



Vol. 3, No. 3, Spring 2006, 73-76
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Review / Reseña

**Temporalities of *cubanía* in the Special
Period**

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José Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005)

Written accounts of travel to Cuba during the Special Period—the period marked by the collapse of the Soviet bloc and ensuing economic transformations on the island—are replete with references to the island as exhibiting a particular sense of time: out of time, stuck in time, timeless, on its own time. These descriptions are typically accompanied by the requisite photos of 1950s Chevys against the backdrop of Havana’s colonial buildings or decaying billboards of Revolutionary heroes. Undoubtedly the idea of Time itself, along with its *compadre* History, is imbued with ideology. The notion of Cuban time at a standstill, for instance, is especially notable

in recent U.S. newspaper and magazine articles that feature Cuba as a travel destination or potential capitalist investment opportunity. As seen from the point of view of potential U.S. investors, this idea of time communicates a sense that the Cuban present is stagnant, trapped within the glorification of a socialist Revolution whose triumphs have passed, and that the island will enter the globalized present again pending Fidel Castro's death and the always "imminent" collapse of the Revolution. Time is of the essence. Questioning the imperialist ideology contained in the placement of Cuba outside this particular rendition of modern, sequential time is imperative.

José Quiroga's *Cuban Palimpsests* deftly critiques this leitmotif of the immobility of Cuban time in the Special Period. For Quiroga, Cuban time has not stopped but is instead suspended in a moment of transformation as those in Greater Cuba (Cubans within and outside the geographic space of the island) engage in articulating new temporalities of *cubanía* (Cubanness). He rejects defining the Special Period as a moment of "transition," contending that this idea presupposes a progressive march forward that discounts the possibility of diverse outcomes and the non-linear, uneven processes by which present and future are imagined.

Quiroga argues that comprehending how Cuba—its past, its present, and its future—is being reimagined in the Special Period requires setting aside a sequential mode of temporality represented in the teleological project of History. To this effect, Quiroga's method is to treat the Cuban present as *palimpsest* by placing the present and its pasts side by side so that both can be seen and interpreted simultaneously. The method works outside of a sequential model of historical temporality, focusing instead on the relationship of memory to politics and cultural production in rearticulations of *cubanía*. José Quiroga, who also authored *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*, emphasizes

that palimpsest is a queer method, for it dismantles rather than reproduces an original, and functions to conjoin disassociated concepts as it represents the layering of historical time. *Cuban Palimpsests* does this by examining pivotal cultural sites of the Special Period in concert with their past articulations in order to highlight how processes of dismantling and reproduction operate in reimagining cubanía. The book's focus on memory's dismantling and reproduction of Cuba is further represented in the author's poignant introduction of his own personal journeys within Greater Cuba—a method that queers the traditional distance between neutral academic observer and object of study, particularly in the remarkable chapter composed of his personal and academic reflections on temporality in ephemeral art of Ana Mendieta.

Quiroga's book is a cultural studies project that examines seven sites that loom large in the 20th century Cuban imagination and are rearticulated in the Special Period: Harlem's Hotel Theresa, espionage, cultural production in photography, literature, music and film, the art of Ana Mendieta, and postmortem memorializations of Celia Cruz and Che Guevara. A significant contribution *Cuban Palimpsests* makes to the often politically polarized field of Cuban Studies is to bridge the contentious divide between Cuba and its diaspora by simultaneously foregrounding both in each of the seven cultural sites examined in the book. For Quiroga, cubanía is reproduced through Cuba's dismantling "at home" and abroad; memory is constantly crossing borders, whether temporal, geographic, political, or disciplinary. Thus, the temporalities of Harlem's Hotel Theresa are placed side by side the physical deterioration of contemporary Havana, Cuban exile Antonio Prohías's Cold War era *Mad* magazine comic strip *Spy vs. Spy* is situated alongside the contemporary espionage saga of the Cuban Five, and the heroic memorialization of the return of Che Guevara's

body to Cuba is treated together with the performative rites of Celia Cruz's New York and Miami funerals.

Quiroga's analysis of temporal shifts in the Special Period focuses on counterpoints of *collective memory* and *memorialization* to elucidate the manner in which Cuban collectivities are interpellated by state projects of memorialization. Quiroga's further argues that memorialization does not exclusively reinforce the Cuban state's revolutionary project and can underpin any teleological project, including those of the Cuban exile community. Despite this attention to relations of power and the state, Quiroga's analysis often fails to recognize the resistance of cultural forms once they are coopted by the Cuban state. This leads him to privilege timba music's validation of conspicuous consumerism and dismiss the transformative potential of hip hop in Cuban racial politics. Also, the book occasionally overreaches its analysis of culture and politics. For example, Quiroga's chapter on espionage is exhaustively researched, yet the conclusion he reaches – that the Cold War culture of espionage produces a sort of performative transvestism of identity— is unconvincingly argued.

Despite these flaws, however, José Quiroga's *Cuban Palimpsests* is a well-researched academic study and poetic meditation on temporalities of cubanía. It greatly expands the scope of existing literature on the Special Period and is recommended for scholars and others interested in understanding the interventions of memory and culture in national imaginaries.