The Fantastic Flying Donkey and the Tattoo

Alejandra Bronfman

To begin, a list: strands of human hair; sculptures made of bread crumbs, fashioned by the inmates of the Asilo de Dementes de Cuba (Cuban Asylum for the Insane) (the fantastic flying donkey is among these); skull of a black man who died at the age of 109 in Santa Clara; wax mold of a breast that accidentally developed in a man who nursed a child for twenty-two months; fragment of a piece of skin, with a tattoo, belonging to a mulatto; colt revolver; dueling pistols; used bullets; paintings of náñigo processions; painting of the original Hippocratic Oath; six-week-old fetus; necklace of Santa Barbara; rosary; bell; maracas; drum; crucifix.

These are 17 out of 177 items listed as the contents of the Museo de la Catedra de Medicina Legal de la Universidad de la Havana (Museum of the Department of Legal Medicine in the University of Havana, hereafter Museo), as it existed in 1930.¹ The list recalls, in its apparent jumble of objects, Jorge Luis Borges’s seemingly arbitrary taxonomy of animals (allegedly drawn from an ancient Chinese encyclopedia) that Foucault used as a point of departure to think about the “narrowness of space” between seemingly incommensurable items. Foucault argued that thinking of “suckling pigs,” animals “drawn with a very fine camelhair brush,” and animals “that from a long way off look like flies” as categories capable of existing under the general grouping of “animals” forced a reconsideration of what he called the grid of “identities, similitudes and analogies.” The grid arranges categories and therefore, by virtue of their proximity, provides a site where meaning is derived from the intersection of language and space.² Foucault roots his analysis in a spatial metaphor, meaning by “spaces of knowledge” the epistemic ordering of categories and things.

Museums can be material manifestations of epistemic spaces, in which the
“systems of simultaneity” are expressed by arrays of objects as they are organized, categorized, and placed. This essay is an effort to elucidate the logics of the “space of knowledge” at the Museo, which included, among other things, a fantastic flying donkey, a skull, a fragment of skin, and a bell. I argue that the logics of this collection don’t quite contain all the objects, some of which exceeded and overflowed the categories in question. Both powerful and incomplete, the museum’s “system” holds many of the objects together but also fails to wholly incorporate all of them. The essay will also consider the relationship of policing to this grammar of collecting, and suggest that putting a history of policing together with a history of museums indicates that the collecting guided the policing as well as the other way around. Because the police were both the intended audience and in many cases the purveyors of objects to the museum, they contributed to a self-justifying and self-perpetuating logic that legitimized an enduring association of blackness with criminality.

The scholarship on museums and public memory in the Caribbean has been largely concerned with debates about slavery, the slave trade, and public memory. This literature addresses a lively debate occurring on most of the islands regarding how best to remember and memorialize the people and events that shaped slavery and contributed to emancipation. This process of commemoration is a healthy corrective to interpretations of the Caribbean past that either downplayed the significance of slavery or framed it solely in terms of European participation. At the same time, the emphasis on slavery and emancipation tends to magnify its memory at the expense of subsequent histories. What Jamaica Kincaid has referred to as an “obsession with slavery” can drown out other histories.

In Cuba, the 1959 revolution inspired a spate of commemorations as well, leaving a large gap between the colonial period and the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet if scholars have tended to overlook the ways that the Republican period (1902–1959) built museums and instituted public memories, those years were in fact replete with attempts to make and remake spaces that conversed with or extended Republican-era projects: to create a modern state, to connect emerging nationhood with both a past and a future, and to demonstrate to the world Cubans’ competence and capacity to direct their own affairs. As the democratic state born in 1902 created both new freedoms (notably, freedom of religion) and new ways to repress them, social scientists such as Fernando Ortiz studied and diagnosed crime as both symptom and signal of Cuban modernity. Gerardo Machado, riding a nationalist wave to his election as president in 1924, explicitly encouraged the pursuit of science and social science in his projects of governance. New buildings and infrastructure, including the Capitolio (an almost exact replica of the Capitol building in Washington, DC) and the highway running down the length of the island, materialized as part of these projects. Newly housed scientific institutions lent con-
crete substance to Machado’s ambitions to incorporate science into his version of the Cuban state. In this context, the Museo took part in a series of ventures that sought to conjoin the state, social science, and legal reform.

At the same time, the stated inspiration for the Museo exceeds the nationalist interests at play in 1920s Cuba. In a short essay that accompanies the list of contents with which I began, Raimundo de Castro and Israel Castellanos, the authors and founders of the museum, cite as inspiration the mandate expressed in 1906 at the Sixth Congress of Criminal Anthropology in Torino: “The congress directs that each government collect any confiscated objects that would otherwise be neglected or destroyed, and place them in a museum which will be very beneficial for the study of law and policing.” The authors cite similar endeavors across Europe, including museums in Berlin, Lyon, and Torino, whose efforts were inspirational. At stake in these conversations were changing definitions of crime and criminality. In the European context, the discipline of criminal anthropology pioneered by Cesare Lombroso and Alexandre Lacassagne bent the pursuit of transgression and illicit behavior toward science, understood as measurable, rational, and based on falsifiable principles. Whether this meant attention to criminals’ physiology or their social milieu, a new focus on the criminal (rather than the crime) gave impetus to efforts to know him or her that included the collection of artifacts as evidence. Body parts, objects procured during raids, photographs, and weapons acquired status as servants of the new science. What Cubans could contribute was knowledge and material from the cohabitation of and interactions among “three races: white, mestizo (or mulatto) and black.” Cuban social scientists aspired to provide the kind of empirical material that might be scarce or rare in Europe. They argued that their “anatomical specimens” encompassed a larger variety of sources than the European, turning the “problem” of race into an advantageous plenitude of data.

Subjects and Objects

In the early twentieth century, politicians and nationalists had racialized crime and sought out the tools of emerging disciplines such as anthropology and sociology in order to further associate blackness with illicit behaviors. Black men, having obtained legal equality but retained multiple burdens of persistent racist practices, became new targets of policing and new subjects of social science. Medicine, a profession of high visibility and status in Cuba, had been incorporated into the conversation as notions of race and notions of legal evidence came to be increasingly rooted in biology and empiricism. As Stephan Palmié has so aptly put it, “the establishment of a correlation between delinquency and physiology on one hand, and an evolutionary scheme of collective moral progress on another — paved the way to a conceptual refiguration of long-standing elite constructions of black deviance into scientifically circumscribable indices of ‘Africanity.’”
Both Israel Castellanos and Raimundo de Castro had been instrumental to this confluence—or mutual constitution, to borrow Palmié’s terminology—of race, biology, criminality, and state modernizing projects. Castellanos enjoyed a long and varied career at the forefront of many Cuban imbrications of race with crime. During the brujería scares of the early twentieth century, in which black men were accused of killing white children in order to use their body parts in Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies, Castellanos, along with Fernando Ortiz, had produced theories about atavism and degeneration that understood African-derived spiritual rituals and beliefs as evidence of the perseverance of primitive culture in Cuba. Trained as a medical doctor, Castellanos turned his attention to crime and criminals and produced a number of efforts to map and read human bodies for their capacity for delinquency, understood as linked to biological factors. By the early 1920s he worked in or directed a number of institutions that provided him with bodies upon which he could conduct studies, including the Cuban National Bureau of Identification and the Laboratory of Penitentiary Anthropology. During this time he produced works such as El pelo en los cubanos (The Hair of Cubans) (Havana: 1933), La talla de los delincuentes en Cuba (The Height of Cuban Delinquents) (Havana: 1927), and Medicina legal y criminología afro-cubanas (Legal Medicine and Afrocuban Criminology) (Havana: 1937). An inveterate collector, he amassed samples of hair, fingerprints, and photographs; measured noses, jaws, and foreheads; analyzed skin color and tattoos; and scrutinized torsos, necks, and limbs. As such, his persistent and indefatigable creation of a series of archives would prove central to Cuban criminology as it both generated a certain biologized understanding of criminality and consumed scraps of incarcerated bodies. Leading the impetus for a more scientific approach to crime, Castellanos occupied high ranks within the administration led by Gerardo Machado, which turned to violent repressive measures in response to rising unrest in a context of the economic and political crises of the late 1920s. Yet at times the archiving impulse would interfere with what Machado might have envisioned as the most efficient use of a repressive apparatus, as when Castellanos assembled some 600 photographs of Cuban female “delinquents” only to conclude that female delinquency was not a serious problem in Cuba.

Less is known about Raimundo de Castro, who was professor of legal medicine at the University of Havana and under whom Castellanos served as assistant professor. Certainly he was connected to the increasingly visible medical establishment as the state expanded its role in public health. A US-occupied Cuba (1898–1902) turned its attention to yellow fever, which had decimated US troops. Concerted efforts on the part of US and Cuban doctors resulted in the largely successful campaigns to eradicate mosquitoes. As Marc McLeod has argued, when malaria reached epidemic proportions in the 1920s and again in the early 1930s, it offered the medical establishment an occasion to racialize disease. Debates about
disease, immigration, and labor converged on the nature of bodies: which were desirable as workers (native-born or Spanish immigrants), which were to be excluded (black immigrants). Nationalist populism in the 1930s sounded with a nativist timbre as migrant workers became scapegoats in the midst of an economic crisis. Policing in this context acknowledged the importance of identifying and distinguishing people who were ill, practitioners of “unmodern” or “unhygienic” rituals, or potential sources of disorder. Policing required a close reading of physicality and biology as well as of social context and personal connection. Tattoos, an Antillean accent, skin color, or jewelry might serve as evidence of foreignness or suspect practices.

The logic of legal medicine assumed an intrinsic relationship among human bodies and the law, or more precisely, the transgression of the law. Under this scheme, both perpetrators and victims could deliver telling details to the astute investigator and contribute to the crime’s solution. As Ruth Harris has argued, the concern of legal medicine was to “investigate the psycho-social state of the criminals, and to measure their dangerousness by probing the recesses of their minds, bodies, and social habits.” This museum seemed to intend to make visible the marginal or illicit—that which was defined as outside the normal or acceptable parameters of culture. The logics that defined it referred to a policing project that tried to render criminalized alterity visible and palpable.

**Disorder and Order**

A brief biography of some of the objects will speak to the range of policing practices and logics at play in the collection. The fantastic flying donkey and the mulatto skin with tattoo arrived at the museum by way of divergent tendencies in legal medicine. The donkey, listed as part of a collection donated by R. Sopo Barreto of artwork produced by inmates of the Cuban Asilo de dementes (Asylum for the Insane), represented the turn to psychiatry in debates about criminality and free will. The claim that those who were mentally incapacitated were not to be held responsible for their crimes had taken hold in legal circles at the turn of the twentieth century and was a commonplace assumption in 1930s Cuba. With emphasis on therapy and rehabilitation rather than punitive measures, what might have been policing institutions became houses of reform. Still, why those sculptures were there at all is not entirely clear: possibly, these bread crumb sculptures had been produced by people who had committed crimes, or, alternatively, the museum’s founders had decided that by way of association, artifacts of the “insane” and the “criminal” all belonged together under one roof.

By contrast, the piece of skin with the tattoo derived from a more retributive ethos, in which people fell under suspicion due to innate and therefore irredeemable criminal tendencies. Criminologists in Cuba had long asserted that tattoos ought to be understood as important markers, not just for identification purposes but because they somehow conveyed something about the dangerousness or potential for vio-
The donkey born in therapy and the patch of skin torn or cut off a body may have sat in close proximity to one another in the exhibits, but the paths that led them to their places aligned with one another only tenuously. If items like the flying donkey and the skull signaled an underlying reformist ideology or an attraction to the bizarre, other pieces on display played a clearer instructional role. Castellanos and de Castro envisioned the collection as a set of propositions to guide evolving police practices. Students would learn most efficiently when they had opportunities to work with material examples. Since they might go for some time, for instance, “without finding, in the course of everyday policing, typical examples of strangulation, poisoning or certain kinds of wounds,” it would prove essential to conserve and display as much material evidence as possible for use in the classroom.22 As Castellanos and de Castro claim, “the key to the exercise of our art” was in learning to see, and for that they needed the objects as tangible products of illicit behavior.23

All of the objects associated with brujería and ñañiguismo, such as the drum, maracas, and necklaces, supported theories elaborated in popular culture and social scientific circles about the illicit nature of systems of Afro-Cuban spirituality.24 As the authors put it, “these are judicial objects, the clothing and accoutrements of antisocial types, used sometimes by born witches, that is to say, Afro-Cuban healers, and other times by pretenders or petty thieves, who are called pseudowitches; because ñañiguismo is a criminal association that practices mutual defense and feeds the most brutal aggression.”25 In their eyes, all spiritual practices with any trace at all of Afro-Cuban derivation ought to be deemed suspect. These practices had been the target of repression and prohibition on and off during the twentieth century. As such the captured items proved the success of efforts to stamp out suspect rituals and beliefs. But to the police who served as the museum’s audience, these objects might have suggested possibilities for future investigations as much as they attested to past convictions. A sighting of a drum or a set of maracas might (and did) lead to indiscriminate arrests and raids. Thus the police created an itinerary for these objects as they moved from the dwellings in which they emanated spiritual power through legal institutions, finally coming to rest in the museum.26

Assumptions about the criminal tendencies of anyone involved in these practices ran deep and were nourished by the presence of objects as instructional tools. And the array of objects on display would help train generations of police, who would learn from and then work to expand and reproduce the collection. The museum encouraged police to treat their repressive activities as scientific expeditions, from which they ought to return with material manifestations of their success. Rather than a mere repository of objects, categories and tables, the museum contributed actively to the production and control of boundaries among religion, culture, and licit behavior in Republican Cuba.
Speculations
I have considered the ways that a museum of legal medicine both followed some principles of collecting and museum organization and confounded others. While Foucault’s notion of a grid of categories upon which objects might be mapped serves as a useful conceptual frame, some of the objects evaded placement on that grid. A nationalist impulse was less important as a founding principle than a desire to participate in the transnational traffic of objects and concepts. Most importantly, the collection was shaped by and contributed to the reproduction of notions of criminalized alterity. But these modest conclusions point to broader questions, perhaps for further research. How does an account of this collection — in turns grotesque, banal, and sinister — change our understandings of the nature of museums as spaces in which a public encounters hidden logics of the state? How fruitful is it to consider the illogical and the places where coherence falls apart? If the conjunction of blackness and delinquency arose precisely out of that incoherence, the museum’s contents attest to the tragic force of that idea.

Notes
1. Raimundo de Castro et al., El museo de la cátedra de medicina legal de la Universidad de La Habana (The Museum of the Department of Legal Medicine of the University of Havana) (Havana: El Universal, 1930), 8–16.
5. For example, the colonial-era museums include the Palacio de Gobernador General (Palace of the Governor General) and the Castillo del Moro (Moro Castle), while the 1959 revolution inspired the Museo de la Revolución (Museum of the Revolution), Museo de la Educación (Museum of Education) and Museo del Ministerio del Interior (Museum of the Ministry of Interior). One notable exception is the Hemingway Museum, which commemorates the author’s residence in Cuba during the Republican era.
8. See, for example, Alissandra Cummins, “Caribbean Museums and National Identity,” History Workshop Journal, no. 58 (2004): 224–45; Richard Price and Sally Price,

9. “El congreso aprueba que cada gobierno recoja los objetos confiscados, de los cuales puede disponer y que serán inutilizados o seguramente destruídos, en un Museo, que será útilísimo para el progreso de los estudios legales y de policía judicial.” De Castro et al., El museo, 5.


21. Harris, Murders and Madness; Bronfman, “Poetry in the Presidio.”

22. De Castro et al., El museo, 4.

23. Ibid.

24. Palmié, Wizards and Scientists; Román, Governing Spirits; Helg, Our Rightful Share; Bronfman, Measures of Equality.

25. “Son piezas judiciales, vestidos y adornos de tipos antisociales, usados unas veces por feticheros natos, es decir, por curanderos afro-cubanos, y otras por simuladores or estafadores vulgares, que son llamados pseudobrujos; porque el naniguismo es una asociación criminal, que mantiene la defensa mutal de sus miembros y alimenta las agresiones más brutales.” De Castro et al., El museo, 7.