

SARAH BALDWIN: A quick note before we start. This episode is a co-production with the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Watson. The center is currently accepting applications for the Cogut Visiting Professorship which brings scholars from Latin America and the Caribbean to teach and conduct research here at Brown. If you're interested in applying, follow the link in our show notes. The application is November 15th. Thanks. OK, on with the show.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin. On this special Monday episode, guest host Rich Snyder talked with Maria Cabrera Arus, a visiting professor at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Watson. Maria studies the sociology, politics, and history of something we all interact with every day, clothes. Specifically, Maria looks at the way clothes communicate power and project values in a culture. And there's perhaps no better example of this relationship in the recent past than in revolutionary Cuba. Rich and Maria go deep on what fashion can teach us about Cuba's history and culture and what Cuba's politics can teach us about the power of fashion. Here's Rich.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

RICH SNYDER: So I wanted to begin by asking you about your research. You really use fashion as a window onto the question of political domination, political control, and also resistance to it. Could you tell us a little bit about your research on fashion and politics in Cuba?

MARIA CABRERA ARUS: So to me, fashion is, as you mentioned, a window to see how the political regime assert its domination and control of the population in Cuba after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and also how people use fashion as a mechanism of resistance, in some cases protest against the control of the government.

RICH SNYDER: And you organized your study, the periods it covers run from 1959 to 1989. Why did you choose that period? And also, there's some master themes that seem to run through almost as narratives through the study. Could you tell us about those?

MARIA CABRERA Yes. It was interesting to me that although there is a lot of literature on the Cuban Revolution,

ARUS: the relationship between state and citizenship and culture in general is not quite much explored in Cuba. So I began to look at the material culture in Cuba, and I realized that there was a gap, not only in the studies of material culture but also in the period in which I focused, which is 1970s, 1980s, 1960s. But the '60s has been more widely explored than the '70s and the '80s. So yes, that's why I just focused on this period.

There is a lot of literature as well in the post-Soviet era, which in Cuba was, quote, "Special Period" because of the economic and political crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union under state socialist regimes in Europe. But the history and the dynamics that I explore in the years prior to the collapse of socialism contributed a lot to what is happening now in the present and in the post-Soviet years. So a lot of studies that focus on the post-Soviet years in Cuba think that what they are discussing originated in those years. But when you look a little bit farther to the past, to the '70s, '80s, you can see that they are like an origin of the dynamics.

RICH SNYDER: You can see the roots of that phenomena. Let me ask you about nationalism. It seems like there's some nice examples from your research of how clothes served to signal and reinforce Cuban nationalism. Could you talk a little bit about that?

MARIA CABRERA Yes. I identified that clothes represents fashion, represents three main narratives that

ARUS: legitimize the Cuba regime, nationalism-- as you just ask me-- modernity, and egalitarianism. So in terms of nationalism, it is easy to identify nationalism in Cuban fashion through the promotion the Cuban regime used of the guayabera shirts.

RICH SNYDER: What is the guayabera shirt? Can you describe it?

MARIA CABRERA The guayabera shirt is a very Cuban, although it is widely used and identified with Mexicans

ARUS: and the Philippines as well. But for Cubans, it is a very Cuban garment. And there are difference between the Cuban guayabera and the Mexican guayabera and the Filipinans' guayabera. So the Cuban, it doesn't have embroidery. The Cuban is mostly made out of pleats and linen and mother of pearls buttons. This is, of course, because it is an expensive garment. It was used before the revolution by landlord, wealthy landlords and politicians, so it was identified with the elite of the previous regime.

Interesting enough, after the revolution, it was re-signify, and it was promoted as a garment associated with the peasants and the rural population. In order to do that, the government produced the cheapest version of guayabera shirts. Instead of linen, it was made out of cotton

and later polyester or mixes of polyester and cotton. And the buttons, instead of being made out of mother of pearl, they were made of plastic. So this was like a popular version of the guayabera, but it was a very nationalistic garment, and it was promoted and produced in a lot of quantities by the government. And to consolidate Castro's leadership after the triumph of the revolution, the government distributed guayabera shirts to the half-million persons that were brought to Havana.

RICH SNYDER: So these were shirts that previously symbolized the elite. And in a sense, it sounds like Castro and his government turned the symbol on its head so that it became a symbol embraced by and representative of the disenfranchised peasants.

MARIA CABRERA Yes.

ARUS:

RICH SNYDER: Very interesting. What about the other two narratives, egalitarianism and modernity, that you mentioned?

MARIA CABRERA Yeah, the triumph of the revolution also brought other kind of changes in the way Cuban

ARUS: dressed. And in terms of egalitarianism, the new institutions created after the triumph of the revolution began to produce and distribute clothes that represented the ideology of the regimes on their own policies which identified with the narrative of egalitarianism. And I'm thinking in terms of school uniforms, work uniforms, particular school uniforms that government homogenize the design of the school uniform throughout the country. So every school kid wore the same uniform all over the island. So it was a policy that was meant to make inequalities at least less visible in terms of clothing but also allow the government to control, because it was easy to spot a kid that skipped school day. If you could see that kid outside of school wearing the uniform, you could easily identify them.

RICH SNYDER: And what did those uniforms look like? Could you describe them?

MARIA CABRERA Yeah. Well, they were different designs. They were similar, but they differed in color. So the

ARUS: elementary school uniform was mostly red, like blood red, and white with a kerchief that was also blue for the grades from first to fourth and red for grades fifth to seventh. The secondary school uniform was a kind of mustard yellow and white. And so the kids that were studying in boarding schools in the countryside, which was in a lot of the programs the government develop in the '70s especially, wore a bluish skirt or pants and a white shirt.

RICH SNYDER: Are there any examples of kids tweaking their uniforms to resist, to--

MARIA CABRERA A lot of--

ARUS:

RICH SNYDER: Express their identity?

MARIA CABRERA I have even--

ARUS:

RICH SNYDER: Individualism?

MARIA CABRERA --picture of myself with the kerchief. I mean, there was a proper way to tie the kerchief.

ARUS: Nobody liked to have that kerchief. Now I wear a lot of kerchief. But when I was in school kid in Cuba, because it was mandatory, so nobody wanted to wear it. And we either took it out, or when we were forced to wear it at school, we tied it by the very tips of the end. So it didn't look nice, but it was a way to resist. So boys sometimes also made the pants slimmer. And I remember going to school and the director of the school standing in the main door and checking if kids had the legs wide enough. Or if they were too tight, they sometimes cut them with the scissors. Girls, of course, we were also forced to have certain length of a skirt. And sometimes we use this shirt that belonged to our parents or a T-shirt instead of a shirt. That was also punished. And sometimes kid would send back home until they got the uniform properly put together.

RICH SNYDER: What about the dress of the leaders? So during this period of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, you always see pictures of them in olive-drab military fatigues. How did that figure into fashion and political control in Cuba during this period?

MARIA CABRERA I think they had a vision of themselves very elevated, and that included their values, their

ARUS: political views, but also the way they look. The clothing and the sartorial style of the leader was also, I wouldn't say imposed, but it was promoted. And a lot of uniforms, military uniforms, olive-drab uniforms were distributed to the Cubans, to the youth that was mobilized to work in the agriculture, to those that were draft. They, of course, were donning the same fatigues the Cuban leaders were. So yeah, it was widely used on spots, even in civil settings, in ministries, in high-level meetings with even foreigners.

There is a story that I read in a memory of one of the participants of the revolution who said that when Castro was sworn in as first minister of Cuba, he was asked by his advisors to

change his military uniforms and wear civilian clothes. And he said, "No, there is no way I'll do that. If you force me to do that, I won't swear in as prime minister." Of course, he would have done it anyway, but he was very proud of his military uniform. And he knew that that image brought in a lot of positive outcomes in terms of propaganda and image in Cuba and outside.

When he first visited the United States, New York in 1959, in April 1959, the Cuban government hire an advertising company from the States. And they advised Castro to wear civilian clothes in New York. He didn't came in a state visit. He just came invited by the Society of Journalists to give like a keynote speech at their annual meeting. And Castro disregarded that advice, and he came wearing his uniforms. And it was surprisingly a very positive promotional element. And there is a picture of Brooklyn schoolchildren wearing his clothes and a fake beard to imitate Castro. So he knew what he was doing, I think.

RICH SNYDER: This is the period after the revolution in the 1960s. It was a time of a revolution globally or certainly in the US and Western Europe in youth culture, you know, blue jeans and long hair and all sorts of innovations in style. How did the Cuban government and society respond to those external changes?

MARIA CABRERA Well, the Cuban leaders were quite orthodox in their cultural views and values. I think that's also related with how convinced they were that the new men and the future had to be mold to their own image. But the thing is that when these youth in Havana, especially in urban cities, began to copy the styles of rock and roll musicians in the US, and they were heavily criticized by the leaders and especially Castro who called them Elvispreslians-- and in Spanish, it's Elvispreslianos-- as a criticism. And they were associated in the speeches of Castro with social and political deviants and with homosexuality which was also considered a moral, not only a moral sin but also a counterrevolutionary attitude and behavior.

RICH SNYDER: In reading some of your work, I learned about the use of a test that the police would apply to people, to men in particular to-- they'd use an orange and roll it up inside of the pants leg to see if the pants were too tight.

MARIA CABRERA Yeah. I mean, because in the early '60s, the proper bourgeois way to dress was like not-too-tight pants and a normal length. So these youth who began to experiment with dress and made their pants slimmer, and sometimes the length was more like a capri instead of a normal pant, and they wore sandals. The police, if the police spot somebody in [INAUDIBLE], that's mostly an urban phenomenon. If the police spots a youth who dress kind of weird and that the

pants very slim, they say-- I mean, I've heard stories that they tried to roll an orange through the legs of the pants to see if it didn't pass through. They were considered like deviant, and they could be sent to prison just because of that.

RICH SNYDER: We've been focusing on clothing, but clothing and fashion is really just one aspect of the broader category of material culture. And I know you have a broader interest beyond clothing. You even have a collection of several thousand objects and items called *Cuba Material*. I've been fascinated to see things like Bulgarian perfume and Russian electric razors from the '60s and all sorts of items in your collection. Could you discuss that?

MARIA CABRERA This is a collection that I began to gather in 2012 when I began conducting research for my dissertation. And it was created by chance. I needed an instrument to get information from the Cubans on the meanings that the objects they used in the '60s through '80s had, and it occurred to me that a blog would be a good idea. And I created this blog that was called *Cuba Material*, and I took the name out of Madonna's song, "Material Girl." So I switched it to Spanish, and it's *Cuba Material*. And it didn't work as an instrument to get information from people, but it worked for me to say some ideas on what I was studying and also to get my project known to a broader public. And lucky enough, after a few months of taking pictures of objects, I began to create this collection on Cuban material culture.

I've traveled to Eastern Europe, and I've seen and visited some of the museum of communism that exists in almost, I would say in almost every Eastern European capital, and Cuba doesn't have one. Here in America, in California, there is a museum that's called Wende Museum. That is, "wende" means in German, I think like change. So this museum has a huge collection of material culture from Eastern Europe, from socialist Eastern Europe, and I've heard they have the biggest collection of Berlin Wall pieces outside of Berlin. They don't have anything on Cuba. So I was curious and interested in having this collection. And my idea, of course, is to have in the future a museum of Cuban communism, hopefully in Cuba. But if it's not possible-- it is not possible now-- but if it's not possible while I'm alive, at least we'll have it here in America.

RICH SNYDER: What are some of the highlights from the collection, some of the pieces that leap into your mind? And I'm curious to know how Bulgarian and Soviet perfumes smell.

MARIA CABRERA Well, it's very hard to me to pick some objects. But I would mention, for instance, an ID card
ARUS: that has-- it was given by the government, by a center of espionage the government had to

person who spy on their neighbors. I saw that ID has like a secret code the super spy had to report or attach to the inform the person made on their neighbor. And to me, that's important because some people might say, now, this is the only image and example of that kind of ID exists. And I remember when I posted online, it made some noise among some mainstream media in Florida, including the *Miami Herald* who published the image immediately and interview me about that.

And it's interesting to me because nowadays, you might think that people began to spy on each other voluntarily or because they wanted to protect the Cuban regime. But when you see that this was a practice that was originally promoted by the government, you see that it was not as spontaneous as you might be tempted to think right now. So this is an example.

Another example, for instance, there is a portable radio. It seems very modern, and it's pretty to see. It's small. It's in red. The color is red, which also means something if you think that the communist ideology is identified with the red color. But it's cool. I mean, the brand is Pioneros.

RICH SNYDER: And just to clarify, the Pioneros, that was the name given to the schoolchildren during the--

MARIA CABRERA The schoolchildren.

ARUS:

RICH SNYDER: --the socialist period in Cuba. How have people-- you gave us the example of the *Miami Herald* and organizations in Florida showing interest in the identity card. But how have others responded to your collection?

MARIA CABRERA Well, I'm very lucky that I have a lot of friends who supported my project from the very

ARUS: beginning. And they were some intellectuals or writers, so they made my collection and my project known. They helped me to promote it from the very beginning. And nowadays, I receive donations of objects from people who-- some of them, I know them, some of them, I don't. But you know, from time to time, I receive a package in the mail with some documents or objects that people send me to contribute to the collection.

RICH SNYDER: And if people are interested in seeing the collection, they can go to the website cubamaterial.com.

MARIA CABRERA Yes.

ARUS:

RICH SNYDER: Are there any other opportunities?

MARIA CABRERA Well, so far, in 2015, I organize a show in New York, in Parsons School for Design. And this
ARUS: was a show focusing on the material culture of childhood in Cuba. And it had, I think, a record number of visitors. And now organizing here at Brown's Watson Institute a digital projection of some of the objects from the *Cuban Material* collection, specifically fashion. And it will complement a panel I'm also organizing that will take place on December 5th with a group of scholars who work on fashion, and we will be discussing the relationship between fashion and politics and revolutions in particular. So we'll talk about fascist fashion, fashion in the American Revolution, in the Mexican Revolution, and in the Cuban Revolution.

RICH SNYDER: That sounds like a fascinating event. Focusing on your stay here at Brown, in addition to organizing the conference and panel, what else are you doing? You're teaching a class.

MARIA CABRERA Yes, I'm teaching a class that I'm very happy to say that I just created for my stay here at
ARUS: CLACS, the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Brown, and it's called Consuming the Cold War in the Caribbean. And this is the first time I'm expanding from the focus on fashion to a focus on material culture in general. So we are seeing how appliances and modern mass consumer goods were used in the Caribbean by the war superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and also by local regimes in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico to promote specific ideas of modernity and to compete with each other and to demonstrate that either capitalism or socialism were the most suitable regimes to promote a decent and modern standard of life.

RICH SNYDER: One final question for you. What would you say to a critic who might argue that the kinds of material objects-- clothing and perfumes and envelopes and so forth-- on which you focus are really just surface phenomenon and sort of trivia, and we shouldn't really waste our time looking at them? How would you respond to someone who felt that way about the value of material culture as a window?

MARIA CABRERA Well, that really happened. When I created the collection on the website, some people call me
ARUS: superficial and banal, and many people didn't trust my project. But I didn't say anything, and I won't say anything again if that happens. But they, themselves, came to the conclusion that there is the lot to know and to learn when you examine an object and when you see not a single individual there but a whole bunch of objects and a collection of a particular era and period. So I wouldn't say much. I would just show them the stuff I have.

RICH SNYDER: Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure chatting, and I look forward to your exhibition here at Brown.

MARIA CABRERA Thank you so much for having me here.

ARUS:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of *Trending Globally* was produced by Dan Richards and Jackson Cantrell. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and review on iTunes. It really helps others find the show. For more information about this and other shows, go to watson.brown.edu.

[MUSIC PLAYING]