be cleaned up in due course.”⁶⁶ Despite rebels’ gains, on the ground and in the press, few U.S. authorities imagined that the unrest on the island threatened its “fundamental relationship” to the nation. Until the very end, historians suggest, many in the United States remained confident that the status quo in Cuba—and North Americans’ place in it, as tourists or otherwise—would prevail.⁶⁷

But as violence escalated, tourism plummeted. While Cuban rebels worked to scare vacationers away, the Cuban state and U.S. government joined industry promoters in trying to coax them back. The uprising, the regime’s 1958 *Report on Cuba* claimed, “is 700 miles away” from Havana’s amusements.⁶⁸ Things in Cuba were “tense,” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles admitted the same year, but not serious enough “to discourage American tourists from

visiting.”⁶⁹ Despite assurances, Hilton executives feared the hotel opening in Havana, scheduled for late March, would be a lightning rod for rebel attacks. They seriously considered cancelling the event, but U.S. officials urged them to proceed. To have called off or postponed the inaugural celebration, according to HI Vice President and Caribe Hilton General Manager Robert J. Caverly, would have reflected badly on the Batista regime, which the United States “recognized and sponsored.”⁷⁰



Despite others’ trepidation, gossip columnist Hedda Hopper proclaimed to feel no concern about the unrest in Cuba in her account of flying to the island from Los Angeles for the opening, published on March 24 in the *Chicago Tribune*. “The State Department said, ‘go,’” she reasoned, and considered those who thought better “faint hearted souls.” In fact, “having never been in on a revolution,” she wrote, “I am hoping something happens while we’re there.”⁷¹

Not wanting to signal a concession to rebels' attempts to sabotage the Cuban tourism industry, Hilton "reluctantly" went ahead as planned, but with the utmost caution. Expecting around three hundred guests, the hotel hired over one hundred private security guards to mix and mingle with them.⁷² Some, like Conrad Hilton and Virginia Warren, daughter of the U.S. Chief Justice Earl Warren, brought their own.⁷³ Sharpshooters were positioned on rooftops surrounding the hotel, and a police escort accompanied the group's motorcade whenever it ventured out into the city. Guests were required to identify themselves by wearing small gold



Here are Virginia Warren and Leo Carrillo at the inaugural.

pins at all times, the Sloanes reported. "If you stepped outside [the hotel] to see if the sun was out," they wrote, "you would have had to show the pin to get back in. If you stepped out six times in six minutes, the pin would have been checked six times." One could be admitted

without this “magic amulet,” but only with one of a different sort—“a badge,” according to the Sloanes.⁷⁴



This photograph shows a member of the police escort that accompanied inaugural guests when they left the hotel. The sign taped to the windshield—pictured in full elsewhere—reads “Instituto Cubano del Turismo,” suggesting that the buses were provided by the Batista regime’s official tourism commission.

Like the Riviera and Caprí openings earlier in the season, the Habana Hilton inaugural brought planeloads of North American celebrities, society figures, and press representatives to Havana. Actress Ann Miller, television star Leo Carrillo, gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, and others flew in on chartered flights from Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Cuban dignitaries joined them for festivities at the hotel. Francisco Aguirre Vidaurreta, an influential politician under Batista and president of the Gastronomico, was an honored guest. Batista’s wife, Marta Fernández Miranda de Batista, was another. Though Conrad Hilton visited him at

the Presidential Palace while in Havana for the opening, the dictator did not make an appearance at the hotel. Hilton International, the U.S. government, and the Cuban state hoped anxiously that the inaugural weekend would proceed without incident, and Batista's presence, historians suggest, was seen as too great a risk. But given his personal role in the hotel's development, Skwiot claims, his absence was conspicuous and counted as a "public relations victory" for the rebel movement.⁷⁵

Good press—and lots of it—was the aim of every Hilton inaugural. Above all else, according to Wharton, the "extravagant galas" were spectacles, designed to display "the convergence of architecture, politics, the media, and international enterprise" that defined the Hilton brand.⁷⁶ Their value was in their representation, as Boorstin argues—it "depended on



Marta Fernández Miranda de Batista is shown here on the right.



Conrad Hilton, Leo Carrillo, and Hedda Hopper, and a young woman Merrill identifies as a former Miss Minnesota disembark in Havana.

[their] being photographed and reported.”⁷⁷ At the Havana opening, the sizeable and seemingly ubiquitous press contingent gives a sense for this priority. But as Skwiot suggests regarding Batista’s absence from the festivities, more than usual was at stake in Cuba. By 1958, tourism’s modes of depicting the island and its people were losing their authority to accounts of

government brutality and photographs of bearded rebels in the jungle, skinning a snake for supper.⁷⁸ Images and accounts of stylish jetsetters enjoying themselves in Havana worked against rebels' gains. The Hilton opening was an opportunity to perpetuate a set of hegemonic cultural discourses that had been central to the neo-imperialist status quo in Cuba for nearly half a century. Photographs and reports from it had the power to convey what many in the United States believed or hoped was true—that the nation's authority on the island and its elite citizens' privilege there would prevail.



Cameramen film Ann Miller's arrival at the Habana Hilton.

In the end, the Habana Hilton inaugural went off without incident. For its North American guests, U.S. journalist Herbert Matthews observed, it turned out to be “something like

visiting a volcano that is not going to erupt for some days or weeks.”⁷⁹ Despite this triumph, the opening turned out to be “one last bright, shining moment” for Havana’s tourism industry.

Weeks after the festivities, the enormous hotel hosted only 44 guests. Months later, 325 patrons greeted the New Year there as Batista and his top associates fled the island for the Dominican Republic. The next morning, as victorious rebels “poured in from the countryside,” the hotel “filled with more than six hundred soldiers,” who made camp in the ballroom. And on January 8, Fidel Castro radically transformed the hotel when he and his compatriots arrived in Havana and made the twenty-third floor home. From a tourist utopia and monument to North



Inaugural guests have drinks outside.



Cuban musicians entertain Conrad Hilton and other guests.

American righteousness, the Habana Hilton became the provisional headquarters of the revolutionary government of Cuba.

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- ¹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 125.
- ² Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 156-162.
- ³ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 126 and Annabel Wharton, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2001), 7.
- ⁴ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 155.
- ⁵ See Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 160 and Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 159.
- ⁶ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 142.
- ⁷ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 26-27.
- ⁸ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 141-142.
- ⁹ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 2.
- ¹⁰ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 118.
- ¹¹ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 40.
- ¹² Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 8-9.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 197.
- ¹⁴ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 32.
- ¹⁵ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 2-3.
- ¹⁶ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 32.
- ¹⁷ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 2.
- ¹⁸ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 141 and Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 34-35.
- ¹⁹ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 21.
- ²⁰ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 5.
- ²¹ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 170.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 170-174.
- ²³ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 5.
- ²⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 201-213.
- ²⁵ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 193.
- ²⁶ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 39-40.
- ²⁷ Boorstin, *The Image*, 99.
- ²⁸ John Urry, "Sensing the City," in *The Tourist City*, ed. Dennis R. Judd and Susan S. Fainstein (New Haven: Yale U Press, 1999), 81.
- ²⁹ Boorstin, *The Image*, 97-99.
- ³⁰ Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 211.
- ³¹ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 36-38 and Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 211-215.
- ³² Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 5.
- ³³ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 141.
- ³⁴ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 5.
- ³⁵ Shirley and Bob Sloane, "Hilton Opens in Havana," *The Miami News*, 4 April 1958.
- ³⁶ Boorstin, *The Image*, 99.
- ³⁷ Shirley and Bob Sloane, "Hilton Opens."
- ³⁸ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 5-6.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁴⁰ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 21.
- ⁴¹ Benjamin, *The United States*, 4.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 103.
- ⁴³ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 138.
- ⁴⁴ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 58-59.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.
- ⁴⁶ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 450-451.
- ⁴⁷ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 41.
- ⁴⁸ Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 230.
- ⁴⁹ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 197.
- ⁵⁰ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 133.

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- ⁵¹ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 356.
⁵² *Ibid.*, 457.
⁵³ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 176.
⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 200-201.
⁵⁵ Ward, *Packaged Vacations*, 39.
⁵⁶ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 490.
⁵⁷ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 190 and Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 169.
⁵⁸ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 55.
⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.
⁶⁰ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 195.
⁶¹ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 167.
⁶² Gosse, “We Are All Highly Adventurous,” 238.
⁶³ *Ibid.*, 238-255.
⁶⁴ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 103.
⁶⁵ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 128.
⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-103.
⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.
⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.
⁶⁹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 140.
⁷⁰ *Ibid.*,
142.
⁷¹ Hedda Hopper, “Hedda on Her Way Again to Another Hotel Opening,” *Chicago Tribune*, 24 March 1958.
⁷² Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 142.
⁷³ Moruzzi, *Havana Before Castro*, 218.
⁷⁴ Shirley and Bob Sloane, “Hilton Opens.”
⁷⁵ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 196.
⁷⁶ Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, 8.
⁷⁷ Boorstin, *The Image*, 10.
⁷⁸ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, 186.
⁷⁹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 154.

CONCLUSION

Among others, a central goal of the research presented here has been to investigate the conflict between the tourism industry in 1950s Cuba and the revolution that succeeded in overthrowing Batista at the end of 1959. That such a relationship exists is suggested in certain Keating photographs, like those that show the conspicuous and outsized security presence at the Habana Hilton opening. But more than anything else, the fact that Fidel Castro and his revolutionary compatriots occupied the Hilton when they arrived in Havana emphasizes—and cemented in history—the hotel’s and the industry’s symbolic significance in Cubans’ rejection of the status quo upheld by the Batista regime. What did the Habana Hilton hotel mean to the dictator’s opponents? On the other hand, what kind of experience did it promise their elite patrons? What made Cuba such an alluring vacation destination for North Americans in the twentieth century, and what forces were at work to sustain, for so many, the illusions that were the basis of tourism discourse?

With such questions as a starting point, this paper has stressed the harmful consequences of tourism in Cuba, its complicity in North American neo-imperial authority, and the implications of the primitivism that underpinned its promotion. But tourism has been—and can be—more than this, too. In the past century or so, as Merrill points out, travel has “entangled the lives of ordinary Americans across the hemisphere,” and its impact has been complex and unpredictable.¹ Even given the nature of the industry on the island, Pérez argues that tourism played an important role in a dynamic cultural exchange between Cuba and the United States in

these years—a “force of enormous vitality,” as he describes it, which “moved in both directions.”² Schwartz discusses the efforts of the populist government that succeeded Machado in the mid-1930s to redefine the island’s appeal by highlighting its natural beauty and cultural legacies, and historians emphasize similar attempts by the Castro government in its first years in power.³ Cognizant of its economic significance, Cuba’s revolutionary leaders sought not to bring tourism to an end, but “to revise [its] meaning” along the same lines as earlier reformers.⁴

Although, at first, Castro “demonstrated ideological flexibility toward tourism” and a “willingness to work with the North American travel industry,” Merrill observes, “Washington never relaxed its furrowed brow.”⁵ Especially in this tense atmosphere, he suggests it proved too drastic for North American vacationers to “reimagine Cuba...sans prostitution...gangsters, and subservience.”⁶ By the time the United States imposed a trade embargo in early 1961, tourism had “already dwindled to the point of economic irrelevance.”⁷ While it may have been, as Merrill argues, one of the last elements of the U.S.-Cuban relationship to dissolve in the twentieth century, he is surely right in speculating that tourism is likely to be among the first linkages re-established in the twenty-first. And since President Barack Obama and Cuban leader Raul Castro announced in late 2014 that the nations would begin negotiations to restore normal diplomatic ties, the possibility may be fast approaching.

Like the Cuban leaders who attempted across the first half of the twentieth century to reform tourism on the island—and those, of course, who profited from it as it was established—“tourists...possess historical agency,” as Merrill points out.⁸ And as this new chapter in the United States’ relationship with Cuba begins, the contemporary North American public is likely to be a major source of new visitors to the island. In light of this, the Keatings’ photographs from 1950s Havana are especially compelling, both as an entrée into the history of tourism on

the island and evidence of it. They make this past—from which we would do well to learn—come alive in ways that photographic images have a special capacity to do. This investigation into what we see in them seeks to expose and dispel the illusions that underpinned the tourism industry they depict, in order that we may move forward with greater understanding of how such forces have been at work in the past and with greater awareness of how they may come into play again.

¹ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 5.

² Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 6.

³ See Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*; Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*; and Ward, *Packaged Vacations*.

⁴ Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 175.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

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