

The Rise and Decline of *La Yuma*: Global Symbols, Local Meanings, and Remittance Circuits in Post-Soviet Cuba

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R E S U M E N

Examinando las transformaciones actuales de la sociedad cubana tras la desaparición de la Unión Soviética, este artículo explora el término popular cubano “La Yuma,” y las mutaciones semióticas de sus más deseados bienes, marcas y símbolos durante los últimos veinte años. Mi propuesta es que, en vez de apuntar simplemente a una política contrarrevolucionaria, bienes tales como prendas de ropa con la bandera estadounidense, o tenis de la marca Nike, indican principalmente la emergencia de lo que yo llamo “circuitos de remesas” entre la Cuba post-soviética y sus comunidades en la diáspora, en vez de denotar sencillamente una posición política de resistencia al estado revolucionario, tal y como se asume con frecuencia. Una mirada integradora, que busque comprender a la vez los movimientos de personas, sus marcas preferidas, y los significados locales de símbolos globales, contribuirá a enriquecer etnográficamente la comprensión teórica de la Cuba contemporánea en campos tales como los estudios (post) socialistas, caribeños, transnacionales, y globales, en un amplio sentido. [Caribe, Cuba, globalización, juventud, migración]

A B S T R A C T

Examining the ongoing transformations of post-Soviet Cuban society, this article explores the popular Cuban term “La Yuma” and the semiotic transformations of its desired goods, brands, and symbols over the past twenty years. Rather than simply indicating an antirevolutionary politics, U.S. flag-branded apparel and Nike goods mark the emergence of “remittance circuits” between post-Soviet Cuba and the Miami-centered Cuban diaspora, as opposed to signaling a political stance of resistance against

The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 276–297. ISSN 1935-4932, online ISSN 1935-4940. © 2017 by the American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved. DOI: 10.1111/jlca.12282

[Correction added on 7 July 2017, after first online publication: Prof. Ryer’s affiliation has been corrected in this article.]

the revolutionary state, as is often presumed by international visitors. Integrating an understanding of the movements of people, their preferred brands, and the local meanings of global symbols promises to ethnographically enrich understandings of contemporary Cuba within (post)socialist, Caribbean, transnational, and global studies. [Caribbean, Cuba, globalization, migration, youth]

The Caribbean story as I read it is less an invitation to search for modernity in various times and places—a useful yet secondary enterprise—than an exhortation to change the terms of the debate. What needs to be analyzed further, better, and differently is the relation between the geography of management and the geography of imagination that together underpinned the development of world capitalism and the legitimacy of the West as the universal unmarked.

(Trouillot 2003:45)

Beginning with a seemingly simple popular term, *La Yuma*, this article explores vernacular Cuban conceptualizations of a capitalist U.S. and its foremost symbols, brands, and goods. Focusing on the specific histories, pan-socialist analogues, and everyday deployments of the enduringly popular Nike, U.S. flag apparel, and Tommy Hilfiger brands, it argues that these goods index Cuba's painful reintegration into a not-new world economic order, specifically as signs of a Miami-mediated remittance economy. However, even the humblest product—a pair of socks or a “Tommy” T-shirt—may be locally sought out in ways that are unanticipated by outsiders. Thus, rather than simply marking “resistance” or blind pro-American sentiment, for Cubans, these goods specifically index a coveted remittee status—a local meaning invisible to the international media or tourist's casual misrecognition.

The Rise of *La Yuma*

In Havana, two possible origins for the popular Cuban term *La Yuma* are commonly proposed by those interested in the topic. Often, it is believed to derive from a 1957 American western, *3:10 To Yuma*, and thus to refer literally to Yuma, Arizona—infamous in this context, ironically, for its prison. The film, based on an Elmore Leonard short story and directed by Delmer Daves, starring Van Heflin, Glenn Ford, Felicia Farr, and Richard Joeskel, recounts the struggle of a stubborn farmer with a captured, but still powerful robber baron as they both wait for a train that will deliver them to the U.S. legal system. It was extensively screened and widely popular in Cuba just before an era dominated by a genre of Soviet war movies, which seem to have been considerably less popular as entertainment. In such a context, this theory suggests, *3:10 To Yuma* had enough recognition, or captured enough of the Cuban imagination, to come to denote the United States of America (3:10 to Yuma 1957).¹

Another widely and often concurrently cited theory proposes that Yuma is simply derived from a mispronunciation of “U.S. man” or “United States.” Common Cuban linguistic patterns, such as an elided “s,” would seem to support this idea. In either case, it is clear that as a spatial term, La Yuma’s primary and original referent is the United States of America. In this context, it is a singular feminine noun. It can also refer to a person or persons from La Yuma:² I was *el yuma* or *un yuma*; a North American woman could be *una* or *la yuma*; and a group (or the total nation of persons) would be *los yumas*. Clearly, the meanings ascribed to the term have a historical trajectory: it seems to have become increasingly popular, first with increased U.S.–Cuba contact during the “blue-jean revolution” of the Carter administration (1978–1979) and then in the “Special Period” of the 1990s, following the end of the Soviet era. Since the millennium and the post-Chavista special relationship with Venezuela and ALBA-related (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) stabilization of the hybrid, dual currency state socialist system, the term has declined in popularity and its use has changed in tone. As argued below, it is probably no coincidence that the term was most prevalent in the period when Western goods first became widely (if unevenly) available, disrupting the previous uniformity of material culture under socialism. Nadine Fernandez succinctly described this just before the 1993 legalization of the U.S. dollar: “Every store has the same items, just as in every Cuban household you can find the same model of TV, the same dishes, the same pots, the same glasses, the same sheets, the same knickknacks, and the same plastic flowers” (Fernandez 1996:44).³

In any case, depending on context and intonation, the designation of a person as a *yuma* may be factual, envious, or critical—perhaps because it bespeaks more familiarity than conventional or official terms such as *americano* or *estadounidense*.⁴ Although not vulgar per se, and despite frequent intellectual analysis of its scope, the term has been more commonly used on the street (especially among men) than in the academy, and my self-referential use of the term was warmly received in nonintellectual circles. Finally, while ostensibly apolitical, in its heyday it would have been surprising to hear the term La Yuma used by a Party official or in the state media—which referred instead to the U.S. and its citizens, for example, as *los EEUU*, *los Estados Unidos*, *los yanquis*, *los imperialistas*, *los norteamericanos*, or *los gringos*. With so many official terms, then, why should another have emerged in popular discourse?

I propose that La Yuma has distinct meanings easily lost in translation, for it does not simply denote a geographic space known to those of us who actually live in the U.S. In the mid-1990s, perhaps the most common and compelling context for the term was encapsulated in a standard articulation of surprise, “*¡Asere, qué cosa más yuma!*” (What a most yuma thing, buddy!). Other common variations included “*¡’Ño, comp’ay, eso está yuma, yuma!*” (Damn, compadre, that is yuma,

yuma); “¡Eso está yumático!” (That’s *yumatic!*); or even “¡Eso está yumatiquísimo!” (That is most *yumatic!*). This was often heard when faced with evidence of some new technological item, such as a CD player, a color TV, or even a cruise missile. In such contexts, La Yuma was powerful, marvelous, and generally admirable (for the quality, beauty, or efficacy of its stuff, not its politics). I heard several variants of “¡qué cosa más yuma!” for instance, after I had shared my North American sunscreen with some Cuban colleagues during a beach outing and it was discovered that the powerful lotion had created distinctly tan and pale patterns where sloppily applied. Furthermore—as I would invariably be reprimanded for pointing out that a color TV “from La Yuma” had actually been made in Korea—by the turn of the millennium, the word no longer referred strictly to the fifty states, but rather to all of the capitalist world, including, especially, the U.S., Canada, Western Europe, and Japan, but also South Korea, parts of South America, and all other sites with an abundance of such goods. La Yuma, then, quintessentially *excludes* Cuba, the nations of the former socialist bloc, Africa, and the global South in general. Initially, during the late Cold War period, the closest contrasting term to yuma may have been *bolo* or *bola*. Literally, “ball” or “ninepin,” bolo was a popular referent to Russians and to the socialist bloc.⁵ In counterpoint to Cockaigne La Yuma and its marvelous goods, the socialist bloc was strongly associated in this vernacular discourse with shoddy, rough, or crude goods, and at the level of material culture, the inimitable word *chapuceria* (literally, “shoddiness”) summed up an entire geopolitical critique of the shortcomings of state socialism and the rejection of ideologies of postcolonial solidarity. In contrast, for many if not most Cubans, La Yuma was an idealized land of milk, honey, and capitalism, and at that time a reference for the sunniest side of the States. In the words of one Cuban scholar:

La Yuma would always be associated with: Madonna; Coca-Cola; McDonalds; the Oscars; Michael Jackson; New York’s skyscrapers; Bill Gates; etc.—the so-called “American Dream” or “American way of life” and its uppermost symbols. Never would La Yuma be associated with: south side Chicago—or Liberty City, Miami; crime and drugs; homelessness; US imperialism; racism; etc.—for those who have a-critically and even unconsciously accepted yuma ideology, this would be only part of the official state discourse, or, to put it crudely, of the “communist propaganda”. (Iván Noel Pérez, personal communication, 1998)

This is akin to Alexi Yurchak’s extended description of the circulation of Western cultural symbols and forms of imagination in the later years of the Soviet Union—a phenomenon he calls the “Imaginary West” (Yurchak 2006:ch. 5). Indeed, in its Special Period heyday, Cuban discourse about La Yuma also bore striking similarities to the discourse of “the normal” in late socialist and early

postsocialist Europe, as documented by Fehérváry (2013), Rausing (2004), Veenis (1999), and Yurchak (2006). If at first “the material world . . . had sparkled so brightly on the other side of the Wall” for East Germans (Veenis 1999:84), and the West had provided a standard for equating “normal” with “civilized” (Fehérváry 2002, 390), the “normal” was rooted in tastes, desires, and an idealization of western life developed under state socialism. People “used it to refer to things that were clearly extraordinary in their local context, but were imagined to be part of average lifestyles in Western Europe or the United States” (Fehérváry 2013:27). More generally, of course, yuma discourse also reflects wider Caribbean and global South aspirations, as are evident in the hope of Dominican sex workers to find a Westerner to marry and take them to “La Gloria” (Cabezas 1999:108), and it is possible to find analogous scales of value throughout the Caribbean (e.g., Miller 1997:335–6; cf. Mazzarella 2003:50). However, the Cuban background of a centralized, state-dominated economic system, political barriers to the completion of a “transnational migrant circuit” (Rouse 1991), limited or nonexistent advertising for yuma goods (cf. Hernández-Reguant 2002), and the fact of a rapid reintroduction to a hard currency economy, seems a distinctive mixture of late socialist longing and Caribbean-rooted material culture.

Any well-dressed foreigner, including Cuban-American *comunitarios*,⁶ Africans, or South Americans, has at least the potential to be a yuma. Importantly, the typical or default images associated with La Yuma also disproportionately involve “whiteness,” and in a sense, *yumanidad* (yumaness) itself—or *cosas más yuma* (most Yuma things)—whitens and cleans: yumas who are phenotypically “white” come from places that by default confer the right sort of genealogy. Even yumas who are not white in Cuban terms become a shade or two lighter for displaying *yumanidad*. Smith (1988) and others have long described similar phenomena elsewhere in the Caribbean. In effect, markers from La Yuma can partly erase or shift normal racial, age, or other distinctions: thus, Kaifa Roland, an African–American anthropologist in Cuba, described herself as a *yuma morena* (Roland 2004:52, 133). There are exceptions, of course (such as students and other poor foreigners), and thus, *yumanidad* is marked contextually by a range of signs and symbols: expensive, well-fitting, or difficult-to-obtain clothing, jewelry, a good watch; a smartphone or a rented Japanese automobile (rather than a Russian Lada); a camera or video camera. Such goods mark los yumas.

Yumanidad Brands

Of course, with the decline of state socialist power, the legalization of the U.S. dollar in 1993, post-Soviet growth in international tourism, and unevenly distributed assistance from family abroad, many Cubans—of both genders and across the full

racial spectrum, as well as Africans and other resident foreigners—increasingly have been able to acquire such goods. This does not quite make them yumas: by their passports they remain unmistakably Cuban,⁷ or from the global South. However, it indicates relatively high status to display such cosas más yuma, and thus certain yuma goods were in great demand. There are far too many yuma signifiers in Cuba today to list comprehensively, so I will discuss Nike first, and then consider the enduring popularity of U.S. flag motifs; finally, I challenge the argument that the Tommy Hilfiger brand marks a form of “resistance.” Perhaps not surprisingly, each of these brands in some manner approaches what Daniel Miller (Miller 1998:170) terms a “meta-symbol.” As Miller argued when looking at the meanings given to Coca-Cola in Trinidad, however, the values accorded global brands are largely perspectival, and thus must be closely interrogated. What is in New York a soft drink, is in Port of Spain a sweet drink—signifying entirely different things. In the Cuban case, many of the most popular symbols are associated both with the original epicenter of La Yuma, the U.S., and also, more broadly, they are representations of an imagined cosmopolitan, capitalist world (see Foster 2008; Hernández-Reguant 2002:302–3).

Occasionally seen on the island as early as the late 1970s, especially among those unusual families with opportunities to travel to Europe, by the later 1990s, no *marca* (brand name) was more sought-out by young Cubans than Nike. One woman I interviewed in 1997 spent a month’s wages (at that time US \$8.00) on a pair of socks bearing the Nike logo, and then complained that she had to share them with her two big-footed brothers. Unlike its also desirable competitors,⁸ Nike is a US-based brand, and therefore prohibited by the U.S. government from selling its goods in Cuba. Thus, Nike apparel had to be imported by family or friends visiting from Miami or elsewhere, or made on the island itself. Figure 1 illustrates the latter phenomenon: the main figure in the image is an artisan in Havana, licensed for self-employment. He is standing in front of leather belts he has made by hand, and a close examination shows belts he has embossed with “Nike” as a logo. A young boy wearing a Nike cap is also visible in the background: I have seen island-made Nike belts, T-shirts, hats, and shoes, in addition to assorted imported articles.⁹ From the 1990s onward, displaying “the Swoosh” Nike symbol, I argue, did not solely represent a display of economic power (Reebok cost just as much), but was simultaneously a tangible display of connectedness to the heartland of La Yuma—to a cosmopolitan world beyond the island. It was also a symbol of the power to overcome not only the scarcities represented by wearing the \$3.00 Chinese sneakers available in state shops, but also of the ability to outwit even the U.S. government “blockade,” as the trade embargo is known.¹⁰

Certainly, Cuba is not the only place with an industry dedicated to imitative branding (Lin 2011; Nakassis 2013), but the logic of such *marca*-copying practices cannot be accurately understood without careful attention to the local context.



Figure 1 Photo by Paul Ryer, Artisans' Market; December 1999. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

For example, after an international track meet, a Cuban athlete, dressed in the regulation Adidas tracksuit and shoes, took off his shoes to stretch: the Swoosh was painted on the soles of his socks. This specific location makes little sense in relation to the international brand, but is a significant site of power in some Cuban religious practices (Todd Ramón Ochoa, personal communication, 2000).

There is nothing static or ahistorical about popular Cuban deployments of North American cultural products. On the contrary, these styles change so quickly that they are good markers of a given moment, and French and North American tastes were established on the island long before state socialism arrived.¹¹ Luis Pérez argues that this process began with the end of Spanish rule in 1898: “Products designed for the US market projected into the Cuban market new concepts of gender relations, sexual modalities, and standards of beauty not simply as cultural types but as commodity related, accessible as an act of consumption . . . US products were appropriated to facilitate social integration and self-definition” (Pérez 1999:306). By the 1930s, he argues, a “dazzling display of consumer goods [brought] the appearance of abundance within reach.” Although he tends to overlook European influences much noted by North American travel writers of the early 20th century,¹² Pérez observes that at that time such progress, civilization, and modernity implicitly underlined “the rejection of Africa in the formulation of Cuban,” and that “what conferred value on nationality was derived from association with modernity in its material forms” (Pérez 1999:325–26). In any event, by the eve of the revolution, North American consumer goods—from automobiles to air conditioners, from telephones to toasters, fans, furniture, and furnishings of all kinds, and fashion items—if not owned by all, were widely incorporated into daily usage (Pérez 1999:347).

As even this brief pre-Revolutionary review suggests, then, Cuba came to state socialism from a different commodity history and aesthetic sensibility than other socialist societies of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, from the 1960s through the 1980s, Cuba shared a pan-socialist experience of a paucity and uniformity of material culture akin to that cited above (Fernandez 1996:44). Although her models have recently been under attack as overdetermined (Thelen 2011; Verdery and Dunn 2011), Katherine Verdery’s (1996) sketch of the differing logics of capitalism and socialism helps frame the distinctive context of the material culture of the classic socialist era in Cuba—which to a degree fits within the notion of an “economy of scarcity” (Kornai 1980; Lampland 1995; but cf. Fehérváry 2009) that results from hoarding and centralized budget planning:

Socialism’s inner drive was to accumulate not profits, like capitalist ones, but distributable resources. [M]ost valuable of all to the socialist bureaucracy was to get its hands not just on resources but on resources that generated other usable resources, resources that were themselves further productive . . . Thus, if capitalism’s inner logic rests on accumulating surplus value, the inner logic of socialism was to accumulate means of production . . . In other words, what was rational in socialism differed from capitalist rationality. Both are stupid in their own way, but differently so . . . Socialism’s redistributive emphasis leads to one of the great paradoxes of a paternalist regime claiming to satisfy needs. Having constantly to amass means

of production so as to enhance redistributive power caused Party leaders to prefer heavy industry . . . at the expense of consumer industry . . . In short, these systems had a basic tension between what was necessary to legitimate them—redistributing things to the masses—and what was necessary to their power—accumulating things at the center. (Verdery 1996:25–26)

Thus, consumption was theoretically a privilege of socialist citizens, but in practice a systemically neglected—if aroused—right, and the definition and satisfaction of “needs” became a political contest that often separated ordinary citizens from state planners. Unlike a capitalist market-oriented system driven to find buyers for goods to produce profit (surplus value), “as long as the food offered was edible or the clothes available covered you and kept you warm, that should be sufficient” (Verdery 1996:28).¹³ The economic crisis of the early 1990s only compounded such consumer neglect and material scarcity to the point of desperation: in those years one could walk for miles, passing only empty window displays in Havana’s commercial districts. It is against this background that yuma goods first arrived in Cuba in substantial quantities in the mid-1990s, as socialist trade agreements withered and the economic crisis forced the legalization of the dollar.

Two decades ago, Nikes were an unmistakable sign of foreignness: “Havana knew me by my shoes,” begins Tom Miller’s Special Period travel account:

Everyone looked at [my Air Nikes] as if they were laced with gold . . . ‘What is it with my sneakers?’ ‘They’re Nikes, aren’t they. That’s how we can spot you as a foreigner. The tennies we get here . . . [are] thin, they don’t give you any support, and they fall apart in three months. They come from China and you have to wait a year to get another pair—if they have them in stock.’ (Miller 1996:3–4)

Perhaps not coincidentally, Nike is also leisurewear. Compare this to Rosendahl’s report from the late 1980s regarding *bolo* footwear:

Pancho, an old farmer who worked as an agricultural worker, was once complaining to his work-mates and a man from the local union about the lack of consumer goods. “It’s getting worse and worse,” he said. “Now there are no shoes at all in the shops, and the only shoes I have are these,” he said, showing his heavy, worn boots. “Before we did not want to buy *botas rusas* (Russian boots) because they were so badly made, but now I would gladly buy them if there were any. It is terrible, this. I have to have shoes. I could go to work without trousers,” he said laughing, “but not without shoes. That is impossible. And there are no files or machetes either. How can we work?” (Rosendahl 1997:125)

Both Miller and Rosendahl’s accounts reflect that era’s discursive association of chapucería with socialist goods—locally familiar goods that raised what Mazzarella has elsewhere called the “specter of provinciality” (Mazzarella 2003:48). By

the late 1990s, however, Russian work boots had largely given way to Nikes and other hard currency yuma brands and goods—again, items not available through official channels or the state-issued ration book, but acquired through connections and kin living abroad. With this transition, the theme of leisure takes precedence over a long-sanctioned emphasis on utility and agricultural production. Thus, for instance, in youth baseball leagues, players often wear Nike shoes, swing Easton bats, and field with Wilson or Rawlings gloves. These are all U.S.-branded products obtained (despite the U.S. embargo) through family connections (Carter 2000:295–6). Further underscoring the Nike phenomenon at the millennium, Carter described a national broadcast of boxing matches from the Kid Chocolate Gymnasium in Havana. Between rounds, the camera operators would focus their lenses on a mural consisting of:

a basketball, volleyball, and a pair of white tennis shoes. The tennis shoes have a tell tale, internationally recognized swoosh, the corporate logo of Nike, painted on their sides. No name is painted there for none is needed. The government has no agreement with Nike . . . The symbolic swoosh also happens to contradict the state's ideals of how one achieves athletic excellence: for love of country rather than corporate sponsorship. (Carter 2000:298–9)

In short, it would be no exaggeration to claim that in the 1990s, the dollar was welcomed back to Cuba with a Swoosh (Fig. 2).

To round out this picture of this moment of recommodification, I would like to consider two other popular deployments of yuma symbols in post-Soviet Cuba: the use of the U.S. flag pattern, and the popularity of the Hilfiger brand.¹⁴ The on-island backdrop to the fashionable flag, of course, is the state's intensive, decades-long use of Cuban and U.S. flags, and flag-derived motifs to symbolize resistance and aggression, independence, and imperialism. The Cuban and U.S. flags both contain stripes and stars, and are red, white, and blue, but the white Cuban star is on a red background with blue stripes, rather than a white star on a blue background, so it is evident that the Stars and Stripes are the symbolic referent of these patterns.¹⁵ At first, wearing the Yankee flag as a bodysuit, a shirt, or a scarf seems a strongly political statement, or a marker of a resistant subculture (Hebdige 1979). This is certainly how it was portrayed in the 1996 Miami film “Bitter Sugar” (*Azúcar Amarga*), and how it is presented in recent U.S. media portrayals of Cuban daily life, particularly following the Obama–Castro rapprochement of December 2014 (Ryer 2014). However, for most *Cubans* it has been first and foremost a fashion statement, and only a political statement for some, or only secondarily so (Hunt 1998; La Franchi 1997; Ryer 2000; Vaughn 2006). For instance, one evening in 1997, I made dinner for a good friend who was an active member of the UJC (Young Communists' League). She arrived late but amused: “Sorry . . . My *reunión* [local Party meeting] went on and on and on, while we debated



Figure 2 Photo by Paul Ryer, Havana bandana, 2004. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

whether it was appropriate for *militantes* (Party members) to wear Yankee flag lycra, or whether we should ban it, at least from marches and *reuniones*.” She started laughing, and could barely finish the story: “Some leaders wanted to ban it, but after several *militantes* suggested that wearing the flag of the enemy on one’s butt was hardly an unambiguous endorsement, the proposed ban turned into a ‘recommendation.’” That this style was at that time primarily a fashion statement was confirmed by many friends and informants, including some following their subsequent emigration, and others whose politics were no secret to me. As with Nike, this fashion peaked in the late 1990s, and like Nike at that time, flag fashion was certainly not available in either peso or hard currency state-run stores on the island. Rather, each article had to be hand-imported from abroad—often by visiting relatives. This was crystallized in a simple conversation I had in a small town in central Cuba in 2002, by which time I had growing ethnographically derived doubts about the seemingly straightforward interpretation that U.S. flag themed apparel was blatantly political. Stopping two young girls walking arm-in-arm, one with a star-studded T-shirt, I said, “Excuse me, where did you get that shirt?” The smaller girl smiled and replied (my translation), “Oh, I live here, and this is my cousin visiting from Florida, and she brought it for me. Isn’t it great?” I believe



Figure 3 Photo by Paul Ryer, *Peanut Vendor*, 2013. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

that this simple description of transnational kinship and a gifted T-shirt lays bare a more ethnographically persuasive interpretation: *what is at stake locally with this fashion is not a political symbol per se so much as marking one's enviable status in an emerging remittance economy*. After all, it is precisely apparel with the U.S. flag that is the fashion least likely to openly appear in state shops; such styles are only available when hand-imported by family or friends from Florida or elsewhere in the diaspora.¹⁶ Although less common than a few years ago, the fashion has proven remarkably durable and remains visible today (Fig. 3).

However striking such symbolic deployments may be in a still-socialist state, it is important to note that their massive and uncritical deployment does *not* mean that Cuban nationalism has disappeared. Thus, my Stars and Stripes clad friends could nevertheless walk with Fidel Castro in their Nikes when he famously traded his combat boots for his own pair of Nikes, marching to bring Elián back to Cuba in 2000, or more recently, to free the Five Heros—five Cuban agents imprisoned in the U.S. Put another way, these young Cubans see no contradiction between displaying symbols of America/La Yuma, and retaining their *cubanidad* (Cubanness).

The Domestication of La Yuma

By 1997, when socialist Cuba's first shopping mall opened and as the hit sounds of Cuban *timba* (style of music) disseminated North American hip-hop rhythms and new attitudes toward capitalist consumption (Gordy 2006; Hernández-Reguant 2006), a new look had begun to rival Nike's popularity on the streets of Havana. The signature red, white, and blue blocks of Tommy Hilfiger were hot, and hard to come by.¹⁷ As with Nike and the Stars and Stripes, Hilfiger wear initially¹⁸ had to be hand-imported by tourists or from Miami, and *michi-michi* (fake) versions of the "Tommy" brand soon appeared. When Livan Hernández won the World Series MVP that fall, teal Marlins caps were briefly *de moda*. A couple of years later, Nike and Hilfiger brands were widely distributed among young Cubans, and there was a clamor for Fubu and New York Yankees insignia. By 2002, Baby Phat jeans were hip, and Nike was old hat, and by the middle of the decade, the phrase "jardines de La Yuma" (gardens of La Yuma) came into use to describe Cuban tourist zones such as Old Havana and Varadero beach (Carter 2008:245). In 2008, the key brands were Mango, D&G, Converse and Puma sneakers, and Jordache; in 2013 these styles remained prevalent, including the now venerable Nike, Yankees, FuBu, and many more, while as in Miami and beyond, the Union Jack had come back. Noting the undeniable links to the North American hip-hop movement, Sujatha Fernandes argues that young Cubans' adoption of rap-associated brands Hilfiger and Fubu is a political statement and a "gesture of defiance" aimed at Cuban hierarchies: "Cuban rap audiences use their clothing, and their adoption of American slang such as 'aight' and 'mothafuka' as a way of distinguishing themselves as a group and highlighting their identity as young black Cubans" (Fernandes 2006:128).¹⁹ As with the flag fashion-as-resistance hypothesis, this interpretation is the most readily available one; it is not, however, an adequate explanation. For instance, at the turn of the millennium, I attended the baptism of the daughter of a young white couple in a protestant church in central Havana, in which the baby was dressed to perfection and the proud father wore a new Tommy T-shirt. Rather than making a political statement or marking themselves as "young, black Cubans," these parents were literally wearing their Sunday best. At that time, Fubu and Tommy were as popular with *blancos* (whites) as with *negros* (blacks), and young Cubans²⁰ of whatever color may or may not have been fans of rap music and hip-hop style.²¹ Certainly, in some contexts, these marcas may signal defiance of Cuban aesthetic, political, and racial hierarchies, and arguably, with economic restratification, a more militant hip-hop nationalism has taken root in Havana. But, as Barthes put it, "meaning is like a grace that has descended upon the object" (Barthes 1983:65); imported brands may also cross (or create) boundaries in ways unanticipated or unrecognizable from a global or etic (outside) perspective. Reduction to "resistance" is both unedifying and misleading. As Alexei Yurchak (2003:504) argued

in relation to late Soviet youth: “The act of the reproduction of form with the reinterpretation of meaning . . . cannot be reduced to resistance, opportunism, or dissimulation.”²²

Thus, this would seem to be something more than simply “style as resistance.” Defiance is an element of this dynamic, and certainly the initial allure of western goods in this era has been replaced by more heterogeneous and ironic appropriations, but arguably, what is also happening is the Cubanization of *yumanidad*—of *yuma*-ness. For instance, in Cuban hip-hop documentaries in the 2000s, there were imported rhythms and movements and NY Yankees gear, as popularized by 50 Cent and other North American rappers (Cuban Hip Hop All Stars 2004; La Fabri_K 2004), but it is also clear that the imported styles had as much to do with placing then-new Cuban rap movements in relation to other Cuban music genres as it had to do with signifying the U.S. or the Cuban state. Here again—as with the Nike-soled socks—imported goods or cultural styles nevertheless attach to and are transformed by specific local meanings and histories. The popularity of New York Yankees insignia, for instance, evokes much more than an association with global hip-hop culture (see West-Durán 2004:25). Not only has that baseball team long had a disproportionate number of fans on the island—as famously described by Ernest Hemingway (Hemingway 1952)—but it also did not go popularly unnoticed at the time the style emerged—a decade ago—that Yankees starting pitchers Orlando “El Duque” Hernández and José Contreras were Cuban. Thus, the Yankees’ success became a point of Cuban national pride; to this day, there must be fifty Yankees logos visible for each Red Sox insignia in Cuba, for instance. The Red Sox offered Contreras more money, but there was little doubt that, given the choice, he would sign with New York—by national consensus the proving ground par excellence for evaluating the international value of elite Cuban players. Similar domestications are apparent in the pride with which already-noted Cuban participation and triumph in Oscar and Grammy awards are celebrated. Many times I have heard the argument that jazz was originally Cuban music, picked up and exported by an African American New Orleans military band stationed in Santiago de Cuba during the 1898–1902 U.S. occupation.²³ Even Coca-Cola is nationalized in this vernacular; I cannot count the number of times I, as a *yuma* interlocutor, was reminded that this quintessential symbol of corporate Americana was headed by a Cuban CEO, Roberto Goizueta, who had arrived in the U.S. with virtually nothing but an entrepreneurial spirit (see Greising 1998).²⁴ The Cubanization of Coke: There is as much appropriation, domestication, and reascription of meaning as there is “resistance” here.

If the U.S. continues to be the epicenter of *La Yuma* today, without question, its emotional capital and aesthetic conduit is Miami. Certainly there are other stylistic influences—notably from increasing numbers of European tourists and diasporic Cubans in Spain and Italy—but the dominant styles come from Miami’s working-class neighborhoods of Hialeah and Little Havana. Miami’s fashions, of

course, are embedded in a larger U.S. scene, but that city is the principal mediator of contemporary Cuban couture.²⁵ Thus, the path of the popularity of a Tommy T-shirt for a Cuban or resident foreigner runs from the double alienation of U.S. popular culture as noted by Naomi Klein (see endnote 17), through Cuban Miami, to Cuba at a certain moment, and even perhaps from there into what Susan Eckstein calls the “New Cuban” diaspora (Eckstein 2009). Thus, contrary to the tired tropes of North American travel writers who feel transported back in time by the old cars and crumbling streets of Havana, there is absolutely nothing timeless, static, or frozen about contemporary Cuban fashions or culture. Vibrant, dynamic, and appropriative would be better descriptors.

By the same token, neither is La Yuma the hyperreal America of a European intellectual (e.g., Baudrillard 1989; Eco 1986; Hardt and Negri 2000:4.2); it rests on very different points of access and travel, divergent interests and ironies, and postcolonial experiences and expectations. Especially as the CUC (or convertible, hard currency peso) takes an ever-firmer hold of daily life, La Yuma increasingly resembles the metropolitan migrant magnet *América* of the wider circum Caribbean. Indeed, the very term “yuma” is gradually fading from everyday speech, often being replaced by the more dismissive *pepe* (“foreigner” or “Spaniard”) (Roland 2011:99); a Cuban–tourist dynamic is discernable here—akin to those described by Marc Padilla in the *Caribbean Pleasure Industry* (Padilla 2007) or the Gmelches’ (2003, 2012) work in Barbados. However, at least until recent reforms take hold, the migrant circuit in Cuba is incomplete, and is more of an escape route than a transnational loop: on a US \$20 per month salary, travel is expensive. Thus, for the era of recommodification that La Yuma marks, the closest comparisons are still with eastern Europe. Not that this is an exact match either: the economic changes are parallel, although without an accompanying political change in Cuba—perhaps because socialism was not in conflict with Cuban nationalism the way it was in small states in the shadow of the Soviet Union. However, as in postsocialist Europe, a more discriminating and simultaneously blasé attitude toward now abundant (but prohibitively expensive) yuma/Western goods is increasingly apparent, and often tinged with bitterness. Similarly, in the 1990s,

the sudden shift in Hungary’s geopolitical status combined with the abundance and availability of [western] commodities for cash created confusion about how people were to respond to them. While it was necessary to mark success in the postsocialist world with status goods, it was no longer appropriate to express delight with a commodity simply for its western origins or inventive design; on the contrary, normalizing or even denigrating such goods was a way of demonstrating one’s active participation in and knowledge about a transformed social and economic order. (Fehérváry 2002:378)

Thus, not entirely unlike Colombia's Caucan peasants famously faced with the transition to commodified exchange (Taussig 1980), (post)socialist citizens in Europe and Cuba have eventually faced the paradox of desire for *and* disappointment in such goods (Fehérváry 2012:635; Patico and Caldwell 2002). It is in this context of more abundant commodities, unevenly available convertible currency, and deepening social stratification that there is clear evidence of increasing antiforeign sentiment, and nostalgia for past socialist social networks and solidarity.²⁶ Not surprisingly, given these dynamics,²⁷ La Yuma as a spatial term is less frequently heard, and yuma is now often an insult to more plausibly filter back into the state-sponsored public lexicon of gringos, Yankees, and imperialists; plausibly, the recent rise of nostalgia for the USSR, documented by Loss (2013), is inversely linked to declining popular enthusiasm for the term yuma.

By the mid-2000s, the belt makers in the artisanal markets of Havana had a wider selection of handmade brands than could be found in the 1990s (see Fig. 1): Levi, Fila, Adidas, Tommy, and Nike. However, they also had a newer, equally large, selection of *Cuban* themes. I asked one craftsman which belts were the most popular, and he replied: "the ones that say Cuba." I asked which are most popular for Cubans, and he said: "Oh, these others: Tommy, Levi, Fila . . . The [Cuba-themed belts] are for foreigners" (field notes, June 2004). In other words, while Cuban belts were on the table by that time, at the level of national style and material culture, the foreign-Cuban division was still a great gulf, and the allure of the foreign still outweighed the value of the local—unless it was for sale. Nevertheless, by 2016, people would be hard pressed to find any *michi-michi yuma* brands in these shops. Not that people have entirely stopped wearing them (Fig. 3), but the remittance circuits have matured, and demand for the latest hot brand from abroad is perhaps not so pressing. Thus, the presence or absence of Nike or Hilfiger does not really mark the boundary of a racial group in the narrow sense Fernandes proposed (Fernandes 2003, 2006); there may be a loose generational divide, but younger Cuban women and men of every color tend to value and desire these brands and styles. At the same time, yuma brands do, still, denote a renewed racial boundary in the writ-large sense that Kaifa Roland has described, wherein "Cuban" itself, resting on a locally crucial Cuban-foreign distinction (see Roland 2011), becomes imagined as a racial category. Although it is a recurring distinction, there is value in everyday Cuba in associating itself with the styles and symbols of *lo extranjero* (the foreign)—as long as it is the prosperous sort of foreign rather than the largely silenced poverty of socialism and the developing world. In that sense, "the interface of state socialism and global capitalism has produced shifting structures of rights, obligations, authority, and freedoms. Yet the 'exit from socialism' is far from unitary or complete, nor is it truly a radical departure from the past" (Patico and Caldwell 2002:291). That is, at the end of

the day, perhaps (post)socialist and (post)colonial realities are not so separable (Gonçalves 2012, 2013).

Conclusion

This article has explored the rise and decline of La Yuma as a popular geography of the imagination in post-Soviet Cuba, which has significantly animated daily activity within the Republic over the past 20 years. Most importantly, through its leading symbols, it marks the emergence of privileged access to the Miami-linked remittance circuits that are now so crucial to everyday life in Cuba. In this sense, what is at stake locally may be easily misread from the outside. When Cubans don a U.S. flag bodysuit, sometimes there is more going on than a simple statement of political inclination. Similarly, very often, a sock is just a sock, but sometimes a sock may be a symbol of something worth a significant struggle, with distinctive semiotic meanings, best made intelligible ethnographically. What theory of consumption or material utility, after all, has the power of thick description in explaining the meaning or intensity of a cultural preference for Coke over Pepsi, Old Glory over the Stars and Bars, or Nike sneakers over Reebok?

Acknowledgments

Research for this article was made possible by a Ruth Landes Fellowship from the RISM Foundation, by the John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Amherst College Graduate Fellowship program, with the additional assistance of the University of California, Riverside.

Notes

¹See also Dopico (2004) and Roland (2011).

²For the sake of clarity, I capitalize *La Yuma* as a spatial term, but not *ell/un/una/la/las* or *los yumas* when these refer to persons or are used as adjectives. While I draw on travels throughout Cuba over the years for this article, Havana is its principal research site.

³For more on Cuban and socialist material cultures, see Veenis (1999); Patico and Caldwell (2002); Sunderland and Denny (2007); Porter (2008); Weinreb (2009); Pertierra (2011).

⁴L. Kaifa Roland (2011:78) notes that while *yumas* are to be envied, they are also seen as somewhat stupid, at least in the way they navigate Cuban realities. Interestingly, she also describes Cubans identifying her as a *yuma* by smell.

⁵Jacqueline Loss explores more recent Cuban nostalgia for the USSR in Loss and Prieto González (2012) and in Loss (2013); also see Anonymous (2010), and Pérez (2006).

⁶In the same vernacular register as *yuma*, Miami Cubans (but not other diasporic Cubans) are often specifically referenced as *comunitarios*.

⁷The east German term *Möchtegerns*, literally “would-be’s,” is used to describe recently successful upwardly mobile locals (see Veenis 1999). Kaifa Roland has noted that even Cuban-born foreign

residents can ultimately become yumas (Roland 2004), and Marc Perry discussed one rare case in which a bilingual black Cuban was able to pass for one (Perry 2004).

⁸Although Adidas and Reebok (also desirable yuma goods) were by then legally available for purchase in dollar shops, Nike shoes, shirts, or hats were more popular. This relates to the “remittance circuit” described below.

⁹Such imitative branding has become so distinctive since the mid-1990s that postmillennium the term *michi-michi* emerged to describe brand-imitating goods such as fake Nike shoes, or the belts in the artisans’ market. Partly taking on the semantic space of the earlier socialist-era term *chapucería*, described above, *michi-michi* refers to something that is fake, unoriginal, inferior, or even trashy. It can also be used to describe someone who tries to dress slickly but is trying too hard. Etymologically, it is often believed to come from the English-language term “Mickey Mouse” and certainly has similar connotations: see Pertierra (2011). Interestingly, there is an inverse *Miami*-based industry, making US- or Dominican-based knock-offs—for example, Cubita coffee, Cohiba cigars, and Hatuey malta—of Cuban-branded products.

¹⁰This is clearly a Cuban analog of the continental “socialist consumer strategy in which objects for interior decorating were valued according to the mode by which they were acquired” (Fehérváry 2002; see also Berdahl 1999 and Pertierra 2011)

¹¹For a more thorough historicization of the allure and consumption of North American goods, services, brands, and movies before the 1959 Revolution, see “Fichu Menocal,” in Geldorf (1991); Hermer and May (1941); Schwartz (1997); Levi and Heller (2002); and especially Pérez (1999: 279–353). See also Pertierra (2011) and Weinreb (2009) on more recent Cuban consumption.

¹²The popularity of French automobiles, for instance—see Hergesheimer Hergesheimer, J. (1927). *San Cristóbal de La Habana*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Also see Irene Wright’s description of Cuban fashions, circa 1910, in Jenkins (2010).

¹³See also Medvedev (2007).

¹⁴Similarly, access to screenings of and knowledge about the Oscars, Grammys, and, more recently, Latin Grammy awards are of particular interest to many young Cubans. See Artists (2003) and Pertierra (2009).

¹⁵“The first time Gary Buxton went to Havana, Cuba, to play softball two years ago, he brought New York Yankees hats. This time, he’s bringing Old Glory” Murphy (2011). Occasionally, the patterns of the Union Jack or the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy are visible, but the Stars and Stripes remain by far the dominant motif of this style. During President Obama’s March 2016 visit, apparel overlaying his image on U.S. flag-branded apparel was prominently visible throughout Havana

¹⁶This is *not* a struggle for the ordinary, as Miller and Woodward (2011) argue is the case for the enduring popularity of blue jeans in the U.K., but rather a conspicuously Bourdieuan display of cultural capital.

¹⁷Ironically, Hilfiger’s popularity in Havana builds on a clever U.S. marketing campaign tying together “yacht club” and “ghetto.” “Once Tommy was firmly established as a ghetto thing, the real selling could begin—not just to the comparatively small market of poor inner-city youth but to the much larger market of middle-class white and Asian kids who mimic black style in everything from lingo to sports to music . . . [Thus, Hilfiger] feeds off the alienation at the heart of America’s race relations: selling white youth on their fetishization of black style, and black youth on their fetishization of white wealth” Klein(2000).

¹⁸With the opening of shopping centers and sporting goods stores selling hard currency goods principally imported through Panama, a limited selection of North American brands such as Nike and Hilfiger became available in “*la chopín*”—hard currency state shops—often in both “real” and *michi-michi* versions. Indeed, North American goods have proliferated and become, if not ubiquitous, certainly less novel than in the immediate post-Soviet period (see Corbett (2002).

¹⁹See also Fedorak Fedorak, S. A. (2009).

²⁰As well as resident Cuban-educated African students. See Ryer (2010).

²¹Also see Perry (2009). More recently, reggaetón has become more prevalent than rap.

²²Grete Viddal has recently made a similar ethnographically based critique of “resistance” as an inadequate framework for understanding the relationship between Haitian-heritage communities and the Cuban state (Viddal 2015).

²³This would have been the ninth U.S. Volunteer Regiment’s band (Rebecca Scott, personal communication); see also Sublette (2004).

²⁴ “[S]ocieties have an extraordinary capacity either to consider objects as having attributes which may not appear as evident to outsiders, or else altogether to ignore attributes which would have appeared to those same outsiders as being inextricably part of that object” Miller (1987). Also see Foster (2008: 29). Very few yumas would associate a can of Coke with Cuban entrepreneurship in the way that a Cuban might. Similarly for Nike: much of what “Nike” connotes internationally (its celebrity spokespeople and inspirational television commercials, as well as anti-globalization protests against labor conditions in its factories) is absent from the Cuban vernacular space occupied by “Nike”.

²⁵Italian fashion photographer Fabio Fasolini: “I liked the spirit of Cuba, but now it’s like Miami. Very commercial. They don’t even dress like before. They dress like they’re in Miami Beach” Martin (2003)

²⁶Many ethnographers have noted extensive social networks (referred to, e.g., as *quanxi*, *blat*, and *sociolismo*), distinctive patterns of reciprocity, and the circulation of prestige goods as characteristic of the state socialist societies in which they have worked, from China to Estonia, East Germany to Cuba (e.g. Yang (1994); Verdery (1996); Rosendahl (1997)). Daphne Berdahl (1999: 136) noted that, ironically, “some of the very products that sustain elaborate networks of friends and contacts under socialism are seen to be “driving us apart” in the new market economy”.

²⁷To reiterate, the context of yuma ideologies in Cuba was first one of scarce and shoddy socialist goods, culminating in the crisis of the early 1990s; as the economic situation improved through the later 1990s, western goods flowed in along with guarded optimism (see Tattlin 2002; Hernández-Reguant 2004). While Cuba no longer has a classic state socialist “economy of scarcity” (Kornai 1980), the recovery has been uneven, with variable access to hard currency and remittances. The resulting disillusionment and bitterness are now accelerated by new distributional inequalities and limited opportunities, despite gradually improving conditions, including enhanced ties with Venezuela and China, and rebuilt ones with Russia and its tourists. This background correlates closely with the rise in the 1990s and the decline in the 2010s of La Yuma as a vernacular cartography.

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