

History in Focus

2. Unlikely Entry Points, Unexpected Dead Ends

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Pair with March 2022 Issue of the AHR

Daniel Story (0:00)

So a quick word of explanation here at the start. Episode 2, one week after episode 1. So this is a weekly podcast, you say? No (*laughter*). Basically, we're releasing a bit of a flurry of material here in these first few weeks—episode one, followed by episode two, and then some bonus material coming up a few weeks from now. But after that, we're going to settle into what will be our normal schedule. And that's going to be one episode a month, released on the first Wednesday of each month. So after this first run, the next episode, episode 3, you can anticipate on the first Wednesday of April. Just thought I'd clear that up. Alright. Now to episode 2.

So Judd, what is this term that appears in your title?

Judd Kinzley (0:55)

Zhuzong dawang. Yeah, that's, that's literally... pig bristle king. I mean, I think what was sort of interesting about that, just the term, and when I kind of came across it, I thought it was kind of unique. But there's any number of guys who also had the sort of "king" attached to their name connected to these materials, something like hog bristles. But they also had a "tungsten king" and a "wood-oil king" and these kind of things. So it's sort of a term I think that, you know, I was interested in playing with, but yeah, it is a term in Chinese really explicitly.

Daniel Story (1:29)

In the 1940s, as the United States entered World War II, they began scouring the globe for raw materials to fuel their military production needs. One of those crucial materials, perhaps surprisingly, was hog bristles. And it wasn't many years prior, in the 1930s, that China emerged as the world's leading supplier of these bristles. The collision of US demand and China's need to fuel foreign trade created opportunities but also some unintended consequences. Such was the power of the hog bristle. I'm Daniel Story, and you're listening to *History in Focus*, a new podcast by the *American Historical Review*. This is episode 2: "Unlikely Entry Points and Unexpected Dead Ends." A bit later on, we'll eavesdrop on a conversation between Kate Brown and Jennifer Lambe about Jennifer's History Unclassified article, "Christine Jorgensen in Cuba: On Dormant Leads and Archival Dead Ends." But we begin with

my conversation with Judd Kinsley, about his article, "Wartime Dollars and the Crowning of China's Hog-Bristle King: The Dubious Legacies of US Aid, 1938-49."

So I wonder if one way to approach this story would be to ask you, who were the various protagonists and antagonists that appear, and what was at stake for each of them?

Judd Kinsley (3:05)

Well, I guess I'll start with...China had been involved in the production of hog bristles since around the 1920s. And before that, I didn't really talk that much in the article about this, but it had been the Russian Empire that was really heavily involved in bristle production in the past. And so a lot of the bristles that were produced in the Russian Empire were distributed into Eastern Europe through various textile and fabric markets. And then from there, were distributed mostly to the East Coast, United States. But after the fall of the Russian Empire, most of that trade moved to move to China. And so China then becomes heavily involved in the production of hog bristles. And so by the 1930s, they are just dominating the hog bristle industry. And it creates a real, to speak to some of the characters that come out of this and what their intentions are, I mean, the United States becomes really dependent on the production of Chinese hog bristles, by the 1930s. And so, by the outbreak of the war in China in 1937, the United States is taking at least 90% of American bristle imports are coming out of China. And so I think that the interest for people in the United States government, and ultimately people who are working for things like the War Production Board, is just to get access to enough bristles to feed the industries that relied on bristles, and there was a lot of them.

The other kind of player in this is the Chinese government. The Chinese government is really highly dependent on bristle production, because they are really desperate for foreign currency. Previously, in the 1930s, China had become quite dependent on raw material sales to Germany, in particular. So in the mid 1930s, they sign any number of agreements, largely exchanging tungsten and wood oil or tung oil to Germany in exchange for cash, in exchange for weapons. But the the Access Alliance means that Germany is no longer willing to sort of deal with the Republic of China's government to continue this kind of material exchange. So for the Chinese government, they're really desperate to find certain kinds of export materials that they can exchange for dollars. They're in a wartime situation. There's major problems with inflation that are happening after 1937. And so they need a stable form of currency to float their own currency, but also to be able to purchase equipment from the United States or weapons from the United States. And so the larger goal for the Chinese government is to make sure that they are able to produce and export a large enough amount of raw materials, and that's a relatively

small number of things. So hog bristles is really part of a small kind of constellation of materials that could be exported for US dollars, or for gold bars, or what have you. So that's, I think, a lot of this is a negotiation between the Chinese government and the American government, both of whom are trying to find a way to ensure a larger sort of stream of bristles are making their way to the United States.

But I think what's really unusual about this story is the powerful role that certain individual businessman can play in mediating that exchange. And so I'm pointing in this piece to Gu Gengyu, this guy who controls most of the hog bristle production in central China for the war period, is able to parlay his control, and his connections to American corporations into a much larger sort of hog bristle kingdom that he puts together after the war. And so his larger goal is to control the export of hog bristles and to control the production of hog bristles as well. And that's what he's able to assert himself by creating much more or highly vertical production networks over the course of the war. So at the same time that the wartime situation and inflation is driving a lot of other bristle producers out of the market, Gu Gengyu through his connections, particularly to the Chinese government, is able to consolidate his control and to absorb all of these different businesses who were involved in the hog bristle trade and able to expand really aggressively, and he takes that sort of larger position that he develops over the course of the war, and uses that to establish himself after it.

Daniel Story (6:59)

Can you talk about how the hog bristle moved from the hog to the US?

Judd Kinzley (7:07)

Yeah, that's really interesting, and one of the most sort of exciting things for me was trying to, to piece together what it looked like for a hog bristle to move from the back of a living hog to a case that would then be shipped across the Pacific to the United States.

Sounds from hog farm in the background.

And so essentially, for the most part, hogs would be slaughtered in the winter, the spring and that was, you know, around the time of the Chinese New Year. So there's significant amounts of hogs that were being produced. And luckily for the bristle industry, that's when hog bristles also tended to be the most flush. Hogs would then be slaughtered by local village butchers. And for the most part for most of Chinese history, you know, there is a small amount of hog bristles that would be used for certain kinds of brushes. But for the most part, they were discarded, or they were used as waste material of different kinds, either thrown into fertilizer,

or used to help firm up bricks, that kind of thing. But the emergence of demand for hog bristles changed that kind of calculation. So increasingly, this waste material that would have just been sort of swept into the scrap heap of the local butcher, was demanded by people like Gu Gengyu and his company. But this whole system was dependent not only on local butchers saving those bristles, but also on itinerant and often sort of offseason workers who would gather and collect those bristles and to kind of go from village to village, because each village wouldn't be producing enough bristles to make it worthwhile for that butcher then to come to the county seat to offload those bristles. And so essentially, what you'd have is offseason, agricultural workers would circulate through many of these villages, collect those bristles, and then deliver them higher and higher up this sort of chain. And so you'd have then these offseason workers who would go through a network of villages, deliver their collection of bristles then to a larger wholesaler. The wholesaler then would bring more bristles, all together, and ultimately deliver them at various sort of stages here, deliver them to what's called a bristle dressing factory. And so in the dressing factory, they align the bristles so that they have the bottom end or the butt end to the flag end, so the bottom to the top. And they go through a very extensive sort of process of cleaning, making sure that the fat and the flesh that's attached to those bristles is stripped away or boiled off, and that those bristles are not sort of matted, and that they're all arranged in the same direction. And also that they're arranged in sizes, because what's really important for bristle importers was to make sure you have a whole assortment of sizes. Not surprisingly from after you slaughter the hog and you have a big clump of bristles, there's going to be different size bristles in there, different quality of bristles in the bristle dressing factor. You need to have people who are skilled enough to be able to go through those bristles and clean them but also sort them into a range and that's really what makes bristle production so difficult. It makes it really unreasonable to do in the context of the United States. The United States tries to produce its own bristles but it's just too labor intensive. It doesn't make financial sense for, you know, the large scale, hog packing plants in places like Chicago to save the bristles because no one can process them. It's just too labor intensive and too costly. In China, which had sort of lower wage labor that could be thrown at this problem, they are able to do that and are able to sort of profit off of that. And so from the bristle dressing factory, they would arrange these things, put them into standardized assortments, wrap them into cases, and then ultimately sell them or offload them to American importing firms or to American government agencies that were purchasing the bristles and sending them out to the United States.

Music fades in from clip from the 1941 public service film "America's Call to Arms."

Film narrator (10:38)

America prepares. All America alters its pattern of life and work to meet the demand for protection. Industry is at double step to supply the final of safety. America's vast resources are harnessed to the job of being the world arsenal for this and other democracies. Its present production of armaments is but a mere fraction of the great job that lies ahead.

Film clip fades out.

Judd Kinzley (11:02)

You know, as far as the War Production Board was concerned, one of the main concerns that they had was getting hog bristles for what's called the noble comb, which is a device that was developed for the mass production of wool, for the carding of wool, which is really critical for the American wool industry. And there's this larger discussion by the War Production Board, I don't have the numbers at hand, but it's something like if they aren't able to import 100,000 pounds of bristles annually for the wool industry, then the wool industry would basically, you know, come to a complete halt. And so they're not going to be able to produce the type of fabric that is needed, you know, to clothe American soldiers or, or just for the American textile industry in general. But I think bristles were most important for their use in paint brushes. Unlike, you know, nylon that was being produced in the first half of the 1940s, which is relatively smooth, there's, you know, elements of the bristle brush that allow for kind of capillary action, that means it can hold significant amounts of paint. And so, you know, painters at all levels in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s were pretty heavily dependent on bristles coming in, you know. As tensions in the Pacific ratchet up in the late 1930s and the import of bristles kind of dries up, there's a real fear that whether the United States will be able to paint the things that it's producing. This sort of desperation from the US government, and the reason that it ultimately became a strategic material, was when the US Navy was trying to acquire a significant amount of paint brushes to be able to paint ships, and it couldn't find them. So this sort of prompted the War Production Board to think very differently about bristles and to put new kinds of monopolies and to create a strategic stockpile on bristles.

Daniel Story (12:44)

So what was the impact in China of this growing US demand for hog bristles?

Judd Kinzley (12:52)

The bristle industry and American demand creates certain kinds of opportunities, I think it's worth it for us to remember, you know. I think the 1930s in particular are notable for real problems at the rural level for village life in China. And to some extent, these sort of sideline industries like hog bristle peddling is an important source of income. And it's recognized as

that at the village level, and there are offseason workers who are able to, you know, make ends meet because of that increased demand and because of the prices than the US government is paying for these products. But I think at the same time, you know, it does create opportunities for certain businessmen and for certain actors to be able to profit extensively. And you know, on the face of it, maybe that's okay. But I think at the same time, men like Gu Gengyu are able to consolidate their economic control over the industry, and able to consolidate their kind of political power in ways that I think have long term consequences in China. And I think that as hog bristle demand declines after the war, the kind of temporary increase to the bottom line for village families goes away. In many cases then that kind of creates a certain amount of rural immiseration, that ultimately the Chinese Communist Party is able to profit from. I don't want to draw a direct connection between the rise of the hog-bristle king and the victory of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, but I do think it's a factor. It's part of the larger sort of phenomenon that's emerging in the late 1940s, as you have people like Gu who are able to consolidate their control over certain kinds of industries, eliminate and push other people out of those industries because of their economic control and their connections to the United States, their access to US dollars. That I think is an important phenomenon that's worth it for us to take seriously. It's worth it for us to understand how the American alliances and economic relationships do have a consequence, potentially creating unrest and local anger that I think is worth sort of balancing against the very real benefits in some cases for American demand for certain kinds of products. I think it's worth it for us to have a clear sort of understanding of the ledger of what American demand for certain kinds products had, but I do you think there is a consequence.

Daniel Story (15:13)

I don't know if it's just me, and I suspect it's not just me...I find these kind of odd entry points to be really interesting and compelling. And in this case, we're talking about something that in a literal sense is very small and ephemeral. I wonder if you feel the same? And if you have any thoughts on why it is these somewhat unexpected entry points into our research can be really engaging as well as really enlightening.

Judd Kinzley (15:45)

I mean, I guess what I love about it is just to increase the cast of characters who are part of these stories, to put them in their their rightful place in many in many cases, you know. And so that's what I think is really exciting about that is to think about how a pedaler who's an offseason agricultural worker in tributaries of the Yangtze River in Sichuan Province, how they too are part of this larger sort of wartime story, and they too are impacted by, you know, American demand for certain kinds of raw materials in order to produce goods for this larger

war effort. They're part of that story. And I think that we wouldn't realize that unless we're able to find those entry points. I think that those entry points are everywhere, but it's just a matter of sort of chasing them down when you find them. And so for me, because hog bristles was so weird, and because it's so not a commodity that one thinks of as important, I found it to be compelling and just sort of chase down that story. But I think that those stories are everywhere. So yeah, I am a big proponent of trying to find these unlikely entry points because I think that they lead to interesting figures we tend not to focus on. But I hope my work suggests that we should focus on them.

Daniel Story (17:11)

You can find Judd Kingsley's article, "Wartime Dollars and the Crowning of China's Hog-Bristle King: The Dubious Legacies of US Aid, 1938–49" in the March 2022 issue of the AHR.

Music fades in from newscast covering Christine Jorgensen's arrival at the New York International Airport (now JFK) in 1952.

Newscaster (17:40)

Christine Jorgensen, who used to answer to George, creates quite a stir as she returns home to New York from Copenhagen. Christine hit the headlines following the series of operations in Denmark that transformed her from a boy into a girl.

Sound of camera flashes and reporters clamoring to get closer to Jorgensen.

Christine Jorgensen (17:56)

Very impressed by everyone coming.

Reporter 1 (18:00)

Christine, are you happy to be home?

Christine Jorgensen (18:03)

Yes, of course. What American wouldn't be?

Reporter 2 (18:07)

Have you been offered a movie contract?

Christine Jorgensen (18:09)

Yes, but I haven't accepted it.

Reporter 2 (18:12)

Do you have any plans regarding the theater?

Christine Jorgensen (18:15)

No, I don't think so.

Reporter 3 (18:16)

Hey, Christine!

News clip fades out.

Daniel Story (18:18)

In the early 1950s, American Christine Jorgensen emerged as the world's first transgender celebrity. And in 1953, she traveled to Cuba to perform at the famous Tropicana Club, a visit that by all indications fixed Jorgensen in Cuba's collective psyche for at least the next decade. But what do you do with such a fascinating and important story when the evidence trail seems to run out? Here's Jennifer Lambe in conversation with Kate Brown on Jennifer's History Unclassified article, "Christine Jorgensen in Cuba: On Dormant Leads and Archival Dead Ends." You'll hear Jennifer's voice first, reading from the introduction.

Jennifer Lambe reading from article (19:07)

Every historian has a b-side on the soundtrack of their research ruminations, an assortment of hunches and references with sleeper-hit potential. On mine, one particular note has been clamoring to crossover for years. While I worked on my dissertation, which became my first book, and more recently, as I began to dig into my second, Christine Jorgensen beckoned. In the 1950s, she surfaced in the freewheeling world of Havana's farándula, its nightlife scene a host for her cheeky cabaret routine. She popped up years later in island psychiatrist debates over homosexuality sustained in the thick of revolutionary campaigns against gender and sexual nonconformity. Jorgensen, the world's first transgender celebrity, left these and other marks on Cuban public culture, where she continued to be a point of reference for well over a decade.

Kate Brown (20:03)

So I assume Jorgensen went a lot of places. Why Cuba?

Jennifer Lambe (20:07)

Well, I think at the time, the logic was pretty straightforward. In the 1950s, Cuba was a hotspot tourist destination for many Americans. Many celebrities came to the city of Havana to go to its famous clubs and casinos. But she actually came in the capacity of a performer, and specifically was contracted to appear at Cuba's most legendary nightclub, the Tropicana Nightclub, where she wasn't the only American performer to appear, but certainly one of the most novel. And I think that was a deliberate choice clearly on the part of the promoter and owner of the nightclub—they were counting on the novelty of the act as she and her manager were counting on as well. And so Cuba, just 90 miles away, of course, from South Florida, had long maintained these complex connections to the US entertainment celebrity world. And that's certainly the circuit that brought her there. But her reverberations, the echoes of her visit, came to spread well beyond the walls of the Tropicana, as occurred almost everywhere that she went. It was about performance, but it was also about much more than performance.

Kate Brown (21:17)

You track down some of the songs that people wrote specifically about her visit to Cuba, she made such a splash. Can you tell us how you found the songs?

Jennifer Lambe (21:28)

So in addition to having this legendary night scene and tourist economy, Cuba was also one of the leading developers of innovative popular music in the hemisphere at the time. And this is a moment where a lot of new rhythms are coming out of Cuba that become international hits. And so she alludes in her autobiography to the fact that there was a Cuban song written about her, and she gives one name of a group. I still haven't been able to find any song written about her by that group, but I did find actually a song written by the man who would become Louis Farrakhan, a Calypso song about her, a kind of tongue in cheek, you know, ditty, as was common at the time, playing with the fact of her transition itself, something that was also. It seems, a prominent part of her nightclub act.

Music fades in for "Is She Is or She Ain't" by Louis Farrakan (22:20)

*I am trying to find a solution 'bout a certain person.
Trying to find a solution 'bout a certain person.
With this modern surgery they change him from he to she.
But behind that lipstick, rouge, and paint,
I got to know is she is or is she ain't?*

Music fades out.

Jennifer Lambe (22:43)

Since she said in her autobiography that it was in fact a Calypso song that was written about her. Calypso is not a genre that was being developed in Cuba, of course. It was much more prevalent in the Anglophone Caribbean. But the fact that she insisted that there was a Cuban song wouldn't let me stop there. So even after I found the Farrakhan song, I continued to look and to hunt, and that turned up a few surprises of its own.

Kate Brown (23:14)

The 1950s, in which your story takes place, was a time of anxiety and danger with the emerging Cold War that's getting hot. And that Cold War will soon overtake and devour Cuban history for the rest of the century. How do the multiple geographical, social, and gendered boarder crossings of Jorgensen spell out danger?

Jennifer Lambe (23:38)

Yeah, she interacts with Cuba, both before and after the Cuban revolution, but certainly most intensely before. And she does so in a mode, in a genre, if you will, that's become pretty familiar by this point. Now, everybody knows about these novelty acts of the Tropicana. They occupy a kind of a certain place in the leisure landscape, the cultural landscape of Cuba, and by extension, the United States, precisely because of all these border crossings, because of the interconnections between Cuba and the United States at the time. But of course, she's doing this as the world's first transgender celebrity. And so much has happened in the United States. Every time she appears, there is this possibility both for enthusiastic engagement, but also for violent backlash. And the fact that she inspires both in Cuba in many ways reflects exactly the experience that she has basically everywhere, that there are many who thrill to her example, who really find her willingness to be public about her experience to be liberatory. And there are others, of course, who are deeply threatened by exactly that, and respond violently in different registers to her person. But what I think is interesting in the case of Cuba, and I think historians of Jorgensen elsewhere have argued, that all of this also maps on to the politics of the Cold War itself. Because after 1959, the Cuban Revolution ushers in this crackdown on precisely that tourist leisure landscape that had been such an essential part of Havana's economy before 1959 and that the new government is arguing amounts to a kind of stain on the national moral character. And of course, the government is going to become a socialist government, all kinds of radicalization come along with that. But historians of gender and sexuality and Cuba have long argued that in this particular realm, there is a very strong puritanical streak, moralistic streak, that in turn inspires homophobic backlash. And so she becomes a kind of symbol of precisely this shift in public representation. Whereas in her earlier

appearances, she's afforded a quite prominent space in the island's newspapers, magazines, *Bohemia* being the most famous, which is an important magazine not just in Cuba but all over Latin America, where she's afforded a relatively uncomplicated and celebratory treatment—you know, splashy pictures, kind of lifestyle sort of writing. And that depiction itself inspires some of the backlash after 1959, *how could we have celebrated someone like this* is basically the message. And all of this is wrapped up in turn into the radicalization of the revolutionary government's messaging around homosexuality, which is conflating here with Jorgensen in a way that she would have personally been very upset by, conflating, you know, what it means to have undergone the surgery that she underwent with homosexuality, which is becoming such a prominent target of revolutionary government. And so it's not surprising that she becomes, I think, part of that transition, because that had happened in other places as well, including in the United States. But what I tried to do, however, tentatively in the article is suggest that that kind of backlash, the violence that sometimes went along with it, if only discursive, in turn, suggests other kinds of violence, repression, but also liberation and possibility in Cuba, on the part of subjects who are much harder to access in the historical record, and about whom we know much less, and who, frankly, some of what we know about is confined to somebody who will tell the story who told the story, who told the story that somebody wrote up in a blog six decades later.

And those were the kinds of leads I found myself chasing, especially in trying to figure out the mystery of this Cuban song. Because the year that Jorgensen appears in Cuba is also the year a very famous song comes out called "La Engañadora," which is sometimes translated into English as "the gay deceiver," a song that itself seems to be about what in Cuba were called "transformistas." And there were many legendary transformistas before and even after 1959, people who, like Jorgensen, made gender transformation a part of their cultural performance, but also, in many cases, their embodied realities as well. So I think there are many different layers of crossing, engagement, inspiration, backlash, violence, some of which she directly unleashed and inspired and others that I think her story allows us to begin to pull out of the shadows.

Music fades in for "La Engañadora" by Enrique Jorin (28:44)

*Estaba gordita, muy bien formadita
Era graciosa en resumen, colosal.
Pero todo en esta vida se sabe...*

Music fades out.

Kate Brown (29:00)

So you talk about, in your History Unclassified article, about coming to a research dead end as you're trying to track Jorgensen in Cuba. What is a historical dead end? And what is its opposite, a living end?

Jennifer Lambe (29:16)

Yeah, well, you know, I was eight months pregnant. And looking at all of the unfinished things on my desktop, and thinking, oh my God, I've got to clear something off of my desktop before, basically, I can't do anything for however many months. And I was pregnant with twins, so people had told me that period would be even more extended. And so I was looking at this thinking I really need to figure out something to say about Christine Jorgensen. And I couldn't. So you know, I put the document away. The twins were born in February 2020. The next month, the entire world locked down, and everything pretty much receded from my mind, besides just figuring out what the next day was going to bring and how we were all going to deal with it. And I have to think that it's something about that experience itself that sort of led me to reconceptualize what I wanted to come out of this piece, to accept that maybe there wasn't a finite kind of end that it was heading towards. And I think, frankly, the experience of all of us has been trying to come to a place of acceptance with stories that are just inherently unfinished, that no matter what we do, and how hard we try to wrap them up, something surprises us out of nowhere and completely transforms the way that we've been thinking about everything that came before it. And that was sort of my experience with Jorgensen as well. I mean, she would pop up here, she would pop up there. I would try to wrap some kind of neat analytical story about what I was finding, only to discover something else that completely reoriented the way that I was thinking about it. And of course, you know, we're taught in graduate school that you want to come up with the strongest possible interpretive historiographical argument that you can to wrap neatly around the evidence that you found. And you'll just know, when you have the right amount of evidence to craft the right kind of argument that will be convincing for all of the potential audiences who might encounter your work. And there was something about this moment about the just fundamental state of uncertainty that I was living in that made me feel like maybe that's not where this particular story needed to end. There didn't seem to be a secret cache of documents waiting for me to discover. I tried pretty hard—nothing ever seemed to turn up, which is a relatively common experience, I have to say, for historians of Cuba, and certainly historians working on marginalized subjects in the past. But there was something about this story that just nagged at me a little bit more. I couldn't quite let it go, but I couldn't quite finish it. And so one day, I think I was out walking, it was March, it was cold, and I just thought, maybe this story doesn't have

to end that way. Maybe it's just not going to end at all. And frankly, the experience of sending the piece in and getting the reviewers' feedback only reinforced that feeling that the more people who interacted with the story, the more loose ends seemed to pop up. I wasn't closing doors, I was just opening more and more doors. And to try to find that process actually exhilarating, as opposed to frustrating. And to write from that process. And let that be the story that I told ultimately about Jorgensen felt weirdly appropriate for a person, of course, whose public persona also tottered this delicate line between disclosure and hidden self, you know, what she was projecting and what she wasn't showing. And for the many people who interacted with her, who, of course, shared that experience, it felt appropriate to acknowledge that there were just things that we couldn't know, that we would never know. And that that would be okay, and it would still be worthwhile to try to write something about it.

Jennifer Lambe reading from article (29:16)

Ultimately, Jorgensen has forced me to confront the very idea of a dead end. The phrase itself feels like rhetorical overkill. Aren't ends final enough on their own? Might there be other kinds of ends, living, say, better suited to historical pursuits? Generations of scholars devoted to uncovering the experiences of subaltern populations have forged a rich toolkit for reaching across and beyond historical silences, from theory, to oral history, and more. Such efforts have defied the very notion of documentary impossibility. Initial work in this vein suggests that many such leads lie in Cubans' embodied memory as well. They tend to map poorly on to the paradigms that structure political and historical debates, undoubtedly contributing to popular forgetting and official erasure. But the very process of communicating our incomplete and imperfect stories inevitably yields new leads, possibilities, and often productive archival frustrations.

I cannot quite get over the uncanny coincidence that brought Christine Jorgensen to Cuba and then “La Engañadora” to the world in 1953—one archival enigma wrapped in another. Even though no folder or document connects them, these overlapping stories of cross-cultural attraction, interaction, and, at times, repulsion are woven of the same cloth: the ambivalence attached to gender, sexual, and national crossings, especially in the fertile channel of the Florida Straits. Absent new archival finds—or serendipitously resurfaced memories—I see no straightforward way to tie these mysteries into a neat, or even Gordian, knot. But if we want to imagine living ends in our writing, we must also, I suspect, redefine our interpretive ends and endings. The archival roads we follow may sometimes take us in seemingly terminal directions, but only if we accept that a course that is uneven, circuitous, or composed of fewer than twenty thousand words (footnotes not included) is necessarily unwelcome.

Daniel Story (35:55)

That was Jennifer Lambe, speaking with AHR consulting editor Kate Brown, about Jennifer's article, "Christine Jorgensen in Cuba: On Dormant Leads and Archival Dead Ends," which appears in the History Unclassified section of the March 2022 issue of the AHR. History In Focus is a production of the American Historical Review, in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library, the University of California, Santa Cruz. This episode was produced by me, Daniel Story, with audio engineering assistance from Myles Rider-Alexis. For more information about the episode, including an episode transcript, visit americanhistoricalreview.org. Until next time, stay safe.