Daína Chaviano: A Panorama of Cuban Science Fiction

by Yolanda Molina-Gavilán (Ph.D.)

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The latest novel from Daína Chaviano, *The Island of Eternal Love* (2007), has been translated into twenty-five languages and was awarded the gold medal for Best Spanish-Language Book in the Florida Book Awards. This novel closes the tetralogy "The Occult Side of Havana", also comprised by *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* (1998), which would go on to receive the Azorín Prize that year, *Casa de juegos* (1999) and *Gata encerrada* (2001), in which Chaviano shows off her gift for more traditional styles of narrative. While her most recent production, although not entirely bereft of fantastic elements, isn't science fiction, Chaviano is considered one of the greatest exponents of the genre that she has cultivated since her beginnings, in 1980, with *Los mundos que amo* (reissued by Alfaguara in 2004). This story collection was followed by *Amoroso planeta* (1983), *El abrevadero de los dinosaurios* (1990, 2005), and *País de dragones* (2001); the screenplay *La anunciación* (1989), the novellas volume *Historias de hadas para adultos* (1986, 2007) and the novel *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* (1988, 2003). Her short story "The Annunciation" (*La anunciación*) was included in the anthology *Cosmos Latinos: Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain* (2003), together with veteran Ángel Arango and the younger Michel Encinosa. In 2004, she attended the 25th International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts (Fort Lauderdale, Florida) as a Guest of Honor. Her novel *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* received the Anna Seghers Prize (Germany 1990), granted by the Berlin Academy of the Arts, and the Goliardos Fantasy Prize (Mexico, 2003), given by the association of that name, made up of critics and writers of sci-fi and fantasy from that country. This interview will delve into the opinions of this Cuban author of such high acclaim in regard to science fiction (SF) in Cuba, its evolution, its present and its future.

After *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* (1988), you've published some four other novels and, although fantasy is an integral part of them, none could be said to fit within the genre of SF. Does that mean it no longer interests you creatively?

No, I've never distanced myself from the genre. After I left Cuba, the majority of the SF books that I published on the island were re-released by publishing houses in Spain, Colombia, Mexico and other countries. I even expanded the story *Los mundos que amo*, which Alfaguara published as a novel for young adults. I've participated in SF events in the United States and I'm in touch with writers and researchers who study the topic. And even if it's true that, up to now, I haven't published any new SF titles, that doesn't mean that I won't go back to doing it in the future.

How do you link your earlier SF work with your later work, published after having left Cuba?

My last novels, belonging to the cycle "The Occult Side of Havana", come from a lot of self-searching. In all of them I've tried to sound out themes related to the origin of the Cuban nation, the experiences of various generations and my own links—historical, biographic, genetic and spiritual—with that country. However, the element of fantasy has been fundamental to all of the plots. None of them would exist without that load of fantasy that for me constitutes a vital tool of creation and exploration.

On the other hand, anyone who has read my stories or novels knows about my obsession with fusing genres. It's something that I've never stopped doing. All my books, published inside or outside of Cuba, form a continuity in that sense. And the common denominator is the component of fantasy, which in my universe goes hand in hand with magic, the paranormal, the mythic and even the erotic. Nothing has changed, except that I've expanded the borders of the hybridization. So no one should find it strange if, at some point, I go back to using the tools of SF.

In 1982, you founded and directed the first literary workshop of SF in Cuba, the Oscar Hurtado. What do you think was the workshop's role in the development of Cuban SF and in the formation of many current writers?

I founded the Oscar Hurtado workshop not long after I graduated from college. There I had the pleasure of supporting people just as young or younger than me. By then I had published a book—which had received the David Prize in SF—and a second about to come out. I was still a developing writer, but my enthusiasm for studying narrative tendencies and techniques counted for a lot when directing the workshop. I also learned on the fly. And keep in mind that, age-wise, some of the members of that workshop could have been my older siblings. The truth is that we were all very young, but I was happy whenever I learned that one of their stories had received a prize or was going to be published.

Over that time I was in contact with Juan Carlos Reloba, who was working in the publishing house Gente Nueva, in charge of publications for young adult readers, and he always let me know when he was preparing an anthology or selection of SF. Then I'd tell the members of the workshop about it, and we would select the best stories that we'd already analyzed, so they could be presented to the editor...They're all there, in the anthologies from that period, the stories from those young people who became writers when they published those stories which were fresh out of that workshop.

However, the Oscar Hurtado was more than a group that we'd turn up to argue over literature. It also created a kind of bond that still persists among some of the members. In theory, each session was supposed to last an hour and a half, but sometimes we were there up to three. And that happened because we really loved what we were doing. We were literally in love with the genre and felt passion for those discussions...In those sessions we didn't just analyze works by the workshop members, but also Cuban classics and works by foreign authors. We invited some of those Cuban authors to visit the workshop and share their points on view on their craft. Writers like Ángel Arango and Miguel Collazo passed through there. To me, it always seemed important to establish and recognize generational continuity. Activities of this type allowed those young people to respect the work of those who had come before them. There are always ruptures between generations, but that would never happen if there weren't already common links...I think the Oscar Hurtado workshop was the marker of an era. Of the founding group, many of us live in other countries. But it never stops being remarkable to me that, when I read the biographical notes of the old members, they never neglect to mention that they belonged to that group. I think that speaks to the impact that it had on their formation.

What do you think about the evolution of the genre on the island? What do you think are the differences between the diverse generations of SF writers in Cuba?

Cuban SF dates back to 1920, to the publishing of the novel *La corriente del golfo* by Juan Manuel Planas. But the real birth of the genre occurred in 1964, with the appearance of three titles: *¿Adónde van los cefalomos?* by Ángel Arango, *La ciudad muerta de Korad* by Oscar Hurtado, and *Cuentos de ciencia ficción*, with stories by three authors (C. Cabada, Juan L. Herrero and A. Martí). From there, other works and writers began to follow, almost without interruption.

Up to now, the history of the genre in Cuba can be divided into three periods. The first takes place between 1964 and 1979, when writers started to absorb elements of foreign SF (especially Anglo-Saxon) and, at the same time, expand their search for "Cuban" themes. It was an era where the short story played a starring role, where stories were written that are still brilliant today, like "No me acaricies, venusino" by Juan Luis Herrero, or the spine-chilling "Las montañas, los barcos y los ríos del cielo" by Germán Piniella. There wasn't a great deal of emphasis on a technological component, which has never been an important element in Hispanic-American SF, anyway. Social or familial environments seemed to be the axis of a lot of stories. There were also attempts to reinterpret history and myth from another perspective. Let's remember the stories "Un inesperado visitante" ("An Unexpected Visitor") by Ángel Arango, and "De Tulán la lejana" ("From Distant Tulan") by Giordano Rodríguez, with biblical and pre-Columbian subject matter.

With the establishment of the David SF Prize in 1979 begins the second phase, which lasted until 1990, and continues to be the most prolific in terms of publications. In just ten years, 35 titles were published (compared with 15 titles in the first period, which lasted fifteen years; and twenty-some titles in the third, which hasn't yet concluded). A generation of new writers emerges, including of women, who start publishing work within that genre for the first time. Almost everyone was a university graduate—studied the arts, sciences or engineering—which might have contributed to the diversification of styles and themes.

Within this phase there were two perspectives. One of them kept closer to orthodox SF, with social and political criticism that some confused with "hard" SF, because a number of its titles could be defined that way. But that classification is deceptive. In fact, it should be called "pro-Soviet", as stories by all these authors came about within a Soviet-Caribbean milieu. The other position tried to break the genre's traditional molds, fusing itself with the fantastic and developing plots with a

psychological, parapsychological or magical-mystic edge. This variant could be catalogued as “hybrid” due to its characteristics.

The second period ended in 1990 for various reasons. For one, the David SF Prize no longer existed. Furthermore, many of the authors who were most prolific or representative of that phase decided to leave the country for good, which produced a momentary void in publications. Finally, what was the greatest economic crisis in the history of the Island, the so-called Special Period, had begun, almost entirely paralyzing the country, including the publishing industry.

From 1990 until 1999, a publishing stoppage of almost ten years was produced, in which only two SF titles saw the light of day, both in 1994. However, that year kicked off a profusion of conventions dedicated to the topic. To date, some of those annual meetings still take place. Additionally, right in the middle of the special period emerged the first SF magazine which, due to the absence of paper, begins to circulate in digital format, passing from computer to computer at workplaces, and reaching other countries through e-mail.

I would say that the third phase began in 1999, when four books were published simultaneously, three of which were anthologies. This last detail is indicative of the rest of the period, which has been characterized by a scarcity of novels and the proliferation of anthologies. It should be noted that, due to extreme material poverty, authors have opted for the short story, which affords them greater opportunities for publication.

The subject matter in this third phase has also varied. Cyberpunk has started to boom. This dimension of SF, which distinguishes itself through the description of marginalized worlds in a techno-futuristic, dehumanizing and violence-filled environment, has been the basic ingredient off of which many of these authors have fed, authors who are subsisting in a social environment that is increasingly more difficult, more strained. It’s not by accident that themes like prostitution and social apartheid proliferate now, together with a good dose of cynicism and amorality.

Other authors cultivate “heroic fantasy”, of which I’ve read interesting stories. There are some that don’t follow a single thematic line and move along with more independence. I should make clear that none of the aforementioned periods has been more important than the other. Each one has made its contributions to the genre and are part of the evolutionary process of which different generations have taken part.

Judging from that with which you're familiar, and from your experiences as a seasoned writer and great reader of fiction and literary criticism, what have been the main accomplishments and errors that you detect in current Cuban SF?

There are some really original writers. Others, not so much. And some that make it difficult to understand why they've been published. Moreover, the authors with a greater number of published works aren't always the best. In some cases, excessive literary production could explain the uneven quality of their work.

One of the principal problems lies in how some of them seem to have forgotten that the word *narrativa* (fiction) comes from the verb *narrar* (narrate)—that is, to tell a story. It's that simple. Instead of looking for a good subject, constructing an interesting conflict and coming up with a satisfactory denouement, these authors try to reinvent the wheel. They indiscriminately abuse neologisms and puns, giving the impression that we're reading with one of those old avant-garde, now-obsolete texts. It's as if the author were trying to search for "original" (i.e. "strange") elements that don't do anything but tangle up the plot.

I've also seen a type of graphic postmodernism where *Blade Runner*-style screenplay formats or settings from video-games and even comics are mixed in, and when they're poorly executed, they produce a chaos so absolute that not the most assiduous reader of the genre could manage to follow the story. I suspect that that tendency to unnecessarily complicate a text is due to an unconscious attempt to camouflage ideas. I think that the fear of being too explicit still exists...and not because the stories are subversive, but by simple reflex.

Worse yet, I've read stories that cry out for a copy editor. When you discover spelling errors, repeated words or poor wording, you have to ask if the editors had forgotten the guidelines of their work or simply lost their sense of shame. In this case, I don't think that the authors alone can be blamed, but also the publishing house, although it's obvious that a writer that doesn't know how to handle the basic tools of his language is automatically unqualified. In spite of everything, there have appeared amazing authors, among them several women, who manage to contribute original situations and solidly constructed characters. There are abundant displays of talent to which we might not pay much attention, but they're there and one day they'll be the face of Cuban SF.

In your opinion, to what degree did Soviet SF influence the pioneers of Cuban SF and the creators that followed in their footsteps in the 1980's? What other influences or models do you consider significant?

The Soviet influence begins and ends in the second period; that is, it scarcely spans ten years. I already mentioned that during that phase there were two perspectives, one of which stayed faithful to the Soviet model, with a strong socio-political cast where Communist ideology marked the setting and the ethics of the characters. By contrast, the authors of the "hybrid" view, which at the beginning may have had some Soviet influence, quickly separated themselves from that model. Each one found methods to elude censorship, dedicating themselves to exploring philosophical and aesthetics canons considered something of a taboo, at risk of being accused of "heretics" or obscurantists.

In an article published in the magazine **Science Fiction Studies,** titled "From Socialist Realism to Anarchist-Capitalism: Cuban Cyberpunk", Juan Carlos Toledano, a Spanish-American academic who has studied the development of Cuban SF at length, also notes the existence of these two groups. The academic refers to the dramatic case of Agustín de Rojas, the most representative writer of the first view, who he calls "the champion of socialist realism". Rojas is the author of a trilogy of novels (*Espiral*, *Una leyenda del futuro* y *El año 200*). Toledano points out that his literary engagement in socialist ideology was so strong that, upon the disappearance of the social reality that sustained it, he suddenly abandoned SF and since then has only published one novel that doesn't have any relation to the genre.

Of this Soviet influence, then, nothing remains. But others exist. In recent anthologies I've encountered the fingerprints of inescapable classics like those by Ray Bradbury, J.R.R. Tolkien, Isaac Asimov, William Gibson, the guru of cyberpunk, and even of Cuban writers, exiled or not. In some cases, the similarity is so evident that one hopes that, at least, the author would quote or dedicate the story to his or her "model", as it usually happens in the literary world, but this is never the case. It would seem that they're embarrassed to recognize who they admire, when such an attitude isn't a stigma, but a healthy sign of mastering.

The other thing is, in order to talk about influences, they need to arrive from somewhere. The writers of the first and second periods had access to the translations of foreign works, but these have disappeared with time and today are relics that are difficult to find. The new generations scarcely know the names of contemporaries who have renovated the genre. Ted Chiang, Serguei Luknayenko or Andreas Eschbach (to name only three) aren't published in Cuba. As far as I know,

you can't find inescapable classics by Larry Niven or Ursula K. LeGuin either. And if a writer doesn't have points of comparison or doesn't know what's being done in the rest of the world, it's difficult to be able to get out of the vicious cycle, which condemns him or her to that informational apartheid. In spite of everything, many go to enormous lengths to keep themselves up to date. There are blogs, bulletins and digital magazines (composed by the writers themselves or by fans) that try to disseminate contemporary works. And if one of them has been lucky enough to read one of those books, he or she summarizes them for those less fortunate. There have also formed cultural groups dedicated to subjects related to fantastic literature, like Celtic culture, and take advantage of their annual events to offer talks or show movies or music videos that aren't seen in theaters or on television. But these little sparks of information aren't enough. More than influences, it would be better to talk about the eagerness to receive influences.

What do you think about the standard of criticism on Cuban SF and fantasy, inside and outside of the Island?

Lamentably, criticism is the Cinderella of those genres in Cuba. In other countries there are conferences and specialized magazines where academics that aren't writers (or aspiring writers) can participate. In Cuba, however, the majority of those articles are composed by the creators themselves, some of whom have little or no academic training and don't possess, therefore, the adequate tools to analyze a literary work. They're fail to understand that to criticize, in academic terms, doesn't mean to throw out adjectives left and right. There are also those who believe that to do criticism or essays is to compose a listing of titles that they've read, and then lightly assert that one book is superior to another, or that one generation is better than its previous one; not to mention those who write about the genre in order to praise themselves and prove themselves the paladins of the best SF that's been done on the Island. There's a lack of modesty that's almost terrifying.

Of course, some writers avoid all this and are capable of showing restraint in their prologues and articles, exploring the genre without protagonistic pretensions. But, in general terms, there aren't any independent academic voices that study the phenomenon with the rigor that it deserves.

Although it seems paradoxical, the best studies that I've read on Cuban SF come from the United States and aren't done by Cubans. In many American universities there are special chairs for SF that include courses and curriculums dedicated to the genre. Those academics hold annual congresses where hundreds of papers are

read and analyzed. Among them, I know several scholars who study the evolution of the genre on the Island. Besides Professor Juan C. Toledano, who did his graduate thesis on SF in Cuba, there's your thesis on SF in Spain and Spanish America and your book *Ciencia Ficción en español: una mitología moderna ante el cambio*, in which there's a number of chapters dedicated to Cuban SF works.

Another important scholar with numerous publications is Andrea Bell, who, together with you, edited and translated several stories from the first anthology of Spanish American SF published in the United States. The two of you, along with other scholars of the genre in Spanish and Portuguese, from inside and outside of the United States (Miguel Ángel Fernández Delgado, Elizabeth Ginway y Luis Pestarini) have produced, additionally, a chronology of SF texts published in Latin America between 1775 and 2005, separated by country, in which there figure Cuban titles from 1885 up to 2004, with an aside that summarizes the history and evolution of the genre in Cuba.

Also, academics like Robin McAllister, Dale Knickerbocker and Sharon Sieber have published works, presented papers, translated texts or participated in conferences where Cuban authors and their works have been studied.

A significant case is that of physics professor Daniel W. Koon, of St. Lawrence University (New York), who on his own web page maintains a bilingual reference section dedicated to Cuban SF. It doesn't just offer detailed and up-to-date information on works and authors, but also fragments of novels and stories translated into English, interviews, links to websites of digital magazines and Cuban authors, and much more information.

Whenever Cuban scholars decide to study this area of literature, they will necessarily have to count on bibliographies and analyses published before them by their foreign colleagues. But such healthy interaction is part of academic life.

How do you see the future of SF in Cuba?

If despite the confinement and material difficulties of these last years, works of considerable quality keep being produced, it's to be hoped that this process multiplies when writers—and the country, in general—can freely interact with the rest of the world. Cuba has always been a hotbed for creation. Cubans have specialized in absorbing what arrives from the exterior world and transforming it into a *sui generis* product. I hope that something similar occurs with SF from the Island in the near future.

Yolanda Molina Gavilán, Ph.D. (Madrid, Spain). Literature professor at Eckerd University in St. Petersburg, Florida. She has also compiled and edited Cosmos Latinos: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain (Wesleyan University Press, 2003) with Andrea Bell, where Chaviano's story "The annunciation" was included.