

2

Negotiating the Past, Representing the Nation

The Contested Uses of Heritage
during the Republic (1898–1959)

After two wars against Spain (1868–1878 and 1879–1880), Cuba acquired its political independence in the War of Independence between 1895 and 1898, a century after most Latin American countries. Nearly 10 percent of the Cuban population died during the war, including the intellectual José Martí, who became the martyr and hero of Cuban nationalism. The conflict had escalated with the involvement of the United States in the last months of the war, following the explosion of the battleship *Maine* in Havana's harbor. Spanish colonialism in America ended and the United States became the new regional imperial power, occupying Cuba and ensuring control over political and economic affairs through the Platt Amendment.

The occupation government put an end to the resolve to break with the old social order, favored by radical proindependence Cubans. Instead, it favored the interests of creole landowners and urban elites, who regained their positions of strength in the new republic. The period of political turmoil, civic revolts, and economic fluctuations between 1898 and 1959 reflected the tensions between the opposed modernizing projects of Cuban

politico-economic elites, intervening U.S. authorities, intellectual and cultural elites, and the popular classes' demand for inclusion. In fact, the modernization of the Cuban state in its transition from a Spanish colonial corporatist structure to a liberal model was unable to combine the democratization of society with the expansion of culture and the redistribution of wealth. As a result, efforts to build an independent and more equitable state with social cohesion largely failed.

For most Cuban scholars, the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a national identity associated with a Cuban culture, a specific combination of Spanish and African traits (Pupo Pupo 2005:37). However, Cuba presented a heterogeneous ethnic and racial population. Also, it had to develop an original identity against an ex-colonial power with which it shared many sociocultural tenets and a language. To complicate things even further, "whitening" policies fostered the arrival of thousands of Spanish immigrants to Cuba during the first decades of the twentieth century (Naranjo Orovio 2001). The question of national identity was fundamental in Cuban political and cultural life during these decades, and there was a general disorientation in the construction of a national discourse. Although in Cuba the nation may have existed well before the state, the republican state played a prominent role in using heritage to construct usable pasts for grounding a discourse of national identity and collective memory. But the creation of usable pasts in Cuba proved a difficult task, as the Spanish, black, and indigenous histories did not provide useful underpinnings for crafting a distinct Cuban narrative. Ethnically, Cuban national identity had to be grounded in an abstract national spirit that combined, but differentiated itself from, the indigenous, black, and Spanish inheritances. The political situation exacerbated the difficulties, as Cubans debated whether the nation should be annexed to the United States, remain linked to Spain, or be independent.

The passage from defining Cuban identity against Spanish colonialism to doing so against U.S. imperialism after 1898 led to a deep process of reflection and redefinition of national representations and discourses. Cubans had to develop a national history associated with figures, facts, and myths from the past that would render Cuba unique. The Cuban nationalist project was led by mostly Hispanic elite groups, including political leaders, intellectuals, scientists, historians, doctors and writers, professional organizations, migrant associations, and political parties. This elite

group's monopoly over the state apparatus has led José Fernández (2011) to speak of a "Republic of the elites." However, elites presented vaguely defined cultural and political identities that tended to imitate and import foreign models, first from Spain and Europe and after the 1930s from the United States.

It would be misleading to conflate Cuban elites with intellectuals, as they all came from diverse backgrounds and classes, and their political projects never lined up with one another (Bronfman 2005:6). Characters such as Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring represented the contradictory group that made up the intellectual elite. Following Jorge Duany (1997:12), this group was characterized by a combination of anti-imperialism with elitism, reformism, and paternalism and by a frustrated ambition to lead and transform the nation. For them, heritage was fundamental in the project to create a homogeneous people and culture that shared a representation of the national past to disseminate through education. As in the Puerto Rican and other Latin American nation-building processes, the construction of the national idea involved the intermixing of political and intellectual elites, with intellectuals providing legitimacy and guidance for political action.

Cuban elites sought heritage management models in consolidated nations, such as the United States, England, and France. In these countries, evolutionist ideas informed the production of monuments and museums. Heritage served to rank social groups chronologically and hierarchically and to fix the morality and tastes of the newly defined nations. In Cuba, this entailed a form of continuity with the attitudes of elites during the late colonial period. In his exploration of late colonial Cuba, Paul Niell (2015) has related the appearance of heritage policies in Havana during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the emergence of a public sphere and the phenomenon of cultural modernism. For him, Cuban creole elites patronized public heritage works to ensure cultural authority through the symbolic appropriation of Western Greco-Roman neoclassicism. In doing so, Havana's elites connected their social position within the colony to the tradition of European antiquity and set the standards of human excellence that should guide the modernization process. It is therefore necessary to explore in which ways republican heritage policies continued or disrupted the late colonial phenomenon of cultural modernism.