

Pillaging the Archives: Cuban Cultural Icons for the XXI Century

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For more than a century and a half, literature written by Cubans had been determined by two expressive markers: a heightened literary stylization, and the creation of cultural emblems so as to define a nation. This sweeping generalization characterizes very different writers who unfailingly share these two traits. From its early Romantic beginnings, Cuban literature in its myriad variants has nevertheless been constructed on a self-conscious search for a highly literary language with an equally self-conscious desire to articulate a literary national corpus. From such disparate sources as José Martí's mimic of simplicity in *Versos Sencillos* to Guillermo Cabrera Infante's urban Havana lingo, aesthetics mingled with the sense of national identity has been its literary markings.

Central too has been the city of Havana. When Cabrera Infante once quipped that he was Atlantic and not Caribbean, far from being witty, he was stating an undoubtedly historical fact. Havana has been in fact Atlantic since its settlement on the northern coast of the Island. The city's central role in the transatlantic trade explains not

just its foundation, but also the former immigrant growth of its population, as well as its eclectic architecture. The resulting cultural and ethnic diversity of its population was incorporated early on in the first Cuban novels from Cirilo Villaverde up to the Modernists. Writers as different as José Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier, Cabrera Infante, and the postmodern Severo Sarduy explored, mapped and plumbed these emblems as unifying national identifiers. Thus they configured also a Havana mystique, while recreating a cultural *mélange* for which the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz famously coined the term *ajiaco*.

Havana and the acceptance of cultural hybridity -persistent cultural icons of Cuban fictional representations- are undergoing a reversal of fortunes in the most recent fiction. Their historically centripetal forces in the representation of cultural identity are inverted in Carlos A. Aguilera's *Teoría del alma china* and *El Imperio Oblómov*, as well as in Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo's *Boring Home* and *Abandoned Havana*. This narrative strategy of upturning icons ends up arguably rejecting their former integrative function, seemingly smashing the atom of the national literary self.

At first glance, it would seem an incongruous coupling of two very different writers with their contrasting themes, styles, trajectories and loci. Yet curiously both Aguilera and Pardo Lazo fashion intently a carefully crafted highly self-conscious literary text, recasting thus continuing -I wonder if in spite of themselves perhaps- what I argue is one of the national identifiers of Cuban literature. Aguilera's prose is

laconically sparse with an underlying covert edgy satire at every turn. It stands in sharp contrast to Pardo Lazo's vehemence that seeps through his writing though always kept in check by an unnervingly constant wordplay. His conceptual language functions ultimately to undermine the certainty of any given affirmation in his literature. In Aguilera's texts there seems to be a deliberate distancing of any trace of national markers -his plots take place in China and somewhere in the shifting borders of Russia.

In Pardo Lazo, geographical Cuban markers are highlighted only to obsessively deconstruct them: he exploits them seemingly gathering them for their implosion. *Abandoned Havana* consists of his photographs accompanied by his texts, lengthy captions for eighty images of emblematic and political urban spaces. Here the city is not just abandoned, it is ultimately defunct, remembered as a trace in a wandering wordplay as it appears in a last mortuary scene: "Es que ambas son mías y yo soy de ellas dos: Habanorando, Orlandocuba. Los tres iremos entonces por el mundo ancho y ajeno hasta el fin de los tiempos." (Kindle Locations 1028-1029). *The country with long shadows*, the first image in the book is a bird's eye view that turns the inhabitants into long disembodied shadows -with less corporeal reality than holograms. In #61 titled *The crutches of victory*, the solid masonry of the building blurrily fades into the background with the stripped darker scaffolding in between. The multitude of flags are translucent pierced by the misty light of an unseen sun.

In *Boring Home* a lovers' encounter takes place in a rundown apartment, the woman named "Ipatría" –the discarded child of a former Chilean refugee- balances herself perilously from the edge of a balcony her back against a horizon of *Alamar*. This satellite city of prefabricate Soviet-style construction in the outskirts of Havana was built in the sixties. It is now a ghetto with a depressing row of shabby buildings. While Carpentier's "city of columns" had experienced already a radical descent in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *El Rey de La Habana*, in Pardo Lazo's stylized representation it has bottomed out. Its inhabitants are aimless souls who drift through a devastated urban landscape that is unrelentingly marginal. Whether the abandoned daughter of a South American, or a lascivious Cuban-American who returns looking for a childhood home that now belongs to others, Pardo Lazo's characters are unbalanced and displaced fragments of now inexistent past realities. They roam helter-skelter in a desolate urban space.

Aguilera and Pardo Lazo's loci may be different but in both they are equally off centered. Though in his books, *Teoría del alma china* and *El Imperio Oblómov*, Aguilera seems to emphasize concrete places –faraway from Havana- actually the opposite effect is ultimately achieved. Aguilera's *Teoría* is a mock travelogue told by an unnamed narrator who travels with someone who -he takes pains to point out- he decides to leave out of the story. This narrator travels along mud roads, goes in a slaughterhouse that is next to a censored writer's apartment that is under constant surveillance, although it turns out that the writer is not at home but in a clinic. Later the travelers end up in a

bordello of a lesbian dwarf who also enjoys voyeurism. These satirical scenes that play out in vaguely described places seem to take their cue from a literary influence mentioned at the start of Aguilera's text, the Belgian poet Henri Michaux's who, unlike the Cuban writer, actually did travel through the Orient as told in *A Barbarian in Asia*. André Gide's description of Michaux's narrative as one that emphasizes "the strangeness of natural things and the naturalness of strange things" serves well to describe Aguilera's text. As is in the case of his flaunted literary antecedent, Aguilera's prose is devoid of metaphors and interlaced with violence. In its almost insouciant depiction of violence, vigilance, torture and degradation, as Martínez Bravo has pointed out, the text unavoidably transforms into a fable of twentieth century totalitarian repression. Yet Aguilera too incurs in what Paul Virilio has termed the pitiless art of the twentieth century. His characters float unrepentant and uncritically through the maze of perversion and mindless violence.

Aguilera, currently living in the Czech Republic, began as a poet associated with *Diáspora(s)* an unofficial Cuban literary review –more in the style of a Russian samizdat– that was published in Havana between 1997-2002. He had written in Cuba a poem titled *Mao* that alludes to an actual historical episode of the Great Leap Forward. In 1958 Mao Tse Tung ordered the destruction of several species, among them the sparrow. Mao has "un cerebritio/ verticalmente metafísico," he is an economist who determines that the sparrows had become the enemy of the state, therefore issues the order "mátenlos."

Mao's decision to exterminate sparrows provoked an environmental disaster that resulted in a famine of enormous proportions in China. Aguilera's poem focuses only on the unilateral order of the Communist chairman, the killing of the sparrows. The man-induced human catastrophe is narrated in the poem devoid of hyperbole or figurative speech creating a curious deadpan tone punctuated only by the use of diminutives. It registers the sinister irrational nonsense of political repression of life, revealed in undramatic unpoetic language. Slyly the import of the desultory mocking incantation of the "maodemocratic en su movimiento" results in a ferocious satire that indicts totalitarian violence. Placed in faraway China in another time, the political implications are nevertheless evident. The performance and video artist who goes by the name (Aldo) Maldito Menéndez based his 2014 video on Aguilera's poem exploiting the subversive reverberations closer at home for both Cuban artists. A voice over recites the poem with a rhythmic declamatory tone that recalls another one that is familiar to Cubans over the past half-century. The implications did not go unnoticed. Maldito Menéndez who lives in Spain was barred from returning to Cuba to attend an art festival in April of 2015.

Aguilera's most recent fiction toys with Russian influence. The narrator in *El Imperio Oblómov* hastens to point out in the first page of its prologue the sad absurdity of national identity: "un hombre que piensa la alianza entre raza y locus es, sin dudas, una psicología especial." (9) The detached doctoral tone of the statement initially

masquerades its satire. The obvious link between tribe and place is the commonplace – not exceptional- binary used to define national identity. In another twist, there is an embedded literary joke: the character alluded to in the title Oblómov is the protagonist of Ivan Goncharov's nineteenth century Romantic novel that in Russian culture came to represent a national stereotype, whose despondency and lack of personal enterprise became a diagnostic of a Russian national malaise: the lazy upper-crust male, the do nothing aristocrat who held the country back. The narrator of Aguilera's *El Imperio Oblómov* says that he was born of an Alsatian father and a Hungarian hemophilic mother in a place where: "Polonia demarca un territorio que a veces ha sido alemán, a veces ucraniano, a veces ruso." (11) As in *Teoría*, the emphasis on the link between cultural geography and national identity is ironically diffused, a central quest that dissolves into unreal strangeness turning it into a meaningless proposition.

The rejection of a macro national narrative is one that Aguilera has argued in personal interviews: "La Literatura Cubana no existe. Digo, eso que identificamos como espacio molar y épico, como macrorrelato, como Absoluto, no existe. La ontología le ha cerrado todas las puertas." The subjective being trumps the objective place. Interestingly in *Teoría* Aguilera reverses Cuba's historical connections with Chinese culture while reframing the literary conventions of travel narratives. In his text the Chinese presence is not mentioned within a Cuban national cultural setting. The China in Aguilera's narrative is a strange landscape of a faraway invented country. This

inversion is directional: it transforms the real historical ties between China and Cuba. China is no longer an actual ethnic component of Cuban culture as it is pointedly in Sarduy's *De donde son los cantantes* and most recently in Zoé Valdés *El pie de mi padre*. In fact, the three Cuban writers Sarduy, Valdés and Aguilera are all ethnically part Chinese. But whereas in the first two writers China is a cultural presence that is integrated within Cuban culture, the connections to be drawn from Aguilera's text are abstract. China and the unnamed Cuba are linked through the notions of totalitarian violence and repression. Despite the apparent exotic locals of Aguilera's texts that erase the Cuban presence, it needs not to be pointed out; it is unavoidably evident that both China and Russia have a lot to do with Cuba. However, traditionally immigrants, among them Chinese, were narrated incorporating them within the national body, as a component of the cultural *ajiaco*. Cuban fiction exerted a centrifugal force to narrate the Cuban cultural and human landscape. In Aguilera's fiction there is an important shift in perception. There is a centripetal force that eschews that integration seeking to cancel the national marker.

Despite the obvious differences in writing styles between Aguilera and Pardo Lazo, nonetheless both writers insert a dizzying arsenal of literary allusions either embedded or flaunted in their narratives. Whether it is Oblómov or orientalism as a genre, Aguilera follows also the example of Borges –who translated to Spanish Michaux's text- in mixing real and imaginary sources. Pardo Lazo's *Boring Home* equally

inserts writers from Guillermo Rosales' *Boarding Home* to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The elaborate trail of literary references flaunted in a text is not at all new in Cuban literature. From La Avellaneda's insertion of Montesquieu of the French Enlightenment in her novel *El artista barquero* to such different writers as Lezama Lima and Cabrera Infante, I would argue that the deliberate literary ostentation of disparate cultural influences is in fact a Cuban trait. What distinguishes these writers is their obstinacy in the dispersal of a whole taking the point of view of the marginal, a distancing that refuses to look inward or outwardly to state or search for a national definition. Pardo Lazo, a writer who defines himself as "del año cero," -his incessant wordplay on the name Havana notwithstanding- seeks the fragmentary, to "talar el telos." Both writers seek a way out of the construction of a macro narrative, seeking on the contrary to dissipate the national imprint. And both subject erstwhile essential signifiers of national identity to centrifugal forces that render narratives about critical cultural dispersion and/or disintegration.

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