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Unpacking the Libraries of Post-Soviet Cuba

A partir de las renombradas “Palabras a los intelectuales” (1961) pronunciadas por Fidel Castro en la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí y la creación de una red de bibliotecas estatales, la biblioteca en Cuba se transformó en una esfera cultural saturada de ambigüedad ideológica. Por una parte, la biblioteca constituía el eje simbólico de las campañas de alfabetización y de lectura como núcleo catalizador del voluntarismo revolucionario y la imaginada solidaridad entre cubanos de distintas clases sociales. Pero la biblioteca también concretaba el escenario fundacional de la relación reiteradamente incierta entre el estado y los intelectuales y encarnada en la directiva “dentro de la Revolución todo; contra la Revolución, nada”. En este contexto, la representación de la biblioteca en la literatura y el cine de la época pos-soviética re-escenifica inconclusos debates entre la libertad de expresión y el contrato social. Valiéndose de conceptos de Foucault, de Certeau, y Benjamin, este análisis demuestra que la reciente producción cultural cubana revigora la biblioteca como espacio de negociación ideológica en una época de expectativas precarias y reactiva conversaciones culturales sobre la clase social y la democratización; la propiedad cultural individual o colectiva; y el ideal revolucionario de la inmersión ciudadana en la vida cultural.

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In a cramped, dusty institutional library, readers yawn, wipe their glasses, or comb through crumbling newspapers. This recurrent scene in Fernando Pérez's film *Madagascar*, produced during the low point of Cuba's state-designated Special Period and first screened in 1994, projects an eloquent view of stagnant state institutions.¹ The image is central to the film's portrayal of the disorientation experienced in the 1990s by an aging Cuban revolutionary generation, such as the protagonist Laura, a physics professor, and of the disaffection of that generation's children from revolutionary ideals. In sharp contrast, Juan Carlos Tabío's film *Lista de espera* (2000), based on Arturo Arango's 1997 story of the same title, imagines the lively restoration of a small

library in a rural bus terminal where arriving buses have few available seats. Here stranded passengers cope with idle time through a collective dream in which they pool resources to transform the terminal into the vibrant home of an improvised Cuban community. As they explore the terminal's abandoned rooms, they encounter remains of a would-be library and begin filling its shelves and cataloguing books rediscovered in scattered boxes. This brief scene reiterates the centrality of reading and libraries in the 1959 revolution's program for democratizing Cuban society and culture through education that would ostensibly render social class divisions moot.

The contrast in these portraits of the Cuban library of the post-Soviet era as a place of stasis and loss on the one hand and of individual and community renewal on the other exemplifies the library's status as a charged cultural trope in turn-of-the-millennium Cuba. The library was already a recurrent motif in twentieth-century Cuban literature, for example the alluring interior library in Dulce María Loynaz's 1935 avant-garde novel, *Jardín* (unpublished until 1951) or the eclectic reading matter that Alejo Carpentier's Sofía assembles as she and her brothers dismantle their family's eighteenth-century Havana home, liberating themselves from parental rule in *El siglo de las luces* (1962). But beginning with Fidel Castro's well-known *Palabras a los intelectuales*, delivered in June 1961 in the Salón de Actos of Cuba's Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, and with the subsequent creation of a centralized network of state libraries throughout the country, the library became an ideologically charged cultural sphere. On the one hand the library constituted a symbolic hub for the state's far-reaching literacy campaigns and for reading as the core of revolutionary volunteerism and imagined solidarity among Cubans divided by social class. But the library was also the foundational performative site of the state's recurrently strained relationship with Cuban intellectuals embodied in Fidel's famed directive for art: "[D]entro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución nada" (11). In this context, the library portrayed in post-Soviet Cuban literature and film provides the scenario for recasting debates about tensions between intellectual freedom and the social(ist) contract, private life and public citizenship.

The first Cuban film exploring these tensions—Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968)—already locates key scenes of cross-class encounter in a Havana bookstore and in Ernest Hemingway's library-study on the Finca Vigía.² These scenarios visualize the cultural politics contextualizing the disconnection between the

bourgeois intellectual Sergio and his young lover Elena, whom Sergio sees as the revolution's intended beneficiary and incarnation of Cuba's "underdevelopment". Decades later, as variably addressed by James Buckwalter-Arias, Esther Whitfield, José Quiroga, and Rafael Rojas, Cuba has experienced extensive "migrations of the book," to borrow Quiroga's term for the complex fragmentation of Cuba's literary culture in the post-Soviet era (*Cuban Palimpsests* 115–43). The exodus implicit in this phrase unfolded not only in the sale to international customers of valuable private collections but also in the preponderance of non-Cuban publishers for Cuban books when the economic crisis decimated island publishing and Cuban-authored books became less available to ordinary Cubans and were increasingly read by non-Cubans. Rojas's term "el estante vacío" eloquently evokes this process and also points to state efforts to control the reading material of Cuban citizens.³

Arguing that the book itself constituted a fetish of the revolution that embodied its ideals of education and collectivism and that the relationship between the revolution and the book was "[o]verdetermined from the start," Quiroga poses the accepted defining features of Special Period fiction, in particular its intertextuality, as a "reaction to the political imperatives of revolutionary literature" (*Cuban Palimpsests* 117, 140, my emphasis). In a similar vein, Cuban scholars writing from the island such as Jorge Fornet and Margarita Mateo Palmer, underscore the disenchantment weaving through literature of the 1990s (Fornet, "La narrativa" 38–45; Mateo Palmer 157). But the library portrayed in literary-artistic expression also elucidates the complex texture of the post-Soviet era's structures of feeling, in which disillusion with a revolutionary ideology deemed fossilized and repressive cohabits with nostalgia not only for lost cultural artifacts of the pre-revolutionary past (proscribed or forgotten artists) but also for revolutionary idealism itself. The term *crisis* is used by many Cubans to describe the Special Period and by Fornet to designate the epoch's values under siege (*Los nuevos paradigmas* 62). But the term is also apt for unpacking the library trope because it points not simply to disillusionment with a shaken system but also, in its etymological shadings, to the discernment and choice-making deployed in complex cultural responses to a vanishing past and dysfunctional present, a sifting through remnants in search of what might be salvaged for an unknown future.

The library in contemporary Cuban fiction and film generates such reflections because, more than a (private or institutionalized)

collection of books, the library is also a social space whose modern formation implies circulation. As such it possesses the qualities of what Michel de Certeau would term a “*practiced place*,” a locale that he argues is constituted by the recurrent, everyday activity of its users rather than through its official mapping. Certeau uses the term “practiced place” as his definition of “space,” which he contrasts with “place”: a manifestation of the “rule” of the law of the “proper” and of “stability” (117). By these terms, a library can on the one hand be conceived as stable in Certeau’s terms, that is, as an institutional sphere with officially inscribed expectations. But the library is also activated as such by the improvisational substance of the everyday. Drawing on Certeau, Ben Highmore argues that such everydayness manifests cultural life’s “density” and “refusal to be contained by the parameters of what would pass for ‘national life’” (177). The library’s interpretive richness in post-Soviet Cuban fiction and film derives in part from the everyday testing of such official parameters.

Even as a charged “practiced place,” in the era of electronic networking, the timeworn library might seem like an archaic location for imagining such contestations. Yet a striking feature of the library in contemporary Cuban renditions is its aura of power that evokes utopian designs and fantasies of superhuman erudition but also activates their subversion through a generative force of perspective-altering discovery. From the mythologized Great Library of Alexandria to the Borgesian impulse toward all-encompassing, universal knowledge on the one hand and toward books fated to repeat other books on the other, the library has long been tied to modernity’s encyclopedic impulse to encompass all (knowledge, power, or language) *and* to the postmodern undoing of those dreams, as in Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and his reflective and more theoretical *Postscript to the Name of the Rose* (1984).⁴ As Debra Castillo has observed, the library “represents a power structure and a menace to that structure . . . a space of hierarchical constructions, which . . . are constantly open to question as artificial and meaningless but whose orders are no less rigid or powerful . . .” (viii). Although secularized, Castillo adds, the library represents the “basis for spiritual communion” and the “denial of both spirituality and community” (viii).

With changes unfolding since the early 1990s, Cuban citizens have experienced relaxed proscriptions against the sacred in everyday

life, the reemergence of tourism as a revenue source, increasing flexibility in private enterprise and rules of ownership, and reconfigurations of citizens' relationships to work. Periodic state initiatives in ideological retrenchment have paralleled these changes. In this context, the library provides a dynamic, almost phantasmagoric space for imagining shifting relationships to power through unlikely dialogues among the revolution's diverse stake-holders. Such scenarios bring to mind Foucault's conception of the modern library as a phenomenon that liberates "the power of the impossible" and that, in its multiplication of potential readings within readings, is akin to a discourse "whose function is to maintain not a single and exclusive meaning (by excising all the others), but the simultaneous existence of multiple meanings" (91, 99).⁵

Even with economic stresses on the country's libraries, the Cuban state has not abandoned the library's symbolic domain or regulation of its activity. The Special Period witnessed the controversial "Independent Cuban Libraries Project" executed by alleged alliances between dissident Cubans on the island and US donors of assorted ideological stripes, a project consistently challenged by Cuba's leadership.⁶ In response to a report on the Special Period's negative impact by the International ISBN Agency, the Departamento de Investigaciones at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí reaffirmed the national library system's relative vitality against economic odds (Escobar). In this context, the library portrayed in fiction and film projects a sense of movement and potential change that coexists with and sometimes undermines the images of stasis associated with the Special Period's worst years. This air of activity reenergizes the library as a sphere for ideological negotiation in a time of open-ended expectations and reactivates unfinished conversations about social class and cultural democratization; about individual and collective ownership, particularly of cultural artifacts; and, in a period of refocus on the individual, about the espoused revolutionary ideal of citizen participation in cultural life.

The Library in the *Solar*: Close Encounters of an Unexpected Kind

A recurrent scenario in contemporary Cuban fiction and film is a character's momentous entrance to a library, an overpowering moment of astonishment whose force registers as a palpable bodily experience

infused with physical sensations and the promise of something about to happen. This sense of imminence brings to mind Foucault's conception of the library's "power of the impossible" and generation of multiple meanings and Walter Benjamin's equation of book collecting with the anticipation of discovery (60–61). In contemporary Cuban cultural production, this anticipation emerges in part from the library's sheer volume. But it also derives from the library's serendipitous appearance in unexpected places, a fictional character's discovery that, in turn, sets the stage for unlikely encounters among citizens of varied ideological positions that can generate at least partial meetings of the mind.

The second chapter of Jesús Díaz's 1992 novel *Las palabras perdidas* offers a fine example. This work portrays the failed effort by four young writers, including one woman, to produce an innovative aesthetic project: an eclectic literary magazine, *El Güije Ilustrado*, dedicated to an ideal of "gran literatura."⁷ The venture ultimately succumbs to state censorship, a fate revealed through the work's juxtaposition of a narrating present in the 1990s with an account of events when the revolution was still young though already institutionalized. Although set primarily in the 1960s, the beginning of the end of Cuban intellectuals' fleeting honeymoon with the revolutionary state, *Las palabras perdidas* epitomizes the structures of feeling of the early 1990s when it appeared and recasts the problem of artists' relationship to the revolution through the critical optic of the Special Period.⁸ Its protagonists in some sense anticipate the future as they aim to revalidate pre-revolutionary aestheticism sidelined or discredited by the state during the so-called "*quincenio gris*" of the 1970s. But their magazine project is simultaneously enveloped in the utopian drive of the revolution itself.

In this novel, a prodigious home-grown library—and a bookstore scene that anticipates it—frame a key encounter between two of the novel's four *güijes*: el Rojo, an aspiring aesthete, and el Flaco, a university instructor and would-be fiction writer. The two men differ in class origins and initial aesthetic philosophies; el Rojo, apparently from a family of means and education, cultivates a style-conscious art ostensibly disconnected from reality while el Flaco, who lives in a *solar* or tenement, has been writing realist stories. But they share dreams of art's transformative potential. Their project lays bare the tensions between and idealized synthesis of the political and artistic avant-gardes and the Cuban state's goal of art-at-the-service of the revolution. In

aligning artistic position with social class, this chapter implicitly ascribes class identities to aesthetic styles. Even so both men channel the utopian impulse of the 1960s into their writing: el Rojo imagines an all-encompassing poetic language and el Flaco envisions a novel embracing all literary forms.

A key encounter among the two men sets the *Güije Ilustrado* project into motion in this chapter, titled “El Flaco y la biblioteca de Alejandria” that juxtaposes their aspirations with the everyday reality in which they cross paths during a sale of the latest European arrivals in a Havana bookstore. When he first glimpses the store, el Rojo’s response projects the power exercised by a massive assemblage of books over a bibliophile: “[A]l mirar hacia la librería sintió un mareo, una sudoración, un llamado.” This call beckons readers, el Rojo reflects, into an anything-is-possible-world, quixotic flights of fantasy, where “el loco más cuerdo de la historia entraba a la eternidad montado en las aspas de un molino . . .” (15). El Rojo’s celebration of the power of literature encompasses references from Cervantes to Joyce, Rulfo to Grass, Solzhenitsyn to Vallejo. As a self-designated member of the *ciudad letrada* from a privileged background, el Rojo registers astonishment not only at the dynamic imaginative potential of so many books in one modest space but also at their indiscriminate reception by ordinary bookstore customers who, in his equation of aesthetics with class, lack literary discernment. This scene unfolds through el Rojo’s perspective as a free-for-all in which customers accustomed to waiting in long lines for consumer goods (one person thinks they are awaiting potatoes) seize from the shelves however many books they can hold: “[U]n enjambre de manos cayó sobre los libros, que empezaron a desaparecer como en un acto de prestidigitación. . . . Una suerte de locura se había apoderado de los compradores, que pugnaban por adquirir colecciones completas en las que se mezclaban el oro y el barro” (22).

El Rojo’s self-designation as the person in this near-riot capable, unlike his compatriots, of distinguishing between gold and clay supports the novel’s implicit conversation, under the shadow of the revolution’s cultural politics, about the relationship between “good” (aestheticist, disengaged) and “bad” (realist, socially engaged) art. As Buckwalter-Arias demonstrates, the novel calls this tired binary into question more than reinforcing it, by locating in its four *güijes* a range of positions on art’s relationship to life, by their rehearsal of a gamut

of styles, and through the contradictions between their literary philosophies and actual practices and similar contradictions inherent in the novel itself (50–82). But the bookstore encounter and the library scene that follows also manifest the contemporary return of a repressed, unresolved class-consciousness whereby artistic sensibility is recast as a measure of social status. El Rojo holds himself above other bookstore customers not only because he believes they lack literary judgment but also because they are mere consumers, shaped by the market (regulated or free). El Rojo, by contrast, prides himself for never deigning to buy books (“la *liaison* del verbo vender con el sustantivo libros era repugnante” [14]) and instead steals them (from stores, from friends) using a text-emptied volume of Otto Kuusinen’s *Manual del marxismo-leninismo* to hide them. El Flaco, by contrast, buys books in large numbers, and el Rojo’s speculations on this betray his own prejudices in tension with the revolution’s leveling goal that all Cubans have access to literary culture: “¿El Flaco sería un revendedor? No, no tenía tipo. Probablemente era algo muchísimo más siniestro, un oportunista nuevo rico que se había hecho con alguno de los palacetes abandonados por los burgueses de Miramar y que ahora compraba libros por metros para adornar paredes” (23).⁹ Implicit in this conjecture is el Rojo’s assumption that Havana’s “new rich”—those rewarded for service to the revolution with a house left behind by wealthier compatriots gone into exile—lack the old intelligentsia’s ostensible aristocracy of taste, with which el Rojo identifies.

This resurgent classism, swathed in a critique of the state’s regulatory cultural politics, is not unusual in post-Soviet Cuban artistic expression, for example in Arturo Infante’s scathing parody of ordinary Cubans’ cultural knowledge in the short film, *Utopía* (2004). But locating such revitalized class-consciousness in a library offers a more reflective account in which the unfulfilled revolutionary promise of cultural democratization is simultaneously challenged and reactivated. When el Flaco asks el Rojo to help him carry his book-filled backpacks home to his remote Havana neighborhood, the narrative casts the bus-ride from Vedado, center of much of Havana’s intellectual life, to Luyanó as a descent into “*terra incognita*” for el Rojo, who is discomfited by the sector’s poverty and estranged by the race and speech patterns of its inhabitants (28). El Flaco explains almost proudly that he lives in a *solar*. When he pulls back the bedraggled curtain separating the dwelling he shares with his mother from the surrounding tenement, el Rojo’s

astonishment at el Flaco's monumental library reiterates his awe in the bookstore. Here, too, the sources of his surprise are mixed:

El Rojo quedó boquiabierto. El cuarto . . . estaba literalmente tapizado de libros. Tres de las cuatro paredes de altísimo puntal estaban cubiertas por enormes libreros improvisados a base de tablones y ladrillos; en los rincones había paquetes amarrados con cordel y cajas *desbordadas* de libros. Junto a la cuarta pared, bajo una ventana de barrotes sin pintar, se veía un refrigerador descarado, un tosco escaparate color crema con *el techo atestado de libros*, una venerable máquina de coser con *la tapa cubierta de libros*, una mesa despintada con un cajón de libros debajo, un fogón de luz brillante encima, dos sillas y *una butaca desfondada por el peso de los libros*. Casi en el centro del habitáculo había una cama camera con el bastidor hundido. Sobre el ángulo que formaban dos de los libreros, un altar de Santa Bárbara, al que de milagro no le había puesto un libro encima.” (33, my emphasis)

The library's power to amaze el Rojo here derives not just from its uncontainable volume but also from its unexpected location in a *solar* inhabited by people he views as uneducated. While incarnating the two men's divergent views about art, this scenario paradoxically brings them together. When el Rojo observes that it must be difficult for el Flaco to assume the distance from his squalid surroundings necessary to write, el Flaco dismisses the implicit equation of artistic creativity with social location: “¿Y qué coño tiene que ver el solar con el talento? . . . ¡Dímel, ¿qué coño tiene que ver?” (46). At the same time, el Flaco's bulging *solar* library provides the common-ground where, irrespective of social origins, the men can air their divergent views about art, where el Rojo reads el Flaco's short-story aloud and offers feedback, and where they plan the experimental magazine, the vicissitudes of whose creation and fate constitute much of the novel.

Notwithstanding their sharp disagreements and the group's ultimate breakdown through infighting and the impact of state repression on their efforts, this chapter in *Las palabras perdidas* suggests that, in post-Soviet Cuban cultural discourse, the library exceeds containment by official life, to recall Highmore's exegesis of Certeau. In contrast to Fidel's 1961 meeting with artists and intellectuals in the Biblioteca Nacional, el Flaco and el Rojo's library encounter, however contentious, unfolds through dialogue rather than a lecture, a model that paradoxically also evokes Che Guevara's conception of the interactive pedagogic potential of such cross-class-engagements as the literacy campaigns. In

keeping with the Special Period's disenchantment with revolutionary ideals, the novel ultimately registers the failure of the *güijes'* camaraderie and of the magazine through state intervention, a bipartite collapse metonymized by the destruction of el Flaco's home library during a deluge. But the novel also implicitly reflects on what might be salvageable from those ideals, as the library couples the period's disenchantment with a recharged inquiry into the power of unexpected social encounters inscribed in the revolution's ideal of eradicating inequality and building community that transcends class.

Interestingly, in this chapter, Diaz's critical recycling of the revolutionary ideal of cross-class solidarity bestows the role of intellectual custodian—the librarianship—on el Flaco, whose modest digs situate him among the revolution's designated beneficiaries. The novel reinforces el Flaco's privileged position by intercalating its narrative of the 1960s with his reflections years later from Moscow's Ostankino Tower and through the concluding implication that the novel we are reading may be el Flaco's creation that salvages the *güijes'* lost literary languages. In contrast, the more widely known example of the *solar* library as the scenario for a conversation among unlikely interlocutors—Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's 1993 Oscar nominated film *Fresa y chocolate*—stages an inverse relationship between social class and art. The film is based on the 1991 story *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* by Senel Paz, author as well of the film script. In an early film scene, the gay, dissident intellectual, Diego, leads the young communist David, into the busy Havana tenement that houses his *guarida* or hideaway. The *guarida* is overflowing with Diego's eclectic library, a disorganized assemblage of Cuban and international literary and artistic objects, many retrieved from Cuba's past, and contraband artifacts of the present. This diverse material resembles what for Benjamin constitutes the “prismatic fringes” that mark every truly “living library” (66). David, el Flaco's social counterpart, is a university student of provincial origins in Havana on a government scholarship, a beneficiary of the revolution's reforms. David follows Diego home on the promise of book loans and to retrieve photos of himself that Diego claims to have. As in *Las palabras perdidas*, to challenge its own present the 1993 film locates its action in a contentious moment in the past. The year of David and Diego's encounter is ostensibly 1979, the end of a decade marked by active state persecution

of homosexuals and shortly before the 1980 Mariel exodus that culminated the serial confrontations between the state and its dissidents. But as in Díaz's novel, *Fresa y chocolate* exudes the aura of the early Special Period with images of scarcity and an intensified black market and with nostalgia for prerevolutionary aesthetic icons as well as for revolutionary idealism.

Under the cover of a *guarida* library, *Fresa y chocolate* unfolds as a virtual conversation between the revolution's beneficiaries (David) and its dissidents, like Diego, persecuted because of their divergence from the revolution's heterocentric model of Cubanness and dissent from the state's cultural parameters. With Diego's library as a classroom, and as I've argued elsewhere, the film also recasts the teacher-student encounter of the revolution's literacy-campaigns into a private tutorial in *cultural* literacy (Unruh 203). But rather than brand the state's educational project as a failure, *Fresa y chocolate* attributes its shortcomings to ideological orthodoxy and repression. Diego enhances David's state education in the arts, corrects his understanding of homosexuality, and encourages him to abandon the slogan-style socialist-realism characterizing his fiction, a tutorial reminiscent of el Rojo's critical feedback on el Flaco's short story "Fidelidad" in *Las palabras perdidas* (38–41).

But as in Díaz's novel, in *Fresa y chocolate* the library provides the requisite locale for such transformations, imbued with the Foucauldian library's "power of the impossible" where frank exchanges among the Revolution's variably positioned stakeholders can unfold. A scene not long after David's first entry into Diego's *guarida* library registers the collection's impact as the camera—through David's perspective—pans the room filled with books, magazines, photographs of literary and cultural figures, and religiously-themed sculptures. The library includes a display wall that David finds both welcoming and estranging, as it juxtaposes the familiar—a photo of José Martí, a lantern from the revolution's literacy campaigns—with the unknown, for example, a photograph of the renowned poet Lezama Lima whose work was for a time marginalized by the state. Comparable to el Rojo's initial physical response to el Flaco's *solar* library, *Fresa y chocolate* registers the power the *guarida* collection in the alternating tensing and relaxation of David's body. The nostalgic background music from José Vitier's score showcases the library's allure as David, fascinated, peruses the wall and the shelves.

A verbal dance of advance and retreat characterizes the film's unfolding friendship between men occupying adversarial positions in the cultural politics of late twentieth-century Cuba: a true-believer in the revolution's promise, and a disillusioned dissident who was denied participation in literacy campaigns and is fired from his current job for expressing critical views. In the improvisational space of the *guarida* library what at first seems impossible in fact flourishes. As David becomes more conversant with the library's contents and the proscribed cultural archive they embody, the film visually enacts the men's growing equality by placing them eye-to-eye in their later discussions, in contrast to earlier scenes where Diego looks down on David while imparting information. When David adds the revolutionary flag of the 26th of July and photos of Fidel and Che to the wall constituting the Benjamin-like "prismatic fringes" of Diego's dynamic, changing library, he makes an impassioned plea for a refashioned revolution that can accommodate the diversity of cultural, artistic, and political icons and positions displayed on the *guarida* library wall. The resulting eclectic display and Diego's response with a toast to "comunismo democrático" recall Foucault's notion of the library's discursive staging of multiple meanings.

Critics have aptly noted that by sending Diego into exile at its end, the film undermines the gestures at rectification and reconciliation enacted through the men's friendship and reigns in any substantive coming-to-terms with gay sexuality.¹⁰ But in the context of unresolved discussions about social class in post-Soviet portraits of the library, I want to make a different point. For all its critique of the revolutionary state's proscriptions of free expression, Díaz's novel *Las palabras perdidas* assigns its library stewardship to el Flaco, a *solar* occupant of modest origins who affirms that social class has nothing to do with talent or knowledge, a view validated in the novel by his implicit authorship. But *Fresa y chocolate* reinstates an equation of aesthetic sensibility with a more aristocratic intelligentsia by embodying its knowledgeable librarian—a custodian of the lost archive of Cuban and international art and thought—in a character who, though warm and generous with his neighbors, identifies more with an elite *ciudad letrada*—ostensibly archaic in socialist Cuba—than with the people around him.

Thus although our knowledge of Diego's origins is vague, his possession of porcelain cups from the prestigious family of writer Dulce María Loynaz (1902-1997) suggests a lineage more privileged than David's rural roots. And for all his appeal as a character (it is impossible for

most spectators not to love Diego, particularly in his engaging portrayal by Jorge Perrugoría) his offhand attacks on a lack of cultural sensibility in others, though enveloped in wit, enact a refashioned classism with racial overtones. When David refuses offers of tea, Diego contrasts a metonymy of the “civilized” English and tea-drinking with Cuba’s supposed backwardness and racially-inflected coffee-drinking when he sings lyrics from the well known Cuban song “Ay, Mamá Inés”: “Todos los negros tomamos café.” Similarly, Diego belts out operatic lines satirizing food shortages that besiege ordinary Cubans (“Vecina, ¡llega la cebolla!”) and angrily parodies Cuban (particularly Afro-Cuban) street talk to decry that people with such language are considered patriotic when someone like him is not. In contrast to el Flaco’s defense of the *solar* as the location for a library and a generator of talent, *Fresa y chocolate* implies that its aesthete-librarian’s intellect and taste endure *in spite* of their location in the *solar*. Although nearly three decades of Cuban socialism separate director Gutiérrez Alea’s first major achievement, *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, from his (co-directed) *Fresa y chocolate*, and the characters differ in more ways than they are alike, Diego’s judgment of his fellow citizens as culturally underdeveloped bears a curious resemblance to Sergio’s condescension toward his lover Elena’s indifferent responses to art-exhibits, bookstores, and the Hemingway library.

These examples of *solar* libraries reveal recurrent tensions about social class and cultural democratization in Cuba decades after the vast changes the revolutionary state installed in the name of social leveling. One could argue that these particular libraries—especially Diego’s *guarida* where the two men meet without the risks David would take if seen with Diego in public—are construed as safe havens removed from everyday life as conceived by Certeau. And of course el Flaco’s and Diego’s collections are both privately owned. But these *solar* libraries have a strong public character as well. Diego’s library display wall evokes a dynamic between internal and external orientation and calls to mind the variegated artwork peppering the Western side of the Berlin Wall prior to its 1989 dismantling. Closer to home, the *guarida*’s spectator-engaging wall brings to mind the outdoor *vallas* or public billboards, often imposed on walls, where the Cuban state displays revolutionary slogans.

In both works, moreover, the libraries have permeable boundaries and conversations are interrupted by other characters wandering in and out and by surrounding neighbor and city noise. This permeability

marks the interpretive richness of these libraries' location in a *solar*, which in Cuba is by definition on overpopulated tenement where the lines between private and public are often under duress. In el Flaco's and Diego's *solar* libraries, intellectual activity, tutorials, or reading aloud overlap with mundane tasks of eating, cooking, shopping, and gossiping. Moreover, tactics by the film's characters such as drowning conversations in music to evade official surveillance call to mind Highmore's argument, via Certeau, that the imaginings unfolding in practiced places differ from the rule of law (118). In this vein, in the post-Soviet era that witnesses a renegotiation in literature and film of the revolution's privileging of public duty over individual autonomy, the library trope mines the boundaries between public and private to explore resurgent questions about cultural ownership and ordinary citizen engagement with literary life.

Whose Books? Between Private Collections and Public Access

This portrait of the private libraries of *Las palabras perdidas* and *Fresa y chocolate* as permeable and quasi public is consistent not only with the revolution's espoused policy of cultural democratization but also with a long-standing Cuban location of the act of reading in a network of multifaceted communal cultural activities. Long before the 1959 revolutionary takeover, this view of reading was implicit in the multiple events—lectures, book displays, educational exercises for children and young people—promoted by those libraries, whether privately or state owned, actually open to the public.¹¹ When a Cuban library is officially open to the public, in fact, this underscores not the circulation of books outside of the library but rather the circulation of a community of readers within the library for activities related to reading and artistic culture. The revolutionary state's promotion of a network of regional libraries, though centralized in Havana, channeled this pre-revolutionary tradition toward an ideal of cultural democratization that, as Carlos Robió argues, imagined reading less as an individual activity than as a form of social participation (473).

Scholars of the Cuban revolution have long emphasized the ideal of broad citizenship participation framing the state's notion of cultural democratization, beginning of course with the far-reaching literacy campaigns that sought to equate active citizenship with the ability to

read.¹² Antonio Kapcia and Par Kumaraswami construct a capsule genealogy of these initiatives: the “instructores de arte” of the 1960s (sent throughout the island as cultural teachers); the “aficionados” (amateur performers) movement of the 1970s; and the *municipio*-based Casas de Cultura of the 1980s (226). This process, Kapcia and Kumaraswami argue, picks up in the 1990s, the central focus of their analysis, with the revamping of the Havana Book Fair (originally begun in 1982) as a “ritualization of cultural belonging” (167). But, as I have noted in the example of Sergio in Gutiérrez Alea’s 1968 *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, the ideals behind such ventures were implicitly challenged by the intelligentsia early on. In the same vein, Kapcia and Kumaraswami point out that these experiments in cultural participation met from the outset with skepticism from the cultural elite or producers toward the ideals of universal cultural participation and of collective ownership of cultural products (167–69). Such tensions flourished in the Special Period, as the (not so) clandestine book trade that evolved to surmount economic crises decimated Cuba’s private library collections in ways that challenged the notion of a national cultural archive and reactivated questions about individual and collective cultural ownership.

Conflicting visions of the library as a site of individual intellectual enterprise on the one hand or as an archive of national patrimony or catalyst for social belonging on the other saturate the novels of Leonardo Padura, in particular his detective fiction, whose protagonist is the disenchanted police detective and aspiring writer, Mario Conde. This corpus by the most widely read contemporary Cuban novelist on and off the island includes an initial tetralogy of four novels, *Las cuatro estaciones*, in which Conde works for the Havana police, and three subsequent novels, *Adiós Hemingway* (2001), *La cola de la serpiente* (2001), and *La neblina del ayer* (2005), in which he has left the force but still helps solve crimes ad hoc. Although the cases to be solved elucidate official hypocrisy and corruption during the years in which they are set—1989 to 2003—the mystery itself is typically less important than Conde’s serial discoveries that the post-Soviet Cuban society surrounding him as an adult is distant from the revolution’s cultural imaginary of his youth.

As a unit, Padura’s Conde novels can be read as the re-education and progressive disillusionment of a child of the revolution—and of the generation he embodies—in the realities of turn-of-the-millennium

Cuba. Through narrative flashbacks, one can reconstruct from the seven novels a de facto Bildungsroman beginning with Conde's formative years in the *pre-universitario*, La Víbora, a time and place that his hindsight imbues with nostalgia. But in juxtaposing these two temporal lines, in the post-Soviet era of Conde's disenchantment Padura's novels also reactivate ideals rooted in his revolutionary formation, including camaraderie, expectations of social equality, and a powerful faith in the value of education. As underscored particularly in *Máscaras* (1997), *Adiós Hemingway* (2001), and, above all, *La neblina del ayer* (2005), the library is central to Conde's upbringing and even more to his reeducation in the post-Soviet present. Culminating in *La neblina del ayer*, the library in Padura's work encapsulates Conde's struggles between his individual formation as a writer-thinker and the vestiges of his engagement with a broader revolutionary-era concept of responsible citizenship.

If the revolution's espoused ideal of cultural democratization was that all Cuban citizens have access to books, the library trope in Padura's Conde mysteries offers a way to question just what constitutes educated citizenship in contemporary Cuba. The novel *Máscaras*, third in the initial tetralogy, offers such a reorientation. Here Conde's obsession with libraries first emerges when a powerful sense of mystery and allure saturates the impressive library of Alberto Marqués, an eccentric, gay theater-worker and dramatist with whom Conde, at this point still a policeman, must consult several times to solve the murder of Alexis Arayán, the gay son of a state diplomat. As when el Rojo first enters el Flaco's *solar* library in *Las palabras perdidas* or when David steps into Diego's *guarida* in *Fresa y chocolate*, a strong sensorial response marks Conde's first glimpse of this collection: "[E]l perfume opresivo y magnético del papel viejo, húmedo y empolvado, que salía de aquel recinto . . . seguramente poblado de obras y autores excluidos por ciertos códigos y de exóticas maravillas editoriales, inimaginables para un lector común . . ." (52).

Here Conde is the stand-in for that common reader and, by extension, for ordinary citizens. Comparable in some ways to Diego and David's exchange in *Fresa y chocolate*, the re-education that Conde receives from the Marqués through their conversations encompasses the periodic state marginalization of certain Cuban writers and books that fascinate Conde because of their absence from his own repertoire. He

also receives an on-site education in the world of Havana's gay community. But in *Máscaras* most of the tutorial unfolds in the Marqués's living room because Conde must first *earn* access to the library itself via this re-education in tolerance and by assuming a more inclusive view of the archive of Cuban literature. Implicitly recasting the revolution's concept of citizenship through the literacy that unlocks the cultural archive, library access in *Máscaras* rewards a mind-opening embrace of books beyond what passes for the official national archive at that moment and enacts a rescue of lost cultural artifacts, in particular the work of poet and playwright Virgilio Piñera and his dramatic piece *Electra Garrigó* (1948). When Conde finally enters his library, the Marqués notes: "[U]sted que es un escritor debe saber que . . . está asomándose a lo eterno, a lo imborrable, a lo magnífico, a algo contra lo que nadie puede, ni siquiera el olvido" (225). When the Marqués shows Conde the plays he has written and hidden in his library, moreover, he implicitly inscribes the room as a practiced place in Certeau's sense, a space that, through the agency of those traversing it, exceeds the law that rules it: "[aquí] no me dejaron publicar ni dirigir, pero nadie me podía impedir que escribiera y que pensara" (226).

But even as he gains access to clandestine private libraries that enthrall him, Conde reveals an enduring, if conflicted, ideal of libraries as sacred temples for bibliophile initiates but also as social spaces whose custodians are obliged to share the contents with others. Conde's socially-aware ambivalence about the private libraries he so admires brings to mind Benjamin's argument that libraries assembled by private collectors, though possibly more objectionable socially, he notes, than a public library are grounded in an aura of inheritance manifested in a collector's "feeling of responsibility toward his property" (67). This attitude of responsibility in a book-collector-as-heir, Benjamin argues, parallels the fact that "the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility" (66). The notion of a book collection as a unique kind of inheritance—particularly as a *cultural* legacy subject to transmission—peppers Padura's Conde novels. *Máscaras*, for example, appears to legitimate the Marqués's private library in socialist Cuba because the collection retrieves and transmits—in the Marqués-Conde tutorial—lost artifacts deemed inadmissible to the national archive by the revolutionary state. Thus the private library assumes the responsibility for transmission unmet by the very public institution charged with that mission.

In Padura's fictional world, in fact, private libraries sometimes appear to be more accessible than official ones. *Adiós Hemingway*, in which the discovery of skeletal remains on the Hemingway estate leads the now ex-policeman to reconstruct a 1958 murder, offers a scene with Conde actually working in the Biblioteca Nacional. Here, while doing research on Hemingway, Conde enjoys an atypically un-crowded space while university students are away on vacation. As he breathes in the empty library's "aire apacible," a monumental state institution morphs into a sanctuary for individual reflection, and Conde is overcome by a joyous sensation: "[Z]ambullirse entre libros" (133). At the same time, Conde reactivates a lost ideal of the Biblioteca Nacional as a locale of cultural belonging and collective pride when he discovers, to his surprise, the richness of its Hemingway collections: "Algo parecía funcionar en la isla" (133). Still, Conde notes some collection gaps and suspects that the national library falls short in fulfilling the responsible transmission of the collection to ordinary citizens. Surely the only source of unexpected efficiency in this case, he speculates, is an official police call to the library preceding his visit. More often than not, he reflects, the caretaking "cabrones" of the national cultural archive are, at best, "misteriosos" about sharing certain books (132). Thus the library is falling short as a promoter of literate participatory citizenship, an ideal that Conde appears reluctant to relinquish.

Set in the early new millennium, *La neblina del ayer* reveals the bibliophile detective's unresolved ambivalence about the library as a private enterprise or as the generator of cultural participation. Still officially retired from police work, Conde is now a middle-man who acquires private book collections for sale by others. Summoned by its caretakers, Conde finds a massive private library in an old mansion in the Vedado section of Havana, a collection left behind by one Alcides Montes de Oca. An upper-class Havana businessman who briefly supported the revolution, Montes de Oca left for the United States in 1960, leaving his secretary (and sometime lover) Nena in charge of the house and the library amassed by the family from the beginning of the twentieth century and Cuba's foundation as a republic. Nena's children—the seventy-ish Dionisio and Amalia—want to sell the books to survive. The collection is portrayed as distinctly Cuban, a Borgesian encyclopedic archive which, as Conde imagines it, contains *all* books written in or about Cuba, from the priceless tomes of the slave-holding *criollos* to the repertoire proscribed by the institutionalized 1959

revolution. Through the force of Conde's imagination, then, the novel transforms a private library into a powerful cultural imaginary capable of accommodating an implicit readership of colonizers *criollos*, literate citizens of Cuba's pre-revolutionary republican eras, revolutionaries, and their others.

As in *Máscaras*, the library's initial impact on Conde is corporal and borders on the supernatural, the collection a "prodigio" that simultaneously paralyzes him and commands his presence (24). Conde's attraction to this library is in part nostalgic, not so much a yearning for the literary repertoire marginalized under the revolutionary state (as in *Máscaras*) but rather for the apprenticeship in literary culture that, as a child of that revolution, he received from the beloved school librarian, Cristobal el Cojo, in the *pre-universitario*, La Víbora. Here, Conde recalls, he and his cohort learned to love libraries and reading "del mismo modo en que los creyentes adoran sus templos: como sitios sagrados, donde no está admitida la profanación" (164). In this vein, Conde sees the Montes de Oca library as a "santuario perdido en el tiempo" that he fears his bookselling will defile (25). But the library in *La neblina del ayer* is instead desecrated when one of its custodians, Dionisio, dies there, murdered, it turns out, by his own sister. The plot's multiple twists, most beyond my focus here, also include Conde's discovery of the presence in Montes de Oca's life of a popular 1950s singer, Violeta del Río, whose fate Conde becomes obsessed with tracing. In resolving the mysteries of Violeta's fate and Dionisio's death, the novel dissipates the alluring "neblina" of Cuba's pre-revolutionary past as it unmasks the collection's embodiment of a deplorable history of class-based injustices, official corruption, and family conflicts. The novel also draws close parallels between the crime, racism, and human misery of the Batista era with the devastating realities of the resurgent post-Soviet Havana underworld that Conde discovers and where he weeps as much for its inhabitants as for his generation's lost ideals: "[L]a muerte de tantos sueños, esperanzas y responsabilidades históricas" (314).

Redeemed at the novel's end, however, is the likely fate of the books in the Montes de Oca collection. Their designated custodians and heirs now deceased or imprisoned, the remaining books will go to the Biblioteca Nacional, which Conde finds reassuring because it means that, at least in principle, they may still be read by Cuban readers. This option, though less than ideal given his uncertainty about ordinary

citizen access to the national library, is preferable to scattering Cuba's cultural heritage to the winds through the international bookselling about which he is unremittingly ambivalent. Conde imagines the emptying of Cuba's private libraries as a cultural blood-letting in exchange for food, a process whereby "centenares de bibliotecas privadas dejaron de ser fuente de ilustración, orgullo bibliófilo y acopio de recuerdos de tiempos posiblemente felices, y trocaron su olor a la sabiduría por la fetidez ácida y vulgar de unos billetes salvadores" (17). Conde takes solace in the fact that he is only the pathfinder for book collections rather than their actual seller.

From his first trip to the Montes de Oca library, Conde begins sorting the books: some for delivery to sellers, some for the national library, some perhaps to be kept as his own. This fixated yet indecisive sifting through books embodies Conde's struggle to square his residual ideals of cultural democracy and collective ownership a la revolution with the contemporary realities of bookselling driven by crisis and the de facto unequal values ascribed to privately amassed libraries by diverse Cuban constituencies. These realities challenge Conde's inherited ideal of the library as communal terrain that is "inviolablemente neutral y colectivo" (165), above all when Amalia renders her own class-based experience of the library with whose care she has been entrusted for 43 years: "[S]iempre le he tenido . . . mala voluntad a esos libros, no por los libros en sí, sino por lo que significan, lo que significaron: son el alma viva de los Montes de Oca, el recuerdo de lo que fueron ellos y otros como ellos, que se creían los dueños del país, y solamente entrar en esa biblioteca me resulta desagradable, es un lugar que me rechaza y que yo rechazo . . ." (35–36; final ellipses in original).

In contrast to the massive Montes de Oca collection—captivating for the bibliophile and oppressive for Amalia—Conde recalls the neighborhood of his youth where serendipitously assembled home libraries never exceeded more than twenty books. Still, even a cast-off *Selecciones de Reader's Digest* version of *Huckleberry Finn* stimulated Conde's intellect and passion for books, a passion nurtured in the La Víbora school library curated by his mentor Cristobal el Cojo. This collection, which Cristobal generously disseminated among students, instilled in Conde a notion of books as collectively owned and circulated. Thus we learn that in his early years as a "depredador de bibliotecas," Conde on principle never bought or sold any book with a stamp

indicating its status as an “objeto público” (166). Still, it appears that Cristobal el Cojo also planted the idea that official designations may not always ensure citizen access and that whether a library is private or public, a Benjamin-style responsibility of transmission should trump the act of collecting when it comes to books. As he prepares to retire, Cristobal, concerned that his successors will not value the library he has created, encourages his students to steal the books: “Llévatelos, sálvalos, pero cuídalos” (167).

The location of the massive private library of *La neblina del ayer* in Vedado is fitting. A neighborhood housing Havana’s pre-revolutionary upper middle class, Vedado has also constituted the heart of the city’s intellectual life, the home not only of the long-lived University of Havana (founded in 1728) but also of a majority of the revolution’s cultural institutions. Catalyst of a murder that, in the best Conde tradition, turns out to be secondary to the retired detective’s reflections on books, art, and connections between Cuba’s present and pre-revolutionary past, Padura’s Vedado library—along with el Flaco’s solar library in *Las palabras perdidas* and Diego’s *guarida* collection in *Fresa y chocolate*—generates a sifting through the residue of revolutionary ideals that posed participatory access to cultural life as the complement to social equity. The library’s significant presence in post-Soviet Cuban cultural expression suggests a persisting irresolution about such ideals, articles of revolutionary faith exposed by recent history for an apparent disconnect from reality and ostensibly dashed by the Special Period’s economic crisis but that, as Cuban writers reflect on an uncertain future, somehow refuse to disappear.

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NOTES

¹ Cuban leaders began using the term “Período Especial en tiempos de paz” in 1990.

² *Memorias del subdesarrollo* is based on the 1965 novel by Edmundo Desnoes, who co-authored the film script with Gutiérrez Alea.

³ “El estante vacío” is the title of Rojas’s essay on this topic and his collection on Cuban literary-cultural politics in which it appears.

⁴ I am alluding here to Borges's essay "La biblioteca total" (1939) and fiction narrative "La biblioteca de Babel" (1941).

⁵ Foucault extrapolates this approach to the library from an analysis of Flaubert's multiple versions of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, a "monument" (like the library) to "meticulous erudition" (89) and the embodiment of a library "on fire" (92). See Radford's rendition of Foucault's library as a "dynamic site for the possibility of new knowledge" (408).

⁶ See Hamilton on the project's critics and supporters.

⁷ The phrase "gran literatura" appears throughout the novel.

⁸ In addition to the characters' disillusionment with state repression, the novel's Special Period markers include images of material scarcity common in fiction and film of the 1990s.

⁹ El Rojo's reference to reselling books also marks the novel's dual time frame, as book-selling to tourists became widespread during the 1990s when the novel was published rather than in the period when its action is set.

¹⁰ See Quiroga (*Tropics of Desire* 124–44) and Bejel.

¹¹ On the history of Cuban libraries, see Mayol and Orne; Carranza and Jiménez López; and, in the *Diccionario de la Literatura Cubana*, the entries on the Biblioteca de la Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País (125–26), the Biblioteca Gener y Del Monte (127–28), the Biblioteca Municipal de la Habana (128), and the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (128–30).

¹² See Fagen (33–68) and Medin (67–85) on the literacy campaigns and educational projects.

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