Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s

Yvette Fuentes
Nova Southeastern University, yf60@nova.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/shss_facarticles

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

NSUWorks Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in CAHSS Faculty Articles by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.
Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s

Yvette Fuentes

To cite this article: Yvette Fuentes (2016) Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s, Hispanic Research Journal, 17:3, 262-264, DOI: 10.1080/14682737.2016.1157935

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14682737.2016.1157935

Published online: 07 Jun 2016.

Article views: 19

View related articles

View Crossmark data
and rule the newly docile queen (pp. 189–90). Some years afterwards, Bances Candamo wrote ¿Quién es quien premia al amor?, also inspired by Christina, for the ladies of the Spanish court to perform. In a nice postscript to her work on the Swedish monarch, Quintero brings in the 1933 film Queen Christina. ( Appropriately), it stars Greta Garbo, with female-to-male cross-dressing, a portrait of Felipe IV, and even a scripted nod to Calderón.

The Epilogue considers Caro’s El Conde Partinuplés for an instance of female-authored rule by a woman who turns her own gaze on potential mates.

Quintero demonstrates that comedias put women in charge in cases of ‘the feminization of the monarchy and its concomitant crisis of masculine power’ (p. 18). Time and again the plays empower queens when male governance weakens and fails, the depiction of rulership’s effeminization perhaps a warning to contemporary audiences, public and royal.

Brandeis University, USA  Dian Fox
fox@brandeis.edu


During the last twenty years, there has been growing international interest in Cuba, from its political situation and social-economic milieu, to its cultural and literary production. This interest has resulted in the publication of numerous books by and about Cuban authors, yet few have offered a comprehensive analysis of the narrative produced on and off the island during the 1990s. Hence, the newly published work Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s could not have come at a more essential moment. In this discerning study, Ángela Dorado-Otero moves beyond essentialist notions of identity and prevailing dichotomies, ‘inside/outside’ and ‘male/female,’ to delve into a corpus of narrative works produced during the Special Period by novelists living on and off Cuba. She calls for an understanding of Cuban culture as fluid, transnational, diverse and decentered, what she labels a ‘cubanía desterritorializada’ (p. 2). As she reiterates throughout the text, Cuban literature cannot be simply divided along political lines or binary cultural divides as many critics have frequently done.

Although Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s has as its base Bakhtinian theory, Dorado-Otero also incorporates feminism, psychoanalysis, as well as concepts from such varied intellectuals as Fernando Ortiz and Roland Barthes. She applies Barthes’s concept of the ‘infinite text’ to maintain that Cuban narratives of the 1990s rely on intertextuality in order to create a non-official history, or ‘memory from the margins’ (p. 3). In these novels, writing becomes a site of resistance against hegemonic discourses and a means of creating a new version of history from below. And more importantly, Cuban novels from the 1990s display a shift toward the subjectivity of characters that become dialogic, in what Dorado-Otero calls ‘a process of becoming’ (p. 3).

Dorado-Otero begins with a detailed examination of Reinaldo Arenas’s final novel, El color del verano, published posthumously in 1991. In view of the fact that Arenas belongs to ‘La generación del Mariel’, his inclusion in this text may seem out of place. Yet, as
Dorado-Otero shows, in Arenas’s novel one finds both the themes and discursive techniques that will dominate future Special Period literature. Arenas is a sort of precursor, so to speak, to subsequent writers since his novel, ‘in its own process of writing and rewriting and depiction of an underground culture it is representative of the fluidity and decentralization of Cuban culture’ (p. 5). Indeed, Arenas includes carnival, for the first and only time in a work, to create polyphony, and in doing so, subverts official discourses and established order. His use of particular discursive techniques, including parody, point to a unity in Cuban discourse that exists both within and beyond the island, regardless of political ideology.

Whereas the first chapter focuses on Cuba’s most celebrated exile writer, chapter two evaluates the work of the most well-known novelist still residing on the island, Leonardo Padura. In Máscaras (1997), Padura relies on intertextuality, and the figure of the transvestite, as a dialogic narrative strategy to subvert monolithic notions of literature, culture and identity. Despite living on the island, Padura’s work coincides with a wider aspect of Cuban literature beyond national borders. In this novel, Padura returns to Sarduy and Piñera, both as a tribute and method of rescuing the voices of two authors who suffered under the Cuban regime. Although solely critical of the system within the limits of what has been acknowledged by the state, through his inclusion of the discourses of others, Padura reinstates voices that have been excluded from official discourse and questions traditional notions of genre, author and reader.

In chapter three, Dorado-Otero reflects upon the creation of a Barthesian ‘infinite text’ in Abilio Estévez’s Tuyo es el reino (1997). Although internationally recognized, few critical studies have centred on Estévez, most probably because of the complexity and literariness of his works. In her research, Dorado-Otero goes beyond other analyses on Estévez’s narrative to argue that in this polyphonic text, authoritative discourse is challenged, reality is subverted, and the process of creation becomes a mechanism by which the characters reach self-knowledge and inscribe themselves into the nation’s collective memory.

The study’s final chapters address three Cuban women writers who have adopted subversive feminist discourse in their novels to refocus and challenge patriarchal notions regarding the role of women in society. Eroticism, rather than silence is the ‘trick of the weak’, and it becomes the tool with which these women writers examine feminine subjectivity and denounce patriarchal society. Dorado-Otero’s analysis of Daina Chaviano’s Casa de juegos (1999) is especially valuable given that only one other study has analysed this novel. In addition to Bakhtin, Dorado-Otero employs theories by Kristeva, Irigaray and Lacan to reveal how the erotic becomes an element in a larger group of rituals that allows Chaviano’s female protagonist to revisit the semiotic before re-entering the patriarchal symbolic.

In her study of Yanizia Canetti’s Al otro lado (1997), Dorado-Otero integrates Cixous’s theories on femininity and women’s writing to explore the role of the female body as site of resistance against oppression. As Dorado-Otero explains, Canetti’s protagonist subverts authoritative discourses and escapes their power by means of a creation of a feminine discourse. In contrast to Chaviano and Canetti, in Zoé Valdés’ La nada cotidiana (1995) eroticism is utilised to demonstrate the protagonist’s subjectivity and agency. As the author elucidates, Valdés appropriates male dominant discourse(s) of the street and concentrates on turning the female position from object to producer of feminine subjectivities.
With a solid command of literary theory and an exceptional knowledge of previous scholarship on the topic, Dorado-Otero clearly illustrates how Cuban narratives of the 1990s, in response to the particular historical circumstances and economic hardship, represent a turning point in the creation of the Cuban novel. As she contends, in their narratives, this diverse group of Cuban writers makes use of specific discursive techniques to create polyphonic novels and dialogism in line with Bakhtinian theory. Their novels serve to undermine monolithic representations of reality, and challenge fixed notions of literary genre, as well as of national, gender and individual identity.

_Yvette Fuentes_  
Yvette Fuentes  
yf60@nova.edu


This volume comprises a selection of papers presented at the conference _The Dark Side of Catalan Culture: Far-Right Ideologies in the Work of 20th Century Catalan Artists and Writers_, hosted by the Centre for Catalan Studies at Queen Mary University of London in July 2008.

Much of the discourse concerning Catalonia’s twentieth-century history continues to construct a somewhat Manichean image of a democratic society that fell victim to the Spanish State’s obsession with eradicating difference and later the dictatorial repression of the fascist Falange. However, we are reminded that during the 1920s and 1930s the fascist phenomenon and indeed authoritarianism in general existed across Europe. It is not then surprising that in Catalonia, just as in France, Britain and Italy these ideas influenced and attracted a number of artists and writers. Nevertheless, the support — however fleeting — given by these intellectuals to a political approach that subsequently favoured the eradication of the Catalan language and culture, has consistently led to their depiction as traitors of the Catalan cause. Indeed, for many it has distorted the way in which their work has been accepted and celebrated within the Catalan canon. Jordi Larios stresses the importance of context in order to arrive at an appropriate analysis of those Catalans and Mallorcans who were seduced by fascism or those who collaborated with the regime (p. 11). Building on this principle, across fifteen chapters, _La cara fosca_ unmasks many of the complexities behind apparent decisions to cooperate, including challenging the supposed paradox of being at once a catalanist and a supporter of the regime.

First, Henry Ettinghausen discusses the classification of Dalí, Ors, Pla and Villalonga as traitors. The chapter serves as a comprehensive opener to some of the arguments that permeate the volume, relating to the types and degrees of collaboration as well as the circumstantial drivers behind those decisions. Josep Murgades then explores the figure of Eugeni d’Ors and his _Glosari_ to discuss a patent affinity with authoritarianism — as opposed to an admiration for Franco — that was behind the author’s decision to side with the right. In the third chapter, Dominic Keown continues the theme of popular misconceptions regarding the ideological positions of Catalan intellectuals. He suggests that although many of the ideas expounded by J.V. Foix were connected to fascism