

An Extraterrestrial Perspective on Daína Chaviano's *La isla de los amores infinitos (The Island of Eternal Love)* by Robin McAllister

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If Daína Chaviano's characters in *La isla de los amores infinitos* inhabit not just the contemporary worlds of Havana and Miami, but spirit worlds of pre-Christian, pre-literate culture, they inhabit a world of almost forgotten literary traditions as well. Her characters and science fiction romance belong to an ancient form of literature that first arose in highly urbanized, civilized Hellenic times at a time of empires and the break up of empires, flourished again in the 17th Century, and most recently and most spectacularly in the Latin American fiction of the 1960's.

I think it is relevant to evoke the possible survival of ancient traditions in contemporary fiction when we are dealing with a novel in which Angela, one of the characters, a girl haunted by a "duende" or spirit, converses with a pre-Roman "mora de la fuente," or water nymph combing her hair at the dawn of Midsummer Day, and later offers bread and cheese to the forgotten pre-Christian nature deity, Pan. At the same time or, better said, in the same lifetime, when Angela finds herself married to the owner of a record store in Havana, she can say, "How far behind those days were now when she had wandered woods peopled by immortal creatures. Now, as she watched people passing on the sidewalk, her youth seemed the memory of another life. Once she had spoken with a nymph? Had she been blessed by a sad, forgotten god?" (164). This novel is haunted by archetypes of romance, Byzantine, and Gothic romance. They create presences and bonds that weave together the lives of these lovers as they meet, separate, and return if not for this life for the life of a new generation.



Menippean satire is a mode of narrative in which an alienated, displaced, highly cosmopolitan writer, often “bi-located” with a foot in different cultural and linguistic worlds, is writing a type of narrative that can appeal to an alienated, cosmopolitan reader, who wishes to renew contact with the sources of consciousness from which civilization, or war, or exile, has alienated her or him. This type of literature combines the most sophisticated philosophical or religious speculation with a return to pre-rational, preliterate modes of thinking and genres of story telling. In Chaviano’s protagonists this takes a form analogous to that of the shaman, a religious practitioner, who brings healing and knowledge to a disharmonious tribal society by detaching temporarily from waking consciousness through trance, flying to the land of the spirits and ancestors, and returning with knowledge and healing. Ana, the writer/protagonist of Chaviano’s *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre*, does not invent characters like an ordinary fiction writer, she is the medium through which already existing characters can return from exile and perilous situations bringing lost knowledge of the future and the present.

At first glance *La isla de los amores infinitos* is a complete departure from that first science fiction novel *Fabulas*. Cecilia denies she has inherited her grandmother’s ability to see into the future or communicate with spirits. There are no imaginary planets, extraterrestrial visitors, genetic memory, or space flights to megalithic ruins that hold the key to the past and future. Instead we move from fantasy to history, from the conventions of science fiction to romance, real embarkations in the lives of Cuban families rather than space voyages. Strange planets no longer exist as parallel universes, but actual personal history. Still, characters are haunted by duendes or spirits, and Cecilia, the protagonist of *La isla*, is a newspaper reporter writing a story about a phantom house that appears and disappears in Miami. As the story progresses Cecilia will discover that she is haunted by that house, which is not only the abiding presence of her family, but the soul of Havana that has deserted the island for Miami. *La isla* is partly an Ode to Havana, partly an Ode to Miami. This ambiguity remains unresolved for Cecilia, at least in my reading of her character.

The supernatural has been naturalized, but it remains active as a structural principle in *La isla* as in the earlier *Fabulas*. The novel consists of four story lines including that of the protagonist who listens to a grandmotherly, wise figure, Amalia, recount the fabulous stories of Chinese, African, and Spanish families who converge in Cuba, and now find themselves in exile in Miami still haunted by memories embodied in song, boleros, nostalgia for lost and forgotten times and people whose lives still resonate in the lives of the present. In words that are



prophetic of the unresolved issues that Cecilia must try to deal with in her alienation and solitude, she responds to the stories Amalia begins to recount to her in the darkened bar where boleros seem to make time and memory stand still: “It was a story of burning landscapes and creatures who spoke an incomprehensible dialect, of distinct superstitions and ethereal embarkations that set out for the unknown... Amalia’s story was rather an enchantment. The wind blew with force through the tall cane of a far off country, loaded with beauty and violence. There were celebrations and deaths, marriages and killings. The scenes spread out from some crack in the universe as if someone had opened a well from which the memories of a forgotten world were escaping... The visions that rose up from the old woman’s story and the evocation of an Havana overflowing with musical deities had left her with an unusual feeling of bi-location. She felt like those saints who can be in two places at the same time” (25-26). Like Ana Cecilia will discover she is a medium through which already existing characters can return from exile and perilous situations bringing resolution to the soul of a lost Havana seeking out Cecilia in her solitude, cultural dislocation, and alienation.

If Chaviano’s protagonists are haunted by duendes and spirits that others cannot see, if their memory and consciousness embrace a spirit world underlying the surrealistic, contemporary world of Miami, so Chaviano’s novel, at least for this reader, is haunted by forgotten forms and genres of Menippean satire, Gothic and Byzantine romance. These genre or underlying archetypes continue to assert their power in the shape this novel takes, though not necessarily visible to every reader. There are at least two levels in this novel. One that is a nostalgic “bolero” for the mixing of the three ethnicities that make up the people of Cuba, a story grounded in personal, family, and country history. But below the surface of the fiction are the structural principles of earlier science fiction elements that first gave form to Chaviano’s fiction. To recognize these elements is not to subvert the authenticity of the historical and familial stories, but to recognize how these schemata once interiorized or “naturalized” into a writer’s process of creation can serve new purposes.

I see a continuity between all of Chaviano’s protagonists whether they have separate names and identities or not. In some way they are all the same protagonist dealing first with isolation and repression in Havana and later displacement and exile in Miami. Ana and Cecilia, the science fiction writer and later newspaper reporter, resemble the protagonists of Gothic Romance—innocent victims confined and threatened by monsters in a gloomy old house, Havana for Ana, the solitude of an American city separated from the island for Cecilia. Science fiction fantasies of escape into other worlds, other dimensions of reality, are appropriate for these



women, searching for identity in a stifling, confining world threatened by forces too powerful for the individual to overcome. Cecilia has escaped the gloomy old mansion of Havana, but that haunted house has left Havana now and haunts her in Miami as a phantom house. Her story unfolds as she alternately pursues her newspaper story about sightings of the phantom house and spends lonely nights in the bar listening to Amalia tell her stories of the loves and lives of interconnected Cuban families. Only at the end will Cecilia discover the link between the phantom house and Amalia, who is also a phantom, that the house is Cecilia's forgotten family history and that she is destined to marry Amalia's son, Miguel (whose mixed race features appear "extraterrestrial" to Cecilia), and unite between them the blood lines of all the families Amalia has recounted, the blood lines of the soul of Havana, adrift now, seeking out a place to inhabit where the authentic history and culture of Cuba can emerge from exile.

In accomplishing this destiny, Cecilia fulfills in an historical and political way the role that Ana accomplishes in *Fabulas* in allowing characters from parallel planets to cross the boundaries of time and space to bring knowledge and healing to a broken world. Cecilia will finally make contact with those pre-Christian, pre-rational shamanic powers of communicating with the spirits she inherited from her own grandmother: "Then Cecilia remembered the first riddle, "tavern, vision, illuminations." Why hadn't she noticed before? Tavern, what they called bars in the days of Amalia. That was what the old woman had wanted to tell her: she, Cecilia, was a vision in a bar, someone who was there to be illuminated. She thought of Amalia's words: Your lottery combination will show you who you are and what you should expect of yourself. Now no doubts remained. She too was a visionary, someone who could speak with spirits. But this brought with it a house inhabited by the souls of those who refused to abandon her. Now she was certain that she had inherited her grandmother Delfina's genes. "Even Claudia had told her: 'You walk with the dead,' but she had been blind"(378). Cecilia has renewed contact with those sources of consciousness that make up her soul as a Cuban, but can she escape her destiny as a Gothic protagonist haunted by memory and solitude? Although she has denied her shamanic powers, if she did not already possess them without knowing it, she would not have been able to meet Amalia and hear her stories. Amalia is a phantom, a ghost, who acts as Cecilia's spirit guide and ancestor spirit.

Fulfillment, eventual marriage with Amalia's son, Miguel, would transform Cecilia's story into something resembling a heroine from Byzantine romance, like Characleia in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Romance*, a young girl protected by the gods no matter how many shipwrecks, captivities by pirates, voyages to strange lands,



slavery in bordellos, and apparent deaths and miraculous survivals she suffers until the destiny preordained for her from the very beginning and presided over by her invisible guardian spirits is brought to a surprising resolution when she is reunited with her lost lover and recovers her true identity as the daughter of a queen. The intensity of love in Byzantine romance depends on the overwhelming accidents and obstacles that separate two true lovers, but no matter how those lovers are threatened by loss, separation, and apparent death, their eventual reunion has been predestined before their first moments of separation. No matter how irrational and unpredictable the world seems to us, Byzantine romance reassures us that a god or goddess ultimately preside over our fate, and our destiny will be revealed in a sudden reversal of fortune and discovery of our true identities.

The story of Amalia and Pedro demonstrates why I would call their love affair a contemporary version of Byzantine romance. They meet and fall in love at first sight in a magical moment that takes place one night at a party Amalia's father is giving for a famous singer, [Rita Montaner](#). Rita has just draped a silver shawl over Amalia's head, a shawl with the magical quality of glowing in the presence of two people destined to love each other for ever. The doorbell rings and Amalia opens the door to stare into the eyes of Pedro, Pag Li, a Chinese Cuban whose social class debars him from marrying Amalia in the eyes of her parents. Pedro is delivering a load of laundry from his parents business, but has knocked mistakenly at the wrong door. The accidental meeting of these lovers creates a moment in the novel that resembles the crossing of space and time boundaries in the previous science fiction novel, *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre*: "She leaned out a little in order to make out better the shadow that crouched in the threshold, but only saw a Chinese boy with a load of clothes in his hands. A jet black amulet in a tiny hand of gold slipped from her neck and fell at the feet of the youth, who hurried to pick it up. Without wanting to, his fingers touched the silver shawl. He lifted up his face to look at her and in that moment saw the Goddess of Mercy herself, whose features reflect love on all mortals. And she recovered the stone talisman with trembling hands, because she had just recognized the prince of her dreams" (212). Perhaps it is in this moment, or in moments like this in the other love affairs in the novel, that love takes on the infinite destiny promised in the title of the novel itself.

This miraculous moment resembles those climactic moments in the earlier science fiction novels in which the boundaries of space and time are crossed by the protagonist. A moment of contact between goddesses, persons, legend and moment of history, world of spirit and living passion and blood. Most important, a connection across the discontinuities of generations. Only if we have read Amalia's stories about previous generations of Pablo's and Amalia's families do we realize



what events, loves, and destinies meet in the moment Pablo sees the Goddess of Mercy in Amalia's face. It is as if these lovers are living out lives whose destinies have already been prepared, laid out for them. How else could someone read their futures in their palms? And how else could these moments on fatal contact occur? This encounter—love at first sight—had already been prepared for, already preordained, since before Pedro was born. His destiny fulfills the uncompleted destiny of another. The lives of these lovers haunted by the destiny of Byzantine romance are a complex web of “predestinations” in which the actions in a present life will only manifest their consequences in a future time and those same actions in the present have already been predestined by a prior ancestor's encounters and journeys. Amalia and Pedro are lovers whose life and future are predestined in a strange karma of future and past—and always presided over or protected by spirit figures outside the realm of human control, like Martinico or Oshun.

Amalia herself denies this determinism when Cecilia expresses a wish to see into the future: “The future is not one thing alone. If right now you were able to see the destiny of a country or a person, this does not mean that in a month you would see it the same... The future that you see today only will become reality if no one takes sudden decisions or initiates actions without thought. Even an accident can change the original prediction. By the end of a month, the sum of all these occurrences will convert the future into something else” (349). The actions of the lovers and the logic of their relationships, separating and meeting again across boundaries of time, continents, generations lead me to suspect that falling in love will not resolve the solitude in the sense of longing and nostalgia that Cecilia feels as an exile living in Miami.

As Cecilia watches television coverage of the Pope's trip to Havana, she seems to accept Miami for the first time: “Suddenly she recognized how much she owed Miami. There she had learned stories and sayings, customs and tastes, forms of speaking and working: treasures of a tradition lost in her island. Miami could be an incomprehensible city even for those who lived there because it showed the rational, powerful image of the Anglo-Saxon world while its spirit bustled with a hurricane Latino passion. But in that feverish, contradictory place, the Cubans guarded their culture as if it were the British crown jewels. From there the island was as palpable as the cries of people shouting on the television screen, Cuba for Christ, Cuba for Christ. In the island a specter or perhaps a mystique floated that she had not noticed before, something she had only discovered in Miami” (321).

Although Cecilia begins to see Miami in a new light, it is not certain she has accepted her life as an exile: “Miami had converted itself into an enigma. She began



to suspect that there was conserved there a certain spirituality the oldest had rescued from the hecatomb of the Revolution. Only that breath of spirit was hidden in the small corners of the city, far removed from the tourist routes. Perhaps the city was a time capsule, an attic where the old furniture of an ancient splendor were preserved awaiting a return to their place of origin” (143). In the closing scene of her novel she is once again listening to boleros in the bar where she will meet Miguel. She has a vision of Martinico, the [duende](#), whose appearance always heralds the meeting of true lovers. As verses of the song go through her mind, she longs for Havana: “That bolero seemed to sing of her city. Or perhaps she could not listen to a bolero without remembering Havana. ‘It’s that you have changed into part of my soul.’ Yes, her city also was part of her, like her breathing, like the nature of her visions... Her Havana moribund, inhabited by so many phantoms dispersed through out the world. ‘You learn to love a place where you have loved,’ she repeated to herself. She looked up to see Miguel and remembered the faces of those beloved dead that continued in her memory. His heart was half way on the road between Havana and Miami. In which of these extremes breathed his soul? ‘My soul beats in the center of my heart,’ the song said. And her heart belonged to the living, near or absent, but also to the dead who continued next to her. ‘With you in the distance, my love, I am,’ she sang in a soft voice, looking at the image of Havana on the television screen. Havana, my beloved. And when she leaned her head on Miguel’s chest, the phantom of Amalia turned to look at her and smile” (379-80). Cecilia’s longing can never be fulfilled until she comes home to Havana. This is a novel about the Cuban diaspora, and its conclusion tells us that Chaviano’s protagonists are not finished with their flights and journeys.

Living in exile in Miami has liberated Chaviano’s protagonist Cecilia from science fiction inventions, imaginary planets, parallel universes, genetic memory, time/space travel across boundaries of reality, to integrate or find those elements in the reality of a dislocated, separated existence in which earlier and later stages of one’s life are separate planets and journeying of making a connection or transition from one to the other as perilous or impossible as space flight. SciFi fiction no longer has to be wish-fulfillment fantasy, escapes from reality, fantasies of power for the powerless. Now these elements are embedded in the reality of a life lived, a means of trying to re-integrate dispersed and dislocated former existences by means of memory. Once our own life seems as unreal as fiction, we do not need fictions.



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