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Book Review: To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society

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To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society. LOUIS A. PÉREZ, JR. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiv + 463 pp. (Cloth US\$ 39.95, Paper US\$ 21.95)

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Louis A. Pérez's provocative and culturally penetrating *To Die In Cuba* tackles a historical question that has marked the writings of chroniclers of the Cuban condition for more than four hundred years. Whether found in the musings of such influential authors as Bartolomé de las Casas in the sixteenth century, Alexander Von Humboldt in the nineteenth, Fernando Ortiz in the twentieth, or countless others spread over the centuries, hundreds of scholars, intellectuals, novelists, and poets have all commented directly or indirectly that Cubans have a proclivity toward suicide. Pérez stresses that for at least the last hundredfifty years (when somewhat reliable data have been available), Cuban rates of suicide – whether under colonialism or independence, economic boom or bust, military dictatorship, or socialist revolution – have consistently ranked among the highest in the world, and have long been the highest in Latin America. Given the constantly changing and radically unstable social, political, and economic realities that have characterized Cuban history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Pérez asks why Cuba's high rates of suicide have remained so stable and unchanging.

With clarity of purpose and lucid prose, Pérez states his thesis and methodology in the introduction. Overall, he approaches suicide from neither a pathological nor a medical perspective, but rather a cultural angle. Searching through discourses that address Cuban national identity, he argues that the centrality of such political slogans as *morir por la Patria* that marked the independence struggles to the revolutionary slogan of *Patria o muerte* and *socialismo o muerte* created a culture that connected death with self-sacrifice. As a result, this “frame of reference appears to have lent general endorsement to the efficacy of suicide as an appropriate solution and that has served to lower the threshold at which the solution enters the realm of the admissible” (p. 8). Pérez is careful to stress that the rhetoric of death and dying in service of the nation is not the cause behind Cuba's high rates of suicides, but rather a key to explaining the specific cultural connotations behind the act, and more importantly for his purpose, people's reaction to the decision to take one's own life. As he states very clearly: “This books seeks to situate the phenomenon

of suicide in Cuba less in the realm of national identity than in the domains of national sensibility” (p. 10). Thus, he argues that the practice of suicide took on a logic of its own which was deeply ingrained into the everyday normative assumptions and daily actions people made in leading their lives.

The book is structured through six exhaustively researched chapters that span a chronological terrain from nineteenth-century Spanish colonialism to the 1959 Revolution. These chapters include a disparate cast of historical actors from slaves to revolutionaries, the illiterate to intellectuals, exiles to Fidelistas, the working poor to the elite, Blacks and Whites, and men and women. Chapter 1 examines the acts of suicide by African slaves and Chinese contract laborers as both a response to their horrific working conditions and an affirmation of their own cultural values. Chapter 2 examines how self-sacrifice in the name of political independence became intertwined with self-destruction whether it was José Martí or the act of self-immolation, showing how the political became the personal. In Chapter 3 Pérez turns to a detailed statistical analysis of the causes, frequency, age, and gender dynamics that characterized patterns of Cuban suicide from the 1850s to the 1950s. Chapter 4 analyzes the impact of fluctuating material and economic conditions on the working poor and economic elite, with particular attention to the gendered differences between men and women. In Chapter 5, Pérez employs a remarkable and eclectic base of sources such as political cartoons, novels, and poems to demonstrate how pervasively the theme of suicide penetrated Cuban culture. Chapter 6 examines the period from the 1959 Cuban Revolution through the 1990s Special Period to show how suicide as political act in the name of the revolution and as protest to the Revolution continued among Revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries in both Cuba and the diaspora. Despite its complex coverage of a huge historical chronology and diversity of individuals, Pérez’s study does not result in confusion. Rather, his study shows that virtually no sector of Cuban society over the last hundred fifty years remained untouched by suicide, further testifying to its importance in shaping Cuban “sensibility.”

In a book that covers such a large topic and crosses disciplinary boundaries, some readers will undoubtedly find that certain events or topics cry out for more elaboration. For example, Pérez acknowledges that the suicide of Eduardo Chibás during a live radio broadcast in 1951 “must be considered as the most prominent political suicide in the twentieth-century Cuba,” but it only receives a single paragraph of analysis (pp. 319-20).

Louis A. Pérez’s *To Die in Cuba*, the product of prodigious research and insightful analysis, will find a wide audience. It should be mandatory reading for scholars and students of Cuban history, Caribbean history, Latin American cultural history, and, more broadly, historians interested in national identity.