

Politically Escapist... or Engaged? History and Subversion in Leonardo Padura's *La novela de mi vida*

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La novela de mi vida (2002), by the Cuban novelist Leonardo Padura, interweaves multiple epochs in Cuban history. On one level, the exiled protagonist—Fernando Terry—returns from Spain to Cuba after eighteen years in an attempt to ascertain the circumstances of his initial banishment during the Fidel Castro regime. On a different level, his search involves an investigation into the life and writings of his Cuban compatriot, José María Heredia: the famed Romantic poet who spent much of his brief life in exile. There is yet a third level: that of Heredia's son José, whose activities in homage to his late father add another layer of complexity to Terry's investigations. In a Cuban context, at least, this historical multi-layeredness should be seen as anything but accidental: it speaks to what one might call the Cuban condition of both the last fifty years as well as the one-hundred fifty years that preceded them, both on the island and in exile. In such a context, an event at a given historical moment is not isolated from the many that preceded it; more importantly, this complex temporality—rather than signaling a post-modern political escapism—allows Padura, an island-based author, to register a very subtle critique of the Castro regime.

This essay addresses how within the context of Cuba's recent history a novel's political agenda may be teased out. The novel in question is Leonardo Padura Fuentes's *La novela de mi vida* (Tusquets, Barcelona 2002). While registering what some might call the Cuban condition in its insistence on a cultural and historical multilayeredness or slipperiness, I argue here that while this novel often does proclaim the (seemingly apolitical) indecipherable flow of history, it is nonetheless a highly political text. This is particularly so in light of Cuba's post-revolutionary, politically-charged cultural arena, and also in light of the novel's ideological subtleties which are often slyly critical of the Cuban revolutionary government.

Granted, it is a truism that any stance, including an apolitical one, is potentially (or ultimately) a political one inasmuch as it can suggest or derive practical and consequential implications. That stated, my task in the paragraphs ahead is on the one hand to show that *La novela de mi vida* is neither "apolitical" nor escapist (although, quite importantly, it can very easily be read as such); on the other hand, my task is to outline a possible political reading of the novel. This dual task

is by no means an easy one: in order to accomplish it I look first at basic features of the novel and its author, then I contextualize the novel in terms of relevant discussions of temporality and historicity within a Cuban context; I then survey some of the criticism that has been published on the novel, which sometimes references important moments in Cuban history involving the intersection of politics and literature. Then I examine the novel itself in greater detail before outlining my conclusions.

The title, *La novela de mi vida*, literally means the novel of my life or the story of my life. It bears mentioning that in Spanish, to speak of a “novela de mi vida,” is usually done in a plaintive tone, as when someone says in English, after perhaps a string of unfortunate events, “that’s the story of my life.” The plaintive tone of the expression befits the novel in that it indeed describes a series of unfortunate, often painful events. The expression assumes an additional meaning insofar as the novel pertains in large part to what may be a lost autobiographical narrative within the principal storyline.

Padura, meanwhile, is a highly successful Cuban-born and Cuban-based novelist, best known for his series of detective novels featuring the wily Mario Conde, and winner of Cuba's 2012 National Prize for Literature. Despite his fame in detective fiction, Padura has also published in a variety of genres, including journalism, literary criticism, and historical fiction. Among his most recent novels is *El hombre que amaba a los perros* (2009) which recounts the death of Leon Trotsky. Similarly, *La novela de mi vida* (or at least one of its narrative threads) could be categorized within the historical fiction genre. Padura, however, issues a disclaimer: he makes it plain in the foreword (indeed, in the very opening words of the text) that while much about this novel is historical, a fair amount is fictitious or at the very least conjectural:

Aunque sustentada en hechos históricos verificables y apoyada incluso textualmente por cartas y documentos personales, la novela de la vida de Heredia, narrada en primera persona, debe asumirse como obra de ficción. La existencia real del poeta y de los personajes que lo rodearon—desde Domingo del Monte, Varela, Saco, Tanco, hasta el capitán general Tacón y el caudillo mexicano Santa Anna, o sus dos grandes amores, Lola Junco y Jacoba Yáñez—ha sido en puesta en función de un discurso ficticio en el que las peripecias reales y las novelescas se entrecruzan libremente. Así, todo lo que Heredia narra ocurrió, debió o pudo ocurrir en la realidad, pero siempre está visto y reflejado desde una perspectiva novelesca y contemporánea. (*La novela de mi vida* 11)

Perhaps because of its considerable length, its emphasis on island-centered literary intrigues, and the manner in which it has been understood by its few published critics, the novel has received scant critical attention and has yet to be translated into English (although there is an Italian translation). With regard to the little critical attention the novel has received, Janet Pérez observes that, “curiously, this interesting and complex novel has been the most neglected by critics among Padura’s fictions, perhaps having been seen as a departure from the detective genre, inasmuch as it ostensibly involves an academic investigation” (Pérez 2006, 166).

In the novel, the exiled protagonist—a man named Fernando Terry—returns from Spain to Cuba after eighteen years in an attempt to ascertain the circumstances of his initial banishment during the Fidel Castro regime. From the start, then, the novel tackles quite squarely delicate political issues pertaining in particular to how certain intellectuals have been treated by the Cuban government. On a different level, Terry soon discovers that his search involves an investigation into the life and writings of his Cuban compatriot, José María Heredia (1803-1839), the famed Romantic poet who spent much of his brief life on the road, including an exilic stint in neighboring Mexico. The portion of the novel foregrounding José María constitutes a second narrative thread in the novel. This second thread—which alternates with the first (and a third)—consists of Heredia’s first-person account of his life. Although this possibility is never confirmed, there is in the novel a strong suggestion that the lost narrative Terry seeks is none other than Heredia’s autobiographical account fictionalized in the novel (i.e., the second thread). José María wrote his autobiographical account while fleeing Cuba’s colonial authorities and after seemingly having been betrayed by his one-time friend and collaborator, Domingo del Monte. Del Monte is known to posterity as the organizer and host of the *tertulia de Del Monte*, an abolitionist group that sponsored several writings that shone a negative light on Cuba’s prevailing plantation-based, slaveholding society.

By the late twentieth century, in other words during Terry’s lifetime, José María’s autobiographical novel has been long lost and its previous existence has become little more than a rumor. This brings us to the novel’s third narrative thread: that of Heredia’s son José de Jesús, who was an infant when his father died in 1839, and whose own travels and activities in homage to his late father add another layer of complexity to Terry’s investigations. The narrative level involving José de Jesús recounts the dilemma he faces during the early twentieth century with regard to the destiny of his father’s obscure manuscript, which remains in his possession several decades after his father’s death: should the feeble and impoverished José de María—among several possibilities—sell the manuscript, destroy it, or entrust it to others for safekeeping? If the manuscript (the so-called

“novela de mi vida”) were to come to light it would, apparently, cast a negative light on the illegitimate descendants of José María while also forcing a complete revision of canonical Cuban literary history: in particular a reassessment of the friendship between Heredia and Del Monte. In short, Terry, the protagonist of the present-day portion of the narrative, seeks—like a good *terrier* befitting his name—to unearth the lost manuscript and in this way vindicate himself professionally for the several years he lost to exile after winding up on a black list of political subversives: something that, historically, has happened with relative ease on the politically oppressive island. Jacobo Timerman’s observations in his 1990 critical account of his visit to the island are prescient here, both in terms of the island’s stifling political atmosphere as well as with respect to the broader cultural role of its detective fiction:

Writers have sons in the army, families to feed, the need to improve their housing, obtain spare parts for dilapidated cars, be able to publish. Everything depends on the state, and even in the year 1987, an accusation or observation from the critic and writer Agenor Martí in *Granma* could terminate a career, force someone to leave a university position, thrust a writer into nothingness. Agenor Martí himself in 1979 hailed the vigor of the Cuban detective novel, which had emerged eight years before . . . he goes on to add that in the Cuban detective novel, “a new, essential aspect in the whole history of the genre always emerges: the action of the people grouped together in their mass organizations, mainly in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.” To some extent Martí was right. A new kind of detective novel appeared in Cuba: one that promoted informing. (69-70)

Furthermore, Terry’s interest in the manuscript and its author also carries a more personal dimension given his identification with Heredia’s banishment from Cuba.

In a Cuban context, at least, the novel’s peripatetic multi-layeredness should be seen as anything but accidental: it speaks to what one might call the Cuban condition of both the last fifty years as well as the one-hundred fifty years that preceded them, both on the island and in exile. In his seminal 1989 study, *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat contends that this Caribbean island nation is best characterized by its resistance to any definitional scheme that would remove it from a radical relatedness: “Because of the island’s peculiar history, the Cuban writer or artist [Fernando Ortiz, for instance] is especially sensitive to opportunities for translation, in both the geographical and linguistic senses of the word” (4). There is no founding or original *Cubanness*; rather, Cuban identity is a dynamic phenomenon with multiple

moving parts. Pérez Firmat's interpretive framework (which predates the publication of *La novela de mi vida* by more than a decade) can be productively applied to Padura's novel inasmuch as within it the "Cuban Condition" is suggested by, among several other factors, José María Heredia's numerous voyages, José de Jesús's inexorable link to a past dominated by his father's literary accomplishments, Fernando Terry's condition of exile, and a Havana cityscape characterized by the continuous coming and going of foreigners (particularly during José María Heredia's time). It is worth noting that although politics is not Pérez Firmat's focus in *The Cuban Condition*, it would be a mistake to conclude that his analysis is empty of political significance or evasive of the same. Similarly, while *La novela de mi vida* may in some respects suggest the aforementioned Cuban Condition, it also moves beyond this interpretive framework in significant respects.

One of the ways it does so is through its pronounced temporal complexity. If Pérez Firmat outlined Cuban identity's cultural and linguistic fluidity, José Quiroga has argued for its temporal fluidity. By examining a wide range of cultural sites of memory, Quiroga demonstrates that remembering does not entail a simple plotting of points or moments along a chronology; instead, the palimpsest (i.e., a document that over the course of time has been written over, repeatedly perhaps) offers a better metaphor for the ways memory works: memory is a palimpsest that is continually being written over, but never perfectly so. This is because the newer writings or memories never completely conceal the older ones, and several layers of memory can coexist simultaneously. In his description of a Havana streetscape, Quiroga writes:

For the foreign observer, as well as for many habaneros, walking around central Havana as late as 2002 invited the stroller, or flâneur, to apprehend different temporalities within the same structure—the colonial or nineteenth-century prerevolutionary capitalist use of the building in the advertising and signs that still remained—neon lights with no neon, or the practically intact counter of what used to be a Woolworth's soda fountain counter – and then also the third stratum: the use that the revolutionary government gave to that structure. (32)

It bears mentioning that in a context informed by the palimpsest, an event at a given historical moment is not isolated from the many that preceded it. Even more to the point, such a moment can be understood only in terms of prior events, which never fully disappear in the first place. The palimpsest as an interpretive prism is perfectly suited to *La novela de mi vida* given the novel's three-fold narrative structure, each of which spans several decades across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Just as a cultural artifact's political thrust does not disappear either in Pérez Firmat's view

of the translational nature of Cuban identity or in Quiroga's notion of the palimpsest, I argue that the same can be said about Padura's novel: while it appeals to the concepts outlined by both scholars, it cannot be reduced to them inasmuch as its political thrust does not dissipate within potentially politically evasive cultural and temporal prisms.

La novela de mi vida has been read as an expression of a postmodern sensibility in which the only truth is contingency and instability, particularly inasmuch as all three men live in and suffer from a similarly precarious political environment, and each struggles mightily and ultimately in vain to uncover the identity of their nameless and faceless betrayers. In the three men's respective searches for elusive truths, Padura's interest in detective fiction in some respects rises to the surface. Furthermore, there can be little doubt that the novel does engage the historicalness or acute temporality of the Cuban condition, one that could, I suppose, prevent any particular event from gaining any discrete political potency and immediacy. As, for example, the omniscient narrator of the storyline involving Terry observes while this character is walking along Havana's waterfront and spots a tourist sailboat carrying a passenger who captures his imagination:

Cuando miró hacia la embarcación descubrió, acodado a la baranda, a un hombre al parecer ajeno al jolgorio de los demás turistas. De pronto la mirada del viajero se levantó y quedó fija sobre Fernando, como si le resultara inadmisibile la presencia de una persona, sentada en el muro, a merced de la soledad reverberante del mediodía habanero. Sosteniendo la mirada del hombre, Fernando siguió la navegación del velero hasta que la más modesta de las olas levantadas por su paso vino a morir en los arrecifes de la costa. Aquel desconocido, que lo observaba con tan escrutadora insistencia, alarmó a Fernando y le hizo sentir, como una rémora capaz de volar sobre el tiempo, el dolor que debió de embargar a José María Heredia aquella mañana, seguramente fría, del 16 de enero de 1837, cuando vio, desde el bergantín que lo devolvía al exilio luego de una lacerante visita a la isla, cómo las olas se alejaban en busca precisamente de aquellos arrecifes, el último recodo de una tierra cubana que el poeta ya nunca volvería a ver. (17)

This, apparently, is what it means to be Cuban: in an eternal state of physical and temporal flux.

The novel contains several similar temporal counterpoints, counterpoints suggestive of another, actual Fernando prominent in Cuban letters: Fernando Ortiz, whose *Cuban Counterpoint* argued convincingly through his account of the roles of sugar and tobacco on the island that the Cuban condition is one of eternal flux: as the above passage suggests, Cuban identity lies somewhere

between land and water, somewhere within the gazes of strangers who may or may not belong to the same historical epoch.

Sonia Behar is one literary critic who has noticed the abundance of temporal counterpoints in Padura's novel. Her conclusions about it in many ways affirm this temporality's role in any attempt to reach broad interpretations about the novel. She writes, for instance, that

La novela de mi vida es una historia que se reescribe en cada frase . . . la gran diversidad de voces de cada nivel narrativo es prueba fehaciente de las numerosas interpretaciones que se pueden hacer de una misma historia. Por tanto, el texto constituye un llamado al cuestionamiento, a no aceptar como definitivo ni real lo que ha quedado escrito en los libros. El lector, por su parte, tiene la libertad de crear su propia versión. El mensaje subyacente de la novela es que cada individuo es un historiador, y que, por lo tanto, eso que llamamos historia no es más que un vasto y a veces confuso conglomerado de reescrituras. (28)

Behar could have continued building on her conclusions. More to the point: according to Behar's reading, the only conclusion possible is its absence or inconclusiveness. I now turn to other treatments of the novel in particular and Padura's oeuvre in general that attempt a different brand of conclusion and that more directly describe its political dimensions.

In terms of the totality of Padura's writing, Rosi Song and, before her, the Spanish detective novelist Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, have identified in the broader context of Padura's detective novels that an example "de una literatura que supera la identificación revolucionaria y es capaz de criticar sus realidades sociales" (Song 459; Vázquez Montalbán 359). How does Padura's writing achieve this and would a politicizing characterization be a fair way to assess *La novela de mi vida* as well? In her essay on the novel, Janet Pérez in some respects reinscribes some of the postmodern themes Behar identifies, particularly in her insistence on Padura's "obsession with time" (Pérez 2005, 114). Her essay, however, which places *La novela de mi vida* within a broader intertextual framework involving "academic detecting" (certainly applicable in that Terry is an exiled academic who returns to Cuba in part to ascertain the whereabouts of Heredia's lost novel) and *la novela negra* (applicable, too, in that the novel employs many of the same investigatory techniques used in the Mario Conde series), does address some of the novel's political thrust. This can be seen, for instance, in her observations regarding the physical deterioration Terry notices on the island upon his return, a deterioration noticeable both in Havana's infrastructure as well as among his old friends: in *La novela de mi vida* as well as in his earlier novels, "Padura emphasizes the wear and tear suffered by the

Cuban capital, the lack of routine maintenance, pervasive shortages, and rampant neglect wreaking havoc upon the once-beautiful city, emblemizing the economic failures of Castro's regime" (118). Later, in her final remarks on *La novela de mi vida*, Pérez signals the novel's ultimately pessimistic tone, a tone that speaks both to the impossibility of a successful return from exile as well as a general hopelessness in light of Cuba's seemingly perpetual climate of political oppression: at novel's end Terry asks himself rhetorically whether it is in fact possible to rebel ("¿Es posible rebelarse?" 342) despite fully knowing that such a possibility is the first denied by the island's rulers. According to Pérez, through Terry's pessimistic internal monologue, Padura "suggests realization that Castro's long-established control of the island has crushed individual wills" (120). Although Pérez closes her essay with a glimmer of hope based on the valiant struggles of Cuba's early revolutionaries ("Yet *La novela de mi vida* is at the same time a hymn to Cuba's first revolutionaries, in spite of their human shortcomings, in spite of their failures, the deaths in exile of nearly all the original conspirators..." 120), her remarks on the political relevance of Padura's novel move closer to the kind of analysis the novel merits.

In her analysis of post-Soviet Cuban novels, Guillermina de Ferrari examines the code of honor several of these novels depict, often involving the precarious dance between groups of male intellectual friends and their sometimes contested allegiances to an orthodox and stifling political regime, which itself cleverly manipulates codes of honor as a way of entrenching its power. Within a post-Soviet Cuban timeframe, such a regime has existed within the context of the so-called "Special Period in Times of Peace," which has enabled first Fidel Castro and now Raúl Castro to justify drastic shortages in basic goods and services in light of an often symbolic struggle against U.S.-led imperialism. Significantly, De Ferrari further contextualizes male friendship bonds as well as the overall position of Cuban intellectuals within the framework of A) Fidel Castro's 1961 address to Cuban intellectuals ("Palabras a los intelectuales"), in which he outlined his vision for how intellectuals needed to produce cultural works fully committed to the Revolution, B) the establishment during the mid to late 1960s of UMAPs (Unidad Militar de Ayuda a la Producción); as De Ferrari explains, the UMAPs "were labor camps where homosexuals [and other 'undesirables'] were sent for sexual and ideological re-education, the assumption being that sexual deviation from the masculine model of the guerrilla soldier meant a weak devotion to the cause" (88); and C) the infamous "Caso Padilla" bridging the 1960s and 70s, in which the prize-winning poet, Heberto Padilla, was first imprisoned and then forced to denounce his own sly critiques of the Revolution, a

process that led to international condemnation of Castro's oppressive tactics, even from public intellectuals sympathetic to the Revolution.

Although her treatment of *La novela de mi vida* is brief in her essay, De Ferrari astutely contrasts the two major narrative strands in the novel (those involving Heredia the poet and Fernando Terry); she argues that “unlike Heredia's, Terry's exile has neither made history nor literature” (99). The latter's existence is characterized by “stillness” and a frustrated, unresolved quest to challenge some invisible—perhaps non-existent—foe that sent him into exile; being unable either to find or confront such a foe, Terry—according to De Ferrari—is unable to reclaim his honor: “It is not surprising, then, that he finds himself morally, artistically and politically maimed” (100). De Ferrari also states, significantly, that the “plots are such . . . that the cause of dishonor can be safely traced to a specific villain only in the past story lines” (100). This fact underscores for her Terry's existential dissipation.

While this may be true, I will argue in the remainder of this essay (and through a close reading of the very contrast between the novel's narrative strands), that there is an additional explanation for Terry's aimlessness and ineffectiveness in the modern-day portion of the novel. In many ways, it is no surprise that Terry, as De Ferrari notes above, is a “morally, artistically and politically maimed” figure. While he is visiting his old friends in Havana—a group known informally as the *socarrones*—the conversation turns to the murky and dangerous links between literature and politics on the island. One of these *socarrones*, Tomás, who aspires to being a novelist, claims that he will adopt an apolitical stance in the novel he wants to write: “Voy a olvidarme de la política, de cualquier cosa que huela a política. Porque lo que tiene jodida a la literatura cubana es el delirio de la política” (163). A second *socarrón*, Miguel Ángel, retorts, “La política está en todo. Y claro que se puede escribir de la política, pero lo que no se puede es dejar que la política sea lo más importante” (163). Curiously, Terry weighs in on the debate in a way that runs counter to his prior political victimization: “A mí no me importa un carajo la política... Yo escribo poesía y lo que me interesa es la gente, si sufre o si se enamora, si tiene miedo de morir o si le gusta el mar” (163). We are not going to find the novel's political agenda in the midst of such a perspective. A third *socarrón* party to this dialogue, Álvaro, concludes with an escapist and defeatist remark that makes an unwitting but subtle allusion to the novel's own multi-temporal framework: “Nosotros escribimos sobre el [siglo] XIX y les dejamos lo que pasa ahora a unos socarrones del 2074 y ellos les dejan sus líos a los del 2174 y así todo el mundo vive en paz y escribe sus novelas sin autocensurarse... Los de ahora viajamos al extranjero y los del 2074 a la Luna y los otros a Plutón” (165). Such a view suggests the

place within the narrative to look for the novel's political thrust. It is not within Terry's narrative thread alone, nor perhaps within either of the other two, but rather in terms of how the three act in unison. As Miguel Ángel, who holds the most politicized view of literature among the *socarrones*, explains: "A mí, la verdad, lo que me gustaría es escribir una novela sobre el siglo XIX. Porque yo creo que cuando hay tiempo por medio, el escritor es más libre, no sé, tiene menos compromisos con la realidad..." (165).

Although the José de Jesús narrative thread describes the quandary José María's secret narrative eventually put him in, while also serving as a bridge between the first and third narrative threads, it is José María's *novela de mi vida* that provides the most forceful comments regarding strategies for reading the novel politically. Such comments abound in the novel. We can begin with some remarks Domingo del Monte directs at José María; quite interestingly, these remarks lack any of the historical specificity that would limit their applicability to the speaker's own epoch: "¿Ves, José María, ves lo que es este país? . . . Esto es una feria, un circo, una mentira de país. Se supone que esto es lo mejor de Cuba. Pero aquí sólo importa figurar y tener dinero, que te vean y hablen de ti, o de lo contrario no existes... Lo peor de todo es que aquí la gente no quiere ser lo que es" (28-29). Later, another of José María's interlocutors, Félix Varela, who—like Del Monte—was also an important figure in Cuban literary history, warns the young poet after exalting his brilliance:

Quizás ahora mismo no entienda lo que le estoy diciendo, ni por qué. Pero llegará un día en que lo querrán utilizar, querrán comprar sus versos y su inteligencia, porque los déspotas, que siempre desprecian la poesía, saben que vale más un poeta servil que un poeta muerto, y los versos pueden dar lustre a las aristas terribles de las tiranías. Recuerde eso. (50)

Varela's warning is confirmed later by the tragic events that engulfed the young poet. It is important to note, however, that the warning—in its vagueness—is applicable to and descriptive of political tyrannies that have afflicted Cuba far beyond the lifetimes of José María and Varela; in other words, they are also applicable to and descriptive of Terry's (and the Castro regime's) historical time period. The warning is, in effect, one without a clear expiration date: as such, it stands in sharp contrast with Varela's observations on the persistence and predictable strategies of despotism.

Yet another example of the novel's multi-temporal political dimension involves José María's consternation in 1819 when he realized that the reigning Spanish monarch was actually tightening the imperial grip over Cuba:

Tal era mi ingenuidad como para pensar que un tirano es capaz de hacer cambios que socaven su poder y aflojen las ataduras con las cuales mantiene amordazados a los pueblos... Porque el rey español, como lo hicieron todos los déspotas de la historia, y como estoy seguro lo harán todos los sátrapas por venir, apenas realizó oportunistas cambios políticos para ganar tiempo y reparar los barrotes de su Estado opresivo y volver a segar los leves espacios de libertad concedidos. (72)

While he may make specific reference to the reigning monarch during that time, he expresses such a reference in terms of despots in general, who may inhabit either the historical past or epochs yet to come. Furthermore, the *ingenuidad* or *naïveté* identifies in himself finds an echo several decades later in Terry's own *ingenuidad* before the modern-day Cuban regime responsible for his exile.

What may be José María's best known poem, "En el Teocalli de Cholula," is also accorded extensive mention in the novel. The Teocalli de Cholula is an ancient Aztec temple over which the conquering Spaniards—in palimpsestic fashion—erected a Catholic church. In the poem, José María suggests that Spanish imperialism, like the Aztec imperialism that preceded it and all political tyrannies in general, perish. In the narrative, he introduces his own verses: "Pero ellos también perecieron, ellos, que llamaban / Eternas sus ciudades, y creían / Fatigar a la tierra con su gloria. / Fueron: de ellas no resta ni memoria" (75). Obliquely, the novel says as much about the Castro regime.

To conclude, Padura's novel is not in the final instance to be read as postmodern text, even though there is no question that it uses several postmodern literary techniques. It is important to keep in mind that Padura is an island-based writer and seems uninterested in leaving the island. In a telling scene during which Terry interviews a member of Cuba's former (now decayed) aristocracy, Carmencita Junco (a descendant of the Heredia line), one of the *socarrones* asks her a question that was also on Terry's mind: "Y ustedes, Carmencita, ¿por qué no se fueron de Cuba?" To which she replies bluntly,

¿Irnos nosotros? ¿Por qué? Acuértese de que los Junco, los Ponce de León y los Vélez de la Riva somos cubanos desde hace tres siglos y no siempre hemos tenido dinero, pero hemos seguido viviendo. El que quiera irse, que se vaya, pero por lo menos a mí, que soy cubana por los cuatro costados, tienen que botarme, si no, no me voy a ningún lado. (153)

Fernando's admiration for this "contundente declaración" (153) may to a significant extent his own commitment to the island. If he were in exile he could undoubtedly write other sorts of novel, but

then he would no longer enjoy the benefits of living at home. For this reason, as well as clues in the text, I argue that the novel's historical complexity is meant to frame contemporary political debates, even covert ones, within a larger historical and literary context. Rather than settling for a political defeatism with respect to the current regime, *La novela de mi vida* can remind readers that the struggles of today are not new ones and they can be overcome. At the very least, virtue—like the kind shown by all three principal characters—is possible. As we learn early in the novel, when Fernando receives a draft of another novel from one of his friends in his literary circle, political meaning does not necessarily have to be spelled out. In this novel, Fernando "leyó en vilo una historia decimonónica, de gentes comunes, que se encuentran y se desencuentran movidos por los vientos de la historia, en una trama a través de la cual se podía hacer una lectura oblicua del presente cubano, al cual no había, en cambio, una sola referencia directa" (41). Ultimately, the clues regarding the novel's political nature are there amid its post-modern elements. That they are—by design, I have argued—scarcely perceptible to readers in or out of the island does not diminish their political thrust.

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