

Book Review/Reseña

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Damaris Puñales Alpízar. *La maldita circunstancia. Ensayos sobre literatura cubana*. Leiden: Almenara, 2020.

In *La maldita circunstancia. Ensayos sobre literatura cubana*, composed of an introduction and ten chapter-length essays divided into three sections, Damaris Puñales Alpízar explores a rich compendium of cultural materials revealing the enduring relationship between Cuba and the USSR, particularly during and after the Cold War. The diverse materials studied encompass literary texts, films, paintings, music—composed by Cuban artists, including many contemporary artists unknown outside of Cuba—along with popular magazines translated from abroad for Cuban readers. Puñales Alpízar provides fascinating historical overviews and anecdotes to contextualize the works at hand. With few exceptions, the chapters focus on Soviet/Russian-Cuban connections, past and present.

In a brief introductory chapter, “La maldita circunstancia: El fin de la excepcionalidad cubana y un posible futuro para la literatura,” the author departs from the notion of Cuba’s “exceptionalism” by providing a list of historical events that resulted in, and continue shaping, the nation’s unique identity. Her study revisits this central tenet throughout, echoing Virgilio Piñera’s famous expression about “las malditas circunstancias de agua por todas partes.” She presents a provocative question to initiate her work: What will Cuban art look like when the island is no longer plagued by its “exceptional circumstances”?

The first section, “Por el mar de las Antillas: Conexiones trasatlánticas y caribeñas,” comprises two chapters and opens with an essay that highlights the importance of the translation of popular magazines to indoctrinate the masses on both political sides of the Cold War. It centers on translations of *Reader’s Digest* and *Sputnik* as weapons in the war of public opinion between the CIA and the Kremlin in Cuba and Puerto Rico. In the chapter that follows, after highlighting the influence of Sputnik-1 in

sparkling the imagination of Soviet-era Cubans, Puñales Alpízar contemplates works that ruminate on how the USSR's ensuing collapse reverberated in its former satellite states. Her analysis centers on Antonio Carballo's *Adiós, camaradas* (2007), a novel based on a cosmonaut stranded in space as the Soviet Union disintegrated; the character serves as a metaphor for Cuba upon the dissolution of the USSR: abandoned, forgotten, and isolated.

The following chapter is distinct, as it explores Asian contributions to Fernando Ortiz's famed *ajiaco*, a metaphor for the hybridity of Cuban culture. Puñales Alpízar corrects a common assumption by many—that "Chinese" Cubans were a homogenous group of immigrants—by delineating the historical and cultural contributions of diverse Asian immigrant groups to Cuba. She briefly presents Orientalism and then reviews multiple artistic representations of Asian culture in more contemporary Cuban art. Discussing Severo Sarduy's *De donde son los cantantes* (1967), she suggests that the search for "lo chino-cubano" is generally an impossible task, as it has been absorbed within other cultures, like a simulacrum in which observers impose their own ideas of exoticism.

The second section (two chapters), "Estrategias culturales para el nuevo siglo," returns to the effects of (post-)Soviet-Cuban relations. Puñales Alpízar compares the successes of the early Revolutionary publishing and editorial apparatus with its failures during the "Período Especial." Some of the more positive, eventual outcomes are emphasized, including more autonomy and attention accorded to artists outside Havana, despite many challenges. The ensuing chapter analyzes two anthologies of contemporary Cuban literature: *Maneras de narrar. Cuentos del Premio La Gaceta de Cuba* (2006), a compilation of stories granted prizes by the *Gaceta de Cuba* between 1993 and 2009, and the anthology *Generación año cero* (2013), published by a digital journal in Pittsburgh. While *Generación año cero* was largely conceived for Cubans in exile and *Maneras* for those in Cuba, she argues that both anthologies have much in common, as they share several contributing authors and similar themes, which points to common experiences across the transatlantic Cuban community. She concludes by noting that despite many changes, Cuba continues being "excepcional," because of its past and present, along with a lack of widespread access to the internet.

The final section, "Balalaika caribeña: Un oso en la playa," is made up of five essays, united in that they generally continue with the theme of the aftermath of Soviet-Cuban connections. The first chapter explores dramatist Ulises Rodríguez Febles's novel *Minsk* (2013) which portrays two stories paralleling the lives of characters affected by the collapse in Moscow and Matanzas, archetypes reflecting the dissolution of both political relationships and personal ones. The following chapter then revisits the influence of Soviet space exploration in a myriad of Cuban texts, including: Yonnier Torres Rodríguez's *Círculos de cal* (2018), where real-life Cuban

cosmonaut Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez is demythologized, depicted as a pathetic old man; the film based on historical cosmonaut Serguéi Krikaliov's journey when he was stranded in space upon the USSR's dissolution, *Sergio y Serguei* (2017); and a painting by Camilo Villalvilla that meshes Alberto Korda's iconic photograph of Che Guevara with that of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin's space suit, deconstructing their roles as commodified, quasi-religious symbols. In Post-Soviet Cuban ideology, space no longer signifies hopes for progress and collaboration, but rather, dystopia and broken dreams.

The following chapter, perhaps the most intriguing, examines the connections between Leon Trotsky, his assassin, Ramón Mercader, and Cuba, along with their representations in contemporary Cuban art. Puñales Alpízar first reviews the historical links between Trotsky, Mercader, and the island, emphasizing how most Cubans were ignorant of this history until very recently, now that Trotsky is no longer considered *persona non grata*. She suggests that, ironically, Cubans only learned of these historical events via "fictional" texts. Her analysis features: Frank Delgado's parodic song, "Trotski's cha-cha-cha" (1997), along with two novels, Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres* (1967), and most significantly, Leonardo Padura's deeply-researched *El hombre que amaba los perros* (2009/2011). Despite their many differences, she finds that the song and the novels share a ludic tone, and, once again, the aim of humanizing previously silenced giants of Soviet-Cuban history.

The penultimate chapter takes up the question of how vestiges of the past, particularly "una postmemoria socialista," are transmitted to younger generations (187), focusing on Karel Bofill Bahamonde's poetry collection, *Matrioshkas* (2010), and Abel Fernández-Larrea's collection of ten short stories, *Absolut Röntgen* (2009). The poems reveal the emptiness that many experienced upon the abrupt dissolution of the USSR and the disappearance of the Soviet presence in Cuba; the haunting stories recreate how the Chernobyl nuclear explosion touched the lives of those affected by the accident who were treated in Cuba.

The final chapter explores the politics that governed translations during the Soviet period in Cuba. The author notes how, though the political goals of the country were explicitly socialist, as Castro expressed in his infamous "Palabras a los intelectuales" speech in 1961, the Cuban economy could not provide the socialist lifestyle that it touted. Through translated, Soviet texts, though, the idealized "socialist reality" was presented to the Cuban population. Finally, she suggests that though there was some ambiguity in terms of what was meant by "revolutionary art" in Castro's speech as related to cultural production *on the island*, when considering what should be translated from abroad and disseminated locally, more rigid censoring criteria were employed.

Puñales Alpízar's study, masterfully written and rich in content, is a must-read for scholars interested in contemporary Cuban literature as well as the ongoing legacy of Soviet/Russian influence on Cuban cultural production. This wonderful piece of scholarship, diverse in its examination of a wide variety of contemporary Cuban art, particularly literature, should not be missed.

Angela (Angie) L. Willis is Professor of Hispanic Studies and Latin American Studies at Davidson College. Her scholarship centers on transatlantic, transtemporal intertextualities, specifically between Inquisitorial Spain and Revolutionary Cuba. She is especially fascinated by transgressive texts, by the underdogs and rebels of literature, and by the notion of writing as a means of escape and survival.

Dr. Willis is the author of several articles on Cuban literature. She is coauthor of a forthcoming book about Reinaldo Arenas, *The Dissidence of Reinaldo Arenas: Queering Literature, Politics and the Activist Curriculum* (University Press of Florida, 2022) with Rafael Ocasio and Sandro Barros. She is also currently completing a second monograph centered on the notion of (homo)sexual rewriting of canonical texts from the Hispanic cultural tradition in Reinaldo Arenas's narrative. She was awarded the Sturgis Leavitt Award of SECOLAS (Southeastern Council on Latin American Studies) for Best Article Published by Members in 2005. Additionally, she is the past president of SECOLAS, an organization in which she has also served in many other leadership capacities.
