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Book review of A Cultural History of Cuba During the US Occupation, 1898-1902 by Marial Utset (U of North Carolina Press) 'Almanacs, Street Names, and Symbolic Gestures: Producing the Cuban Nation in Daily Life'

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For those of us more generally interested in film and history, particularly in this era, the call to further research into the vast landscape of visual culture that was available to consumers of late nineteenth-century popular forms is very welcome. How film scholars decide to periodize and classify their findings, I leave to them and look forward to reading the synthesis when they work it out. If this book provides a new impetus to research as well as a spur to disciplinary debate inside film studies, well done. If it offers the possibility of enhanced engagement with other disciplines and fields of study, even better. Although film studies has somewhat stabilized over the past generation in many academic venues, like all humanities disciplines, it too has come under increasing attack for its emphasis on critical theory. All of us who understand that certain other voices of the present are bearing down intently on our capacities to write about the past in our own voice need to press forward in the search for new interpretations. If for no other reason, at this moment in history, the act of demanding a new interpretation instead of settling for received wisdom is itself rapidly becoming an endangered practice.

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Almanacs, Street Names, and Symbolic Gestures: Producing the Cuban Nation in Daily Life

UTSET, MARIAL IGLESIAS. *A Cultural History of Cuba during the U.S. Occupation, 1898–1902*. Translated by Russ Davidson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xi + 232 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3398-8; \$26.95 (paper) ISBN 978-0-8078-7192-8. doi:10.1017/S153778141300011X

A Cultural History of Cuba during the U.S. Occupation, 1898–1902 offers a translation of Marial Iglesias Utset's award-winning *Las metáforas del cambio en la vida cotidiana: Cuba 1898–1902* (2003).¹

¹Marial Iglesias Utset, *Las metáforas del cambio en la vida cotidiana: Cuba 1898–1902* (La Habana, 2003). The Spanish edition, based on Utset's dissertation, was awarded Cuba's prestigious *Premio UNEAC de Ensayo*, Enrique José Varona in 2002 and the American Historical Association's Clarence H. Haring Prize in 2006 for most

Utset is professor of history and philosophy at the University of Havana, and despite some problems with the translation, this publication finally provides English-speaking readers access to her innovative cultural history of the “complex juncture” of the Wars of Independence (1895–98), the U.S. military occupation of Cuba, and the formation of the Cuban Republic in 1902.² With a nod to Louis Pérez’s formulation of “between empires,” Utset describes Cuba’s situation as “neither colony nor sovereign state” (2). She argues that it was precisely through creative negotiation of the former colonial culture and the “new set of political and cultural norms championed by the interventionist authorities” whereby Cubans enacted the elements of *cubanía* or “the belief in a unique Cuban identity and national consciousness” (3).

The project is in conversation with the classics of Cuban historiography and contemporary English-language historiography of the War of 1898 and the U.S. occupation of Cuba, particularly Pérez’s cultural history, *On Becoming Cuban*.³ The latter is broad in scope and takes up nearly a hundred years of Cuban history, whereas Utset’s time frame permits deeper focus. Whereas Pérez demonstrates that U.S. culture functioned as a form of domination, Utset documents how Cubans combined aspects of American culture with other symbols—and not only in ways that matched interventionist desires.

outstanding book on Latin American history published between 2001 and the award year.

²In the introduction alone, sections have been removed and new material added without any documentation in the translator’s note. This is a significant problem, given that a full chapter of Utset’s study takes up the issue of linguistic colonization. Other changes made by the translator undermine the work as a performance studies project. The translator’s note suggests that English-language words used in the original Spanish appear in quotations, yet the term *performance* does not, indicating its use in the course of translation rather than in the original. However, Utset’s use of the English-language term (which does not exist in Spanish) is key to her methodology. Also in the introduction, the translator three times misuses “performative,” a term that does not appear in Utset’s original. Scholars should attribute these flaws to the translation rather than to Utset’s critical perspective. For analysis of the uses of “performance,” “performativity,” and *lo performático* in Spanish and English, see Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, 2003).

³Louis A. Pérez Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1999). Also Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment* (Pittsburgh, 1986); and Pérez, *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill, 1998). Among major Cuban works that Usted cites (106, 170n18) as especially relevant: Manuel de la Cruz, *Episodios de la Revolución cubana* (La Habana, 1967); Ramón Roa, *A pie y descalzo de Trinidad a Cuba* (Miami, 1977); and Enrique Collazo, *Desde Yara hasta el Zanjón: apuntes históricos* (La Habana, 1967).

At the heart of Utset's project is a theoretical challenge to the idea that culture is "a condition that formed and informed the assumptions of daily life."⁴ She argues instead that "an extensive corpus of symbols, images, and discourses" was an essential component of the "nationalist imagination" and was "both cause and effect of a political and cultural process of great complexity" (7). Her goal is to demonstrate that the "symbolic gestures" and "multiple performances" of daily life (*la vida cotidiana*) formed and informed national politics and culture (4, 9). Each of the book's chapters takes up a different area of symbolic culture, from the spatial "dismantling" of the "symbols of colonial power" (ch. 1), celebrations and fiestas (ch. 2), and the linguistic colonization and the preservation of Spanish (ch. 3), to the relationships between nationalism and the rapid changes in place names (ch. 4), museums and patriotic symbols (ch. 5), and public culture (ch. 6).

Like Benedict Anderson, Utset defines the nation as an imagined community, but she challenges his assumptions about the importance of print-capital to the process by citing the high illiteracy rate in Cuba (7).⁵ "If it is true that intellectual and political elites play an important role" in the production and mediation of nationalism, she reminds us that "it is also true that the participation 'from below' of subaltern groups cannot be ignored or diminished" (7). She criticizes the classical Cuban "historiographical line which locates the symbolic construction of *cubanidad* (the constituent elements of *cubanía*) in the vanguard actions undertaken by the educated creole elite" because it, too, "minimizes or relegates to a secondary plane the active participation of popular sectors and the important weight borne by subaltern political culture in fostering the 'imaginative community of the nation'" (106–07). Utset's aim is not to explore the "activities pursued by the intellectual and political class," but the ways that "common people, the majority of them illiterate, took part in this conflict over symbols" (100). For Utset, the nation is equally enacted through daily decisions—whether to travel by horseback or ride a modern bicycle, whether to attend mass or a Sunday baseball game (4).

Tracing such performance ephemera is Utset's greatest challenge and the major contribution of her work. She develops a creative archival methodology in which she reads almanacs and calendars

⁴Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 8.

⁵Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London, 1991).

for “changes in cycles of festivals and celebrations that for decades had defined and governed the social life of the colony” (31). She treats local criminal records as quasi-theatrical documents of impromptu street gatherings and other visceral gestures, such as one group of young men arrested for bursting into nationalist song in public (100–01). In order to trace the rapid street renaming, which “occurred on a massive scale during the first months of 1899” and yet was not the result of “any centralized initiative,” Utset scours announcements made in newspaper advertising sections. In her efforts to be as inclusive as possible, in addition to the mainstream press she examined numerous unlicensed papers, such as the penny press newsheets that were affordable to most Cubans (89). Similarly, many of the changes in company names in the capital were made by individual businessmen rather than formal decree —tracing these also required inventive methodology (94). Utset argues that historical advertisements often allow for the reconstruction of “the range of political leanings prevalent in [a] locale” regardless of the newspaper’s own political ideology. For example, in a pro-American magazine, advertisements “placed by La Estrella, a Cuban chocolate manufacturer, competed for attention against those placed by La Española,” based in Galicia (97). Through these methods, Utset tells of the Purísima Concepción pharmacy (its title a trace of colonial times), which, in the shifting geography of street names, quickly found itself located at the intersection of McKinley and Martí. She notes, with some humor, that the juncture of names that emerged on this corner depicted a Cuba that, “while intent on leaving the colonial past behind, nonetheless vacillates between taking Martí, which leads toward the realization of national sovereignty, or McKinley, which points in the direction of a ‘modern’ yet dependent future” (98).

Utset’s outstanding analysis makes several contributions to both U.S. and Cuban historiography as well as to developing useful strategies in historical methodology. Most significant are her highly nuanced readings of competing and conflicting national imaginaries, “riven by class tension and by ethnic and racial conflict,” and the performed and lived production of nationalist sentiment and symbolism—“from below” and at the level of daily life (7–8). The book is highly recommended for scholars and advanced students of Latin American, Cuban, and U.S. history, historiography, and cultural studies.

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