

Recapturing Havana

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In a study named *Novelando La Habana: ubicación histórica y perspectiva urbana en la novela cubana de 1959 a 1980* (1990) [Havana in novels: historical placement and urban perspective in the Cuban novel from 1959 to 1980 (1990)], Ineke Phaf analyzes the role the city of Havana plays in a number of Cuban novels published after the Castro revolution: “The authors, in evident progression, take Old Havana as a source of artistic inspiration... Descriptions of that part of the city figure most prominently in the works dominated by subjective narrative” (p. 177).

Chaviano’s novel takes place in the decade of the 90’s, and so is subsequent to the above-mentioned work. In her novel, “narrated time” (the time within which the plot develops) probably starts in 1991 (the year she left Cuba) and ends with the rafter stampede from the seaside boulevard of El Malecón in August 1994.

Multiple voices doing monologues –sometimes directed inwards, at other times to a silent interlocutor– feed the plot from several points of view. The narrative thread becomes fragmented, interspersed with moments of suspense; these will be filled by an all-knowing narrator in subsequent chapters. It is up to the reader to take up the investigative task and to reach conclusions, sometimes even before the characters themselves.

Daína Chaviano’s characters move among an Old Havana now in ruins. Claudia, the main character, seeks comfort in her despair, and her successive, retrospective visions provide her with “a gradual increase of her link with her city ... it was a link of hope, a force. She sensed that, without such a connection, she herself would be extinguished” (p. 214).

The retrospectives take her to colonial Havana, where she’s led by Muba, her black, still half-wild godmother, who shows her not Dante’s Inferno, but a Havana filled with life and color.



What does Claudia seek in the past? “In order to have faith in the future, one needs the past; but her past had been stolen, altered, repressed” (p. 186). The visions of times past are superimposed on Claudia’s present, where Havana is a decadent city, physically and morally as well. The backdrop of “narrated time” is Havana’s streets.

In her study, Phaf has used the distinction established between “narrated time” and “narrating time” by Eberhard Lämmert in his work *Formas de construir la narrativa*. According to Phaf, the latter, “in some chapters or repeated fragments disfigures in a determinant way the narrated time according to the author’s [or, in Claudia’s case, the character’s] free-association with the purpose of introducing a particular dynamic within the whole narrated context”. A constant tension is created between both times.

The “narrating time” in *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* goes from an initial time-fifth vision: the Indian shows Claudia a pristine, happy island at the arrival of the “floating houses”: the year 1492. And it stretches to 1994.

Chaviano’s strategy to penetrate this “narrating time” is Claudia’s mediumistic talent. [Spiritualism in Cuba is very pervasive and often mixed with the rites of Santería, which in turn originate in Africa]. Muba, whom only Claudia can see and hear, makes her appearance the very first time Rubén takes Claudia out to eat at La Bodeguita del Medio. There’s also an Indian character, naked and full of scars, who never speaks but only shows up as a harbinger of danger or tragedy.

Through her visions, Claudia will witness a different lifestyle, discover a different Havana. In eight scenes or vignettes of past times, the former physiognomy of the city will be laid before her eyes. Chaviano provides the reader with abundant and interesting information about the walls, the streets, the colonial buildings –some of them already quite altered or non-existent– even anecdotes and other data picked up from old sources, all of it marvelously woven and embroidered into the narrative itself. When Claudia crosses the streets of Old Havana, one is able to follow her footsteps all over the city’s map: she goes to great lengths to display its real topography.

Claudia contemplates nightfall while sitting at El Malecón's seawall, close to El Castillo de la Punta. Once it’s dark, she heads towards the city but comes up against “a gigantic, seemingly endless mass...” (p. 165). The walls, of which only fragments remain, were erected in the 17th Century and torn down in the middle of the 19th.



Where the Church of the Angel should have been she could only see a garden, and on top of the hill, “an unknown temple, surrounded by a stone enclosure with turrets” (p. 166).

Although we may know of the mediumistic abilities Claudia shares with Ursula, and of the existence of Muba, this first vision seems to have been provoked, without the latter’s intention, by Claudia’s desire to discover her city’s past. “Those monuments left by men who lived through a hell worse than hers exerted a mysterious attraction...”

Ursula visits her again in the next chapter, bringing with her a cassette *Vision: The Music of Hildegard von Binge*. “This music was composed by an abbess who lived a thousand years ago” (p. 173) Ursula tells her as she gives her the cassette. Chaviano has dedicated this novel to Hildegard, an illuminata, a visionary like Claudia, a German nun known as “the sibyl of the Rhine”.

From then on, the visions follow one another with greater frequency, and the “narrating time” practically invades the “narrated time” Claudia lives in, taking her to a Havana unknown to her up until then.

The novel is divided in six parts, subdivided in turn by short chapters, with a “Prelude” first and an Interlude after the third part. Each one of the first five parts concludes with a philosophic disquisition (Claudia’s? Chaviano’s?...) carrying a Cervantes-like title: 1. “Where imagination is bread for the soul”. 2. “Where certain culinary secrets are revealed”. 3. “Where love can feed on any mirage”. 4. “Where it can be seen God also dances the rhumba”. 5 “Where no one knows what to rely on”. These meditations can be autonomous, ironic or poetic, and in my judgment they tell more about the author than about the character.

In the “Prelude”, Claudia is walking on some avenue in Havana. The first phrase announces: “She doesn’t know it, but her life is about to change” (p. 11). This is followed by four enigmatic paragraphs which again conclude: “Thus she approaches, unknowing and smelling of cologne, the only point in the city she really should avoid” (p. 12). When the novel is about to end, the first, second and fourth paragraphs are repeated, and the reader realizes Claudia is heading towards the Malecón, and the final scene. The circle of the narration is closed, and the reader hadn’t suspected he started reading at the end of the story.

Daína Chaviano has woven a fascinating plot around a Cuban woman in the decade of the 90’s, simultaneously paying homage to the city of her birth.



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