

Maiden or Mambisa: Race, Gender, and Agency in the Cisneros Affair

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At the close of the nineteenth century three events converged to create an international affair that shook the Atlantic. In 1895, Cubans embarked on a war of national liberation against Spain, ultimately achieving the end of Spanish colonial rule on the island. In the same year, the wealthy American William Randolph Hearst purchased a minor New York City newspaper, *The New York Journal*. Over the coming years, Hearst and his paper entered a bitter circulation war armed with innovative and populist ideas of how journalists should present news. The third event which incited this affair began one in 1896. That year, Spanish authorities arrested a white Cuban woman named Evangelina Cosío y Cisneros on charges related to rebellion against Spain.¹ Hearst's paper, ever watchful of the war in Cuba, seized on the arrest. Hearst and the journal reported a version of Cisneros' story which described her as a white, victimized, feminine archetype. This constructed media narrative caused such a fervor in the United States that *The Journal* illegally worked to rescue the distressed damsel Cisneros, and brought her to the United States. To the delight of the more invention minded sections of the American public, *The Journal* succeeded in November of 1897. When first examining this story, it almost seems as if it were a fairy tale

complete with an innocent maiden and a heroic saviour. Upon closer examination, this version of events appears unlikely. Indeed, in the process of selling the story, *The Journal* glossed over the real possibility that Cisneros was not a helpless victim, but in fact, culpable of the crimes she stood accused of.

Cisneros claimed in a memoir published in New York City that her personal trouble began in 1895. That summer, her father Jose Augustine Cosío y Serrano, chose to leave home to fight in the insurrection with fifteen compatriots. One member of the band quickly betrayed the rest, and the Spanish authorities sentenced Augustine Cosío to death by firing squad. Evangelina demonstrated a considerable amount of resourcefulness as well as bravery, and convinced the authorities to commute her father's sentence to imprisonment in the African penal colony of Ceuta. She went further, and proceeded to obtain a meeting with the Spanish military Governor of Cuba, General Valeriano Weyler. She convinced Weyler to lower her father's sentence to a lax, house arrest imprisonment on the *Isla de Pinos*.² She then accompanied her father to his place of imprisonment.³ The agency Cisneros displayed in commuting her father's sentence would not be mentioned in much of the American reporting on the matter.

By her own account, Evangelina and her father found the Isle "very peaceful," until the Spanish military governor of the Island, Colonel José Berriz, arrived.⁴ What happened next is disputed. One version of the story tells us that Cisneros solicited

Berriz to come to her house at night, and then unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Berriz for the revolution. Another version of the story pushed by the American media posited that Berriz found himself so taken by Cisneros beauty that he tried to force himself on her. In this version of the story, a crowd of her compatriots came to her rescue and tied the Colonel up. Rather than face the dishonor associated with the failed attempt at rape, Berriz claimed Cisneros and her associates attacked him.⁵ Regardless, the Spanish authorities swiftly imprisoned Cisneros in a notably unpleasant Havana women's prison, the *Casa de Recogidas* for attempted assassination of a military officer. At this point, *The New York Journal* seized on Cisneros story.

The *New York Journal* represented a new wave of journalistic practice that significantly departed from traditional journalism. A few decades prior to The War of Cuban Independence, major newspapers in New York catered mostly to the elite, educated, literate segments of society who concerned themselves with world events. In a time period when few could read, the writers of newspapers did not cater to mass audiences. A newspaper in the early to mid-nineteenth century scarcely resembled the newspapers of the 1890s. No pictures accompanied stories, and no headlines existed either. The entirety of the paper contained several columns of small text, similar to a contemporary classifieds section. Newspapers worked for maximum efficiency of information to paper used, not for readability.⁶ In the 1880s, innovative papers such as the *New York World* and *The*

Sun, began to push the boundaries of journalism. Seeing a market, these papers began to print readable, dramatic interpretations of local news which appealed to the newly literate classes. With a huge new market tapped, newspapers entered circulation wars to see who could take control of the largest share of the market.

William Randolph Hearst may have been the elite son of a San Francisco millionaire, but this new style of journalism impacted him as strongly as it did the less affluent. Roggenkamp notes that Hearst genuinely enjoyed human drama, and was reported as able to "project himself into any drama and shed copious tears." Upon discovering *The World* in his early twenties, he fell in love with its unique brand of reporting. He went so far as to declare it "undoubtedly the best paper" and praised it as democratic and beholden to "the people."⁷ It took several years for Hearst to enter the newspaper business, and it was not until 1895 that he purchased *The Journal*. Upon entering the business he succeeded enormously. In keeping with the new primacy of readability, Hearst told his editors that their goal was to shock and amaze readers. He specifically dictated that if the front page did not elicit a "Gee Whiz!" from readers, that edition of the paper had failed in its mission. In order to extract the desired reaction from readers, the editorial boards of Hearst's Papers approved explicitly false stories. If reporters found already interesting stories, Hearst required his writers to embellish and push their stories in the direction of drama and readability.⁸

Additionally, Hearst made an original contribution to the field of journalism. Hearst moved his paper from reporting on domestic and local news to reporting on the world. Local events inherently possessed a relatable and human character, but the events of global politics needed more work to take on a human face. When a New Yorker picked up a copy of *The Journal*, the paper grabbed their attention immediately with large, full page headlines in sharp contrast to the dull column filled style of prior papers. Hearst's paper pioneered the use of these so called "streamer headlines." To enhance the visual appeal of his papers, Hearst made an effort to recruit talented and established artists such as Frederic Remington to provide illustrations for *The Journal*.⁹ The huge illustrations and screaming headlines of *The Journal* brought the world of international politics into a human, easily understandable light. World events no longer consisted of abstract talk about trade, diplomatic relations, and geopolitics, but instead seemed "personal and epic."¹⁰

These new practices featured heavily in reporting on the war in Cuba. An example is found in February of 1897, several months before *The Journal* picked up on Cisneros in earnest. Spanish authorities accused two women of aiding Cuban rebels and strip searched them on the American ship *Olivette*. This story provoked a wild response from *The Journal*. The paper ran several illustrations of naked women surrounded by sinister Spanish men in uniform drawn by Remington, accompanied by screaming titles.¹¹ The titillating drawing

substantially misrepresented the search. Remington had not been present for the strip search and drew the image from his own imagination, which *The Journal* represented as if it were fact.¹² The authorities who performed the search were themselves female, presumably out of consideration for the women who were searched. In addition to the dimension of sexual assault depicted by imagery of a naked and unprotected women at the mercy of Spanish soldiers, the reporting held racial overtones as well. Remington depicted the soldiers as dark skinned, and the women pure white. This attempt by *The Journal* to sensationalize events in Cuba with imagery of female gendered, white figures foreshadowed the iconography on which *The Journal* based the Cisneros Affair.

Cisneros began to appear in *The Journal* prominently during summer of 1897. On August 17th, *The Journal* ran an inaccurate front page headline which emphasized Cisneros' noble victimhood as a result of the guilty verdict of her trial, "THE CUBAN GIRL MARTYR," with the subtitle "THE GENTLE NIECE OF THE CUBAN PRESIDENT, WHOSE FATE BY SPANISH DECREE WILL BE TOO AWFUL FOR DESCRIPTION."¹³ Cisneros had no relation to Salvador Cisneros Betancourt, the president of the fledgling Cuban Republic. Evangelina instead took the name Cisneros from her mother's side of the family, which possessed no relation to any prominent members of the fledgling Cuban government. Nevertheless, *The Journal* continued to whip up a frenzy, either unperturbed by or unaware of the

inaccuracy of its report. On August 23rd, the entirety of the first four pages of *The Journal* contained speculation on the wellbeing of Evangelina. The four pages dedicated to Cisneros on the 23rd took up nearly a third of the fourteen page publication. A huge front page illustration displayed the apparent physical degradation of Cisneros with an image of her before as well as after her imprisonment. One column screamed "MISS CISNEROS IN DEATH'S SHADOW." Cisneros maintained reasonably good health throughout her stay in prison, and Spanish authorities eventually moved her to more pleasant accommodations. Dozens of curated letters to the editor on the front page expressed the desire of readers that The United States should intervene and rescue Cisneros.¹⁴ The text of the writing lingered on the destructive impact of prison on the Cisneros's beauty and fairness. This pattern continued throughout the affair. The following day, *The Journal* again dedicated the first several pages of the paper to Cisneros. The first page displayed discussion of a women's letter writing campaign organized by the journal to petition the Queen Regent of Spain to pardon Evangelina Cisneros. Figures as significant as President McKinley's mother and the widow of Confederate President, Jefferson Davis signed the petition. Throughout, *The Journal* rarely dedicated any less than two pages a day to Cisneros.

The second page of the paper contained an illustration that depicted Cisneros in "*Ricojidas*."¹⁵ The illustration depicted the fair, beautiful, and white

Cisneros standing in an open air prison yard among a crowd of prisoners, as she extended her arms to receive gruel, ladled into a bowl by a uniformed guard. Three towering guards, all with dark complexions, loomed menacingly around her. *The Journal* illustrator depicted the fellow inmates at "*Ricojidas*" as black women with exaggerated facial features characteristic of racist caricature. The black inmates appeared angry, thick lipped, heavy browed, overweight, and almost animal like in stance and demeanor. The caption to the picture declared the prison a place where "the lowest women are penned," and decried that a "highly bred girl of eighteen" faced imprisonment among such women.¹⁶ The image served the purpose of provoking responses from white readers of *The Journal* with horror at the thought of a beautiful young white girl in such company.

In early October, the affair exploded into scandalous international significance. Hearst sent a reporter from *The Journal*, Karl Decker, to Cuba with a mission to break Evangelina out of her prison. To readers of *The Journal*, Decker embodied white American manhood. A tall, attractive man, a contemporary described him to the as "a man with the Constitution in his backbone, and the Declaration of Independence in his eyes."¹⁷ Decker managed to free Cisneros from her prison. *The Journal* reported that with a saw for the bars in her cell window, opium to put her cellmates to sleep, and a bridge between the window of Cisneros's cell and an adjoining house, Decker smuggled Cisneros out of her cell on the night of October 6th. A few days

later, Decker snuck Evangelina onto a ship bound for New York City with a disguise consisting of men's clothes and a forged passport for a man named Juan Sola.

To celebrate the occasion (which some contemporaries considered a serious violation of Spanish sovereignty and international law), *The Journal* published several papers which detailed the dramatic escape. When Cisneros arrived in New York on October 14th, a story ran in *The Journal*. The writing paid special attention to her beauty, joy at being freed, and of course her boundless gratitude to the American people for rescuing her from the Spanish. A description of her revived appearance read "Her new-found friends could not stare at her enough. Her piquant face, with its chestnut crown, her speaking eyes and mirthful mouth, her rounded chin and broad forehead, held men's hungry attention."¹⁸ The paper told a clear message to its readers. The American people rescued a beautiful and helpless woman in need of a savior. Having left the degenerative *Casa de Recogidas*, her beauty returned once more.

The spectacle was a wild success. Even papers generally opposed to *The Journals* brand of reporting found themselves swept up in the fervor. The dignified *New York Tribune* only bothered to give Evangelina a passing mention in its October 14th issue. The editors of *The Tribune* expended less than two dozen words on her case, but notably reported that Cisneros "was brought to safety."¹⁹ While *The Tribune* took a higher road, the phrasing indicated some level of approval for *The Journals* intervention throughout the range

of New York journalism. On the evening of October 16th, *The Journal* organized a large public reception for the city to greet Miss Cisneros. *The Times* reported on the event with a degree of moderation, but even the previously taciturn and professional *Times* reported on the occasion as a night singularly dedicated to celebration. *The Times* gave what may have been a conservative estimate of "75,000 people" in attendance, who "swarmed in the park on Broadway as far up as 27th Street, and as far down as 23rd Street."²⁰ *The Times* noted that a senator from Nebraska, an ex-ambassador, and a local congressman attended and gave congratulatory speeches.²¹ It can be inferred that a significant portion of the population of New York City, a diplomat, and even members of both houses of the legislature considered the occasion to be an example of justified intervention on the part of white Americans, and a night of celebration worth physically travelling to. Upon arriving in America, she even married a Cuban man who took a part in her escape, and moved back to Cuba with him after the conclusion of the war in 1898.²² For its part in the rescue, *The Journal*, experienced a 300% increase in circulation over the course of the affair.²³ All in all, *The Journals* coverage of the Cisneros affair succeeded admirably in increasing the prestige, profits, and readership of Hearst's paper. In fact the story as told by the Hearst and his *Journal* seemed almost too romantic to believe. The story book parallels come across as almost too obvious. Roggenkamp even argues that the entire scenario mimicked the structure of a medieval romance, a popular genre at the

time.²⁴ While it is impossible to say with any certainty the truth, it seems likely that this story is indeed, too romantic to believe.

Cisneros cannot be understood without first having at least a basic understanding of the conflict which she found herself caught up in. A brief summary of the Cuban Wars of Independence follows.

Cuban society in the late nineteenth century was steeped in revolution. The immediate roots of the war of 1895 stretch at least back to the 1860s. In 1868 the Cuban planter Carlos Manuel de Céspedes del Castillo initiated an uprising against Spanish rule with the support of a multiracial coalition of Cubans. Lasting until 1878, this war came to be known as The Ten Year War. It ultimately failed to achieve independence or even meaningful reform. A comparatively minor war known as The Little War took place from 1879 to 1880, which also proved unsuccessful in procuring independence or reform. Although both wars ultimately ended with more or less a status quo, they set the stage for the war of 1895. Direct personal continuity is apparent in the records of the wars. Generals Antonio Maceo y Grajales as well as Máximo Gómez y Báez served in the Ten Year War before they went on to fight and win The War of 1895.²⁵ We can assume these connections existed for all Cubans along with the great generals. In fact, in the war of 1895, Spanish authorities moved a large portion of the rural population of the island into concentration camps. These camps impacted far more than just active combatants and elites. All members of Cuban society became involved in the war as a result of the policy of

concentration. Cisneros was born in 1877, one year prior to the end of the Ten Year War. Consequently, she grew up in the milieu of Revolutionary Cuba, and like most Cubans of her generation, likely deeply internalized the ideology of revolutionary Cuban nationalism. Her own father, whom she endlessly idolized in her American memoir and actions, took part in The Ten Year War and intended to fight in The War of 1895.

Although traditionally identified as the domain of men, women's efforts contributed greatly to the Cuban side of the war. Mariana Grajales Cuello, the mother of General Antonio Maceo y Grajales, sacrificed nine of her thirteen children to the cause of Cuban Independence over the three wars. According to legend, while caring for her wounded son Antonio, she sent another son to go fight in his place so as to not even slightly weaken the Cuban forces.²⁶ The poet and architect of the final war in 1895, Jose Martí, eulogized her in 1893 as an ideal revolutionary woman for her capacity for limitless sacrifice, "Su marido, cuando caía por el honor de Cuba no la tuvo al lado? No estuvo ella de pie, en la guerra entera, rodeada de sus hijos?"²⁷ Although Martí offered a deeply essentialist eulogy to Grajales which focused on her performance of the feminine act of motherhood, he still highlighted the importance of the feminine gendered revolutionary in the Cuban struggle. It is probable Cisneros knew of and supported this kind of gendered contribution to the war.

In addition to traditional roles, women took part in the less gendered

aspects of The War of 1895. Contemporaries considered fighting women common enough to deserve their own title, and dubbed them *mambisas*. A Cuban soldier who fought in the 1890s recounted that four *mambisas* fought in his regiment, including a seventeen year old girl (about the same age as Cisneros at the outbreak of the war).²⁸ A woman named Paulina Ruiz joined the Cuban forces with her husband and eventually won the rank of Captain for her bravery in active combat in 1896.²⁹ Another Cuban *mambisa* Luz Noriega also joined the Cuban forces with her husband, and attracted negative attention from more than one of her comrades for the masculinity she exhibited in combat. General Antonio Maceo found her so striking that he (perhaps mockingly) referred to her as "La Reina de Cuba." Spanish forces captured her and her husband in 1897. Luz failed to convince the Spanish officer to spare her husband, and consequently requested that he be executed in front of her by machete, so that he would die "with him a friend's presence: mine."³⁰ Although women in active combat received less praise, Cisneros probably at least knew of such female revolutionaries.

Evangelina grew up in a Cuba steeped in revolutionary nationalist ideology. We can tell this not merely by the context she grew up in, but through her own words and actions. In her English language memoir, Cisneros expressed a desire to go and fight for Cuba with her father.³¹ Her memoir, contained flashes of extreme personal independence. In fact, she opened her memoir with the declaration "to begin with, I am not a girl, as all the people who

have been writing about me always say I am. I am a woman. I am nineteen years old."³² The minimization of the Cisneros affair, exemplified by the fact that the American media consistently chose to refer to her as if she were a child, has a legacy that has continued up into current scholarship on the situation. Newspapers and scholars have since decried the entire rescue of Cisneros as a farce constructed by *The Journal* in order to drive newspaper sales. While *The Journal* certainly used the event to increase newspaper sales and distorted the affair to further appeal to readers, it seems unlikely that the whole event was faked. US Consul Fitzhugh Lee recorded his own involvement in a conspiracy to rescue Cisneros, originally completely independent of *The Journals* efforts.³³ Cisneros displayed a startling level of commitment to the Cuban cause during the escape. According to the Lee's personal papers, Cisneros demanded a gun so that she could take her own life rather than surrender to Spanish forces, and planned a contingency to escape if Spanish authorities discovered her rescuers.³⁴ Far from being helpless in the hands of the authorities, Lee's papers suggest that Cisneros was ready to martyr *herself*. Cisneros made further statements that would seem to imply a more complicated situation than *The Journal* reported. Among the most shocking statements made by Cisneros was a declaration to a reporter for *Granma*, the newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party. Years later, she stated that she fully intended to capture and possibly assassinate Colonel Berriz. She claimed she planned to lure him

alone to her house, where there would be several rebels waiting to surround him and force him to surrender the Isla de Pinos to the revolutionaries.³⁵ The American media rarely if ever mentioned this possibility during the 1890s. To be fair, the reporting of a state sponsored communist newspaper in the late 20th century should not be taken at face value. State authorities may have fabricated the account in order to drum up Patriotism or support for the Castro regime. However, the account does not appear suspicious. In fact, Evangelina presented the plot as embarrassing. She did not claim to have masterminded the plot, and admitted that she was talked into it by others. She went so far as to call the whole plot foolish. It seems unwise to dismiss such an account as a fabrication. Why would the Cuban Communist Party fabricate an embarrassing story?

Cisneros further demonstrated her own militant nature in an interview given in her nineties to another Cuban reporter from the *Granma*. When asked if she would have fought with Castro, she replied "Si volviera a ser joven, creo que sí, que combatiría con Fidel pero eso sí, si él me da el mando."³⁶ While not directly addressing the affair, the interview tells us that in her old age, Cisneros considered herself to have fought, not simply rescued. In addition, she displayed enough faith in her own abilities and agency to demand control from Castro, as she would only fight with him if she was in charge. The revolutionary Cisneros represented in the Cuban media stood in sharp contrast to the meek Cisneros of the American media. In terms of observing how

the revolution of 1959 claimed the legacy of 1895 for itself, it's interesting to note that Cisneros was given a state funeral, and the honorary rank of Captain in the Cuban armed forces

The Cisneros affair cannot be remembered simply as the American media reported it. In order to drive sales, the American media of time frequently exaggerated, fabricated, and stretched the truth of stories to make for more interesting reading. In the Cisneros case specifically, *The New York Journal* specifically represented Cisneros as a meek and frail woman, in need of rescue by white, Anglo Saxon, American men. While the true details of the narrative cannot be pinned down for certain, there is significant evidence that suggests Cisneros case was in fact significantly more complicated than *The Journal* presented it. Consideration of the gendered and racialized aspects of American reporting on the conflict, a history of violent rebellion among men & women on the island give us more than enough cause to question *The Journal* narrative immediately. The addition of Cisneros personal statements before and after her imprisonment and rescue give us even greater cause to do so. Far from the meek young girl the press made her out to be, Cisneros expressed a willingness to kill and be killed, a commitment to the cause of Cuban autonomy, and a powerful spirit that is hard to ignore even a century later. Additionally, clear, if biased accounts exist among Cuban sources that describe Cisneros as a soldier. Almost all sources relating to the Cisneros Affair are highly unreliable.

Whether we use American newspapers, Cuban newspapers, official's papers, or memoirs written for public consumption, bias and motivation for deception are abundant. For this reason, we would do well to consider more than one possible true

story. When discussing Cisneros life, we cannot simply discuss her as a meek victim. Indeed, we should leave room for two possible epitaphs, either of which may be true: Maiden and *Mambisa*.

NOTES

¹ Although Spanish naming conventions suggest that Evangelina be known by the surname Cosío in English, the American media perhaps intentionally misinterpreted her *apellido materno* to be the equivalent of her English paternal surname. Much of the English language writing about her follows suit. For the sake of clarity, I also refer to her as Cisneros in this paper

² Now called to the *Isla de Las Juventud*. It lies southeast of the *Pinar del Rio* province. It is something of an ecotourism destination today

³ Cisneros, Evangelina, & Decker, Karl. *The Story Of Evangelina Cisneros Told By Herself Her Rescue By Karl Decker*. New York City: Continental Publishing Co. 131-139, 1897

⁴ Ibid. 155-6

⁵ Bonnie M Miller. "The Spectacle of Endangered Bodies: The Visual Iconography of War" in *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of the Spanish American War of 1898*, 41-43 University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.

⁶ Helen MacGill Hughes. "Human Interest Stories and Democracy." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1937): 73-4

⁷ Karen Roggenkamp. "The Evangelina Cisneros Romance, Medievalist Fiction, and the Journalism that Acts." *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23, no. 2 (2000): 26

⁸ Karen, "The Evangelina." 26

⁹ Helen. "Human Interest 79

¹⁰ Ibid. 80

¹¹ Library of Congress. *New York Journal and Advertiser*, February 13, 1897. [New York N.Y, 1897]

¹² Bonnie. "The Spectacle." 37-39

¹³ Library of Congress. *New York Journal and Advertiser*, August 17, 1897. [New York N.Y, 1897]

¹⁴ Library of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser*, August 23, 1897. [New York N.Y, 1897]

¹⁵ Library of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser*, August 24, 1897. [New York N.Y, 1897]

¹⁶ *New York Journal*, August 24, 1897

¹⁷ Prados-Torreira, Teresa. "Evangelina Cossío Cisneros and the Yellow Press." in *Mambisas: Rebel Women in Nineteenth-century Cuba*, 142. Gainesville, FL.: University Press of Florida, 2005.

¹⁸ Library of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser*, October 14 1897. [New York N.Y, 1897]

¹⁹ *Chronicling America*. *New York Tribune*, October 14th, 1897. [New York NY, 1897]

²⁰ The New York Times Company. *The New York Times*, October 17th, 1897 [New York N.Y. 1897]

²¹ The New York Times Company. *The New York Times*, October 18th, 1897 [New York N.Y. 1897]

²² Ibid. 146

²³ Teresa. "Evangelina," 145

²⁴ Roggenkamp. "The Evangelina Cisneros Romance"

²⁵ Teresa Prados-Torreira. "The War of Independence (1895-1898)." in *Mambisas: Rebel Women in Nineteenth-century Cuba*, 103. Gainesville, FL.: University Press of Florida, 2005.

²⁶ Belinda Linn Rincón. "From Maiden to Mambisa Evangelina Cisneros and the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898." In *The Martial Imagination: Cultural Aspects of American Warfare*, 99. Texas A & M University, 2013.

²⁷ "Mariana Maceo, 12 de diciembre de 1893." (1893), <http://www.josemarti.cu>

²⁸ Teresa. "The War," 131

²⁹ Ibid 129

³⁰ Ibid. 136, her request was granted. Afterwards she was imprisoned and released back to the battlefield. This would seem to suggest that Spanish authorities did not consider her to be a serious threat. She took her own life in 1901 presumably out of grief

³¹ Evangelina & Karl, "The Story" 126

³² Ibid. 121

³³ Joseph W Campbell.. "Not a Hoax: New Evidence in the New York Journal's Rescue of Evangelina Cisneros." *American Journalism*, 19 No. 4 (2002): 67-94, Consul Fitzhugh Lee

³⁴ Joseph. "Not a Hoax," 81

³⁵ Teresa. "Evangelina," 139

³⁶ Anne, Fountain. "Questions of Race and Gender: Evangelina Cisneros and the Spanish-Cuban-American War" *SECOLAS Annals* (1999): 41.