
Reviewed by James Wilkey

There is something inherently compelling about analysing the voices of Cuban writers during the 1990s. On the island, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to an era of economic devastation known as the ‘Special Period’. Meanwhile, the geographical shuffling of Cuban authors in exile in the decades following the Cuban revolution of 1959 generates deep questions about Cuban identity and memory. In tackling the subject, Ángela Dorado-Otero attempts to demonstrate ‘how Cuban narratives in the 1990s, in response to and influenced by the hardship of the Special Period and the historical circumstances of the country, represent a turning point in the creation of the Cuban novel’ (p. 2). The book explores the use of *carnivalesque* and sexualised depictions of Cuba as a means of challenging social and political hierarchies in the Cuban state, as well as any notion of a homogenous Cuban identity.

*Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s* focuses on six authors who Dorado-Otero asserts represent a boom of Cuban novelists in the decade: Reinaldo Arenas, Leonardo Padura, Abilio Estévez, Daína Chaviano, Yanitza Canetti and Zoé Valdés. Despite widespread diaspora, all of the authors Dorado-Otero examines are linked by having spent their formative years in revolutionary Cuba. Dorado-Otero argues that these authors share a carnivalesque aesthetic across six respective novels which ‘in turn creates a non-official history, a memory from the margins, which acts as a form of cultural resistance to monolithic representations of Cubanness’ (p. 3).

Chapter 1 analyses the hypersexual, carnivalised Cuba of Reinaldo Arenas’ *El color del verano* (1991). Dorado-Otero describes Arenas’ Cuba as a way of aggressively engaging in discussion about homosexual oppression in Cuba, while simultaneously gaining a modicum of revenge against the state. Chapter 2 focuses on Leonardo Padura’s *Mascaras* (1997). Padura, like Arenas, subverts traditional notions of culture and identity, but does so through intertextuality and the use of the transvestite figure. In Chapter 3, Abilio Estévez’s *Tuyo es el reino* (1997) is posited as using the form of the novel to explore creation as a means of challenging all discourse. The final three chapters focus on Daína Chaviano, Yanitza Canetti and Zoé Valdés, all female, who, Dorado-Otero asserts, use erotic discourse as a means through which women can reject objectification and assert agency.

Although interconnected, and intriguing, in their own right, the shift in tone, style and subject of the final three chapters of *Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s*
**Novel of the 1990s** is symptomatic of the book’s biggest weakness. Each individual argument Dorado-Otero makes feels complete, well considered and convincingly argued, but none of these individual chapters (excluding the interconnectedness of the final three) feels as if it is part of an overarching thesis that brings the book together. Dorado-Otero also struggles under the weight of her own writing, needlessly relying on ill-defined jargon interspersed in an already dry work that only serves to obfuscate a convincing, if loosely collected, series of essays about Cuban novel writing under the Special Period.

Despite the book’s flaws and inability to assemble into a cohesive whole, and a seemingly deliberate attempt to further mask the book’s point through overly technical language, the well-researched and convincingly argued components of *Dialogic Aspects of the Cuban Novel of the 1990s* still warrant reading, if only for offering a better understanding of the dialogic mechanisms that form the foundation of the way modern Cuban novelists engage with, and subvert, the state, literature and societal and cultural norms to better understand Cuban identity in its broadest forms.

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