Introduction

As a tourism scholar who focuses on Cuba, I feel it is appropriate to introduce my paper about continuities in the Cuban *lucha*, with a scene of touristic patrimony that is regularly witnessed by many foreigners and Cubans alike. Similar to what can be observed in Havana, each night at sunset at the el Morro fortress in Santiago-de-Cuba, there is a color-guard ceremony in which men and women dressed as *mambises*—or rebel soldiers—remove the national flag. The main event, however, is the firing of the cannons that follows. In the performance that I observed, three men actively performed the hard work of loading the cannons with gunpowder under the supervision of their female commanding officers. After a while the men stopped and casually began to wipe their brows, leading many in the growing audience to wonder if the event was over—until the men were compelled to work again under their superiors’ stern gaze. But when the sentries finally did finish loading the cannon, it initially failed to go off. The *mambi* who had lit the fuse shook his head and acted out an expression of frustration with his faulty government-supplied equipment. The Cuban man standing behind me articulated the familiar sentiment being performed: “¡Cojón! No es fácil...” The bombs eventually went off to much applause.

In this contemporary touristic display, the performers wordlessly linked Cuba’s distant, colonial era, past to the struggles—*las luchas*—experienced by Cubans today. Beyond the Cuban government’s official position on the longue durée of Cuba’s
revolutionary process, the performance also signaled parallels in *la lucha* at a less official, or “everyday,” level.

This paper will trace the Cuban *lucha* through three centuries, focusing on the cultural implications of (1) the nineteenth century independence movement; (2) the rise of socialism in the second half of the twentieth century; and (3) the post-Soviet Special Period of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

**The Post-Independence *Lucha***

*Siempre hemos estado luchando. La historia nuestra es de lucha constante—lo mismo que en la manigua que en la ciudad. Pero ellos [los EEUU] saben que con ese tipo de lucha—de guerra—no nos ganan, entonces inventaron el bloqueo.*

(We have always been fighting. Our history is one of constant struggle—both in the countryside and in the city. But they [the United States] know that they can’t beat us in that kind of fight—of war—so they invented the blockade.)

—Hermina, age 26

As in many countries, daily life in today’s Cuba requires a constant struggle to survive. The difference presented by the Cuban context is the historico-political meaning of the Spanish word *lucha*—a noun or verb that means “struggle” or “fight.” Hermina’s use of the term quoted here stresses the historically continuous process that began with the nation’s war for independence from Spain, but resulted in its envelopment into the
U.S. neo-colonial sphere. The lucha against Spain for national independence, then, evolved into a lucha against the United States (as well as many in the Cuban elite) for the right to self-determination.

Culturally, this presented something of a dilemma: whereas many Cubans had struggled for more than forty years to distinguish themselves from their Spanish colonizers, now many of the Americanisms they had adopted (like baseball over bullfights or Protestantism over Catholicism) were also under scrutiny. What constituted Cuban culture? Despite widespread anti-black sentiment in the country—whether home-grown or imported from the racially segregated United States—African-derived music, dance, and religious practices frequently came to the fore as distinctly Cuban, especially given the increasing market for tourism in Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century. Though the 1912 massacre of thousands of Afro-Cuban political activists effectively institutionalized Cuba’s racial democracy myth, race has continued to rear its head as a central issue in the Cuban lucha.

Luchando por la Revolución

During my fieldwork in the early 2000s, a regularly featured political commercial on TeleRebelde [or Channel 2] displayed an image of Antonio Maceo from the Protest at Baraguá, where the mulato general famously rejected the terms of the Pact of Zanjón that would have ended Cuba’s Ten Years’ War without abolishing slavery entirely, and without full independence. Over the image of the failed negotiation, zoomed a graphic that read “Seguimos el Protesto de Baraguá — We continue the Protest at Baraguá.” The “we” in the politi-commercial clearly referred to today’s socialist revolutionaries.
Like Maceo's late nineteenth century *mambi* troops, many Cubans of the 1950s had long been dissatisfied with a political and economic system that empowered an outside entity more than it empowered the residents of Cuba. If the Platt Amendment of 1902 instituted the United States' neocolonial position in Cuba, the progressive Cuban constitution of 1940 seemed to finally signal Cuban independence. However, after Fulgencio Batista, the corrupt former "king-maker," overthrew Cuba's constitutional government in 1952, Fidel Castro and his comrades began a series of events that would result in the Cuban revolution at the end of the decade. The politi-commercial drew a line directly from Maceo to Castro's young rebel movement to the multi-generational Cubans watching television in the early twenty-first century.

Since the Triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959, the Cuban people have been *luchando* (struggling) to fulfill their revolutionary goals of building a politically and economically self-sufficient nation-state that can provide for the basic needs of all of its citizens and support other less developed countries in doing the same. At the national level, the Cuban people have been quite successfully mobilized to *luchar* in the name of the revolution in a number of ways over the decades.

For example, nearly every household in Cuba had a direct relationship with the mass literacy campaigns of the 1960s, which enlisted individuals with at least a middle school education to go to the rural regions to teach their illiterate fellow citizens. Since men were required for the military, many of the *analfabetizadoras* were young women who were leaving their family homes alone for the first time under these campaigns. The teachers were largely white and *mulato*, while the pupils were poor whites and *mulatos,*
and disproportionate numbers of blacks. The literacy campaigns built the foundation for the Cuban revolution’s many accomplishments in education.

Beyond the literacy campaigns, the 1970 sugar harvest was significant in the history of Cuban socialism because, until that point, Fidel Castro had resisted economic (and political) direction by the Soviets. He firmly believed that if all of the Cuban people worked hard enough and sacrificed enough, they could achieve the unprecedented sugar harvest target of 10 million tons. The harvest came in at a record 8.5 million tons, but was an emotional blow because it still fell far short of the national goal. Moreover, because nearly all of the nation’s resources had been diverted to the sugar industry, and because other crops had been neglected in favor of this objective, the Cuban economy was left in ruins forcing Cuba deeper into the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence, both economically and politically. As a Soviet satellite, the struggle for full Cuban independence was, again, subsumed by a foreign power with its own agenda.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the Cuban people have been called upon by the revolutionary government to defend socialism [as my interviewees repeatedly asserted “hasta la última gota de sangre”] despite the renewed impact of the U.S. blockade. Whereas the earlier campaigns involved a mass mobilization of labor, marchers and the media fostered the nationwide calls for the U.S. to return the child Elián González between 2000 and 2001, as well as the Five Heroes of Imperialism from 2000 to present. In contrast to the Elián González controversy, with which nearly every U.S. American at the time was familiar, most Americans know nothing about those whom Cubans call the “Cinco Heroes de Imperialismo.” Five young men had been sent by the Cuban government to infiltrate a far-right anti-Castro lobby group that has sponsored
numerous aggressions against communist Cuba. In 1998, the men were arrested, and in 2001 they were sentenced to life imprisonment for espionage, but the Cuban people see the young men as national heroes who were trying to protect the homeland and continue to rally for their release.

While the Soviets may not have significantly impacted Cuban culture beyond the so-called “Generation Y” of children with names like Yuri, Yuset, and Yosbel, the implications of Cuban nationalism became more entrenched amidst the Cold War. The Soviet-era Cuban lucha divided the Cuban people not only by political lines in the sand, but by the geographical Florida Straits.

The Special Period Lucha

Cuba is a nice place to live—if you have money. We’ve got beaches and all that, but if you don’t have money...Cuba is a place with no freedoms and you live through la lucha...

—Juan Carlos, age 30

Since the Cuban government emphasizes a prolonged revolutionary struggle at the national level, my own research considers how everyday Cubans also signify their own never-ending struggle for personal survival in terms of la lucha. Here, black market clothes vendor, Juan Carlos, uses the term in its Special Period sense—as a way to acquire dollars by any means in the name of the revolution. In other words, in the post-Soviet era members of the general populace now coax earlier meanings of the term in order to describe their struggle to survive in the day-to-day. Notably, today’s lucha frequently forsakes collectivism in the name of the individual.
The range of practices on the contemporary *lucha* continuum include constant maneuverings to conquer the transportation system—like suffering the (now-retired) *camello* mass form of transit, or *cogíndol la botella*—that is, hitchhiking—in a more individual approach. At a more ethically questionable level, individuals and households regularly make purchases *por la izquierda*—that is, on the black market—when the government’s central warehouses have been emptied of goods for rationing. Indeed, the government decided to legalize U.S. dollars in 1993 largely in order to capture the large amounts of currency known to be circulating in Cuba’s then overgrown black market economy. *Jineterismo*, or hustling, is perhaps the most stigmatized example of *la lucha* because young men and women leverage the resources at their disposal (from family members working in cigar factories to ones’ physical appearance) in order to extract wealth from foreign tourists for personal, rather than collective, benefit. Even more than other *luchadores, jineteros* and their female counterparts, *jineteras*, look beyond the Cuban context and into the recently welcomed global market for their fortune. Despite regular police harassment for merely talking to foreigners, as well as the constant threat of deportation from Havana back to the countryside, young people continue to be attracted to hustling.

Regardless of the stigma on *jineteros*, I contend that one of the most damaging aspects of the Special Period is that even the most revolutionary Cubans have been forced to engage in illegal or unethical activities from time to time in order to survive. In my forthcoming book, I argue that in the context of mass international tourism—which assumes “white” (or “whitened”) tourists carrying foreign capital—these morally questionable practices racially “darken” the participants (and other Cubans by
association) based on longstanding Cuban racial understandings about cultura and cultured behaviors.

**Conclusion**

The Cuban trope of *la lucha* reminds us how in culture ‘the more things change, the more things stay the same.’ Cuba is not, nor has it been for several millennia, an insulated or isolated place. From the multiple indigenous groups who had migrated from the American mainlands to the incorporation of Spanish, African, and Asian peoples, the earliest creole Cubans struggled to live and work together. That early creole identity fostered the movement for Cuban independence from the Spanish colonizers in the late-nineteenth century, but ended in neo-colonial relations with the United States. *Entonces, seguía la lucha* – So the struggle continued. Fidel Castro and his rebel comrades took up the mantle of the independence movement in the mid-twentieth century and have since used that nationalist sentiment to successfully mobilize revolutionary Cubans time and again. However, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban masses seem to have re-interpreted the meanings of “struggle” for their own purposes. Like Antonio Maceo and his mambi supporters, twenty-first century Cubans are luchando for full independence—even if many now do so independent of Cuba’s revolutionary state.