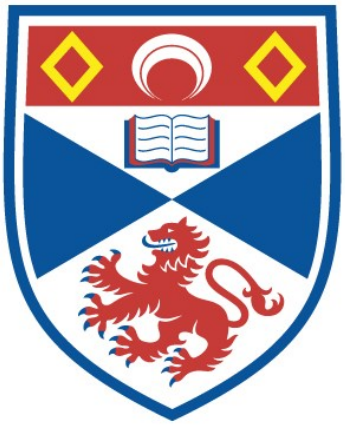
'LITERARY SPACES WITHOUT READERS': THE PARADOXES OF BEING A 'WRITER' IN HAVANA, CUBA

Molly Rosenbaum

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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Abstract

Cuban writers have long struggled for publishing space. Historically that had been because of repressive control of publishing mechanisms during the colonial period and the time of the Republic, which, when access was granted, required expensive systems of patronage in order for writers to see their work in print. While the Revolution advanced literacy rates and took ownership of the publishing houses, printers, distributors and booksellers, creating cheap books for the *pueblo cubano*, trade sanctions and the fall of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 resulted in limited resources for what had been a well-subsidised publishing system.

The writers I worked with in Havana, though, are a generation newly connected to a global literary network through internet access, introducing them to market trends and concepts of mass readership. While they regularly partook in the praxis of writing, through weekly *talleres* [workshops], monthly *peñas literarias* [literary salons] and by publishing digital literary magazines, their idea of *being a writer* was being redefined by awareness of publishing systems internationally and new concepts of economic and cultural value, problematising their self-conception as 'writer'.

This thesis explores the context of being a writer in Cuba through my interlocutors' conceptions of economic change, of future, of past, of literary history and of the city of Havana as a space of creation. In studying how my interlocutors interact with their texts, I question notions of literary invention and world-making and a sense of relatedness to characters. The writers I worked with were concerned with reception, with conceptions of audience, cultural value and literary tastes. This thesis attempts to show what it means to be 'a writer' for a group of people who see *being a writer* as something they simultaneously are and can never be in Cuba.

Acknowledgements

I cannot begin to convey my gratitude to the wonderful people I knew in Havana. I am grateful for their openness and candour, for their acceptance, and for letting me listen for months to their work, their discussions on literature and craft, and their disagreements and laughter.

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Introduction

Literature and Signs

Hanging on a crumbling stucco wall, along the path to a very nondescript-looking, two-storey, colonial style house in Vedado, one of Havana's central neighbourhoods, some large wooden letters read: 'Oh brother, I want to trust you'. 'Have you been here before? What is this place?' I asked a friend walking next to me as we made our way up dark, narrow stairs.

'No, but I've heard of it. It's like an independent Casa de Cultura[1],' she said. We had arrived in a large group of about fifteen as we had walked from the Saturday *taller literario* [literary workshop]. We had come because one of the *taller* members was presenting in a panel discussion on the importance of science fiction and fantasy to contemporary Cuba. Along with him, two other writers, who were well-regraded within the genre and published internationally, would present as well.

While everyone else seemed to walk past it, the sign outside somewhat preoccupied me. While being specific, it did not seem clearly referential, although the choice of writing it in English seemed odd and directed. It spoke of desired intimacy in a forced affinal relationship. It resonated with another sign I had read recently walking through Havana Vieja after President Obama's visit to the island. Using the famous red, white and blue screen print of Obama's face from his 2008 election poster, the word 'Hope' from the original was replaced with a quote from the well-known Dominican song 'El African'; it read: 'Que sera lo que quiere el negro?' [what will the Black man want?].

[1] Casas de Cultura or Houses of Culture are community centres that exist in each neighbourhood in Havana and regionally in all major towns in the provinces. They provide free classes and meeting spaces for people interested in learning and engaging with the arts. Classes range from creative writing to salsa dance to painting.

Figure 0.1: Outside the 'independent *casa de cultura*'

The presentation had been organised by a group of Cuban writers living in the US, El Club de Escritores Independientes de Cuba[2]. Along with some events organised in Havana, they also had begun a small publishing house in Miami. They printed books for a Cuban audience in the US and, according to my friends at the event, tried to get the books into the country, bypassing the government. They were not always successful, with a number of books being confiscated at the borders. When they did make it, these books had the allure of foreign printed, foreign designed books but were sold at a price similar to those books produced by the Cuban government.

As the presentation began, we sat down where we could in the overly packed room. Some stood against the back wall, while a few others went to sit in the adjoining room, out of sight, but still able to hear. Those of us sitting in a group passed around a wooden fan, as the crowd and spring temperatures made the space very warm. The writers sat at a long table set up in the front. Referencing each other's work, the three writers fluidly spoke about the importance of the underrecognized genre. In the middle, the most prolific contemporary writer of Cuban science fiction spoke first. He spoke about publishing here as a 'pendulum'. There was a time when realism was a threat, he said, and you could not write realism, but now they seem to only publish realism and

[2] The Cuban Club of Independent Writers

realismo sucio or dirty realism. He was referencing the lack of publishing space for the genres of science fiction and fantasy.

Another panel member followed up. He said that science fiction and fantasy were *cargado* [loaded], as there was space within the genre for commenting on the way things really are by masking it with completely made up places. Referencing a book written by the writer in the middle of the table, he said that his most recent book was the best examples of this he could think of. He continued, 'in this book, you export Cuba to another galaxy. You speak about the economics, politics, and quotidian life of that place, but to me it is very much the reality of Cuba'.

The writer in the middle answered the praise. For him science fiction provides a way to control and make the changes to a society that you would hope would happen. Sometimes, you are correct with your guesses, he says, and the story seems even more accurate. 'But,' he continues enlivening the conversation, 'now things are different. Cuba now is Cuba post-Obama, post-Rolling Stones'. The audience laughs. 'If things change though, who are we going to blame for all of our problems? *El bloqueo* [the embargo] is to blame for everything now. Why are the tomatoes smaller this season?' Shrugging his shoulders and pausing for effect, he answers '*el bloqueo*'. The audience chuckled again, but perhaps more subtly.

After the event, we stood on the balcony and drank free rum and cola. Some people were speaking about President Obama's recent visit and the typical rhetoric produced by both sides, but most were reflecting on the discussion. In the crowd, I had been told, there were definitely members of the Ministry of Culture to listen to what was said because of who was hosting the event and where it was located. I was curious as to how the author in the centre spoke so confidently then about the hidden critiques and analyses of Cuban society in his work and, in particular, his statement about the embargo. Like Leonardo Padura, I was told, he had published outside of the country, but remained living in Cuba, was well-known in the literary circles, a member of UNEAC and a figure around Havana. While he may be lightly critiquing the government, his lifestyle and actions supported Cuba. He was an example of Castro's 'within the revolution, everything. Against the revolution, nothing' (1961).

***

I came to Cuba with the idea that I could study writers participating in a long history of sharing their literature orally as access to publishing had always been difficult. Looking at these literary workshops and literary salons, I would gain an insight into how writers interact with their audience members when the medium of the book, and the distance it allows, does not exist. While I did engage with questions of praxis and the experience of reading written work to an audience, I was unprepared for broader questions regarding publishing, the book market and conceptions of value, specifically of literary value. What does being a writer signify in Cuban society? What is a reader? Who are readers? What does the book as an object mean for the writers I knew? For the readers? And if, as my interlocutors maintain, Cuba presents a number of 'literary spaces without readers', how does publishing function? It was obvious that studies of art and artistic labour in market economies (see Leach 2014; Sansi 2014; Bağcıoğlu 2016 for example) would not provide useful positive comparisons, although they acted as a foil to show how different the experience of writers and artists could be in Cuba.

Although I had read about the sense of uncertainty of the future in recent anthropological work of Cuba, I was unprepared for how convinced I would be – like it seems most anthropologists who study Special Period Cuba are – that the future, obscured by the collapse of the USSR, may be nearly visible again. Surely this was the moment of change: The writers I worked with, almost all children of the Special Period, seemed to carry a contradictory sense of isolation and cosmopolitanism – this sense of being stuck and untethered simultaneously – into their quotidian life that left them questioning what it meant to be a socialist, to be a Cuban and what it meant to be a writer. This thesis looks at how writers come to understand themselves as writers: how they follow the rules of praxis taught to them through the workshops they attend, but also through attending year-long courses to attain advanced diplomas from a prestigious writing school; how they work to encounter readers and an audience for the things they write; how they understand their work in relation to revolutionary history of writers in Cuba, but also how, in light of the sense of uncertainty of the future, the sharp line between capitalist and socialist seems to be blurred entirely; and how, due to the transmission of information across borders, the idea of what a writer should be transcends national borders and supposed stark dividing lines of different economic systems.

The research I conducted for this thesis was completed over the course of 14 months of fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 with two groups of writers and the *talleres* or workshops they founded in Havana, Cuba. The first, Grupo Ariete, was a group comprised of recent graduates from the prestigious course on narrative fiction at the Centro de Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso. Their group was founded around a desire to disrupt what they feel is a stagnant publishing system in Cuba. Along with the weekly workshop meetings, Ariete also holds monthly *peñas literarias* or literary salons at the Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC) where they read or perform their recent writings. While I was in Cuba, they also published a digital literary magazine. This past summer the group published their second collection of short works. The first was with a Cuban publisher and this most recent volume was published through a Spanish publisher based in Seville.

The second group I worked with regularly is called Espacio Abierto. This group is comprised of a number of writers at different stages of their careers. Some very established writers founded the group and attend as advisors. All the members of Espacio Abierto were interested in science fiction and fantasy and the establishment of those genres more centrally in the publishing space of the country. Espacio Abierto met biweekly, held monthly literary salons as well as an annual conference dedicated to critical papers on the genre. Members of the group also publish a very well-established, digital, literary magazine, *Korad*, which is dedicated to literature and art of science fiction and fantasy. The goal of their *taller, revista* and *peña* was clear: establish a space for fantasy and science fiction in Cuba. While Ariete was a very new *taller literario*, Espacio Abierto had been meeting for years in a number of different locations across Havana. Some writers attended both groups' meetings regularly. Both groups had strong critiques of the type of fiction prioritised by the publishing system and hoped to change the way in which ideas of what should and should not be published was determined; they hoped to reform the 'tastes' of the publishing system and of the literary hierarchy that controlled it.

This presentation given at the 'independent Casa de Cultura' brought together most of the participants in both groups and positioned them around a discussion that very much reflected larger questions about what it means to be a Cuban writer in 2016. It positioned this discussion of writing temporally ('post-Obama, post-Rolling Stones) and in relation to space ('export Cuba'). The context of the meeting is also important as it speaks to new developments in the cultural sector in Havana,

with some independent art centres developing. These precarious 'book runners' of the group who organised the discussion were neither hidden nor completely visible, but definitely watched.

While I am interested in the political changes of the year of my research, I do not see the year as a stark contrast to the years before – as a 'historical juncture in U.S.-Cuba relations' (Brotherton 2017) – or even the years after, or one that predicates massive change. Instead, because of gradual changes throughout the Special Period and through a slow opening-up of international relations, the generation of people with whom I worked represented a uniquely cosmopolitan group, whose struggle to be writers in Cuba centred on a new orientation to revolutionary temporality, which questioned the state of continual revolution, and Cuba's isolation from a global literary consciousness. The writers I worked with established connections with readers and writers around the world and read works of global literary standing through movement of books, texts, electronic books and even writers across Cuban borders. It is the premise of this thesis that the unique outlook of the people I worked with in Havana, the generation born into the Special Period and their perspective through the lens of their desire to be writers, provides a frame to question what was once considered a stark divide between capitalist and socialist notions of value, and global notions of art. This frame originates from the crisis of the writers I worked with in Havana: If you follow the rules of writing as they are taught (globally), learn craft from those who came before and practice regularly, understand the social goal of the revolution toward writers and publish with imprints in the country, graduate from the prestigious, government school for narrative techniques and even situate yourself historically among the national canon, ultimately, can you be a writer without readers?

Antes: the Special Period and the revision of temporality

Central to this thesis is the claim that my interlocutors grew up in a unique time, most of them not knowing Cuba before the economic crisis in 1990. Caribbean anthropology deals with many questions surrounding time and space; history/'History' (Glissant 2008: 88) and geography (see Mintz 1996; Benitez Rojo 1992); and timelessness and rootedness (see Forbes 2002; Berg 2011: 3).

Often, Cuba seems to fall somewhere outside of these analyses, problematic mostly due to the revolutionary recommitment to both the importance of historical time and nationalised space. As many academics have shown, much of this changed after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Conceptions of time, both linear and ahistorical, are very relevant to understanding the Cuban Revolution. Academics have looked at this concept of 'epochs' (Kapcia 2000: 221; Hernandez Reguant citing Bourdieu 2009: 1; Astley 2012: 89) as applied to Cuba through study of different artistic mediums and forms of public culture, such as writing and film (Whitfield 2008 and 2011; Balaisis 2016 respectively) and anthropologists have looked at temporality in relation to media (Hernandez Reguant 2006 and 2009), to music (Fernandes 2006; Riviere 2011; Astley 2012) and dance (Frederick 2009). The Cuban Revolution framed itself around notions of time, or as Miller (2003) writes:

> When Cubans refer to 'the Revolution' (always capitalized) they mean, customarily, everything that has happened since Castro came to power, so that more than four decades of change are condensed into a single process, subject to the same dynamics. History is thought of as what took place before the revolution, or *antes*, as it is popularly known (149).

Rosendahl, writing of rural Cuba both before and after the fall of the USSR, speaks about the use of *antes* as a constant backwards gaze that gives credence and power to the current government (1997:126). Balaisis writes, 'one of the major ideological drives of the revolutionary project was to re-mold historical time... the revolution of 1959 was seen as the triumph not only of the struggles of the 1950s against Batista but as part of a long, historical post-colonial struggle against various Cuban oppressors' (2016: 66). Or as Kumaraswami writes: 'In the first decade of Revolution, at least, recollections, reinterpretations and rearticulations of the past...provided the poles around which revolutionary Cuba measured its progress' (2016; 6).

While the Revolution is perhaps an ever-continuing present and the time before one of colonisation and imperialism, the fall of the Soviet Union caused the smooth temporal continuum in Cuba to shift. Hernandez-Reguant (2009), writing of the period after the fall of the USSR, a time of extreme crisis named by the Cuban government the 'Special Period in Times of Peace' (*Periodo Especial)*, claims that unique difficulties of the 1990s reframed the way Cubans saw their relationship to history and to the Revolution. She writes:

> ‘A sort of anachronistic self-awareness—as socialist survivors in a sea of global capitalism—together with the national gloom over Soviet abandonment, further colored the experience as a radical break from the past. In the Special Period, there was a “before,” which was stable, perhaps purer in its altruism and high ideals, a “now,” which was confusing and unsettling, and a future that was, for many, another country. The experience was intense, yet the period was construed as a time of waiting; as an irresolute transition’ (2009: 2).

While the Special Period was officially started in 1990, it has never been declared over. Classifying this period as ‘late socialism’ (in Hernandez-Reguant 2009 for example), Cuban scholars and Cubans themselves have a new way to classify the seemingly endless, new epoch in Cuban history.

The writers I worked with were almost all children during the 1990s, maturing during this period and into a changing revolution. The Special Period brought about a number of important changes. These include permitting the use of United States dollars ‘and opening state-run “dollar” stores with imported items not available elsewhere, opening farmer’s markets where private as well as state farmers can sell to the public, allowing certain types of private enterprise, and seeking foreign investment and tourism’ (Chomsky, Carr and Smorkaloff 2003: 595). On the part of the government, these changes also included an attempt to partake in a globalized economy by re-joining ‘international trade networks it had shunned for almost three decades’ (Hernandez-Reguant 2009: 5). More recently, the government of Raúl Castro created further liberalizations of the economy, for example: easing restrictions on farming (in 2010); allowing small businesses to hire non-family members (in 2010); and allowing private property — car and home — for the first time since 1959 (in 2011). As Hernandez-Reguant writes, ‘Both in scholarly circles and on Havana’s streets, talk of transition became commonplace’ (2009: 8). When people in Cuba today speak about *antes*, no longer is it limited to the historical temporality of the Revolution alone, as in the *antes* that signified coloniality and imperialism. Exemplifying the changing relationship to the past, present and future, people now speak about *antes* as both ‘before the Cuban revolution or before the economic crisis triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union’ (Pertierra 2011: 21).

Starting research in 2015, more than twenty-five years after the declaration of the start of the Special Period, that sense of imminent transition is alive, but measured. As described at the start of this thesis, the signs in particular, the new presentation space, the event’s sponsorship, and the

subjects of the discussion spoke to a sense that the small changes are happening and larger changes may finally be coming; but there is also a sense of trepidation. Does the prospect of new trade openings, especially with the United States of America, bring the possibility of neo-imperialism or at least new forms of compromise that may have not been considered before? Does being 'post-Obama, post-Rolling Stones' really mean anything? Will anything actually change? People in Havana continued to stare at the future with measured hope as the signs and the presentation on science fiction and fantasy signifies.

Knowing now what happened in global politics toward the end of 2016, it is apparent that the hope for reconciliation with the US seems further away than under the previous government. And while some things have changed in Cuba – with the death of Fidel Castro, the retirement of Raúl Castro, and the meeting of the national assembly of July 22, 2018, which met to discuss changes to the constitution via a national referendum – not all are for the better. The new constitution will make a number of interesting changes. It includes a formal recognition of private property. It includes the creation of a prime minister and provides for presidential elections every five years with a limit of two consecutive terms (see http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2018-07-23/carta-magna-con-intencionalidad-transformadora-y-sensibilidad-politica-23-07-2018-00-07-01). Ideologically, however, while committing to socialism as the future of Cuba, and maintaining the control of the one-party system by the Communist party, the new draft eliminates 'communism' as being the end goal of the revolution (see https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/22/cuba-ditches-aim-of-building-communism-from-draft-constitution). Recently a number of artists, some exiled and living outside of Cuba, have united to speak out against a new addition to the constitution, 'Decreto 349', which prohibits any non-state approved cultural production, a law that many argue would particularly attack certain genres of art, like rap and reggaetón, which the government may not consider 'beneficial' to the nation, something I discuss more in the afterword of this thesis.

While notions of what is to come may still be as uncertain as ever, to ignore changes that occurred during the year of my fieldwork would be a mistake. Although it may not indicate long standing change, there were new heights of international interaction. Not only did a sitting US president visit the island and a group once banned in the country play for free, but in the months preceding my arrival, Havana for the first time had two government operated public WIFI zones. The

internet, which had been reserved for government workers and tourists, was open to the public, albeit at a very high cost. Over the year I was there, these public zones grew to include many of the public parks throughout the city. While internet is still expensive, it is getting cheaper and some people have signed up for pilot programs for internet in their houses. The government has pledged that all houses will have access to internet by 2020 and there are rumours that mobile data will be introduced early next year. That year, Venezuela, a country that had long supported Cuba with cheap oil and goods, had their own political and economic crisis that led to their inability to continue providing aid to Cuba. Finally, in the months after I left fieldwork, Fidel Castro died. Whether international relations for Cuba progress or regress, the new sense of connectedness felt by my interlocutors cannot be undone.

Daily life in 2015-2016 Cuba was still a struggle for most of the people I knew, much easier than at the height of crisis in the 1990s, but still not easy. '*No es facil, pero no es dificil*' [It's not easy, but it's not difficult] was a saying you would hear often as we waited in line for eggs or to pay utility bills. The growing number of private businesses, the ability to sell property, the increasing number of tourists searching for private accommodation or room rentals was creating a growing sense of income inequality (see Powell 2008; Holbraad 2009). The internet, the weekly *paquetes* [packets][3] (see Humphreys 2017) and new access to Facebook and social media allowed for a look into the quotidian lives of friends in capitalist countries, more intimately and immediately than ever before. Many of my interlocutors spoke about family members and friends changing when they left Cuba, becoming *yuma* (a person usually from the US and discussed in more detail below). One person told me that a very good friend had posed in a recent photo for Facebook holding McDonalds, in front of a new sports car, at a nice apartment building in Miami. She believed he was showing off his life *afuera* (outside). Only later was it revealed to her that none of it was his, except the McDonalds. No longer was it necessary to depend on 'illegal' satellite dishes and exchanged memory sticks to see international films as pirated blockbusters played on Friday and Saturday nights on national television, bringing international entertainment into Cuban households.

[3] *Paquetes* are one terabyte internet downloads sold weekly through exchanged hard drives. They are thought of as a weekly download of the internet.

The people I worked with grew up in the poverty of the Special Period, knowing only Cuba as a place of struggle without Soviet support and being fully aware of the seeming, although most likely cultivated, ease of the lives of acquaintances in Miami or Madrid. It was this contrast that shaped the people I worked with. Writing of the previous decade, Hernandez-Reguant argues that 'the Special Period, despite its intense demand for a commitment to the here and now, required the engagement with trends beyond the island' (2009: 16). Many writers I worked with believed that the literary old guard – gatekeepers of official, literary taste and of access to publishing – was out of touch with new literary trends of the global, publishing markets. While they negotiated this relationship between revolutionary goals for literature and connection to market trends, they decided that things must change in the literary establishment in Cuba. Yet, they were not necessarily interested in the idea of a book market. This thesis is about how the writers I worked with, through their praxis and their beliefs, attempt to define and carve out what it means to be a writer in the time of late socialist Cuba in 'a sea of global capitalism' (Hernandez-Reguant 2009: 2). This definition is driven through sets of relationships between the writer and the reader, the writer and the book, and the writer and the publishing system, both in Cuba and in the ideal global publishing marketplace. As I hope to show, the emphases placed on these relationships forced the writers I worked with to contrast different ideas of value – literary, social, economic and personal – fostered in Cuba and in the global marketplace, making the idea of what it means to be a writer complicated and value laden.

Afuera: new networks and the problem of a clear 'outside'

While conducting fieldwork, I knew another anthropologist conducting doctoral work in Havana simultaneously. She was working and living in Centro Habana, the poorest of the central neighbourhoods of the city, with religious practitioners, focusing on questions of race. She told me that her interlocutors would often remind her that everyone in Cuba is religious and I found that very difficult to process in relation to my experience with the people I knew and worked with. The teachers, doctors and editors who I also knew did not consider themselves religious and even treated the concept of religiosity in a very new-age, progressive way. Most of the writers I worked

with, upon being asked about their religious beliefs, seemed to shrug it off. Most said they were not religious, while some said they were not religious but were spiritual, citing humanism or naturalism and in one case veganism as central to their spiritual belief systems. The most surprising discussion came when I spoke with a writer-friend who informed me he was Druid and practiced with a group in Habana Vieja every weekend. To leave Britain and to find a Druid community in Cuba contradicted many of my preconceived notions of the religions of the island.

The person who spoke to me about Druidism is also a *friki* (rocker/punk rocker). The *friki* movement in Cuba started in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s. They are still a very visible subculture in the Havana music scene (see Astley 2012) and, as it turns out, in the groups I worked with, specifically the group of writers of science fiction and fantasy. The musicians associated with *los frikis* have, among others, been described by Astley as the '"new" new left' (2012: 89), although he admits they would probably dislike that categorization. The movement, which has been very marginalized by the Cuban government (consider the treatment of the band *Porno para Ricardo*) is still a unique example of *cubanidad* (Cubaness) (Astley 2016) but also of 'transculturation' (Astley 2014). In terms of transculturation, migration and movement, Cuba is often studied in relation to its diaspora, to the 'mirror city' of Havana in Miami (Behar 1996; Lamazares 2005; Bobes 2012) or with populations in Spain (Berg 2012), and also studied in terms of the 'Black Atlantic' and the forced migration of slave populations traced through the African 'diaspora' (Palmie 2002, Gilroy 1993) to Cuba. Anthropologists of Cuba have often studied this conception of mobility with relation to goods and ideas as well; the concept of movement through objects has been studied through the lens of religious syncretism (Palmie 2002) or through the movement of material goods and conceptions of consumption (Hernandez Reguant 2002; Pertierra 2011; Ryer 2017, 2018). The writers I worked with participated in a supranational, literary community, through books, electronic texts (either electronic books, digital journals or e-zines), online literary communities and emails. As I hope to show with this thesis, and in line with much Caribbean research on the topic, the writers I worked with participated in a global[4] literary community but also navigated Havana as local authors, participating within and trying to

[4] I think 'global' is appropriate here instead of 'international' because of the power of the anglophone publishing industry, which Thompson (2012) claims influences and even dictates taste in multiple markets. Thereby the idea of 'writer' is not related to states, but rather a singular global example.

meet the expectations of the literary community in Havana, the publishing infrastructure and the socialist government. This thesis, in some parts, hopes to understand how the participation in both of these spaces forced the writers I worked with to confront the conception of what it means to be a 'writer'.

It is through consumption that some notions of *afuera* are substantiated. As Pertierra points out, Cuba 'is far from an undeveloped or new consumer society' (2011: 28). She notes that 'the transition from capitalism [of pre-revolutionary Cuba] to socialism was largely experienced by consumers as a change in the *origins* of consumer goods; there was not much change to a longstanding reliance on imports to maintain everyday life' and Cubans were 'thoroughly used to inclusion in global circuits of cross-cultural production and consumption' (2011: 28-29). With the fall of the USSR, the goods imported have changed once again, recently with new goods coming from Europe, China, Japan and Mexico. As is the case with old, US-made *machinas* [machines/cars] and Soviet Ladas, the value attributed to the goods differs based on the origin of the product. While Soviet-made goods always were considered 'shoddy, rough or crude' (Ryer 2017: 279), non-Soviet European or US goods were better. Similar to what Yurchak (2006) writes about with regard to Late Socialist imaginaries in the USSR or what Fehérváry (2013) notes studying post-Soviet opinions of aesthetics in Hungary, the Soviet goods were set in opposition to the non-Soviet foreign goods, which had a higher value.

This is also true of those things made in Cuba and those from outside (Pertierra 2011). This in turn builds an imagined sense of *afuera*. Ryer sums this up in his analysis of the Cuban term 'la Yuma' and the projected imaginary on those places considered part of it (2017, 2018). *La Yuma* is a word that traditionally referenced both the United States and people from the US, but has subsequently come to mean a more generalized category of non-Cuban, non-Soviet and non-global southern group or place. Products from *la Yuma* carry value in Cuba not only because of their quality – better than Soviet and Cuban-made goods – but also because they convey social standing and a place within a network of international exchange. Products like the 'Nike "Swoosh"' for example, Ryer argues, 'did not solely represent a display of economic power…but was simultaneously a tangible display of connectedness to the heartland of la Yuma—to a cosmopolitan world beyond the island' (2017: 281). In this sense, contemporary Cuba 'seems a distinctive mixture of late Soviet longing and

Caribbean-rooted material culture' (Ryer 2017: 280). This manifests with the way my interlocutors imagine the object of the book and publishing.

Recent scholarship of the diaspora notes the importance of problematizing the concept of *afuera* so often used in Cuba to speak about the world outside. As Berg (2011) writes, "Until the late 1990s, much of the literature on Cuba and its diaspora contrasted being inside or outside Cuba, using space as a shorthand for differences" (28). Studies of the relationship between Cuba and its diaspora speak of a Cuba beyond the boundaries of the island or 'transnationalise[d]' imaginaries (Bobes 2011: 27), with multiple groups claiming to be representative of a Cuba. Cuba in that sense is a very good example of Benítez-Rojo's 'repeating island'. In writing about Miami, Bobes speaks about the influence of Havana on the daily lives of those living there. She writes, "The mirror relationship with Miami is intensified and repaired with the increased flexibility of the migratory policy that fosters the visits and economic aid of emigrants to their families" (ibid:27). She continues, "What is said in Miami, what is used in Miami, what is seen on television in Miami, forms part of the life and imaginary of Havana" (ibid:27). Using the diaspora alone to problematise the distinction between Cuba and *afuera* is limiting though. My interlocutors as writers and readers interacted regularly with the ideas and goods from *afuera* that shaped how they understood and worked with the literary world in Havana. Mostly, that was through networks formed with other writers, with readers and with academics of Cuban literature, with whom they would keep in contact and who would visit Cuba or, less occasionally, who they would visit. These relationships formed the way the writers I knew spoke about writing, publishing and about books as objects of possible consumption. I found that many of the people I knew had ideas of how things were outside of Cuba, especially in relation to publishing and how being a writer worked, even if they had never visited anywhere else.

The moment of the Special Period in the temporality of the revolution led to a unique political and economic situation for these young writers: their idea of the value of fiction and of publishing seemed to exist in 'a sort of never-never land between communism and capitalism' (Chávez 2005: 1). They were unsure of what that meant to their goal of becoming writers and how that affected the way they went about creating themselves as such. As the exchange of literature in some ways reaffirms this boundary between Cuban and non-Cuban, it also allows writers as readers to participate in an international community. Although there were complaints, especially regarding

the embargo, that access to certain types of literature was still difficult, the writers I knew had been and were continuing to even more fluidly participate in the global literary field. Through these networks, their entrance into a global, literary network, even just as readers, created a new sense of connection, or what Hernandez Reguant has termed the 'consciousness of connectedness' (Hernandez Reguant 2009: 16).

The ways of thinking of movement and exchange in terms of networks is not at all new to Caribbean anthropology (Hannerz 1989; Olwig 2007; Cubero 2017; Wardle 2018b). The Caribbean is often talked about as an area that 'has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center' (Beníitez-Rojo 1992:4), united by a shared history (Mintz 1996) and defined by fluid mobility to and from the islands, whether forced or elected, creating a culture of 'creolization' made up of interacting networks. As Wardle writes:

> Recognising that locality for the creolising individual is both a function of the networks they are part of as well as of their capacity to synthesise these imaginatively, allowed room easily enough for an awareness that this same individual is in essence a cosmopolitan. Culture was no longer a locale unto which the individual fitted as an objective component, it had instead become a field of meaning that the individual actively localises vis-à-vis and via their own movements' (Wardle 2018b: 458).

The ease of 'the moving back and forth between countries [which] is an ordinary fact of life' (Carnegie 2002:73) in the Caribbean, does not apply as obviously to Cuba due the borders both ideologically and physically constructed during the Revolution. However, not all Caribbean citizens move. As Wardle (1999) points out in his writing on imagination and narration of 'adventure', 'Perhaps to an even greater degree it was people who did not leave the island for whom openness to imaginative and actual mobility took autobiographical shape in the trope of migration as "adventure"' (2018: 459). While the idea of the Cuba as 'de-territorialised' is still difficult to imagine, I hope to show with this thesis and with the examples above, that the increase in movement of ideas, goods and even people during the Special Period, especially with the recent introduction of public WIFI zones, has allowed the people I worked with to participate in the 'creative synthesis of globality' (Wardle 2018: 458), which, I hope to argue, presented itself in the notion of 'the writer'.

Unlike certain research on the new openness of the Special Period, which seems to reify the 'us' versus 'them' binary, while dissolving the separation between Cuba and *afuera* – consider Behar (1996) and her analysis of the the state of '*insilio*' (1996:144-145) – I will argue that the writers I worked with embodied both a sense of being a writer in local and global terms. The idea of 'the writer' presented to me by my interlocutors in Havana, was one that spoke of the '"fuzziness" of local cultural categories' (Wardle 2018: 459). There was an idea of what a writer was meant to be within Cuba, the idea of the socialist writer as one who works a job during the day and writes during the evenings to create something of spiritual value for the social betterment of the community as a whole. Yet, the idea of what it meant to be a writer, the idea of what constituted 'good literature', the means of deciding what held publishable value were shaped and constantly renegotiated by an interaction of what is distinctly Cuban and what is of *afuera*. As Cubero writes about the island of Culebra, the writers I worked with were 'simultaneously isolated and connected, mobile and insular' (Cubero 2017: 3) because 'mobility informs insularity and insularity informs mobility (*ibid*: xvii). For the writers I worked with, it was a struggle to reconcile being a writer in Cuba and being a Cuban writer in the global literary network.

Studying writers and readers

To return to the question of religion, how was the experience of my research in Havana so at odds with the experience of my colleague? Not only was my experience with religion different than hers, so was the central importance of race. In the groups I worked with there were only three regular members who would be considered mulato, a term for mixed race commonly used in Cuba, although one of my interlocutors said he preferred the term 'mestizo' (mixed). There was one member who came occasionally who would have been considered 'negro' (black) and a number of participants who were clearly 'blancos' (white) or 'gallegos' (of Spanish decent), and some who fell at other points on the complicated Cuban racial spectrum (e.g. 'moreno', 'indigeno', 'chino', 'arabe' to name a few). When I spoke with people about race and especially the racial mixture of the group, it was often shrugged off. In speaking with a mixed-race interlocutor, who was taking some classes

in anthropology, he acknowledged the racial disparity of the group, but did not have anything further to say, besides 'Yo lo se' [I know it]. I asked multiple times to different group members, but the conversation always ended quickly. Discussions of race did not come up unless I asked, which made me feel like I was forcing an unnatural discussion. For this reason, I acknowledge that the discussion of race in this thesis is not representative of the current discussion of race in Cuba, which was (and is) very active in academic circles (see for instance Zurbano 2013, 2015).

This leads me to another topic I found very difficult to discuss with the people I worked with: class. Class in Cuba is a very strange topic because, as with race, the Revolution officially dissolved these differences. That said, the people I worked with, the non-religious or spiritual, were also all mostly of a professional class. The profession most represented in the science fiction and fantasy workshop was scientist, mostly of the hard sciences, although there were a large number of information technology specialists in both groups and two sociologists. There were also a high proportion of teachers, instructors and professors. There was a lawyer, a mathematician, a digital marketing specialist (a very new position) and an accountant. There were also a few students who were training to be a civil servant, a psychologist, and an IT specialist. Of those group, there were several writers who also considered themselves musicians, some of whom were also fine artists and at least one who was interested in acting. That said, there were also about three people who were not employed officially by the government, working temporary jobs where they could find them outside the state. Of the latter group, all were *frikis* (rockers).

Class becomes interesting because while these people were mostly 'professionals', it did not necessarily mean that they had access to more money or an easier quality of life. Instead, who is often regarded as the examples of new wealth in the growing income inequality or who represents the growing wealthy class, is often the people who are not part of the formal government economy, but rather taxi drivers who own their own cars, home owners who rent rooms or even apartments, and people running small business of a wide variety, all termed *cuentapropistas* (independent small business owners), yet this category can also be the poorest. To make it more complicated, the professional class, as in those who are employed by the government in positions that require advanced degrees and training, and those who work in the new, private economy cannot be separated into two groups. Often tourists seem to arrive in Cuba ready to meet mythical taxi driver who stopped

working as a doctor because the money was better. In the case of the writers I worked with, one of the people ended his education with secondary school and managed his family's apartment rental to make money on the private market, while a scientist with a doctorate lived with his wife and children in the home of his parents. Class then, in regard to the group I worked with, could be seen as access to education and participation in government careers. Class is reproduced. One of my interlocutors, a scientist, works daily with his son on his math and science homework in order to ensure he gains access to the math and science academy in Havana. Those with good government positions with high levels of education are maintaining a certain class system by fostering a respect for education in their children and have the resources to help them succeed. While there may be different types of higher classes forming, there is certainly a clear group of people who are being left out of the system. Oftentimes, the divide between those who have (money, education or position) and those who do not have (one or any of the listed) falls on a racial line.

The people I worked with in the writing groups were predominantly not Afro-Cuban, highly educated, mostly from Havana and most often held positions in government institutions, departments and companies. That did not guarantee, however, that their lives were easy. Most of them worked hard for little pay and practiced writing around the edges of their working life and family commitments. Yet the lack of racial diversity in the groups, the level of education and the lack of participation in traditional religious communities does speak to some sort of social distinction, although not necessarily economic or literary. This distinction falls in line with revolutionary ideals and even Guevara's understanding of the *hombre nuevo* [new man], although I do not think this was their intention. Serra (2007), in writing about revolutionary conceptions of the 'new man' in Cuban novels speaks of Padura Fuentes. She notes that his protagonist:

> looks at the unfulfilled promises of what was supposed to be a bright future, and the sense of frustration of a generation of people who devoted their young years to the effort of building a revolutionary nation and now find themselves still struggling... they feel that incarnating the New Man has not brought promised benefits' (Serra 2007: 167-168).

The people I worked with were not all members of Padura's (or his protagonists's) generation, most were much younger and shaped by very different circumstances, as discussed above. However, their

idea of what writing could be in Cuba and their vision of a future for Cuban writers is tied up in many ways with a disillusionment of the revolutionary promises and lived realities.

Writers in Cuba play a central part in the revolutionary ethos and mythos. Ensuring the public was literate was foundational to the cultural policy of the government in the early revolution (Smorkaloff 1997:74), the obvious example of this being the National Campaign for Reading, commonly referred to as the Literacy Campaign, in which the government decreased illiteracy from twenty-three percent to three percent in one year (Kapcia 2011)[5]. UNESCO statistics have claimed that during 1961, the year of the campaign, over 250,000 Cuban teachers worked to make over 700,000 people in country literate (Bhola 1984). The government also used a national system of *talleres* from the 1960s onwards, as a way to encourage participation in literary culture for both readers and writers, as discussed more in the next chapter. Nehru (2012) claims that after the slow economic recovery of the 1990s, it is believed that about 45,000 Cubans participated in *talleres* around the country (180). Producing writers and readers has been and continues to be an interest of the government. As Castro says in his 'Words to the Intellectuals' speech: 'The National Printing House is already a reality, and with the new organizational forms which it is going to take, *it also is a conquest of the Revolution which will contribute greatly to the training of the people'* (Castro 1961, italics mine). It is his belief that 'The Revolution and the Revolutionary Government have a duty to have a highly qualified agency which stimulates, encourages, develops, and orients -- yes, orients -- that creative spirit' (Castro 1961). While the history of *ser escritor* or 'being a writer' in Cuba has changed often with regard to censorship, accessibility to publishing resources (i.e. ink, paper and electricity) and with the government's relationship to its creative groups, something I discuss in much greater depth in Chapter One, the foundational role of writers to the goals of the Revolution for the betterment of society has not changed. Yet while there are a number of studies of the literature produced by Cubans, specifically recently of the 'generation zero' group of writers during the early Special Period (see Whitfield 2008, Buckwalter-Arias 2010; Maguire 2017), there has been no anthropological work on literary communities. Kumaraswami and Kapcia (2012) provided detailed research on literary

[5] In his 1960 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Fidel Castro said: "The most important military fortresses today house tens of thousands of students, and, in the coming year, our people intend to fight the great battle against illiteracy, with the ambitious goal of teaching every single inhabitant of the country to read and write in one year" (Castro 1960)

culture, specifically from the angle of political interactions and a further monograph from Kumaraswami that looks specifically at the function of literature in terms of social well-being. Tinajero (2010) provided a historical overview, including some ethnographic moments, of the common practice for cigar factories to hire readers (*lectores)* who would read classic texts of world fiction aloud as work continued. As mentioned earlier, anthropologists have conducted fieldwork with other arts sectors in Cuba.

While anthropologist have been interested in fiction writing and writing fiction, there has been only a small amount of research with a primary focus on readers and writers – discounting for this moment the anthropologist as either – where the interest is primarily on the act of sharing stories and poems through text, whether that is read silently or aloud, or shared through books, electronic books, journals or magazines. Interests in the broadly termed 'literary' in the discipline have often stemmed from the 'writing cultures' movement (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Crapazano 1986; Rosaldo 1986; Geertz 1988) in the 1980s, which has led to continued discussions on representation, on the value of ethnographic writing (Ingold 2017) and the role of the anthropologist as author (Behar 1996; Pandian and McLean 2017). Anthropologists have explored different literary forms, writing ethnographic hybrids with a number of different literary styles: memoirs (Jackson 2006), novels (Stoller 1999), poems (Kusserow 2013; McLean 2017), and short stories (Hecht 2017). There has been renewed interest in the style, craft and form as it applies to ethnography (Waterson and Vesperi 2011; Narayan 2012) all of which has forced an examination of the difference between 'the real' and 'the true' as a line of division between fiction and science (Fassin 2014). Further work in Literary Anthropology has looked at novels and fiction as comparative sources for ethnography or even the place in which to conduct analysis with Rapport's (1994) work on EM Forester in relation to his own fieldwork in Yorkshire, Handler and Segal's (1999) analysis of kinship and community in the work of Jane Austen and Asad's (1990) examination of the politicalized role of the anthropological reader in relation to the reader of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. In the above-mentioned works, fiction or poetry has been treated as a writing tool for the academic or a textual source, but the communities who partake in engaged practice with the fiction or poetry have not been studied.

Anthropologists have traditionally been interested in oral storytelling and folklore, a subject in the discipline which has been re-examined recently in an attempt to reclassify what constitutes as

'literary' (Boyarin 1993; Barber 2007). Often the interest in these types of 'story' productions have been to better understand cosmologies, mythologies or social structure, rather than seen as having a literary value, something critiqued in Barber's (2007) work reclassifying how we should define and understand texts. Sociologists have examined tastes, habits and attitudes as they manifest in genre distinctions (Driscoll 2014) and in the publishing marketplace (Thompson 2010). There are beautifully written historical accounts of reading (see Manguel 1996) and extensive examinations of historical development of publishing field, books and mass readerships (see Newlyn 2000; Darnton 2009, Thompson 2011; Joshi 2018).

The two groups of writers I worked in Havana felt that, for different reasons, they were marginal to the publication process. Espacio Abierto struggled to find enough publishing resources and appreciation for their genre of interest: science fiction and fantasy. Grupo Ariete found that their tastes and literary interests did not meet those of the people in charge of publishing plans and editorial houses. They felt, as young writers, there was no space to mature into the publishing system. Moreover, as mentioned above, both groups were connected as readers to the markets and tastes of the global literary community and had ideas of what being a writer, specifically in a market-based publishing system, looked like in relationship to books and readers. Writers in Cuba, even those who had published, found it difficult to imagine their work encountering readers. A provocation of this thesis then is to question how writers become writers in a literary system without readers.

Recent anthropological studies have focused on readers (see Radway 1991; Reed 2011) or writers (Olszewska 2015; Schielke & Saad Shehata 2016; Sabeti 2017; Wulff 2017; Brandel 2016) of fiction and poetry, but this type of research is still quite rare. Olszewska (2015), who studies a poetry workshop at a cultural centre for Afghan refugees in Iran, places the practice of writing, specifically the stylistic choices, as enmeshed in larger questions of nationality, marginality and tradition. Wulff (2017) conducts her work with well-known, globally recognizable authors in Ireland, providing an interesting contrast to those of us who work with lesser known and unpublished writers in very regional settings. Sabeti (2017) and Brandel (2016) both study, like me, workshops and writing groups, looking not only at the lives of the writers and poets they work with, but also on the collaborative aspects of these communities, the process of writing, of editing, and sharing. Brandel (forthcoming) looks also at the small, independent bookstores in Berlin provoking questions about the communities

created around and through the book, something that is especially interesting as a contrast to the way the book as an object is considered in Cuba. Schielke and Saad Shehata (2016), who work with writers in Egypt, ask a number of interesting questions in their working paper. Like the generation of people I worked with, their interlocutors were navigating a divide between the international and local. They write: 'the aesthetic line of division between experimental, globally connected styles and socially controversial themes on the one hand, and the commitment to a conservative selection of 20th century canon of national and world literature...is linked with multiple lines of division that could be depicted along an axis of conservative and avant-garde milieus' (*ibid*: 5). While the science fiction and fantasy authors I worked with were interested in the aesthetics of the genre outside of Cuba, their main concern, like that of Ariete, had more to do with the assignation of literary value. Without a traditional market-based publishing system, without the input of the consumer or independent critics, who has the power to say what constitutes fiction and poetry of value?

It is the specific context, the non-market-based publishing system, that makes the study of writers in Cuba very different. In fact, much of what is taken for granted when studying literary communities in capitalist market economies seems turned on its head or at least on its side when dealing with the unique relationship of revolutionary Cuba to creative writing and art in general. As mentioned above, the writers I knew created networks of writers – like the 'entanglements' Sabeti (2017) speaks about in relation to the cooperative process she witnessed between writers in her group of study – both with the writers in their workshops and also with writers (personally known or known solely through their work) from outside of Cuba. As noted above, my interlocutors have been isolated from world markets, as hard copies of foreign books are hard to encounter, but the relatively new access to the internet has provided a wealth of literary resources for the people I knew. One writer, who was given access to the internet at her work, contacted other writers internationally through the forum-based website Reddit. Another writer spoke of reading the first Harry Potter book from digital files of photographs of every single page. For the writers I worked with, there was an awareness, as described in relationship to other types of goods above (Pertierra 2011; Ryer 2017), that literature from outside of Cuba was, by the mere fact it did not come from Cuba, better. My argument in this thesis is that the preferential value given to the literature from *afuera* was due to the fact that

it interacted with a specific type of reader, belonging to the foreign, industrialised, publishing market, who was an absent presence in the lives of the writers in Cuba.

For this thesis, I worked with writers. In different moments they played different roles. In the *talleres*, writers would also be audience members, critics and editors. The writers were also readers, as I hope to have shown, of works of fiction and poetry (among other things) from Cuba and from around the world. Yet the writers I worked with tied their idea of 'being a writer' to ideas of reception. In working with writers, I was inadvertently working with their idea of readers as well. Their 'readers' were very present in discussions of style and craft, yet they acknowledged, and complained of, an absence of readers regularly. In understanding what it meant to be a writer among the people I worked with, it was necessary to also formulate an understanding of their readers in all the variations. Reader-response theory provided literary scholars with a number of different types of readers who partake in the creation of literature and cemented the idea that in order for a work to be complete, a reader must participate in the creation of literary meaning whether that reader is 'real' or a figment of the author's imagination (see Barthes 1977; Iser 1972; Eco 1979). Iser (1972) spoke of an intended or 'implied' readers and Eco (1979) of a 'model reader'. Both are creations of the author, the author's ideal recipient, who they consider when writing the text. This reader is fixed by the text, through the way in which the writers write, i.e. how the writer expresses himself to meet the expectations of their idea of their audience. Barthes (1977), in contrast, is interested in dissolving the input of the author – whether through a critical analysis of authorial intention or authorial biography – in the criticism of literary works. The reader he discusses is the reader that actually encounters the text, and this reader, due to their feelings, ideas and impressions of the text, is the locus of creation of meaning. The writers I worked with maintained a notion of a reader for whom they wrote (Eco's model reader) but felt incomplete as writers without the experience of their work meeting an actual reader as well. This was not necessarily in order to complete the meaning of their text, but rather to give meaning to the idea of writer.

The different constructions of reader (and writer) in literary criticism sparked interesting questions about the critical value of studying literary cultures, moving beyond just textual analysis, to begin to understand how literary meaning is created. This included sociological studies of reading habits (Radway 1991) and examinations of the physical transmission of texts through the creation,

publication, distribution and consumption of books (Darnton 1982). In anthropology, Reed (2011) looks at the 'the mediatory role of literature in drawing out specific sets of transformations, effects or flows of causation' (26) in his work with members of the Henry Williamson Society. For his interlocutors, the book becomes 'the mediating object' through which 'Henry colonises the mind of the reader' (2011: 31). In my research, it seemed as if writers I worked with acknowledged the role of the book in creating this relationship with readers. They saw the book as an instantiation not only of their work, but of themselves as well, and a way for them to connect with a reader, who through that connection reifies their status as writer. Yet I have to stress that this was a particular type of reader, one that was encountered through the medium of the book, which permitted a certain space for the reader's creative elaboration. In Cuba, no such distance existed. In a literary culture based on oral publication, the writers were too obvious as agents and creators of meaning. They, not their texts, were meeting their readers. Even published writers had trouble encountering readers. As I discuss in Chapter Two, within Cuba, the lack of a clear marketplace for books, issues of distribution and a lack of marketing or publicity, left published writers unsure if there books, regardless of the materiality, ever met with readers. What I hope to show through the progression of this thesis, from historical situation and quotidian experience of being a writer through encountering ideas, writing, discussions on craft, editing and sharing publicly, is that the sense of marginality for the writers I worked with comes not from being a writer, but rather from the inability to break free from the power structures, whether capitalist or socialist, that dictate what a writers is, what good literature looks like, and what deserves an audience.

Methodology

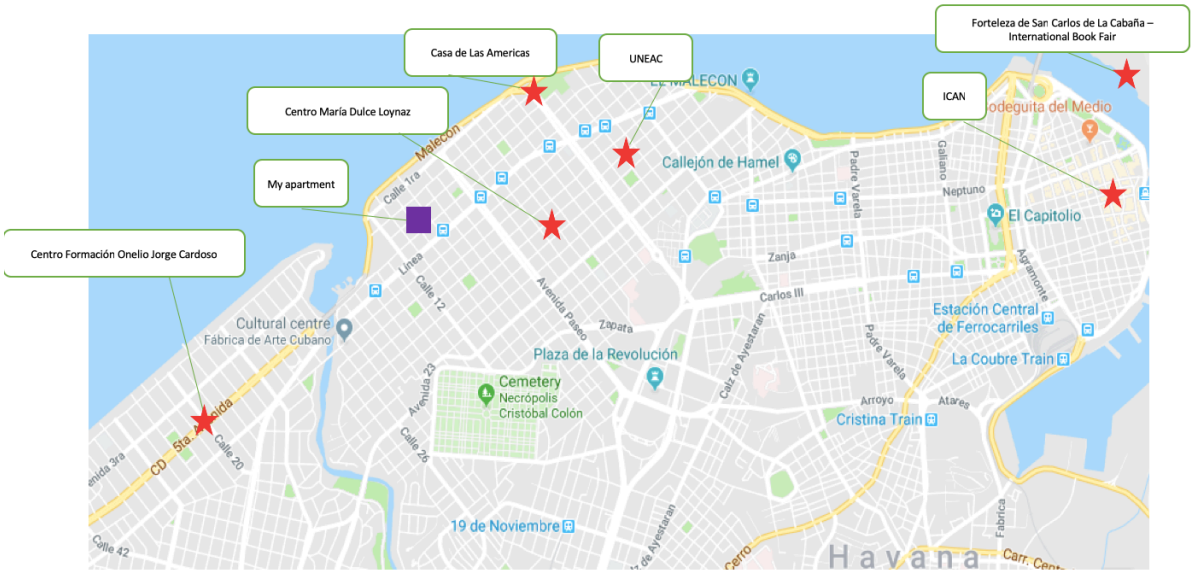

Figure 0.2: Map of Havana, Map from Google Maps

My research was in Havana (population estimates are just above two million), the capital and largest city in Cuba, where I worked for 13 months (July 2015 through July 2016). My research visa limited me to work within the city, although I heard there were budding literary centres outside the capital, specifically in Santa Clara, the capital city of the province of Villa Clara. In Havana, I lived in the neighbourhood of Vedado, which is one of the central, waterfront areas, bordered by Centro Havana to the east, the Malecón and the Strait of Florida to the north, and the Rio Alemendares and Miramar to the East. To the south, the neighbourhood meets with the new centre of government and a number of affiliated buildings, like the National Library, the Plaza de la Revolución, and the National Theatre, to name a few. Vedado was a very good base from which to start investigating systems of literary production in Cuba. I went to events, critical paper presentation and readings at the Casa de las Americas, an institute and publishing house started by Haydee Santamaria after the revolution with the goal of keeping Cuba connected to the writings of Latin America and more recently the Caribbean as well. I also attended meetings at Centro Dulce María Loynaz, the main space dedicated to the promotion of published books in Havana and connected to the National Institute of the Book. Also located in Vedado was the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC), a place I visited often over the course of the year. Not only were the monthly *peñas literarias* of Grupo Ariete held there, but so were many other events organized

through the writers' department of the union. Often my work brought me to Habana Vieja, where I would attend *peñas* (literary salons) at events organised by the National Institute of the Book and to attend writing classes at Centro Hispanoamericano del Cultura. The main focus of my work, however, was in Miramar at the Centro de Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso, a prestigious writing school that ran a year-long course on narrative and from which almost all of my interlocutors graduated.

I was first introduced to the Centro Onelio (or *Onelio* as it was known among both groups) through contacts at the Instituto Cubano del Antropología, the institute that sponsored my research visa. It was through the Centro Onelio that I met most of my interlocutors, specifically through a teacher at the school who participated as an advisor to both Espacio Abierto and Grupo Ariete. The Centro Onelio is located in a building that, during my time in Cuba, seemed to be quickly deteriorating. Upon a return trip in 2018, I learned that the building had been shut for renovations and that the school was temporarily meeting at UNEAC. Both the *talleres* I worked with met in the Centro Onelio. Espacio Abierto met biweekly on Sundays in the downstairs teaching room and Grupo Ariete met weekly on Saturdays in either an informal classroom downstairs or in an office upstairs. The building also became a reserve space used by both *talleres* for other types of literary meetings, like the annual conference held by Espacio Abierto on science fiction and fantasy. More than that though, it was the headquarters in a way for the alumni of the centre still living in Havana to meet, use some computers, and meet with their instructors. During the year I was there, alumni from the previous year participated in shows put on by current students and recruited students and new graduates into the *talleres*. While I was unable to sit in to the class sessions for current students, at the request of the Centro's management, the place was important in my research.

Every weekend I would attend the meetings of these two groups and after the meetings, both groups would socialise in the Centro or in a nearby park where bottles of rum, juice and cola would be purchased and where we would sit around talking about anything from new songs to books, to my life in the UK and current events. We would often bring a guitar and stay until the sun started setting. Occasionally, as a group, we would go on outings after the meetings, whether that was to other literary events, like the one that opened this thesis, or to a swimming spot at a place where the

concrete breakwater had been damaged enough to allow easy access to the ocean. My time during the week was often spent with these same writers in their homes or at other events around the city.

I lived on my own but met a community of non-writer friends through a café at the far end of Vedado, near *el túnel*, the tunnel that passes under the Rio Alemendares. Living on my own was something that I found to be both a blessing and a curse. I had privacy and space to write but felt like I was missing out on the intimacy of Cuban family life. On the other hand, I learned how to shop, cook and clean like Cubans through a close relationship with one family in particular, who taught me how to get by. I spent hours, if not a day at a time, trying to find ingredients that would last me for the week. By the time I left Cuba, I knew which markets sold the best vegetables, the best pork and where to find the best, freshly-made juices. I learned how to buy eggs after months of never knowing where to find them. I learned how to clean using limited water, with a stick and *frazada* (cloth rag in Cuba) and the days on which I could wash clothes. I paid my utility bills in the government *empresa* if I missed the collector when he came to the neighbourhood and learned to greedily listen for the cries from the streets of vendors selling hard to find goods (potatoes or eggs mostly) or homemade treats like *tamales*. I felt like I understood '*no es fácil*' because I was always shocked at how hard it felt and how much time it took to get the daily done, and I still had it easier as my funding stipend was paid in GBP into my account every month. This, along with my weekly attendance at the official meetings of each group and the unofficial social gathering accounted for the crux of my participant observation. While in the meetings, I often had ideas for stories and started to write a few, though I never shared my creative writing with either group due to discomfort with writing fiction in Spanish. This is something I really wish I did and hope, upon returning, to come prepared with something to share. I did, in contrast, present an academic paper in Spanish at the Instituto Cubano de Antropología and hope to continue my ties with the institution.

When I asked Grupo Ariete if I could record group meetings during one of the gatherings, a member of Grupo Ariete retorted, 'this is Cuba. We're used it'. She suggested that I hold my recorder in the air, at the start of the meeting, to indicate I was recording, but nobody ever seemed bothered or phased by the recorder's existence. Both groups I worked with allowed me to record the group sessions and all informal interviews were recorded. This combined with my fieldnotes provide capsules of moments to which I was able to return while writing this thesis. I have used them to

construct narrative events throughout this thesis, where I provide exact quotations of group discussions and descriptions of setting. Most of the photographs in this thesis are mine, but a few were given to me my other participants. Where I use their photographs, I will say so in the figure notes. Many of the writers I worked with gave me permissions to reproduce their stories. All stories in this thesis, including the appendices, have been reproduced with permission of the authors. Due to my use of stories, I have not been able to make anonymous all of my interlocutors. Instead, I have anonymised those who are not identifiable through their relationship to their work. All people who have not been anonymised have given their approval to be so.

While the participant observation was focused on the two *talleres literarios,* Espacio Abierto and Grupo Ariete, and with singular members from each group I came to know well, I filled in a number of gaps, especially about relationships to characters, story, craft and encountering ideas, through informal interviews. Alongside the members of the groups, I also conducted informal interviews with interlocutors who I met around the object of the book: an editor, two 'bibliophiles' and a teacher (non-writer). I also attended two public meetings where members of the National Institute of the Book gave illuminating talks about the state of Cuban publishing. I was once allowed access to the National Library, during which time I was able to read and take notes on histories of Cuba that spoke directly about the development of *talleres*, *peñas* and *tertulias*, and I collected a number of books, newspapers, magazine, independent 'zines', programs and announcements from the different literary locations I engaged with around the city.

My interaction with the writers and my interest in the topic of writers in general is coloured by my past working in the book publishing industry in New York City, where I worked for an editorial house and a literary agency for three years. My decision to leave publishing in 2010 and to return to academic work was directly to do with the economic situation after the recession of 2008, which left the industry in the US heavily fearful of any risky investments in new, literary fiction. There was a dependence on new social media to prove saleability, like blogs and Twitter, and the 'platform' of new authors was as, if not more, important than the quality of their story or the style of their writing. As an industry that had always seemed to walk a fine line between art and market, the tides seemed to be shifting toward popularity over content. While I often tempered the way I spoke about the book market in New York, the closer I became with my interlocutors the more honest I was about what life

was like for writers *afuera*. While this did not deter their idea of what it could be like outside, it did mean that we had many conversations about politics and markets that have come to shape the trajectory of the thesis.

Chapter Summary

This thesis is split into four parts. The first part understands the situation in which the writers I worked with come to understand being a writer in Cuba. Chapter One looks at the discussion Grupo Ariete had as they wrote a declaration of principles. Their analysis of writers in revolutionary Cuba and where they stand in relation to previous genres, styles and movements is contrasted to the literary history of the country. Chapter Two provides a description of the publishing system in Havana and situates the writers in relationship to that that structure, to the city of Havana, and how they negotiate being a writer outside of, what they term, everyday life. The goal of Part One is to contextualise the idea of 'writer' historically and socially, and to provide an understanding of some of the external factors that shape the idea of writer in Cuba.

Part Two is interested in the relationship between the writers and their work, specifically in terms of the movement from idea to text. This section looks at the way my interlocutors practice being writers when they are creating works. Chapter Three looks at the act of invention, specifically by looking at material examples and at discussions about the distinction between world and word. Chapter Four is focused on the relationship between the writer and their production. In this part, I hope to highlight that 'writing', as seen as manipulation of words to construe ideas, seems in some ways a deficient term to describe the creative process as my interlocutors see writing as a means of animation and even translation. The act of writing is only the final step and one that seems to blur the line between that which is of the author and that which exists outside, whether that is character, words or syntax. Part Two is focused on praxis.

Part Three looks at presentation and how the writers conceive of a public. In this section, I am interested in contrasting the freedom of creation, discussed in Part Two, with the perspectival change toward the idea of writing when work encounters an audience. Chapter Five provides a

detailed look at the practice of cooperation in the *talleres*. In this chapter, I am specifically interested in the act of 'co-creativity' and how sharing and listening to stories can impact both the sharer and the listener. In Chapter Six, I look at another venue of literary presentation, the *peña* or salon, in which the 'finished'[6] work of the writers encounters a small public audience[7]. Of particular interest in this chapter is the way in which ideas of experimentation heralded in private discussions of writing seems to be supplanted by an interest in entertainment. In Part Three, I am interested in showing how ideas of writing and being a writer seemed impacted by the idea of reception.

Continuing the theme of reception, Part Four looks at publishing in Cuba, specifically the challenges and critiques discussed by the writers I worked with. In Chapter Seven, I am concentrating on the product of the book and the way that object works in relation to the ideology of Cuban publishing and also as an example, in the opinions of the writers I knew, of how publishing fails. I show how the book is not so simply a vessel of textual distribution, but rather an instantiation of the writer, the quality of their work and a means through which they become 'real' writers. Chapter Eight continues the critique framed in the previous chapter of publishing in Cuba and extends that to a discussion of art and value in the Revolution and in the global book market. Bringing together the previous chapters, this chapter hopes to show that discussions of a publishing future in Cuba are in a way a belief that the revolutionary goal for writing is unfulfilled. This chapter hopes to question who has the ability to say what has value and that it is this question which continues to challenge the idea the idea of what a writer is.

[6] Finished is not a permanent state of the work, but rather a term in relation to public sharing of it.

[7] Public in this case means people outside the *taller* and people the writers do not know personally.

PART ONE: THE WRITER AND THE CONTEXT

CHAPTER ONE

'The Useful Arsenal': The Historical Relevance of Grupo Ariete's *Taller* and their Declaration of Principles

'Who are we?
'Where do we want to go?
'What do we have in common?
'What makes us different from previous groups?
'What do we want to say?'
- Grupo Ariete

The two writers' groups I worked with participate in a lineage of literary workshops and salons in the history of Cuba. Different, unique historical situations from the colonial period through the history of the Revolution, led to the development of networks of writers, where written work would be shared orally to a gathered group. Of the two groups I worked with, Espacio Abierto was well established in Havana by the time I joined the biweekly meetings. Grupo Ariete, though, was only just over a year old. When I joined the workshop, they were still considering who they were as a group and what they wanted to gain from their collective work. These questions seemed to centre on concepts of '*generación*' or generation and it seemed that discussions of a future were invariably tied to their understanding of a relationship to the past, especially the literary past of different groups of writers and workshops.

The questions above were prompts Raúl, the advisor to Grupo Ariete, provided to the group in order for the members to start thinking about the construction of a declaration of principles[8].

[8] Espacio Abierto did not have a declaration of principles. This is due to the fact that the group was united around a genre, science fiction and fantasy, so their need to state why they existed was less necessary.

The idea to create one came from the publisher of the group's first anthology. Upon hearing this, the group felt that the request seemed outdated, harkening back to a specific literary past of political declarations made by writers' groups pre-Revolution and by subsequent generations of writers, specifically those of the Special Period. The political statement they made seemed the most apolitical thing a writers' group could demand: access to publishing and access to readers. Yet it was a very important demand for their understanding of what it means to be a writer and spoke directly to a critique of the publishing system. To differentiate their goals and their statement, they found themselves contrasting their desire for publishing in Cuba with those political statements of the previous generations, specifically the generations of writers from the 1990s and the 2000s. In the context of their usage, 'generation' has nothing to do with the age of participants, but rather to the political leanings and writing ethos, making the term 'generation' in this case perhaps more synonymous with 'school'.

This thesis is about sets of relationships that form what it means *to be a writer* at this particular moment in Cuba for the people I worked with. This chapter examines the relationship the writers I worked with have toward revolutionary Cuba's literary history and thereby their relationship to the politics of writing. In order to understand how the writers I worked with conceive of being 'a writer', it is essential to understand where they see themselves in relation to those that came before and to the politics of the system that fosters what it means to be a good writer or a writer with value. To provide this background, I begin with a discussion Grupo Ariete had as they were trying to jointly write their declaration[9]. Not only does the small section of discussion highlighted look at the idea of future and past and how they understand their relationship to previous generations of writers, it also provokes a question about the relationship between politics and writing that I hope to return to at the end of the thesis. After examining the creation of their declaration, I provide a historical overview of workshops and literary groups in Cuban history, highlighting why it is so important, for both the writers involved in Grupo Ariete and the publishers of their anthology, to locate the group among the groups of Cuban writers who came before and how they fit into the structure of the literary system.

[9] The Declaration of Principles of Grupo Ariete can be found in its original Spanish and with my English translation in Appendix A of this thesis.

La Tormenta de Ideas / The storm of ideas[10]

The Saturday morning classes at the Centro de Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso ('Onelio' hereafter) had just ended and the two instructors were milling about in their office upstairs. I arrived on time for the *taller* meeting for Grupo Ariete, which meant that I arrived well before most other group members. I made my way upstairs to speak with Raúl, the advisor of Grupo Ariete, and his co-instructor at the Onelio, Sergio. Both Raúl and Sergio were well-established writers in Cuba, coming to prominence in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, what seemed like a far-removed generation from the writers I had come to know, yet both had a new book out the year I arrived[11]. Slowly groups members arrived, and we all took seats where we could: on the random chairs brought in from other places, on the floor and leaning on the wall by the windows and the doors. There were twelve members here today. One man, Leo, sprawled out on the floor in front of the doors to the Juliet balcony. He used his bag as a pillow and closed his eyes, listening, but engaging only sporadically. Today was the day that Grupo Ariete had set aside to think about the answers to the questions posed the week before and to try and decide who they were as a group.

[10] In this transcription, there are some absences in the dialogue because, as I hope to note, the conversation in the room vacillated between one person speaking and everyone trying to comment. During those eruptions, I have tried to follow the strand of the discussion here, but due to multiple conversations occurring at the same time and people speaking over each other, some parts are lost to the noise of the room..

[11] Raúl's book that year was a reprinting of his well-regarded debut novel. The idea of reprinting seemed rare, but he had updated the new book to include a glossary of terms and updated artwork.

Figure 1:1: Inside a *taller*

The discussion started slowly as Cristina brought a book with her that she wanted to share with respect to the questions. Sitting next to Maya, who was taking notes on the discussion, she began reading aloud from one of the final pages in Osdany Morales's book *Papyrus* (2013). She highlighted a passage that spoke about the 'oneiric space' (*ibid*:140) of literature and how without direct references to the time and place, certain descriptions fuzzily hint at when and where the story exists. He writes that not only does a particular historical situation drive the writing, but so too does it speak to the depth of understanding on the part of the reader. She stopped with the line: 'No doubt we are in the presence of an identity discourse, which sadly brings us closer to that rubric that we avoided in the beginning: generation' (*ibid*:140).

People reacted very differently to her reading and the room enlivened as side discussions started and different people spoke more loudly in order to try to address the group as a whole. Most people seemed to be confused as Morales's reference is to the story itself and, through that, the act of communication between the writer and the reader. Some pointed out that they are interested, for now, in discussing where they as writers stand in relation to history, not the stories they write. Cristina defended herself. She knew that, but she was pointing out a relationship to history that they have conveyed through their stories, even unintentionally. Their stories indicated their

relationship to the past – both to the history of Cuba, but also to the literary models – through their choice of subject matter and style. This spoke of their 'generation' as much as the time or epoch of their writing.

Everyone reacted, and disagreements started in one corner of the room. '*Permiso*, excuse me, one by one, please' yelled Susy exasperated. 'How can we hear anything when everyone is sharing at the same time.' One of the men by the window got a cigarette out to smoke but could not find a lighter. He nudged Leo with his foot. Leo shook his head. He made eye contact with someone across the room, pointing to his cigarette, but the friend across the room shrugged. The man with the cigarette hissed quietly to Marlon, in front of him, but just out of reach, and a pack of matches went flying across the room.

The conversation provoked by Cristina's reading not only focused the discussion on 'generation' and relationship to the past, but incited a conversation about the author's, Morales's, generation of writers: Generation Year Zero. Generation Year Zero is a group of writers who began publishing in the 2000s. As Maguire (2017) notes, 'the reduction of the date 2000 to zero in their moniker suggests not so much a new chapter in Cuban literature as a completely new beginning' (326). As the members go on to discuss, Generation Year Zero's erasure of the past is not something Ariete is interested in and the group positions Generation Year Zero as a foil, not only because they were the generation that came before, but because their aims are starkly different. As Lena told me later in a conversation about the literary history of Cuba: 'Generation Zero wrote trying to deny our past... trying to experience a new kind of literature, a disruption to the form of literature that came before'.

Susy, trying to refocus the discussion, proposed a comment on Cristina's passage. 'Let's see, *señores*, we are all in agreement then. One way we are different than Generation Zero is our reverence to the past', said Cristina.

'But reverence can mean different things... I use bad words. I write about sexual themes...' started Marlon.

'That's entirely different...' interrupted Cristina. 'Those are provocations. I am talking about reverence to the past. I think it comes from our present situation. The writers of the 60s, 70s and

80s had an idea of a future… A promise of a future and they wrote about that. The writers of the 90s and 2000s no longer had that and it is visible in their relationship to the past'.

'It isn't a return to the past though…' interrupted Raúl. Maya, Cristina and Susy started speaking simultaneously, giving the impression they would never say it was a return to the past. Susy's voice won out: 'Yes, yes, but I think we are rescuing the past, rescuing… If you look at our stories there are so many references… to films, music, stories… I don't know. From whichever epoch, from whatever time, the music of the 70s.'

'Look, those are different things' answered Cristina.

'No, no it's not a different thing' said Susy, highlighting Cristina's previous point about subject matter as support. Another man hoped to light a cigarette and nodded to the man who did last. The matches flew across the room again.

Cristina started: 'There is no promise of future, but we do still express an idealisation of the past.'

'Yes, this! Maya, write that down', agreed Susy. Maya did not start writing. 'Write that sentence…' Maya kept staring ahead. Susy let it go.

'Idealisation?' questioned Camilo.

Cristina answered, 'yes, idealisation. We are not limited by the past, but, for example, your story is an idealisation of the past, the story you put…'

Visibly irritated she is referencing his story, he responded: 'Idealisation, I don't know, Cristina, that's, let see…'

Maya interrupted him in agreement, 'It's too strong. We aren't talking here of idealisation.'

Camilo continued, obviously more confident with the support. 'We take the past, as in we write it as we want to see it. We are transforming it in our way.'

Maya agreed: 'This is also how I see it.'

Camilo continued: 'Take my story as an example then. Yes, yes, in my story I speak about the past, about people that could have been. But basically, I wanted to give my general point of view about a finished event that involved a cast of characters. So it was set in the past because the context is real. But it was my imagination of those events. So I am not idealizing the past. I am just talking about a totally different image of what the past was… what it could have been'.

Cristina backed down. 'The better idea is that we don't use the word "idealisation" then.'

Camilo returned, 'Reconstruction?' pausing to look around the room. 'No, is that too idealistic? I don't know.'

'Idealisation doesn't bother me...' said Marlon. Once again, the matches flew among the less talkative cigarette smokers skirting the room.

'Me either', agreed Cristina.

'But we give it a determined, critical look', said Maya.

'We are critical, as in we are not praising the past, but we're critical without rancour. Although, I'm not saying it is an objective vision', said Cristina. 'It is a relationship with the past that is much healthier.'

Speaking over the side conversations, Maya eventually gained the attention of the room and directed the discussion of the past back to their relationship with other generation, but not necessarily with the political position of Generation Year Zero. She started, 'It reminds me of a writer who came to the Book Fair the year it was dedicated to Uruguay. The woman, this Uruguayan author, talked about the state of contemporary literature [in Uruguay]. And one thing that she said about the most recent generation of writers was this: that they were not so much interested in denying the impact of their [literary] founding fathers [*padres fundadores*], but they're upset that their founding fathers tell them that it is the generations that came before that maintains the quality [of literature in Uruguay], they have the network, they are the people established by the market... But even so she listens to her [literary] adoptive parents, like Mario Levrero and others. The ones who are more or less celebrated...' Maya highlighted their political stance; they are not interested in neglecting the Cuban writers who have influenced their work and style, but they will dispute a stagnant system that dictates that good quality literature can only look a certain way.

'We are doing the same thing!' agreed Susy excitedly.

Camilo continued while the group is concentrated: 'We accept the past, we reconstruct it, take it as a subject... what else?

Marlon interjected: 'Revisit?'

'We maintain the past of our present', said Susy. Side conversations started again. Everyone was speaking loudly. Susy, is sitting next to me and I ask her if this type of discussion is normal, forgetting that the Spanish cognate, *discusión*, actually means something more aggressive, like a debate. She laughed, stressing it is not a debate, just a conversation, and that this is how Cubans speak. The room was getting smoky, so Marlon went to open the sun-facing window's shutters. Leo, on the floor, complained that the sun was in his eyes. Maya and Cristina tried to gain everyone's attention.

Cristina trying to sum up the discussion said: 'This is the reason that the past doesn't need to be analysed. We don't have to be really critical or really humble about the past because of our idea of the future,' she stated tentatively. 'Or rather, the relationship to the future is a relationship to the past. The future itself in our country is not... or it's a nervous thing. You don't know what is going to happen. The majority of the people who plan a future in our country are just trying to solve an individual problem. But the generations before us [of the 90s and Generation Year Zero of the 2000s] had a rejection of the future that we don't have, that's why we don't have a rejection of the past'.

Everyone seemed to agree. Their relationship to previous generations and movements of writers was one of appreciation, not overly deferential, but not critical, which is in stark contrast to the generation of writers of the 1990s and 2000s. In their estimation it seemed to stem from an acceptance of an unknown future, which allows a different perspective on the past. Yet, this acceptance of the past does not mean blind devotion to their literary forefathers who seem to dictate contemporarily what constitutes good literature.

This was one of the main points covered in relation to their declaration, but my recording and the meeting continued for over another hour and a half, this making up only the first twenty minutes. Much of the recording was a cacophony of voices and side conversations, but other clear sections included discussions of the group name, the type of writing they aim to create, and what their ultimate goal is for the group, for their writing and for publishing in Cuba. At about minute seventy-five, Raúl instituted a hand-raising policy, which helped to centre the group and keep the discussion to only just over two hours. The passion, though, and the depth of discussion about self-

identification within Cuban literary history spoke to the importance of the topics of past, future and static hierarchies of publishing.

They positioned the group against the generation of writers of the 1990s – referred to as the '*neo-origenes*' movement academically (Buckwalter-Arias 2010) and 'the writers of the diaspora' by my interlocutors[12] -- and those of the Generation Year Zero[13]. The *neo-origenismo* movement, who also evoked a position in relation to previous groups, specifically the *Orígenes*[14] group, set their 'oppositional energies...against Cuba's socialist government rather than against the trans-Atlantic industry (Buckwalter-Arias 2010: 9). Similarly, as Orlanda Luis Pardo Lazo writes in the introduction to Generation Year Zero's first joint Spanish/English anthology published in the United States: 'No one knows what will happen tomorrow ... Let's even be cynical: It doesn't much matter what happens... This spontaneous nihilism ... prioritizes the histrionic over the historic' (Pardo Lazo 2014: 11-12). Grupo Ariete sets itself up against this rejection of the socialist future and thereby against the rejection of the socialist past, which is very bold statement in their position as the newest generation of Special Period writers.

Two Saturdays later, Maya brought a draft of the declaration to a meeting. As printing resources are limited, Raúl recommended that two versions of the declaration be printed for the editing process. Maya held one copy and the other was given to Lena, a member and an editor. We spent three hours editing the document of three pages in length. The declaration was read aloud once, and then, throughout the editing process, sections were read aloud over again. Individual words were poured over, tenses examined, and phrases analysed for their meaning as well as their artistry. Beginning the discussion, Lena stressed that the work of Maya had been '*super bueno*' [very good], but there was a feeling of sensitivity on everyone's part, as the document belonged to the group, with ideas and input from everyone, but was written by Maya alone. As people worked

[12] This include writers like Pedro Juan Guitierrez, Zoé Valdes and Daína Chaviano

[13] Generation Year Zero includes writers like Raúl Flores, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, Osdany Morales, Erick Mota, Michel Encinosa Fú,

[14] *Orígenes* was the name of the literary magazine started in 1944 by José Lezama Lima y José Rodríguez Feo and included those writers and other famous Cuban writers like Cintio Vitier and Virgilio Piñera.

through the document, occasionally group members remembered that Maya had authored it, taking time to smile at her and, in one instance, pat her leg.

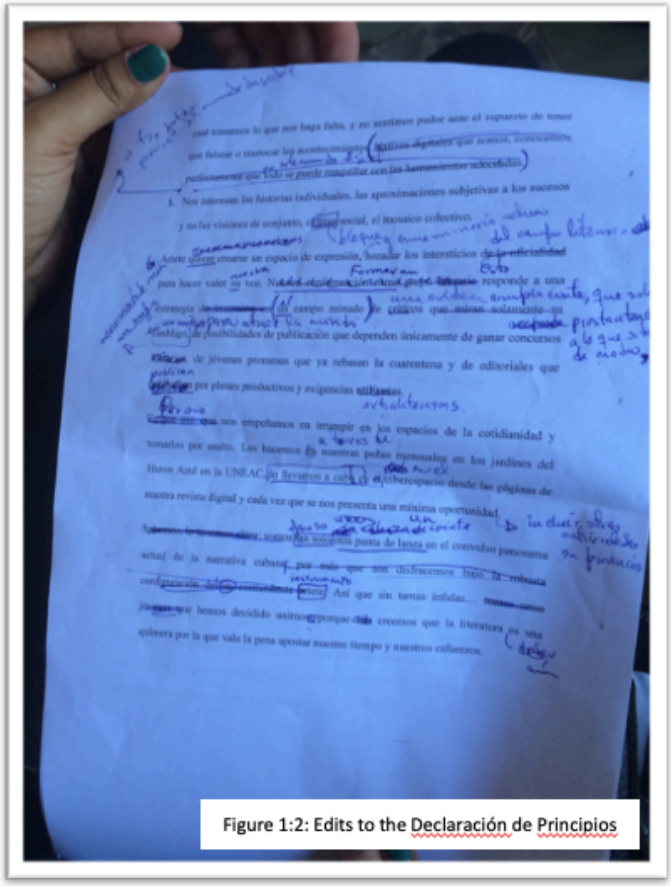

Figure 1:2: Edits to the Declaración de Principios

The level of criticism seemed pedantic and was not usual for the type of attention given to people's stories. One particular discussion about which version of *hacer*, the verb meaning 'to do or to make', took about ten minutes. As I wrote in my field notes:

> Lena had, in a moment of silent edits, changed the simple past tense used by Maya '*hizo*' to the imperfect subjunctive of '*hiciera*'. But the group was convinced that it should not be '*hiciera*'. Someone suggested that they instead use the conditional form, '*haría*'. And someone then suggested the simple imperfect, '*hacía*'. I cannot stress how lost I felt in this moment. English grammar being nowhere near as complicated as Spanish grammar, the possibility that the situation could call for one of four different verb conjugations, all worthy of extensive discussion and defence, seems and seemed in the moment completely crazy, verging on comical. The argument to stay away from the simple past ('*hizo*') and the simple imperfect ('*hacía*') was that the sentence in question did not apply to all of the texts all of the time, or as Raúl said, "*no todos los textos -- algunos textos -- no todo el tiempo...* " [not all of the text – some of the texts – not all the time].

Yet as you can see from the final version, Raúl's opinion did not stand. The phrasing was returned to Maya's original of *hizo* or 'made'. This edit again speaks to their desire to make a hard statement about their relationship to the past, perhaps risking generalisations, as Raúl pointed out, but making clear claims.

People argued about the word 'idea' and whether it was too empty of signification, trying out a number of more specific words in its place. There was a discussion on the characterisation of the group's name *ariete* and whether the second to last sentence, invoking the name, should be punchier: shorter, to the point and more powerful. Figure 1.2 is a photograph of the final page after the meeting, which included edits and edits of edits, that Maya took home to finalise.

I spoke with Maya months later about the whole process. 'It seems a little old fashioned,' she said. She continued:

> But it's a good idea according to Raúl. As we were answering a prompt from a publisher, we wanted Raúl to help us define it [the group's mission]... It didn't seem right to define it. So Raúl tells us about groups that preceded us, from Generation Zero, and the writers of the diaspora, about other groups who wrote a declaration of principles and why they wanted it. I think more and more that we need it. At the time they [Generation Zero] had almost no visibility and they made these kinds of statements to gain it. Paradoxically, it is our visibility, with the publication of our anthology, that asks for the declaration. Our declaration of principles speaks of the fortune we have had literarily up to this moment. But it was still an outdated act as a written statement. Yes, it was useful in the sense that it made us look at ourselves with an outside perspective, with a view of estrangement. And see then what it was we wanted, what it was we were looking for... As much as each one of us had it clear more or less in our heads, to sit down and write, Raúl assured us, in front of each other and to say why we are conforming as a group, as a 'battering ram'[15]... it was an exercise in self-definition. What things are characteristic, what do we have in common and what differentiates us from other generations? Not all literary groups have the opportunity to achieve this kind of clarity with regard to the place they occupy. Of course it is only one approximation, a figment we are making about ourselves, which is very dangerous to try and define as it is happening. And well we did that kind of storm of ideas (*tormenta de ideas*) exercise. It was a little effusive... But ... Raúl told me when he was young, his literary group did not know they were going to go on to be a historical one, they did not think about the stability of their group or how it would appear in the history of literature. So maybe that will be us too. *Ojalá* (hopefully), we have that kind of success.

[15] Battering ram is the meaning of *ariete* in English.

The process of writing the declaration allowed Grupo Ariete to gain 'clarity with regard to the place they occupy' in contemporary Cuban literary society, but also in literary history. Returning to what was discussed in the introduction regarding the reconstruction of socialist, historical time (see Miller 2003 for example), the writers I worked with seemed to position themselves both as writers and Cubans in a significantly different relationship to the future and past than the generation of writers who had come just before (Generation Year Zero and the *neo-orígenes* or diaspora writers) and those of the 20th Century. They accepted the uncertainty of the future and appreciated the legacy of the past, a relationship deemed 'healthier' by Cristina, but centred their declaration and the creation of their *taller* around the need for change. Reflexively then, the act of even writing a declaration provokes interesting questions about how to effect change. Maya calls writing of a declaration an 'outdated act', yet it was a request made in order to be published. In order to disrupt the publishing system in Cuba, they effectively needed to play by the rules they were trying to break.

This seemingly contradictory desire – of squirming away from the staleness of old literary traditions, yet still, in the end participating, even wanting to join the history of those that came before – is emblematic of these two *talleres* specifically, and speaks to something about the fundamental problem faced by these writers as they attempt to change the revolutionary literary arena: if you cannot change the system from outside of it, how do you change from within without losing your goals of disruption through co-optation. The literary *taller* – and previous, historical iterations of literary meetings – in Cuba is a prime example of this. What started as a pre-revolutionary, anti-colonial, anti-imperial act (sharing literature against colonial or republican government wishes) became an emblem of institutional, revolutionary cultural policy. The tool of pre-revolutionary literary resistance is now used as an entrance into the dominant, government-controlled, literary system as I will show through an analysis of the development of the *taller* in Cuban history.

Colonial *tertulias* to revolutionary *talleres*

In this section, I write about the development of the *talleres literarios* or literary workshops. In so doing, I also speak about two other forms of literary meetings that preceded it: the *tertulia,* or literary circle, and the *peña literaria,* or literary salon. While *peñas* still exist, *tertulias*, which are similar to the *talleres*, have a more formal connotation and are referential to a historical, intellectual movement, similar to the phrase 'literary salon' in English. *Talleres* have their origin in the Revolution, appearing 'organically during the transformations of the 1960s, as young writers, inspired by new importance given to culture, established their own groups as a way of participating in the revolutionary process, improving on their writing and promoting literature locally' (Nehru 2012:179). Over the course of the next forty years, they would be made into a formal movement by the government, another way of democratising art, and would be extended to include other art forms, not only literature. The government creation of art workshops throughout the country was called the *aficionados* (amateurs) movement (ibid:179).

Talleres literarios appeared throughout the island, growing in popularity throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Smorkaloff 1997:140). In the 1990s, however, with the fall of the USSR and the Special Period economic hardship in Cuba, the *talleres literarios* lost momentum. Recently, the literary workshop has been reinvigorated, albeit in a slightly different iteration. Where in the early parts of the Revolution, the 1970s and 1980s, the literary workshops were environments dedicated only to amateurs and acted, in some ways, as a gateway to the publishing infrastructure (Ibid:140), the new iteration of *talleres* is significantly more open: not institutionally affiliated and not government controlled. Where there were previously application processes and rules that governed who could participate in the *aficionados* movement, the contemporary literary workshops usually welcome new participants who are interested in joining, as did both Espacio Abierto and Grupo Ariete. The groups I participated in were a mix of published authors and unpublished authors, although often those that were published or well published became advisors, sharing less frequently and at times guiding the discussion. What unites the *tertulias, peñas* and *talleres literatios* is the reason for their creation. In the absence of easy access to a publishing mechanism, these spaces

offered writers a way to reach an audience, share their literature and disseminate their work orally. Historically, however, these spaces were not free of politics.

Considered today to have been the golden age of literature in Cuba, 'the [literary] events of the nineteenth century were crucial in determining the direction the economy would take and in bringing out the characteristics that would come to define national culture in the struggle against Spain' (Smorkaloff 1997:1-2). As Smorkaloff continues, 'Most of Cuba's novelists of the period were abolitionists and separatists, if not advocates of outright independence' (*ibid*:1-2). While a number of now highly regarded writers produced influential work during the 19th Century in Havana, most of these writers were not given access to the means of publication as their views went against colonial regimes of power. Villaverde, author of one of the earliest and most influential Cuban novels, *Cecilia Valdés*, writes in his *Autobiografias* that he asked an influential English abolitionist to take his manuscript with him when he returned to England. Villaverde writes, 'I had come of course to understand that it was useless to attempt to publish anything in the novelistic genre in Cuba; it would be like writing a novel only to preserve it in manuscript form for a long, long time' (Villaverde, quoted in Smorkaloff 1997:2). The Spanish colonial government was aware of the power of literature and the need to control the production and dissemination of texts (Rama 1996). As counter-colonial culture began to develop, the trend in colonial Cuba was opposite to the literacy movements gaining momentum at that time in Europe (Smorkaloff 1997:4). Only about a third of the population was literate and the colonial government kept that in place by limiting the growth of primary education (*ibid*:4). In short, the 'battle for Cuban culture was waged among the literate minority, a minority distributed between the literati, the university and the sugar elite' (*ibid*:5).

While printing presses did exist during the colonial period and during the Republic, they were used most often for small print runs of textbooks and some larger print runs for magazines and newspapers both for distribution within Cuba and around the Spanish-speaking world (Smorkaloff 1997; Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012). Writers who wished to publish their fiction, poetry or prose, would work through a patronage system, which allowed people to publish their work with the small, private printers on-credit, a system that was kept in place through the 1950s (Smorkaloff 1997: 10). If interested writers did not have money or committed buyers to front the

publishing costs, they were unable to print anything. Instead, they developed other means of publication, primarily the *tertulia.*

The first *tertulia,* developed by Domingo del Monte, began in 1834 in Matanzas, the capital city of the province next to Havana, but moved to Havana in 1836 (*Diccionario de la Literatura Cubana* 1984:1011). The *Diccionario de la Literatura Cubana*, provides the following description of the events:

> During the tertulia there was a constant exchange of ideas, and participants gave their opinions about the cultural development of Europe and the Americas. The object of the discussion was the criticism of the written compositions, in prose and verse, of the attendees. Del Monte started beneficial discussions, read parts of new books that he had received and spoke about vices of education and about the need for slave reforms, as the idea of abolitionism was important for the attendees (*ibid*:1012).

The original *tetulias* provided a space not only for writers to share their work, whether poetry or prose and receive critique, but was also a place to learn about the 'intellectual and artistic currents' from around Europe and North America (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012: 7). The connection between the literate Cubans and the outside world, whether through temporary emigration or via the *tertulias* themselves, continued both pre- and post-independence from Spain and shaped much of Cuban identity and literary culture (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012: 7).

Many of the tertulia attendees during the colonial period, including Del Monte were either forced to leave the country or elected to live abroad. The connection between those writers in exile and those literati on the island remained strong. As Smorkaloff stresses, 'It is important to bear in mind that until the end of the century, Cuban literary culture could not be openly manifested on the island and in fact had few direct legal channels to society. Many of the major journals and works of the intelligentsia were published in exile and circulated clandestinely though the *tertulias*' (1997:19). *Tertulias* provided not only a place for oral distribution of unpublishable material, but also a way to overcome the intellectual isolation of the highly controlled colonial apparatus. As more revolutionary and abolitionist tones became apparent in the voices of the intelligentsia, the Spanish government began banning books and periodicals and authorized a decree 'banning all gatherings, in workshops or other locales, for the purposes of reading and commenting on literary works and periodicals' (*ibid*:7).

While the writers combatted royal decrees that limited their ability to publish and gather to discuss literature, the most fundamental issue at stake for these writers was the 'lack of readers for literary works' (Smorkaloff 1997:9). Smorkaloff continues, 'Without universal education and the birth of a mass market for books, literature would not break out of the marginal, elite circle within which it was confined' (*ibid*:9). While many of the colonial Cuban writers, especially those who participated in the Del Monte *tertulia*, 'nurtured hopes of making some money as authors and editors', they instead often 'become teachers, journalists or lawyers, the traditional vocations of aspiring "men of letters"' (Smorkaloff 1997:7). After gaining independence from Spain, the situation for writers in Cuba did not change drastically.

Literature during the Republic

In 1898, with the help of the United States government, and after two wars, the Treaty of Paris was signed, granting Cuba freedom from Spain, while remaining under US control temporarily. While Cuba officially gained nationhood in 1902, the US invoked the Platt Amendment three times to intervene in domestic, Cuban politics between 1902 and 1959, both to protect government interests and to help US corporate interests on the island, backing authoritarian rulers like Machado, Cespedes, and Batista. While printing machinery, paper and materials were sent from the US and there were great craftsmen who could publish beautiful quality books, the print runs remained expensive and small, and authors were still engaged in the act of securing committed buyers to subsidize the cost of printing (Smorkaloff 1997: 27). This led bibliographer Peraza y Sarausa to claim that Cuba was full of things to publish but lacked the presses (ibid: 26). Once again, the writers in Cuba turned to literary groups and circles to publicize their written work and discuss the current situation for artists and writers on the island.

Writing of the period leading up to the Revolution, Kumaraswami and Kapcia write:

> 'Cuba's literary culture had long been based on this tradition [of *tertulias*], usually relying on the prestige bestowed by a well-known writer (effectively the group's mentor) or the on the funds and spaces provided by a moneyed patron. That had been true of the nineteenth-

> century *tertulia*s, and also, in the twentieth-century Republic, with Fernando Ortiz and the *Grupo Minorista'* (2012:7).

Tertulias played an important part, not only in the development of a Cuban literary culture, but also to advance revolutionary doctrine in opposition this time to the Cuban Republic and the consistent intervention by the United States of America. Grupo Minorista, started in 1923, was the most famous of the *tertulias* after Del Monte's in the nineteenth-century. It was a 'a nucleus of young, left-leaning intellectuals' (*Diccionario de la Literatura Cubana* 1984:393). They wrote a famous declaration of principles. In their declaration, Grupo Minorista famously wrote:

> Collectively, or individually, [the group's] true components have worked and work: by reviewing the false and worn-out values; by the vernacular art and, in general, by the new art in its diverse manifestations. For the introduction and vulgarization in Cuba of the latest doctrines, theoretical, artistic and scientific practices; for the reform of the public education and against the corrupt systems in opposition to the professorships; for university autonomy; for the economic independence of Cuba and against Yankee imperialism; against universal political dictatorships, in the world, in America, in Cuba; against the outrage of pseudo-democracy, against the farce of suffrage and for the effective participation of the people in the government; in favour of the improvement of the farmer, the settler and the worker in Cuba. For the cordiality and union of Latin America (*Diccionario de la Literatura Cubana* 1984:393).

The Declaration deals not only with question of artistry or artistic values, but also provides commentary on political issues of dire importance to these intellectuals. It is no surprise then, considering their critiques, that the upon taking power Castro's government heralded this declaration as an important influence.

For writers in the Republic, as before during the colonial period, their difficulty reaching a public readership was not only limited to direct state control of the publishing and printing infrastructure; the population of Cuba, as was the case pre-independence, was only about forty-seven percent literate by 1919 (Smorkaloff 1997:26). As Smorkaloff (1997) eloquently states, evoking the declaration of the Grupo Minorista, 'The history of Cuban literature in the Republic is, to a large degree, the history of the efforts of its creators to see their works in print. It is also the story of their attempts, on diverse fronts, to create conditions that would allow for the emergence of a

national literary movement' (28). Although there was not a huge reading public, 'literature and literary figures did enjoy considerable prestige among Cuba's educated and cultured classes, more than any other cultural form' (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012: 9). Literature 'had a social, political and national value beyond its aesthetic merit' (*ibid*: 9), something Fidel Castro acknowledge with his early actions towards increasing literacy and supporting cultural production.

Literary Resistance to Literary Revolution

'The Revolution cannot attempt to stifle art or culture when the development of art and culture is one of the goals and one of the basic objectives of the Revolution, precisely in order that art and culture will come to be a genuine patrimony of the people. And just as we have wanted a better life for the people in the material sphere, so do we also want a better life for the people in all spiritual spheres and a better life in the cultural sphere. And just as the Revolution is concerned with the development of the conditions and the forces which permit the satisfaction of all the material needs of the people, so do we also want to develop the conditions which will permit the satisfaction of all the cultural needs of the people.'
(Fidel Castro, 'Palabras a Los Intellectuales' 1961)

The Revolution changed the way writers interacted with their readers and their texts (Smorkaloff 1997:81). One goal of the Revolution was to educate the people to be participants both in the creation and appreciation of art and culture. In his 'Words to the Intellectuals', Castro laid out a number of points about how the government hopes to interact with the writers and artists of Cuba. The Revolution would provide materially for the cultural producers; cultural production would be tied to national identity; and while the government would not stand for counter-revolutionary art, it would accept art and writing from honest people who may, themselves, not be revolutionaries. Finally, he lays out the importance of art and culture for the *pueblo cubano* [the Cuban people], pointing to the Literacy Campaign and the movement to create schools, libraries, and cultural institutions throughout the country, not only in Havana or in other major cities. He says:

> Someone who believes himself to be an artist should think about the fact that many others, much better artists than he, may not have become artists... We are going to create the conditions that will permit every artistic, literary, scientific, or any other kind of talent to be

> developed... [and] will arouse artistic taste and cultural inclinations in adults.' (Fidel Castro, 'Palabras a Los Intellectuales' 1961)

While the ultimate goals of the Literacy Campaign of 1961 may have been a democratisation of art, for writers it also provided for something absent in colonial and Republic periods: readers and books. As Smorkaloff writes:

> In four years, two historical challenges were met: illiteracy was all but eradicated and scattered resources for book publishing were consolidated in the formation of the National Printing and Publishing Houses. Cultural Institutions, municipal libraries, writers' workshops and bookshops began springing up all over the island, reinforcing the literacy and post literacy campaigns (Smorkaloff 1997:81).

The Revolutionary agenda placed importance on 'culture' or specifically writing and the arts as a means of decolonising the Cuban nation. As Judith Weiss writes, it was seen 'as the only way to build a new and vital culture out of the ruins of the old, the legacy of colonial and neo-colonialist domination' (1977:14). The democratisation of literary culture was important to writers of the Revolution as a means of fighting 'self-perpetuating elitism' of the colonial literary culture (*ibid*:15).

In line with obvious socialist values, the government decided in 1967 to eliminate the 'imperialist notion of copyright' (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012:27), not only as a socialist statement and a move toward decolonisation, but also as a way to access (pirate) the expensive textbooks published outside of Cuba (Smorkaloff 1997:112-114). Of course, this made problematic the life of the writers, who were hoping to make a living by the income generated through book sales. In response, the government decided that the 'Revolution's duty was to provide for them, not by paying royalties for their production but by paying them to work within the cultural apparatus...in educational structure...in the media...or in the diplomatic service, as cultural attaches' (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012:27). In short, while writers may now have found a government that supported the production of their work and provided readers to engage with it, their ability to write had to be negotiated with other contributions to the revolutionary work model. To extend it to the not so absurd extreme, writers became good examples of Marx's communist contributors: they could 'do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the

morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner ... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic' (Marx 2004 [1932]: 53). In 1977, in order to meet world pressure, the government agreed to resume following international copyright law, which granted writers copyright protection, but still did not provide royalties (Smorkaloff 1997:115). Today, the publishers in Cuba do not demand copyright. If a writer publishes in Cuba no copyright is exchanged. Writers were free to sell their manuscripts internationally, even if they had already been published in Cuba.

In the Revolution, the new space for writers of fiction to publish changed the way in which *tertulias* and *peñas literarias* were used. Instead of hidden meetings, writers began to meet in public. The government, interested, as Castro claimed above, in making art available to all in terms of production and enjoyment, stressed the importance of amateur art, or a culture of *aficionados*, and literary workshops, which spread throughout the country. As Smorkaloff writes:

> The Cuban Revolution's literary workshops sprang from the historical tradition of the *tertulia*, although it should be pointed out that they no longer constituted an alternate, clandestine or underground channel for the dissemination of literary expression but existed at the very centre of the dynamic in which readers participate as social actors for whom literary activity is no longer distant and "other" (1997:137).

In 1974, there were about 70 *talleres* across the country with the number swelling over the next 15 years (*ibid*:140). These *talleres* produced not only a wealth of amateur writers, but also a foundation of interested readers (Kapcia and Kumaraswami, 2012:115). The government sponsored workshops were regulated for amateurs only, so no published authors could participate unless in a supervisory role and certainly no current member of UNEAC, National Union of Writer and Artists, could partake (Smorkaloff 1997:141). What the government formed was a network of literary workshops with the aim of getting the best talent from around the country published. The workshops were 'organized within secondary schools, pre-university programs, technical schools, factories, peasant organizations, military units, suburban or semi-urban neighbourhoods and sugar mills' (*ibid*:141). These municipal level workshops would send their best work to the literary workshops at the provincial level, and onwards up until the Ministry of Culture could put together an annual publication of the best work produced around the country in a volume called *Talleres Literarios* (*ibid*:141).

In connection with the development of writers and groups of *aficionado*s, in 1984, the government launched the National Campaign for Reading, which complemented the Literacy Campaign of 1961 and worked to encourage the Cuban people to engage with Cuban literary culture. However, with the fall of the USSR in 1991, and the serious economic crisis that followed, many of the Revolution's literary goals were paralyzed. Publishing stopped and when they did publish over the next few years, the resources were dedicated to textbook and educational publishing over trade. As Kumarawami and Kapcia write, the crisis of 1989-1994 'had a traumatic effect on the arts…the state could no longer guarantee to provide materially for Cuba's artists and writers, but the disappearance of transport, energy, paper, and other consumables left the artistic community *without a public*, *without physical spaces* and *without the necessary materials*' (2012:31, italics mine). It was an unintended reversal of the developments made for writers and readers at the start of the Revolution. It was only toward the late 1990s and early 2000s that the Cuban publishing industry was able to regroup (Smorkaloff 1997:152), but with some major changes. The publishing industry, as I will explore in later chapters, produces far less books and the literary workshops, which constituted a government-controlled network, became much more informal and localised (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012:31), although still incredibly popular.

The government co-optation of the *tertulia* into the *taller* system, kept all aspects of literary creation, from the workshops to publication, easily monitored by the government. While the 1960s-1980s may have been a time of increased publications and readership, there was still controversy. The *caso Padilla*, or Padilla affair, is one of the most obvious examples of government intervention and punishment of writers. Herberto Padilla, a well-known and respected poet who supported the Revolution initially, started writing and speaking out against the government. He was jailed for his opinions but released after many writers and intellectuals around the world supported his cause. Other examples include Gabriel Arenas who was persecuted for both his writing and sexual identification (Arenas 1992). In contrast, the Special Period's new austerity with regards to literary culture – with the decline in printing capabilities, the lack of resources to support the arts and the unofficial *taller* culture – also provided new, independent literary spaces. As Cuban author Leonardo Padura says in a 2013 article for the BBC website, 'In the 90s, paper, electricity and ink all disappeared, and Cuba stopped publishing books. For writers, that break with state institutions

created a space that soon filled with freedom' (Rainsford 2013). This thesis looks at the repercussions of that period and how the writers I worked with conceive of a literary culture with limited supply of books.

Conclusion: Grupo Ariete's Relationship to the Past

In their Declaration of Principles, Grupo Ariete write:

> Our creations look to the past without resentment or grudges. The history of our nation, whether distant or recent, is first and foremost a useful arsenal from which we take what we need, and we are not embarrassed to distort or disrupt events. Digital natives that we are, we know everything can be disguised with the right tools (Declaración de Principios).

In calling the group *Ariete* or 'battering ram', the group is highlighting the connection between the workshop and utility. The Declaration, along with other co-written works like the introduction to their first literary magazine, reiterate the connection between writing and the image of weapons. Alongside the group itself and the workshop, they write that the 'history of the nation' is an "arsenal". As it is for Grupo Ariete today, *talleres, peñas* and *tertulias* have been weapon for writers throughout Cuban colonial and post-colonial history. Yet, the workshop weapon has been used differently over the course of that period, as I hope to have shown. Before the Revolution, the *tertulia* and *peña literarias* were ways for writers to disseminate their work, often in secret and as a form of resistance against government power. During the Revolution, the *taller* was a government tool to 'democratise' the arts. In the Special Period, the *talleres* and *peñas* became independent and, depending on different accounts, some clandestine.

For the writers I worked with, though, their *taller* was a weapon for a different sort of political statement. They 'oppose the cynicism of previous generations, a more cautious irony, but equally incisive' (Declaración de Principios, Appendix A). Instead of rejecting the socialist past or future, they claim their place as a new, digitally savvy and connected generation of writers. They hope to use the *taller,* as stated in their Declaration of Principles, to disrupt the publishing system as it stands now in Cuba. As they write, they want to 'put together this literary project to begin to

demolish the closed doors of institutional inertia and the tedium of literary spaces without readers'. Ultimately, the *taller, tertulia* and *peña* have been the means through which any writer is able to claim their status of writer in a place where the book or reader has traditionally been absent. The political statement of Ariete's declaration is that, as with the generations of writers who have come before, they want to access the means to publishing. Yet unlike those generations, this criticism is not one levelled against the ideologies of the government, but rather the way those have been put into practice.

CHAPTER TWO

'The spaces of everyday life': The Cuban publishing system and writing around the margins of the daily

In the previous chapter, I wrote about the historical context of literary workshops in Cuba and the way in which one of the groups I worked with, Grupo Ariete, understood their position within that history. The development of the *taller* and idea of *aficionados* is one way in which the Revolution centres literature, literacy and the democratisation of art in the construction of Cuban nationality and culture. Yet, while the development of writers and readers was important to the revolutionary government, the publishing system could not pay writers to live by their earnings, while keeping the price of literature low enough to support Cuban readers. As such, the government provided positions, oftentimes affiliated with the creative arts, to those who were published. That changed, though, with the Special Period and the lack of government resources. Working different jobs, living with family members and navigating a city with little empty space, the writers I worked with spoke about wanting to bring their writing into '*los espacios de la cotidianidad*' [spaces of everyday life], something they feel unable to do due to how the Cuban publishing system works.

In this chapter, I am interested in documenting how the writers I worked with incorporated writing into their lives. Returning again to the idea that these writers conceived of what it means to be a writer through sets of relationships, in this chapter, I am interested in exploring the relationship of the writers to their communities. This chapter is not an examination of public writer in relation to an audience (something I address further in later chapters), but rather it is to provide an idea of how the writers I worked with exercised the praxis of writing in relation to the people they lived with, their jobs and the places they used for writing. In order to understand exactly how my interlocutors understand their value as writers, a goal of this thesis, it

is necessary to understand how they practically live as writers: the challenges they face to meet their writing needs and the places they go to share their literature. A claim of this chapter is that writing is forced into the margins of what the writers I worked with termed the '*cotidiana*' or the 'daily'. In order to present the complexity of what it means *to be a writer* in Havana in relation to the their texts, to their readers and audience, and to books, I begin here with an explanation of being a writer in the immediacy of *la vida cotidiana* or daily life.

Writers, readers and lack of space for connection: publishing in Cuba

One of the first non-workshop events I participated in with writers from both Espacio Abierto and Grupo Ariete was a *presentación del libro* or 'book launch'. I was told to meet for the launch at Parque Lennon, informally named so for the statue of John Lennon leisurely reclining on a park bench in one corner. The book launch was not at all what I had expected. Sitting alongside Lennon, on his bench, was the author, Raúl, and Yoss[16], who was there to introduce his friend's title and give a speech about the book and the author.

[16] Yoss is a very recognisable and prolific writer of science fiction and fantasy, as well as a member of a heavy metal rock band.

Fig. 2.1: John Lennon, Raúl and Yoss (left to right) at Raúl's book launch. Photo by Alejandro Rojas

Next to them, as seen in the Figure 2.1, were boxes of the book. Attendees included most members of both workshops and a few people who I did not know, but who seemed to be friends and *conocidos* [acquaintances] of Raúl, Yoss and other attendees. After Yoss finished his speech, Raúl thanked the attendees and began selling his book. No one from the publishing house was there and Raúl was managing the sales and the money alongside one other person, seen in the photograph bending over. He would sign a copy if the person wanted it signed and chat for a bit with people who approached him. After the presentation, whoever was remaining went to the government-run bar across the road, El Submarino Amarillo [The Yellow Submarine], for drinks as a member of Grupo Ariete played in a rock and roll cover band.

What was notable about the event to me was its informality and small attendance. Most of the people who came were members of the *talleres* that Raúl advised, and thereby many were students or ex-students and friends. The book was a reprint of Raúl's first book from the 1980s. It included new features, like a glossary of terms and illustrations completed by the author. The book was reprinted because it is considered a foundational text in the development of fantasy writing in

Cuba and the editor thought it would be interesting to publish it for a new generation of Cuban readers. People who attended the event were familiar with the book and with Raúl, not necessarily because of his writing but because of their relationship to him, as teacher or *taller* advisor. They were attending the event for him and buying the book to support him, posing with it while friends snapped pictures. Months later, in speaking about the event with Lena and her partner, both members of Grupo Ariete, she showed me her copy of the original book. The new version of the book was worse they said, showing me each copy and highlighting the feel of the paper and the cover. Books are not what they used to be, they lamented.

The *presentación* of this book then was one organised by the author, moderated by a friend

Fig. 2.2: Raúl signing copies of his book at his book launch. Photo by Alejandro Rojas

and attended by colleagues for whom the book was of very secondary interest. The publishing house had given the books to Raúl to sell on his own, something that I learned was becoming more and more commonplace for the writers outside the select few who occupy a position of prestige and are deemed important by the Instituto Cubano del Libro (ICL) or the Ministry of Culture. Alexi, another writer of fantasy and a two-time national prize-winning author, noted that his second book never appeared in any bookstores as far as he could tell. Upon investigation, his editor found boxes

of them in a warehouse and he bought all of them, distributing and selling them on his own. If the function of the book is to transport the story from writer to reader, particularly an unknown reader, the situation in Cuba for the writers I worked with is one of a failure of the idea of the book, which seems to limit the literary spaces for writers and readers.[17]

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There are around 130 publishing houses in Cuba today (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012; 195), but most all of those resources are dedicated to non-trade publishing. Most books published are academic texts, which are required for the basic education of the *pueblo cubano* [the Cuban people]. After academic texts, the government invests in books with 'utility' as one writer told me. They print biographies of revolutionaries and histories of the Revolution, as well as cookbooks, self-help books, advice books and dictionaries. As the majority of resources are dedicated to these utilitarian titles, most fiction writers are vying for a small number of publishing spots in any given year. The only science fiction and fantasy imprint in the country, for example, is allowed about twelve books per year. This is not dependent on demand at all, and rather on a pre-conceived allocation of resources controlled by the ICL and the Ministry of Culture. Young writers or new writers vie to win national and regional prizes that offer, as the award, a chance for publication. Otherwise, typical to most publishing systems around the world, they attempt to submit their work to publishers without much success, unless of course, they have contacts in the publishing houses.[18]

[17] The informal event described above was neither the rule nor the exception when it comes to *precentaciones de los libros*. I have attended other launches at institutional centres, like the Dulce María Loynaz Centre or in the Plaza de Armas, sites managed by the Instituto Cubano del Libro (ICL), where the writer was given a podium, audience members given chairs, and the book signing run by a representative of the ICL or the publishing house. In contrast, some books whose authors are not at all connected and unable to organise their own launch, may have nothing at all.

[18] I should note that recently there are new channels for publication abroad. Some writers, like Padura Fuentes and Yoss, for example, have deals to publish internationally in almost all book markets, while the writers I worked with are now receiving interest from Spanish and Mexican publishers. During one *taller* of Grupo Ariete, a Spanish publisher from Seville was recruiting submissions. The example contract which he provided during the meeting was, compared to typical trade contracts in the United States, predatory, with poor royalty rates and the requirement of exchange of world rights in all medias with little or no advance offered. The writers I spoke with were excited to see their work published abroad and were not concerned about their lack of compensation.

Having contacts does not guarantee publication, though. Lena tells a story about submitting a book of poems to a regional publisher – smaller and easier to get published with than the larger, national houses in Havana – through her father, a well-published writer. While they returned her manuscript with wonderful comments and positive reviews, they told her that there was no room in this year's production plan for that type of book: poetry. As Lena pointed out in our discussion, the publishing houses are held to strict plans that limit the scope of their freedom to decide what gets published. The annual plan or publishing strategy is decided outside of or above the level of individual editors. As Kumaraswami and Kapcia (2012) write:

> Within publishing houses, the annual plan is the basis of all strategy and decisions. Including details of all proposed books – prices, costs, print-runs – this is the formal responsibility of an advisory board (*consejo asesor*), which, consisting of high-profile writers and intellectuals, meets annually to monitor the old plan and agree the next one (197).

This puts the majority power for making the decision about what sort of fiction and nonfiction is published in Cuba in the hands of small majority of intellectuals.

If a writer is lucky enough to get an agreement to publish, they never sign over copyright because the government does not demand copyright due to revolutionary ideology, as discussed in the last chapter. They do not receive royalties, but do receive a flat fee upon being accepted for publication. The fee, I was told, was 500MN (about 20CUC/USD). Yet, there can be some differences depending on who you are and how your manuscript was accepted. For instance, some of the prizes offer higher amounts in prize money. I was also told that the print runs for each book were limited to a maximum of 1000 books, although there can be less, and prices were directly dependent on the resources put into the book, *i.e.* the number of pages, amount of ink *etc*. For instance, a 200-page book may cost 12MN and a 400-page book, 24MN. According to Kumaraswami and Kapcia (2012), however, the advisory board would determine these details. The difference in information can be put down to a much direr economic situation even over the course of five or six years. As they note regarding the downturn in publishing post-1993, 'one logical outcome is the greater tendency toward small-print runs and greater delays for most books, while another… is the need to prioritise some authors and some books' (*ibid*: 205).

Ideally, published books launch annually during Havana's International Book Fair. Yet due to delays in publishing oftentimes this is not possible. A number of my interlocutors spoke about their books not only not arriving on time, but even not arriving in the same calendar year as promised. Once a book is published there is little to no marketing or publicity. Some prominent intellectuals or even some well-known authors, like Yoss for instance, will receive an official *presentación del libro* where an announcement for the event will be circulated in the newspapers or on television, but marketing on that scale is rare. Instead, the print run is distributed among bookstores around the country and to libraries. The government owns all the bookstores and libraries, as well as the publishers, printers and distributors. According to a contact in the ICL, the libraries are given an annual budget to buy what books they want, but the bookstores have no control over which books they receive, the number of copies and, of course, no ability to set price to match demand. In fact, there is no communication in reverse as booksellers maintain minimal records regarding sales. As the booksellers sell or do not sell copies of specific books, the publishers and ICL remain unaware of what has become popular or what has remained on the shelves. Kumaraswami and Kapcia (2012) speak of this as 'disarticulation'. They write:

> 'The disarticulation refers to a complaint common among those in the book circuit: the lack of a direct link between publishers and booksellers. Hence, although publishers and selected sellers do occasionally collaborate in one-off studies of book sales and demand, there is no systematic link between those deciding on prices and print-runs and those selling to the public' (ibid: 201-202).

The disarticulation, however, does not end with the booksellers. Due to limited publicity and marketing, if any at all, readers often have no idea what books are being published. Even if they knew of a specific author and book to look out for, readers can never be sure in which bookstore it will be for sale. There is no communication from the ICL, the publishers and the booksellers to the readers.

Sales information in bookstores is written in ledger systems where the booksellers record the price and quantity of books sold. On a monthly basis, these figures are reported to the ICL in order for them to gather income data (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2012: 202). Yet, while booksellers

may note what titles are sold, it is not required and certainly not reported. Readers, who may love certain books and be completely disinterested in others, play no role in determining what books will be published in the future. In that sense, there is also a disarticulation working in the opposite direction between readers and the publishing hierarchy, something which is very active in market-driven book economies. As the government controls every aspect of the publishing circuit, from editors through to booksellers, including cost, price and print run, and the revolutionary goal of publishing is one of cultural education, the lack of sales figures for individual titles – while perhaps shocking at first – is completely in line with policy. The interest of the government is to get books of cultural value to the *pueblo Cubano* [Cuban people] and there is no interest in market value of these titles. Books will sit on shelves until they are sold, immediately or through discount, or they will stay there indefinitely. The scaled cost-to-price ratio and the wide distribution of limited print runs implies the interest is to break even, where possible, not to profit. While booksellers 'know very well which books are "best-sellers" and which are "non-sellers"' (*ibid*: 202), no one is interested in this information centrally, and '[t]herefore, there is no market mechanism built into the system at all' (*ibid*: 202).

In Grupo Ariete's Declaration of Principles, they write:

> 'Our conformation as a literary group responds to a strategy of insertion in a field undermined by critics who look only at their navel, of publication possibilities that depend solely on winning literary contests, of promising youth who already overrun the quarantine and of publishing houses that publish for production plans and utilitarian demands. That is why we *strive to break into the spaces of everyday life* and take them by assault' (Appendix A, italics mine).

They want to disrupt the institutional space of publishing of which they currently work outside. In so doing, they will be able to 'break into' the quotidian, the spaces of everyday life, with which, up to this point, they are in constant negotiation. The idea of the everyday, *la cotidianidad*, is emic. Unlike the anthropological turn toward the study of the everyday (see Gardiner 2000), I am not interested in examining their everyday experiences from my perspective, but rather I am interested in examining the way they feel and speak about their writing as being is outside of the quotidian. In this sense, the quotidian is their category, not mine. The Cuban category of *la cotidianidad* manifests not only in the good – in the case of writers, the notion that through their

work they could be a part of readers' everyday – but also in the bad. As Pertierra (2011) notes, life where she conducted fieldwork 'is quite literally seen as a daily battle (*una lucha*)' (12). It is unending participation in *las colas* [the queues]. It is the difficulty to find food or gasoline for a broken motorcycle that took months to fix. It is water shortages, electricity outages and mandatory fumigations. As Pertierra notes, she is:

> struck by the peripheral status that public life and public work seemed to hold in the activities and consciousness of [her] neighbors. The average Cuban resident characterized his or her quality of life with reference not to universities, hospitals, museums and workplaces, but rather with reference to more localized and less institutional spaces (12).

The writers I work with not only speak about the normal struggle in quotidian space, but about how their writing seems even marginal to that. As writers receive a flat fee for their accepted manuscripts and receive no royalties, even writers published multiple times find full-time employment in other areas. Yet it is not this alone that affects their idea of writer as marginal. Their work of writing is challenged in their community, at home and within the family. As Maya, a member of Grupo Ariete tells me, 'literature is an act of communication' and as such, they do not only want to bring their writing into their *cotidianidad*, but into the everyday of their imagined readers, their friends, their family members and their neighbours. In everyday spaces, the writers I worked with struggle to be 'writers'. In this chapter, I am interested in sketching out the spaces in which writers can act as writers in Cuba.

Inscribed spaces of writing

She sat at the front of the room nervously preparing for her first poetry reading at the Centro de Formación Literario Onelio Jorge Cardoso ('*el Onelio*'). The room was full of students from the far provinces, who come for twice-yearly, intensive sessions of their course on narrative fiction writing. The same program was run weekly on Saturdays for students from the three provinces within commutable distance to the city: Habana, Mayabeque and Artemisa. This night, called 'Tertulisima', an invented word roughly translated as 'super salon-like', was an event for the

students from the provinces to meet students from the capital and for them to share their work as a large group.[19]

Before reading aloud, she introduced her poem and herself. 'I live in a little bit of a difficult place... with the hospital, the dance clubs, the neighbours... a *real* infestation', which solicited a roll of laughter from around the room. 'My poem is about my home. It's called "Roof"'. She started to read. Her poem was about her roof as a place of escape from the chaos of her home and the city below, but also of imagination, a perch from which to reflect. While this poet was not from Havana, her writing expresses experiences described to me by the poets and writers I worked with about their 'home' life. They all describe their struggle with the space of the city and of their homes with regard to places to write.

The use of roofs and of balconies in Havana is something that has been written about by academics, fiction writers and poets alike (see Piñera 1963; Gutiérrez 1998; Álvarez-Tabío Albo 2011 for example). Walking around the city at twilight, after dinner, I would regularly see people gather in whatever high outdoor space they have to watch the actions of the street below. The outdoor spaces—like a rooftop or balcony, if you are lucky, or the pavement in front of the house—translates in some sense to a continued living quarter, cooler at night than the inside of the house and an extra space to escape the oftentimes cramped living conditions of many Habaneros. There is a sense of solitude outside that a busy, small family apartment cannot provide. The lack of space in the densely populated city inverted the ideas of 'public' and 'private', 'inside' and 'out'.[20] The meaning or use of space is constantly in contention, being redefined or inscribed as necessary or as Birkenmaier and Whitfield (2011) describe it, Havana is 'a palimpsestic city, one whose different temporal, structural, and social layers allow one city to live as many' (i).

In his 'Words of the Intellectuals', Castro laid out an idea of what it would look like to be a writer in revolutionary Cuba. He said:

[19] Kapcia and Kumaraswami are currently working on a Leverhulme funded project entitled: 'Beyond Havana and the nation? Peripheral identities and literary culture in Cuba', looking at the centre/periphery arguments in literary studies of Cuba.

[20] See Deleuze *The Fold* (1988) for an interesting philosophical examination on inversion through folding in Baroque aesthetics and architecture.

> There is also the notion of organizing some recreational and working site for artists and writers, on one occasion as we were traveling about the national territory, the idea occurred to us in a very beautiful place -- the Isle of Pines -- of constructing a district, a hamlet in the midst of the pine trees for the purpose of rewarding and paying homage to writers and artists. At that time, we were thinking about establishing some kind of prize for the best progressive writers and artists of the world. That project did not take shape, but it could be revived, the idea would be to build a hamlet or village in a backwater of peace which invites one to rest, which invites one to write. (Castro 1961)

A space for writers to be writers was a part of Castro's ideas for what it would look like to be a cultural producer in Cuba. My interlocutors understood the lack of space, both physically and in regard to the publishing space, as a challenge to the idea of being a writer. As Low (2016), writing of her work in Costa Rica, says: 'the social construction of space and resulting spatial formations and relationships yield insights into unacknowledged biases, prejudices and inequalities in a particularly forceful way' (69). The reconstruction of the publishing industry after 1989, providing even less for writers than previously during the Revolution, forced writing to become a peripheral activity. While treated as highly important to revolutionary culture (see Kumaraswami 2016 for a detailed history), the lack of recompense led to a contradiction between expectations and lived experiences. Not only are my interlocutors writing and practicing around careers, but also around the spatial and temporal realities of a city that upends notions of private and public space in interesting ways. As Quiroga (2011), a literary scholar and writer, notes of his own experience: 'From eleven o'clock in the morning until dawn the following day, there is no silence in Havana' (270).

I was hesitant to use the anthropological theory of 'inscribed space' in this chapter due to the obvious double reference to the way in which the writers use space and the fact that they use it for writing. However, in most of the quotidian lives of the writers I knew, there is no dedicated space of writing. Instead, they must make a place for it, negotiating common areas and specific hours to transform common spaces into particular places. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) talk about 'inscribed' space as a study of the way people 'attach meaning to space, or transform "space" into "place"' (185). They continue: 'The relationship between people and their surroundings entails more than attaching meaning to space, but involves the recognition and cultural elaboration of

perceived properties of environments in mutually constituting ways through narratives and praxis' (*ibid*: 185). The spaces that the writers I worked with used to write were not different spaces but rather particular places constructed through their use at specific times or in specific ways.

Alexi and Simone, friends and participants in both Espacio Abierto and Grupo Ariete, although less regularly in the latter, spoke to me about writing in their very different living situations. Alexi lives with just his father, who he cares for, in a quite spacious apartment in Vedado. While he has the space to write in his room, the neighbourhood, which is near a university hospital is lively throughout the night. 'That is why I write in the *madrugada* [early morning],' Alexi tells me. 'There are no interruptions, the neighbours aren't playing *reggaetón* or yelling, there are no loud cars in the street. It is the time to think'.

In contrast to Alexi, Simone explains she used to live in Havana Vieja in a *solar* with her mother and brother, but they traded for a larger apartment in Alamar, a Soviet development across the bridge from Havana Vieja, on the other side of the port of Havana. While it is further away, more space was necessary as the children got older. However, her brother's girlfriend moved in with them and space again seems limited. Unlike Alexi, she is not challenged to write by the neighbourhood, but rather by her mother. She told me when she needs to write, she takes her notebooks to Plaza de Armas, a very busy central plaza in Havana Vieja, near where she used to live. I was surprised to hear this due to my experience of even reading outside and being immediately talked to and interrupted, albeit I am a foreigner. 'It is so much worse when I write at home,' she said, expressing her experience of the *la cotidianidad*. 'My mother interrupts me every 5 minutes asking me to do something around the house. I tell her "no, mama, I can't," but no one appreciates that I am trying to write. There is someone to help or a chore to do'.

Similarly Maya, a participant of Grupo Ariete, notes that she does not have a room in her house, so she writes in the *comedor* [dining room]. She lives with her mother and grandmother. Everyday a woman comes around to help care for her grandmother, so she is surrounded regularly by, as she notes, '*mucha gente*' [many people]. For this reason, she too writes daily in the early mornings, claiming the spot before people rise for the day and use the room for other purposes. She notes though, that her work at the University allows her flexibility, which permits early morning wake-ups in order to write. This is similar to Edel, a well-published writer of science fiction and

fantasy and an IT specialist, who explains while he has more room than most in his house, all the spaces are public, and with family members about, he still has to reclaim these areas to write. He has young children and instead of carving out places within his home, he needs to delineate writing time with regard to his relationships. If he sits at his dining table to write, he explains to them that he is doing work and requires concentration and quiet to finish. The table becomes his writing place.

Two writers, Raúl and Leo, explained to me that instead of trying to carve out places at home, they often went to or stayed in their offices around working hours. Leo, a social researcher working for a government company, would stay late into the evening to type up ideas and notes and write stories on his computer before beginning a long trek to his home in the outskirts of the city. His commute to his office would regularly take about forty-five minutes in one direction on multiple busses, which he did daily, but his trip to the *el Onelio* for Espacio Abierto meetings would often take over an hour and twenty-minutes in each direction, which he did biweekly. He would fit writing in where he could. He carried with him an *agenda* or large diary, which he used not as a day-planner, but rather as a notebook for story ideas on his travels. Writing on buses were the only way writing breaks seamlessly into the everyday for him.

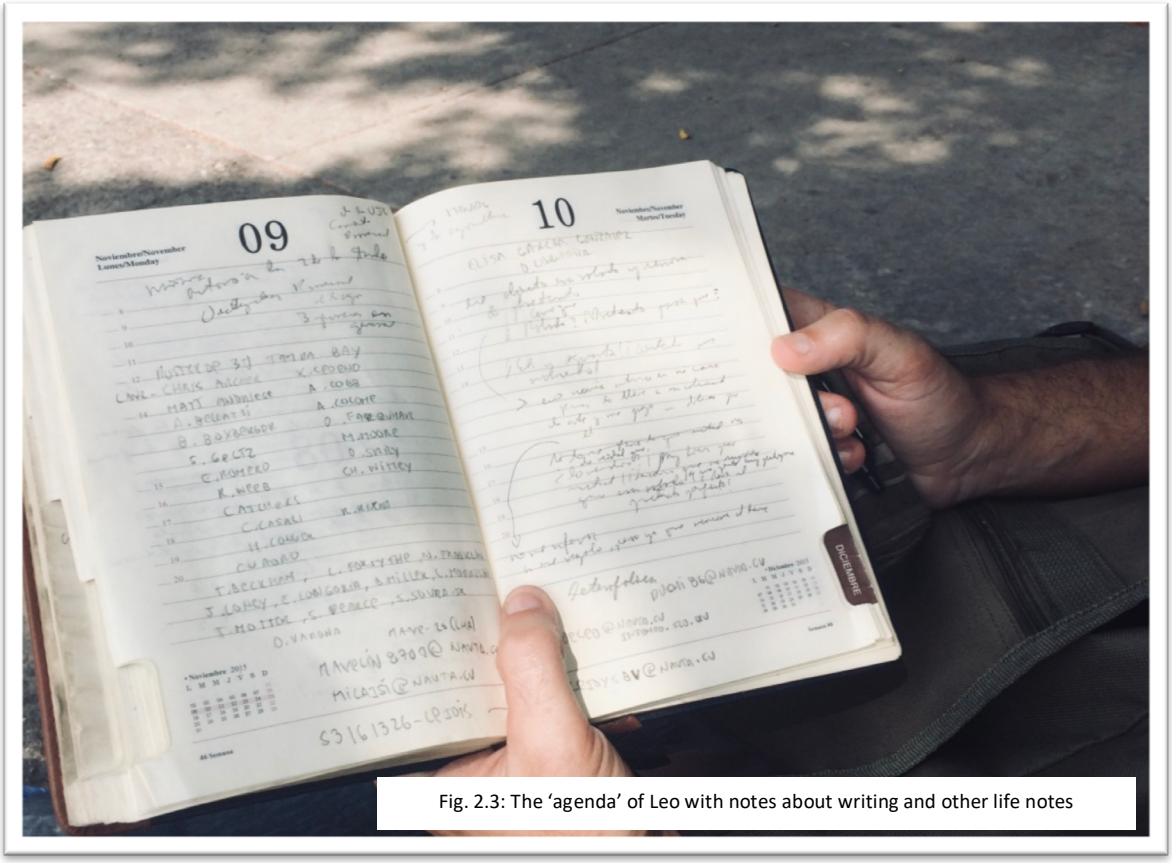


Fig. 2.3: The 'agenda' of Leo with notes about writing and other life notes

Raúl is an instructor at *el Onelio*, and a teacher of other classes around Havana. His work is seasonal and very flexible. While at home, he shares his house with family, instead choosing to use his office space, which he also shares with the other instructor at *el Onelio*, to write. He comes in daily in the mornings even when he has no meetings or teaching on his agenda.

What grounds this section is the belief that there is a mutually generative relationship between people and places, or rather there is an 'influence humans exert on their environments and, reciprocally, the impacts those environments have on them' (Rodman 1992: 642). The reclamation of spaces and time by my interlocutors is the only way they can create places to write. Yet, it is still a negotiation. The place for writing is never permanent and always under threat by the unexpected appearance of relatives or co-workers or the rising noise of neighbours occurs during times of usual silence. For the writers mentioned above, as with most of the writers of the group not mentioned here, the space of writing lacks an official place. For Simone, this was getting out of her house and into a park. For Maya, it was making the dining room a place of writing when everyone else was asleep. Alexi needed to reclaim the space of privacy against the intrusion of the neighbourhood by getting up in the middle of night or in the early morning to write. Leo stayed

late, transforming his office computer into a place of writing after working hours. This left the writers with a sense that they were not 'writers', at least not as much as they were scientists, teachers, carers or house-hold helpers, speaking to the mutually generative nature of environments and people. In the places of the everyday, the home or office, writing was still an act relegated to the margins. It was always secondary to *la cotidianidad*. Of the six authors mentioned here, five had been published by the time I left Cuba, and three had won national prizes for their fiction, at least once and some multiple times, but it still did not guarantee their sense that they *were* a writer.

In Low's (2016) analysis of anthropological debates on space and place, she highlights that much of the work on constructed space deals with areas of contestation. She writes: 'Power relations always underlie the social construction of space' (*ibid*: 69). However, the situation for writers in Cuba is more complex. As I noted with regard to Castro's speech above, writers are held up by the Revolution, while not financially supported. The premise of the support for writers (and artists) by Castro and the revolutionary government was based around the deconstruction of hierarchies of class and tastes. Anyone could be a writer, pending talent and dedication to craft, and it would no longer be a practice meant for those with access to education and the time to write. Moreover, the *aficionados* networks started by the government, and referenced in the previous chapter, established many writers in Cuba, outpacing the publishing capabilities as well as the government jobs available for writers (Kapcia and Kumaraswami 2012: 202). However, the reality of the utopic vision for writers in Cuba walks a very close line with dystopia. In the utopic ideal for writers in Cuba – anyone could be a writer, writers could be writers anywhere – the 'no place' is an everyplace. In the dystopic version, the anyplace has left writers with a 'no place' and a bad place, such as the margins of *la cotidianidad*. The lack of places for writing was not due to contested spaces of power, but the opposite. However, regardless of the dramatic divide between utopia and dystopia what is true for my interlocutors is that without a place to write, there was no place to be a writer. Working, doing chores, participating in *chisme* [gossip] with a mother or grandmother becomes more a part of the recognized *cotidiano* than writing. In a sense, writers have been so supported in many ways that they have become marginal in others.

El Onelio: a space of literature in lieu of a book

One space uniquely reserved for writers and fiction writing is the Centro de Formación Literaria Onelio Jorge Cardoso. *El Onelio* not only houses the weekly, year-long courses on narrative fiction, but also provides space for both workshops I worked with, space for annual conventions on literary topics organized by graduates and workshop members and finally a place for graduates to meet and socialize. It is an old nineteenth-century mansion in Miramar, a part of Havana that is both less densely populated and considered fancier than most neighbourhoods in the city due to it housing most of the embassies. It is an ornate, Mediterranean style building made of grey marble, dark woods, a clay tile roof, and blue, Iberian floor tiling throughout. The ground around the outside is overrun by trees and bushes, with some grassy areas outside of the once-landscaped beds. I walked past the building twice when I tried to find it the first time, even asking a policeman and passers-by if they knew of it, while standing in front of it, without anyone being able to point me in the right direction.

It had been updated and retrofitted to meet the needs of the writing school. There is a modern extension built to house the main classroom. Unlike the original aspects of the building, this extension was built with metal siding and the blue, vinyl flooring typical of schools in the United States and United Kingdom and the government-run *empresas* [companies] in Havana. They also built an extension on the roof, which housed the school's library. They have a small computer workroom with two computers, which students could use, and offices on the second floor for teachers and administrators, of which there were five. There was a kitchen, which was very basic, with a working sink and stove. There was a toilet on both floors, but the second-floor one never seemed to work and the toilet on the first floor only seemed to have an outlet for plumbing. On Saturdays and Sundays, someone in one of the groups would fill up a bucket with water, leaving it by the side of the toilet to be added when needed to flush. The walls were crumbling. The original colonial windows oftentimes balanced on one hinge and stayed permanently either opened or closed. In some places the ceiling beams were exposed as plaster had fallen away over time. The building, though, still seemed to function perfectly, creating a network of graduates and of

acquaintances of graduates or teachers who could then use the space both formally and informally as a place entirely dedicated to writing.

Toward the end of April, I arrived at the usual time to partake in Grupo Ariete's *taller* but did not find anyone in the normal meeting room. I heard movement upstairs and followed the noise. Approaching the landing, I saw two group members leaving Raúl's office and asked them what they were doing. They told me that there had been a leak during the recent storms in some of the back offices and upon further investigation, Ivonne, the Director of Education for the Centre, discovered a large hole in the roof of the building. It had affected the library and they were helping to organize and move the books away from the problem.

I followed the group to the back of the building and around the corner to see a bucket brigade, or a book brigade in this case, as stacks of books were passed down an old, iron spiral staircase from the rooftop library to the second floor. An amazing amount of dust fell from the opening in the floor above as books were handed down. I took my first stack and was shocked by the amount of destruction. The books were rotten, moth-eaten, and deteriorating in my hand as I carried them to Ivonne's office. The destruction was almost beautiful as layers of papers had melded together or rotten away creating a landscape of peaks and valleys decorated by the words. In her office, Ivonne was on the floor, on her knees, going through each stack, book by book, sorting out those that could be salvaged from those that they would be thrown away. There was a giant cardboard box—so large it required two people to carry it to the garbage bin outside when full—next to the desk, which, over the next hour or so of moving, would be filled up and emptied about 4 or 5 times.

Fig. 2.4: Centre from the outside and inside

Fig. 2.5: Books from the library

Slowly my shirt, hands and face were covered with the detritus of disintegrating books. I was covered not only with dust, small scraps of paper, spiders and moths, but yellow and red ink, which had turned crayon-like as the paper it was printed on almost liquefied. The books that I carried were not only Cuban classics, but very old editions of world classics. I saw books by the Bronte sisters, Hemingway, Cortázar, Kafka, Garcia Marquez, Joyce, some in English, Portuguese,

and French, but most were in Spanish. There were a number of Cuban first editions. After the books, we started moving magazines and journals and finally sets of cassette tapes. As I carried a small plastic container of protected cassette tapes to Ivonne, she looked at them and started to cry. 'These are the recordings of the first classes we held here, the first years at *el Onelio'*. The sadness she felt was not because the tapes were destroyed; they were in fact fine, protected in their plastic case. It was not because the course's future was in jeopardy; it is a highly lauded and an important part of the Ministry of Culture. She was upset about the destruction of the building, which had fostered groups of writers for years and provided a focal point for the networks created through the course.

Raúl invited me to follow everyone upstairs to see the source of the destruction. The iron frame of the spiral staircase wobbled dramatically as we all packed up it in a line. The roof was a beautiful, red-tiled patio. There was a set of rooms enclosed in glass in front of the stairs, which had been the library. They were now, due to our afternoon efforts, just empty rooms filled with cheap, metal stacks with dust and rot covering the floor. Following the path between the eaves, we turned a corner and I saw the giant hole, about 4 meters in diameter. 'Ño...'[21] yelled one of the men who was also seeing the hole for the first time. Through the opening, I saw rotting eaves and timbers and the colonial tiles were dropping like dominos ensuring the hole would continue to grow. Unlike Ivonne's sadness, the students seemed both shocked (at the size of the hole) and unsurprised (about its existence). I asked Lena when it was going to be fixed. She shrugged. She told me they had been talking to the Ministry of Culture about it but said that they could not do anything about it right now as they do not have the time nor the money to fix the building at the moment. But I could not get over how important it felt to me that this hole existed and that no one was going to fix it, at least in the immediate future. My confusion was not reflected in the expressions of any of the people on the roof. Ivonne was sad, but the group members were resigned.

The sadness and the resignation reaffirm another aspect of *la cotinianidad:* that of a lived reality among daily ruins. Navaro-Yashin (2012) writes about the materialities of the quotidian in

[21] 'Ño' is short for 'Coño', an expletive used in Cuba to express surprise.

relationship to her field site and specifically 'affective ruins'[22] (157). She noted that 'The affect generated by these ruins, which appeared like a shocking war zone to my eyes and senses, had been repressed and abjected over the years' (*ibid*: 155). My shock over seeing the hole and the new acute awareness I had of the dangers of returning to the building, were not reflected in the reactions of my interlocutors. *El Onelio* existed as a place for the writers to engage with literary networks, which would have ideally been established through print media, literary magazines or books; it was a place to present their work to an audience through a mechanism of oral publication and feedback. My experience of the space was that it was the only, regular space of writing and literature my interlocutors had. Yet for those writers, it too was another space of writing in negotiation, succumbing to *la lucha cotidiana* [the daily fight], like the dining room table, the office, and the waking household.

Conclusion: spaces of literature

In this chapter, I contextualised the experience of being a writer in relation to the publishing structure of Cuba in which the idea of writer as a professional category is diminished. This occurred due to revolutionary ideology – that anyone could be a writer and should not be stopped from trying – and due to the economic reality of a non-market driven, socialist publishing system. The space of publishing and the spaces to write are not functioning in a way that meets the expectations of my interlocutors. The lack of payment and the lack of social acknowledgement among family, neighbours and co-workers, of their writerly status and the importance of writing leave my interlocutors inscribing daily spaces as places of writing, but those places are metaphorically unstable and threatened. The place that has been given to them as dedicated place of writing, the Centre, is actually unstable and threatened.

De Certeau (1984) is interested in the everyday life as a means of revolt against dominant power structurers. In his analysis, 'users make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformation of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own

[22] Due to the space limitations of this chapter, I cannot go into depth on the variety of anthropological studies of 'affect', such as Navaro's own (2007, 2012, 2017).

interests and their own rules' (ibid: xiv). His idea of 'popular procedures' or the 'quotidian' (ibid: xiv) are a means of resistance. However, the writers I worked with, as written into Grupo Ariete's Declaration of Principles, did not feel that they were yet a part of everyday life. Their attempt to work is not a means of resistance, but an attempt to break into the quotidian as writers, a space from which they are marginalized and excluded. In contrast, they believe that central to the definition of being a writer, is being the opposite, or rather being a part of the 'popular procedures' and the quotidian spaces. The book, as a material space that would allow them to access these public, everyday places, does not exist for them in the way they imagine it should. There is an absence of places to work, to write, so instead of participating in the everyday, they are combatting it, but not in revolt, rather as a way of reclamation. They wake up before dawn, transform the kitchen into a workplace, a school without a functioning roof into a place of collaboration. But these places are temporary. As the sun rises, the dining room becomes a dining room again, the everyday begins and writing ends.

Throughout this thesis, the use of space contextualises the way in which the writers I worked with relate to the texts they produce. This chapter is an attempt to show how limited access to publishing and an absence of books and thereby readers impacts the way the writers I worked with see themselves within their community. As one writer tells me, she may have won a literary prize, graduated from the course on narrative fiction at *el Onelio*, and published a book, but until her neighbours recognise her as a writer, she is not sure if she can think of herself as such. Going forward, I hope to continue to show how the writers I worked with use different spaces. Particularly, I am interested in how those spaces influence and impact ideas of experimentation and reception. As I move toward the end of this thesis, I return to the space of the book and the space of publishing, not concentrating on the quotidian realities of the writers I knew, but on their hopes and wishes for what these spaces could be.

PART TWO: THE WRITER AND THE TEXT

CHAPTER THREE

'Building a world from words': From ideas to stories

In the last chapters, I looked at space and time constraints and the way those constraints impacted the act of 'becoming' a writer. In this sense, the writers I worked with were in constant negotiation with space, treated metaphorically – as in the publishing 'arena' and the minimal access to printing and distribution allowed to writers historically in Cuba – and physically – the spatial limitations in homes, public areas and offices of a crowded Havana. An attempt to sit down and begin writing seemed constantly challenged by family and job commitments, and the ability to 'meet' readers through the distance of a book remained difficult. As I have highlighted in Chapter One, the *talleres* (workshops) and *peñas* (circle/club) are unique places that allowed the writers to act as writers. In this chapter, I am still interested in the way in which the writers I worked with interacted with the city, but in contrast to the spatial challenges described earlier, I will write about the city as a literary landscape. The relationship at the centre of this chapter is that of the writer to their ideas; that is the ideas that will eventually become their text. To be a writer is to encounter ideas and to live in a certain way that allows you to move through spaces, finding your stories. In this chapter, contrasting the contextual history and communal difficulties that force the writers I worked with to carve out their spaces of writing, as discussed in the previous chapters, I am interested in the freedom of finding, making and communicating: the relationship between the idea and the writer.

In laying out this chapter, before delving into fieldnotes and recordings, I was originally interested in the idea of 'inspiration', or *inspiración* in Spanish, and wanted to write about where ideas come from and how they were used to build stories and poems. However, in combing through

conversations and interviews, I realised that the writers infrequently referenced 'inspiration'; instead, they spoke about encountering *ideas*. They approached the creation of stories, and the collection of ideas more practically, as acts of translation or communication between a world which they inhabit and the world of their 'model reader' (Eco 1979). Over and over again, the writers would talk to me about the difficulty of writing in terms of the difficulty of communicating. As Maya told me one afternoon over coffee:

> Literature is an act of communication [*un acto de comunicacion*]. Sometimes you can try writing for yourself. But be honest... Writing for yourself is not the goal ... I have always had the notion that I even write my secret journals so that someone else can read them. In other words, writing is an act of communication. In any literature, even the most hermetic poetry possible, one is always trying to look for that emotion, that moment, that will be that last act of communication.

Clark (1997) in his theoretical analysis of 'inspiration' in literary history, notes that inspiration is something that can be passed between writer and reader. Through the act of inspired writing, a person may write the words but is not the cause of those words; those inspired words go on to inspire readers (see Clark 1997). The relationship then – the act of writing as an establishment of a relationship between the writer, that which inspires them, and the reader – is similar to what my interlocutors discuss, yet they frame it differently.

Often Clark (1997) is looking at written accounts of inspiration, usually in letters, discussing the way in which the authors in question felt about creativity after the fact. Their claims of inspiration are a way of reflecting on the event of writing. Claiming inspiration, Clark points out, is political, as 'the inspiration tradition affirms that discourse is not a private intuition but a public revelation' (*ibid*: 2) through which 'the writer gains authority by disclaiming personal authorship' (*ibid*: 2). In the workshops, the discussion of writing was active and not reflexive, leading the writers to speak more about the act of writing as something mutually generative. As much as they were taking from the literary landscapes they encountered, they were also actively building and making the literary landscapes of their poetry and prose. 'How does the world of writing differ from the world of living?' seemed to be a question posed over and over again in the *talleres*. As Goodman (1975) writes in his short philosophical thesis on worldmaking:

> We can have words without a world but no worlds without words or other symbols. The many stuffs – matter, energy, waves, phenomena – that worlds are made of are made along with the worlds. But made from what? Not from nothing, after all, but from other worlds. Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking (61).

Instead, then, of looking at inspiration, this chapter looks at worldmaking or, as Lena claims, 'making worlds from words'.

To return to the act of the communication, Cruikshanks (1998) writes: 'Oral traditions are not natural products. They have social histories, and they acquire meaning in the situations in which they are used... Meanings shift depending on how fully cultural understandings are shared by teller and listener' (40). I believe this is also very important for the way written texts are interpreted, but the writers I worked with were preoccupied with the inverse; the ability to communicate their world to a reader who may not share many or any cultural understandings. The act of written communication in narrative fiction, then, is being able to clearly write for the unknown but imagined reader. The writers I worked with noted that good craft is considered to be writing something that meets a certain universal, literary convention and bad craft is writing so that the thing described is no longer recognizable to the reader. The world they are creating, whether 'world' applies to a city, a diary or a leaf, must be built or made, and must be comprehensible to the reader, *i.e.* identifiable as the city in question, the diary, or the leaf. The worldmaking of interest in this chapter is not that of plot, but of the narrative frames, contexts and objects that support it, which, according to my interlocutors, were the meeting point between their world and their eventual story: It was the 'stuff of the story', to quote Eco (1979), that came from everyday experiences and that required accurate translation for good communication.

A case study: a poetic introduction to the theme

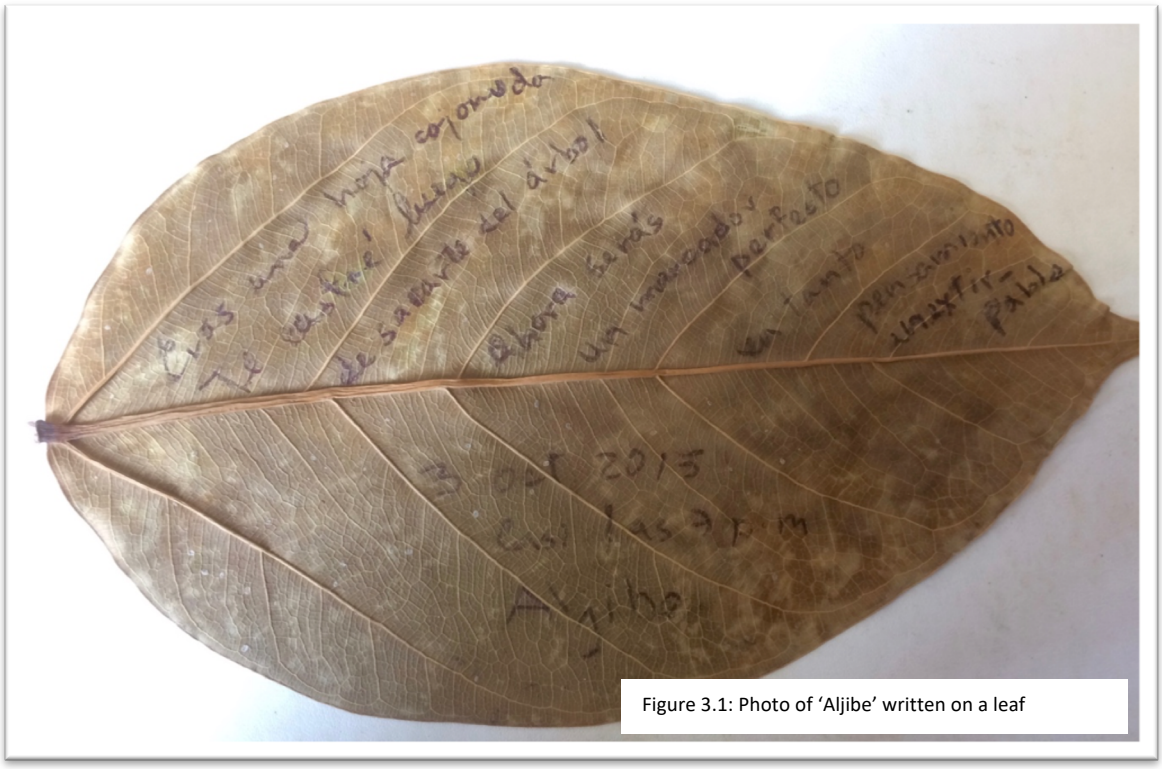
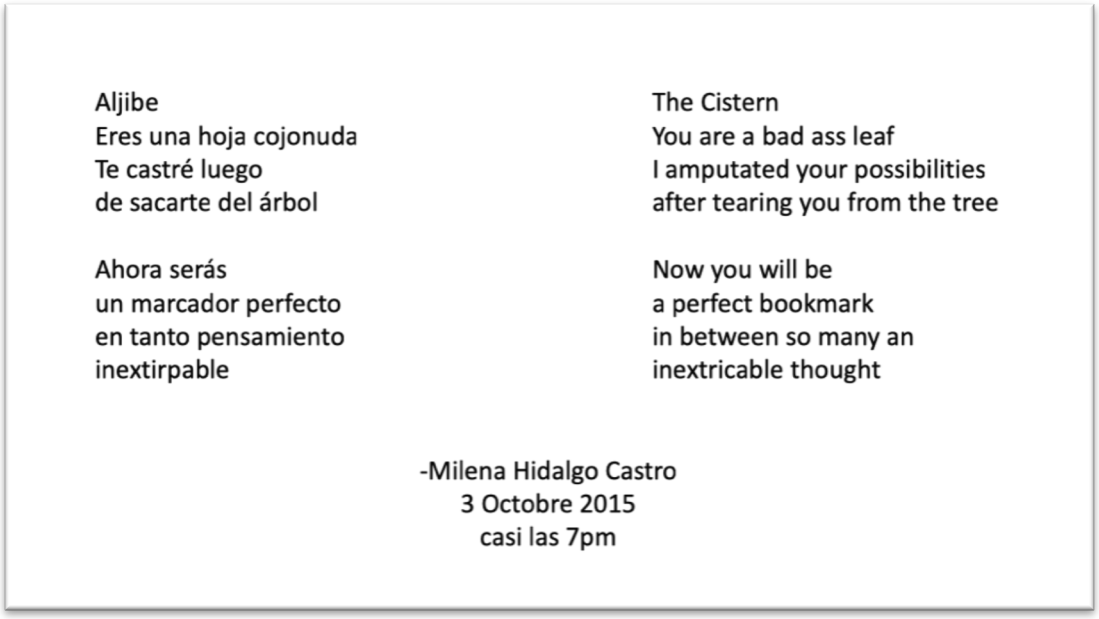


Figure 3.1: Photo of 'Aljibe' written on a leaf

I want to start this examination of the act of writing with a poem written and gifted to me by a friend and contributor in one of the workshops, Milena. This poem is a piece of literature, but it is also a statement by the author about her relationship to the city. There are, represented in the poem, a series of visible interactions depicting the act of creation. These relationships are as follows: the relationship between the writer and the world of Havana, represented in the leaf, which is both the idea for the poem and the material of creation; between the writer and the character of the leaf; and, finally, between the writer and me, the reader. I believe this leaf—at once a source of an idea and the materiality of the poem—and the relationships and discussions stemming from the exchange of the poem, introduce the themes of this chapter perfectly. Because I was given this poem, in its original form on the leaf, by the writer during a discussion on ideas, and because I was able to speak of my interpretation of the poem and hear her thoughts on my thoughts, this situation provides a unique understanding of how Milena, the writer, moves through the world, how she writes, and how her literature or poems move out into the world, encountering readers.



Aljibe
Eres una hoja cojonuda
Te castré luego
de sacarte del árbol

Ahora serás
un marcador perfecto
en tanto pensamiento
inextirpable

The Cistern
You are a bad ass leaf
I amputated your possibilities
after tearing you from the tree

Now you will be
a perfect bookmark
in between so many an
inextricable thought

-Milena Hidalgo Castro
3 Octobre 2015
casi las 7pm

As you can see from the included photo, she wrote the poem just before we met, on the 3rd of October, on a leaf she plucked from a tree. She gave it to me as we were having one of our many ponderous conversations on where she finds certain story or poem ideas. In speaking on the topic, we were looking through her notebook, which she carries everywhere with her. As ideas come to her, she writes them down immediately sometimes in poem form, which she may or may not translate into narrative form later, or sometimes just as a rush of ideas. The ideas can be about character development, about a specific place or a narrative idea, but the ideas usually come from some form of provocation, which I discuss later in the chapter. That said, her notebooks are not only filled with writing, but also with drawings, sometimes on the pages of the book or sometimes written on things found externally, like on a napkin, including them in her notebook after the fact. It is also filled with flowers pressed neatly between the pages, with leaves, and I have even seen her quietly catch a seed found floating through the air during one of our post-workshop, social gatherings, and place it in the book. Her notebook holds sources and ideas for writing in many ways.

When I questioned her about her collection and about her ideas, we talked, and eventually, as if remembering a way to convey her understanding of her idea collection more deeply, she paused to give me the poem on the leaf. I am not sure I really understood the depth of the poem in

the moment she handed it to me, but in reading through the poem and working through the translation, it seems like the perfect way to encapsulate the way Milena, the writer, interacts with her world.

In the process of translation, I have tried to capture the essence of the poem as I understood it. After I spent time interpreting it, I spoke with Milena about its meaning. As I understood it, many of the words take on multiple meanings connecting the image of the tree and the act of gardening with the act of writing or making. Most obviously, *hoja* can be translated both as 'tree leaf' and 'leaf of paper'. *Castrar* can mean both 'to castrate' and 'to prune'. *Marcador* is both 'marker', as in writing tool, and 'bookmark'. The juxtaposition of the two acts, for me as a reader, comes together with word *inextirpable* or 'inextricable', which conveys the relationship between the tree leaf as a source of an idea and the leaf as a participant in the act of writing. In other words, the tree leaf is easily plucked or castrated from the source of its power, but the leaf as a poetic subject (and object), in contrast, is memorialised and forever connecting this now dead moment of discovery to Milena's creative output. It is a poem that carries meaning in the most straightforward sense: She took a distinctive leaf from the tree to put in her notebook as a bookmark. Yet it carries a powerful meaning in metaphor as well. The leaf, which to her seemed unique and representative of strength, could be plucked and placed within the pages of her ideas and writing, transferring the potential power of the leaf to the leaves of her notebook. Or at least this is my interpretation of the leaf and poem. After explaining my ideas to her, she in turn explained her intent to me.

'I took it from the tree,' she told me. 'It was so easy to get, so close to the ground, everything about it was telling me to take it. What made me take it without thinking too much—apart from the fact that I really love trees, and leaves, and flowers, as you must know—were these two kinds of balls it had, so I thought it seemed to be a *cojonuda* [bad ass/ballsy] thing. And I took this appendage from the tree and I felt that I was making a radical change on its form and character [*carácter* not *personaje*]. I was transforming its appearance, but also its meaning to me. That is what happens with everything around us... we [writers] take and change, there are a few instances when we can use things as they are without imprinting ourselves on them. So, the poem is about this, and how something can stay in your head, while only being in a notebook as a mark, as a tool of turning back time, or recalling the moment of discovery'.

Unlike my interpretation of the poem, Milena speaks of the nuanced and complicated way writers interact with the world. They 'take and change' in most cases, which describes an act of agency with volition. Sometimes, though, as she claims, writers can use the world around them without 'imprinting' themselves on the subjects that inspire. In others, like the case of the leaf, it becomes a tool of the author, something that the writer radically changes in 'form and character'. The leaf is unquestionably changed. Not only has it been separated from the tree, its life-giving bearer, but it has been inscribed upon (altering the physical state of the leaf) and about (altering the conception of the leaf both for Milena and her reader). Turning the leaf over, I look for the two bulbous forms described by Milena as what defined the leaf to her as a 'bad ass', but I can no longer see those markings. Rather, I see her poem, inverted. Where she pressed upon the leaf, the leaf is yellowed, as if her words actually sucked the life from the area upon which they were written. Yet, as her analysis dictates, she did not only leave her mark upon the leaf; the leaf also impacted her. The leaf's physical characteristics and metaphorical signification to Milena led to the poem, which impacted her idea of creation itself. The leaf then, with the poem, lived in her notebook as a marker, bookmarking pages, but also marking the specific moment of creation and invention, her tool for 'turning back time'.

Moreover, this leaf, which now exists as a marker in my field notes, has impacted my idea of how Milena moves through her neighbourhood, through her city, and how and where she finds her stories and poems. It has also sparked discussion of the concept of invention (the taking and changing), in turn motivating me to question how other writers move through their environments and providing the structure and ideas behind this chapter. As a writer, the leaf effected an idea in Milena, provoking a poem, a memory; but as a reader, the leaf has also effected an idea in me, *via* the poem. The leaf or perhaps the moment of Milena's encounter with the leaf then becomes, as Milena puts it in her poem, the perfect 'bookmark in between so many/an inextricable thought' for both of us[23]. The leaf is one example, however, as I show later on in this chapter, the idea of 'taking

[23] In seminar presentation of this chapter, someone noted Gertrude Stein's famous quote 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' from her poem 'Sacred Emily' (1913), which interestingly also speaks to the negotiation and invention of signification and symbol in literature.

and changing' appears often in the discussions of representation, translation and communication in the *talleres*.

Encountering ideas[24]

I had invited Milena to a café to chat informally about her writing experience. It was a new café, near my apartment in El Vedado, in a colonial, single-story, brick and stucco house. The café, which occupied the first large room of the house, had giant windows that opened onto the large veranda facing the quiet, leafy street. It was only a partial occupant of the building. The house, although not large, had been split in two, with families living in the adjacent part. There was also a passageway through the centre of the house, the dividing line between the house and café, which led back to what was once the garden, and now was an entryway to even more housing. As we walked up the veranda to the door of the café, children ran and played in the street in front of their homes, and neighbours sat haphazardly, throwing a leg over the veranda wall, catching up with those passing by and watching the street.

The café, La Casa de La Bombilla Verde, although in some senses shutting out the life of a typical Havana neighbourhood, participated in constructed Cuban culture. The oft-memorialised urban decay was used here for style, as tables and chairs are upcycled and the fan, which had attempted to move the hot, summer air through the long room, caught fire during our chat due to age and overuse. The café, owned and designed by a Spanish expat, played upon that which pleases the tourists in Cuba most: the post-capitalist, decaying Americana mixed with late socialist, Soviet nostalgia. It communicated an idea of Cuba to the patrons and what it communicated depends upon who the patron is.

The name of the café is something that resonated with Milena but did not for me. As we walked in, she began to sing a line from a famous Cuban *trova*: 'Monologo', by Silvio Rodriguez. He is one of the most famous Cuban writers and singers and we often sang his songs at post-workshop

[24] The quotes in this section come from a recorded conversation on 8 July 2016. The details of the interaction come from fieldnotes of the same interaction. If there are other quotes from other sources, they are noted with citations of interview dates or fieldnote entries.

gatherings. '*Vi luz en las ventanas y oí voces cantando y, sin querer, ya estaba soñando. Vivo en le vieja de la bombilla verde. Si por allí pasaran, recuerden*'[25], she sang along to the melody in her head. Fittingly, it seemed to speak of the unintended lapse of reality into imagination: the provocative nature of Cuban light, sounds and liveliness to unintentionally start the wanderer dreaming.

Sitting with Milena in the café, surrounded by so many types of *cubanidad*, we started to discuss her ideas and how she comes across them. Milena reiterated to me that she finds topics and themes to write about all around. 'I find ideas everywhere... and I write everything down in my notebook'. She shuffled in her bag to find her notebook, flipping through, she encountered a page with the title, '*Ideas*'. '*Mira*,' she said, 'these are ideas for future stories'. She told me that just the other day someone told her not to eat the berries on a common tree found throughout the city because they are poisonous, but she noted that those trees have the most amazing trunks. She continued, 'that made me think of a story and I wrote it down. It turned into a sort of poem'. The discussion of ideas stemming from interactions, whether those are in the *talleres* or in the daily life of the writers, is quite common, although Milena is unique in translating an idea into a poem and then into a story.

As she says, she collects ideas for stories and poetry from around her environment, a combination, in this case, of a conversation she had with a friend and the recollection of a memory of that conversation provoked by an interaction with her surroundings while walking. Her dependence on these 'real' experiences does not limit her to writing in the style of the genre of realism. She, as not only a student of creative writing and narrative fiction, but also as an instructor of Cuban literature, is aware that the predominant style of fiction in Cuba today is *realismo sucio* or dirty realism. This is a style that developed during the modern period – 'from 1920 something to 1950 something', she says – and which has recently returned to popularity. She described this as a type of 'city perspective, from the darkest places of the city' or as another writer explained it to me, stories about 'the poor, the prostitutes and the gays, the part of society you don't normally hear about'. She explains to me that she writes *realismo-aburdismo* or aburdist realism, which, knowing

[25] I saw light in the windows and I heard voices singing and, without wanting to, I was already dreaming. I live in the old house with the green light bulb. If they pass that way, remember.'

her work and her goals, I would describe as some sort of hybrid between *realismo maravilloso* or the marvellous real, coined by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, and dirty realism. Her subject matter is gritty, dark and often describes urban relationships and moments. Yet it also depicts extreme plots, where 'realities' are pushed to, and often past, rational ends. In his essay 'On the Marvellous Real in America', Carpentier (1995 [1949]) attempts to categorize the movement of translating reality to story for writers of *realismo maravilloso*. He writes:

> the marvellous begins to be unmistakably marvellous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favoured by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state (estado límite) (Carpentier 1995 [1949]: 86).

Milena similarly tried to convey to me how she makes that transition. 'If I have to place my way of writing – I am in trouble because I prefer absurdism, but I do it from a realistic point of view. I am always trying to convey something from reality, maybe not my reality, but an imagined reality that is similar to my reality'. As she is talking, her hands are waving wildly in the air, as if she is grabbing thoughts that only she can see, painstakingly explaining something to me that seems to elude verbal communication. Her eyes are wide, but she sits straighter and clarifies to me her central point on the matter. She continues, in summation, 'My dream is to write as much as I need. And next it is to write as well as I can. Meaning, I want to write as I imagine [*como me imagino*]. And that is a really challenging desire'. For her, there is a divide between seeking ideas in reality – the tree with the poisonous berries or the gritty stories of gender relations in Havana – that she mentions she finds everywhere as she walks through the city, and a story that she imagines, stemming from those ideas.

To take from reality is integral to the process for Milena, yet to move from idea to story, it takes a sort of extrapolation from that reality. For Carpentier, for instance, there is a similar movement, but he interestingly places the writer's ability to write the 'marvellous' as stemming from their unique position to imagine within 'reality'. He writes: 'Those who do not believe in saints cannot cure themselves with the miracles of saints, nor can those who are not Don

Quixotes enter, body, soul, and possessions, into the world of Amadís of Gaul or Tirant le Blanc' (Carpentier 1995 [1949]: 86). Writing begins with being a part of the world you hope to create and seeing within it that which makes it interesting, marvellous or even just relevant. Milena goes on to explain to me that there is a difference between having an idea – which she encounters all around her – and moving to write a story. She explains: 'When you have a story, for me, I have the idea first. Maybe I don't have a character, I have just the idea, and I write it down because I don't want to lose it. And when the idea is strong enough to chase me in my dreams, and in my thoughts, and in my quotidian life, I have to dedicate time to being in it.'

While she attributes volitional agency to finding and keeping ideas, like the leaf, her notion of control seems to shift when her ideas begin to chase her. I believe this has to do with the different categorisations of ideas: idea being that which she encounters outside of herself, in the city as she walks for instance, and the idea of a story which is building inside of her. The idea comes to her as she moves through her environment. When she has an idea, she writes it down. However, the story does not immediately come. The story comes when the idea is 'strong enough to chase' her and then she dedicates 'time to being in it', developing a plot and constructing the world. Knowing an idea worthy of keeping is different to having a story worthy of writing. It is a different process.

The game: building a world in words

> *When I have come up with the story and the character, I start writing, I am willing, I am expecting, I am wishing for the moment to gather the words that I need to make this real on the page. To make this real in the imagination of my readers. Because when I write it, I don't read it, I just write it. I try to be the reader, but I am not the actual reader. I am myself, the creator of that thing. So what I am trying to do is get the words, the specific words, to create the exact world I want to create for them.'*
> *(Milena)*

In moving, or rather being moved, from the point of idea to writing, Milena is faced with a new challenge: drawing her ideas out in words. Milena explains the process of writing as such: she encounters an idea in her daily life; the idea provokes writing; she, the writer, imagines how her writing reaches a reader; the imagined reader, ideally, envisions the world from the text. The

reader as conceived in the mind of the writer is an important factor in the creation of the text not just an active recipient. It is the idea that compels the writer *to* write, but it is the idea of a reader that shapes *how* a writer writes. The need to communicate to the unknown reader, or the known reader in the workshop, dictates how a text must look; as soon as writing starts, the concept of reader has a presence, alongside the writer, at every stage of creation.

Milena was not the only writer to depict the act of writing as a process of waiting or struggling. *La pagina blanca*, 'the blank page' is one example of the struggle faced by many writers I worked with as they navigate using words to make the transition from idea to articulation. As suggested by Milena's quote above, it is in the act of writing that the writer begins to consider 'the reader' with regard to their work, and it is at this point that 'communication' seems to become a concern. As quoted above, for Milena, the prospect of conveying the output of her ideas, the story and the characters, and making them 'real in the imagination of [her] readers' becomes her goal. As she reiterated and clarified for me in a later conversation, 'words are just words on a page if you are not able to put them together to make the world, make the picture... if not doing that, you are doing nothing'. That said, the role of 'the reader' or the audience in this capacity is quite limited, representing a sounding board, a 'model reader'. It is mostly not until the editing phase in the *talleres* that most of the writers encounter their first audience.

All of the writers I worked with spoke to me about the *pagina blanca*, something I also feel aware of as a writer. Raúl told me that it is such a universal problem, they often taught techniques to overcome it as a part of the curriculum at the Centro Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso (*el Onelio*) where he taught. Sitting one morning in his office at the writing school, Raúl explained to me how he begins writing when he needs to. As noted in the previous chapter, Raúl uses his desk at *el Onelio* to write, as he struggles to write at home. The feeling of not writing during the times reserved for writing seemed very stressful. In that sense, the moments of dealing with *la pagina blanca* could be miserable. He had to write when he had time; he could not walk away. In that moment, Raúl articulated how passionately he felt about facing writers' block.

He rested one arm on his knee, in a slight hunch, and the other arm waved around occasionally in the air, seemingly flicking away thoughts in a direct comparison to Milena's tendency to grab at them. He spoke quietly, clearly, and slowly for me, knowing that it would be

much easier to follow than the slang of fast-paced, Cuban Spanish that I was used to from my other colleagues and typical to the workshop meetings. He told me, 'I think the only way that I have to write is to pass a time in total torture in front of the blank page, which I consider totally excruciating and I don't want it and I make excuses not to start or continue the work'. To escape the desire to run away from the writing, he forces himself forward by playing with words in general or even playing with the act of storytelling, narrating his life into the plot. He said:

> But many times *la pagina blanca* inspires me to set aside the difficulty with a type of game. A game could be, for example, words that I pick randomly in a dictionary that I have to insert into a paragraph of a story that I am working on. That would be a game. Or as a game, I am going to involve myself within the writing and I begin to enjoy myself. It takes a lot of work to begin after long periods, but I take the thread of the reality that I already live. I will write that this fucked me over and made me a distressed man. And it is for this that I am living within what I write. I am always thinking of this reality, but it is a specific state and if I can excite myself with what I am writing then... I soon see there is a moment in which I get goose bumps reading it. "Enough," I say, "I am going down a good path." Or I mean "Enough of the game, I am writing well." This is what I like. But I think that the main difficulty for me is to capture the tone when I write.

He went on to tell me that these are techniques he teaches. Many of the writers I worked with studied under Raúl at the Centre and spoke about employing similar tactics.

Milena also spoke about being sucked into the world of her narration through the games she played to overcome writers' block. She told me, writing is 'a complex process of playing with words. You are playing, but when you finish writing, you are just a part of the game. Not the gamer, just another tool of the game [*el juego*]'. She continues, 'words, for me, are alive, like animals, savages.' For Milena and Raúl it seems that the struggle to write, or the stress behind *la pagina blanca,* centres on the problem of moving from the world of ideas, the writer's imagination, to the page (in the case of Raúl) or to the envisaged imagination of the prospective reader *via* the savage and inept medium of words (in the case of Milena). The pain centres on the act of communication and the struggle to mould words clearly from ideas and thoughts, or the imagination of the writer, to the imagination of the reader. This act of communication is integral in the way in which writing

is considered successful and, I would argue, governed by a set of expectations of invention articulated in the *talleres* by group members and by Raúl.

Communicating and writing the 'real'

A topic that seemed inescapable throughout my fieldwork, whether appearing in continued critiques of presented literature in the workshops, or in discussions about writing, was the dependence of good writing on shared experiences. In this section, I am going to use two examples, although there are many from recordings and fieldnotes which exemplify the theme. Both of these moments came from workshop meetings of Grupo Ariete and concentrate on the utility of 'real' usage of an object or the 'real life' in fiction writing. The examples provided highlight the way in which a writer imagines their relationship to a reader and how fiction writing seems to be made up of certain signposts of communication.

On the Saturday in question, someone shared a story written in the format of a diary. He read his story and the critiques came immediately, as if there was a quiet consensus in the room that allowed all those involved to know immediately what was not right with the piece. 'It starts like a diary', says one writer and then she pauses to clarify, 'everything you've just read is under the "diary" entry?' The writer confirms it was. 'Usually,' she continued, 'diaries are not that formal... It sounds like a diary you would record, a taped confessional. It doesn't sound like a written diary. It doesn't seem to me like a diary because you aren't interested in the quotidian things, the daily life...if you want to write a diary, you can't miss the daily...'

Raúl interjected: 'there is a major difference between the first entry and the second entry, which is more a story. The second entry... how did you start it? You start with a story, the story breaks the flow. Look, I have a diary that I wrote from the years 1981 to 2000. Not agendas, diaries... The dated pages are quite short. I would write and I would just write what seemed logical. "I left the house today and went to the movies and saw this..." that's it. They were short pages, but with enough items. "I had this for breakfast and ate so much. I went here. Someone died." But when I read it back, I realise I love it. So, you need to write the daily. You're writing [a diary] for you, for

you, not for any other reader[26]. If you include stories, it has to be in the middle of the writing on daily life'.

The critique provided for this story once again seems to highlight the semipermeable wall separating fiction from lived experience and the limits of storytelling. The story could be written in a diary form, but it cannot challenge the conceived idea of what a diary is. What a diary is, or how a person would use a diary, is determined by preconceived notions of what constitutes a diary. A diary is not a well narrated story; it is not a place to construct plot, or at least not obviously so; a diary is not meant for any other reader than the person writing it. Considering this, the critique of the story was that the author was using the form of the diary without considering the way in which people actually use diaries. While it can contain stories, it cannot formally construct a narrative without effectively conveying the quotidian aspects appropriate for the medium. You can use a diary to tell a story, but only within certain means. A writer's fictive diary cannot challenge the idea of a diary. Writing becomes an act of originally recreating that which is predefined by the experience of the writer and the intended audience. The story masquerading as a diary fails because the writer has failed to be inspired by the true nature of what a diary is. Yet no one is saying he cannot use the diary form to convey his story. Instead, the craft of fiction falls into a constant negotiation; using the lived experiences of the writers as the frame, the construction of narrative can be creative or imagined, but cannot challenge these certain, statically defined structures of life itself. A diary for your personal use can be whatever you want it to be, but a diary framed for a fictive story must always look like some ideal concept of 'diary'.

In the next example, the writer is critiqued for not clearly capturing her imagined world 'accurately'. The story was set in Havana and the scene was a very recognisable one: a woman going through the most mundane aspects of her daily life. She sits in a conference room, watching a fly buzz against the windows as the meeting progresses. Eventually the fly escapes, as the character would like to do. Instead, she plods along with her day, moving from work meeting to crowded bus,

[26] Interestingly, this contrasts with Maya's explanation that all her writing is always intended for an audience, including her personal journal. I believe the difference is due to utility and scale in this case. Maya writes a journal as if someone would read it, although it is still her journal, ensuring a level of quality to her writing and keeping her conscious of technique. Raúl is saying that diaries are not intended to convey stories blatantly and instead the stories need to fit inside the purpose of a diary, which is for yourself not for a reader.

where she, too, is pushed against the windows. While a critique presented at the end suggested her comparison between the main character and the fly was heavy handed, the consensus in the room quickly dismissed that suggestion. Instead, the focus of the critique was on the way she portrayed the world of her story, a recognisable Havana.

Raúl started: 'You haven't done a good enough job describing Havana to us. It isn't complete. When you are writing Havana, you have to imagine you are seeing it for the first time. Imagine you are a foreigner... how do they see Havana? Write that'. This was one instance of many where the struggle to write highlighted certain shared experiences between me, an ethnographer, and the writers I worked with. As I try to write Havana 'scientifically' from the inside, they want to construct a fictive Havana that becomes most complete when seeing it from the outside. The bus is crowded, for example. Everyone (including me) knows what it feels like to get on a crowded bus in Havana. It is not just crowded; it is stifling. The author in question needed to do more than say that the bus was crowded. She needed to write a description about how that crowded bus is different in Havana than it is anywhere else. What makes the crowded bus a crowded *Havana* bus? As a foreigner, I am distinctly aware of how the bus in Havana feels different than a bus in London or a bus in New York. The author's mistake in this case, is to assume that the crowded bus in Havana is a universal symbol. Her being able to see the bus as I see the bus is difficult, if not impossible. In the case of this critique, again, I find the relationship between what is 'imagined' and what is 'real' to be very complex, as well as the concepts of fictive world and 'real' world in moments of communication with 'the reader'. The writer, who is creating a world, 'building a world from words', needs to write a way of seeing the world from a perspective that is fundamentally impossible for this specific writer to actually have.

Goodman (1975) writes 'We have seen, though, that worlds are made not only by what is said literally but also by what is said metaphorically, and not only by what is said either literally or metaphorically but also by what is exemplified and expressed – by what is shown as well as what is said' (69). He uses the word 'made' to speak about the construction of world from worlds using words. I have also used the term 'invented' throughout, because this concept of 'building a world from words', especially the parallel experience of anthropologist and artist, reminds me not only of Goodman (1975), but also of theories put forward by Wagner in *Invention of Culture* (1981 [1975]), a

theory, he acknowledges, that is as much applicable to an 'anthropological study or work of art' (11). Acknowledging the complications of the word 'culture' (see Strathern 1980 for instance), for the sake of this chapter, I want to concentrate instead on the subjects of the above criticism. When I speak about invention, instead of inventing culture, I want to explore how, for instance, the critique of the stories in the above-referenced workshop meeting, was about inventing 'Havana' or inventing a 'diary' in fiction, from Havana and a diary in lived experience. I want to concentrate on this categorisation of the translation that occurs when one person is trying to convey a 'reality' to another through the medium of text, and specifically, 'analogy'. Taking the example of the diary story, what the writer must do is navigate multiple worlds (Goodman 1975) and uses of a diary. The diary becomes in some sense an 'analogy'. Wagner writes: 'The result is an analogy, or a set of analogies, that "translates" one group of basic meanings into the other and can be said to participate in both meaning systems at the same time in the same way that their creator does' (1981 [1975]: 9), similar to Goodman's creation of a world from a world through words or symbols. The diary as a utility in a nonfictive world is like the diary of the fictive world used to translate something particular to the reader. Yet, the diary of the fictive world has another purpose by its mere existence in the fictive world.

The writer in question, unable at first to comprehend the different utilities of a diary, could be understood to have faced a form of 'culture-shock'. He tries to make that which is familiar (the use of the diary in real life) unfamiliar (the use of the diary to convey plot), but in a way that communicates both the familiar and the unfamiliar to the reader (a diary in convention that unconventionally conveys plot). Or as Wagner writes: 'Culture is made viable through culture-shock, by subjecting oneself to situations beyond one's normal interpersonal competence and objectifying the discrepancy as an entity; it is delineated through an inventive realisation of that entity following the initial experience' (1981 [1975]: 9). In the case of the example of the Havana bus, what was missing from the story, according to Raúl, was the culture-shock. The city of Havana in the story was recognizable in minor ways to those who were familiar with it. However, without stepping back and seeing Havana through the eyes of someone unfamiliar with the city, the writer had not invented Havana in a way that would universally convey Havana to a non-specific, ideal audience.

The critique in all of these cases, and in the discussion evoked by Milena through her comment of writing as taking and changing, then, is that a writer's job is 'invention' in the Wagnerian sense, or an 'action of making' in Goodman's terms. It is also comparable to Sneath, Holbraad and Pederson's (2009) analysis of the imagination as not limited to 'operations of the mind/brain' but rather productive relations in external spaces 'spanning between persons, or between persons and things' (14) and an aspect of being in the world. It is a writer's job to replicate the context of the story so closely that it communicates the reality of the context to the reader clearly, while simultaneously inventing something new and fictive. As Wagner writes:

> 'Invention is "controlled" by the image of reality and the creator's lack of awareness that he is creating. His imagination, and often his whole management of himself, is compelled to come to grips with a new situation; it is frustrated, as in culture shock, in the initial intention, and so brought to invent a solution... If he intends his analogies to be no analogies at all, but an objective description of culture, he will make every effort to refine them in a closer and closer approximation of his experience. Where he finds discrepancies between his own invention and the native "culture" as he comes to know it, he changes and reworks his invention until its analogies seem more appropriate or "accurate"... Gradually the subject, the objectified element that serves as a "control" for his invention, is invented through analogies incorporating progressively more comprehensive articulations, so that a set of impressions is re-created as a set of meanings' (1981 [1975]: 12).

For both Wagner and Goodman, the emphasis is on invention through recreation, although recreation leads to difference.

In the examples mentioned above, it is not the plot that is being critiqued, but the world of the story or the context of the story. It is the tree (of the poem), the diary, and the city of Havana of the stories, that are imagined or invented in this case. What drives the need for the 'accurate' invention returns to Maya's insistence at the start of the chapter, and Milena and Raúl's struggle with words, that writing is always an act of 'communication', something Eco (1979) explores in his understanding of an 'open text' in *The Role of the Reader*. Again, I have to stress that in all the above examples the plot, or realism of the plot, was not of interest in the workshops. Instead, the feedback focused on key codes of context that framed the plot in specific ways, and which would communicate a reality to the presumed reader; what Eco would define as the *'fabula'*, the 'basic

story stuff, the logic of actions of the syntax of characters, the time-oriented course of events' *etc.* (*ibid*: 27). As Eco writes, 'You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however 'open' it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation. An open text outlines a 'closed' project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy' (*ibid*: 9). The writers mentioned above write and edit with a 'Model Reader' in mind, ensuring that the text they create effectively communicates 'a system of codes and subcodes constituting the world of the encyclopaedia' (ibid: 39). As Wagner writes: 'invention requires a communicational base in shared convention if it is to be meaningful' (1981 [1975]: 36).

Writers 'take and change' as Milena succinctly puts it, but their intention is subtler than that. The act of writing for the writers I worked with was an act of invention that took a considerable amount of effort, given that the goal was not itself invention. Dealing again with the *fabula* or the stuff of the story and not the plot, the author is seemingly limited in their scope of creation by their need to communicate or co-create with their model reader. The invention on behalf of the writer then comes when they are least trying to invent, or when they are trying to communicate a 'reality' as 'accurately' as possible: the diary as we expect a diary to be, Havana as we would see it from the outside. However, in so doing, the writer invents something new that is not the diary or the Havana of reality, but the expectation of it. The complicated relationship between 'real' and 'fictive' in this case is due to the fact that 'invention and convention stand in a *dialectical* relationship to one another, a relationship of simultaneous interdependence and contradiction' (Wagner 1981 [1975]: 52). Or as Goodman puts it: 'truth cannot be defined or tested by agreement with "the world"; for not only do truths differ for different worlds but the nature of agreement between a version and a world apart from it is notoriously nebulous' (1975:68). The world from which ideas come, and the world of the story, are linked through the effort of the writer to invent a reality that is 'real' enough to communicate with a reader, and effectively 'fictive' merely through the act of recreation in the story.

Conclusion

This chapter is interested in the individual act of writing and the way in which my colleagues in Havana describe the act of translation from idea to written word. I am interested in dissecting their use of concepts that have been of interest lately in anthropology, primarily that of the questionable distinction between 'real' and 'imagined' through the act of invention.

I am interested in what starts a writer writing or what keeps a writer from writing. As we have seen, in some cases, an idea can be so powerful that it chases a writer, forcing them to write or to be plagued and stalked in dreams and waking thoughts. Words are portrayed by the writers as both the enemy of writing, and, of course, as the necessary tool or vessel to carry their ideas outward toward the goal of authorship. When the writers I spoke with faced *la pagina blanca,* they were not struggling with ideas, but rather with the words, the 'savages', needed to articulate those ideas and communicate with their reader. I believe both the driving force and the struggle with words can be found in the relationship between the writer and the idea of the reader or Eco's 'model reader'. Whilst they were presenting their work to an audience in the room, the finished work, after the editing, was not only written for the people in the room, but an unknown reader. There is then an importance of writing not only as a way of telling a story but a way of communicating a reality.

The act of writing seems to be tied to a constant renegotiation of world making. We tend to draw a line between fiction and 'reality', but as writers write, they are bound by certain shared (with readers or with fellow writers) conceptions of different realities. The writer is alive in a text, as Raúl says, as are notions of the reader. Ideas, oftentimes coming from the 'real' world, are taken, changed and born in text. Writing seems to challenge definitions of what is 'life' and what is 'art', and writers transgress any notions of boundaries between those binaries.

Chapter 4

‘He didn’t exist before I wrote about him’: The relationship between character and author

The monthly *peña literaria* (literary circle) of Grupo Ariete had just finished at the Union de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC). It was a very muggy day, in early springtime, and the low, grey clouds dimmed the sunlight creating a late-afternoon, yellow brightness of a particularly eerie quality. The group left the meeting with a levity induced by post-performance adrenaline and helped along by a large rum bottle that had spiked most of our tea during the readings. The group did not want to end celebrations at UNEAC and we made our way in a large, disjointed line of pairs and groups to the park with the dilapidated pagoda around the corner. The musicians and dancers who were featured in this reading came with us and everyone threw their bags down and placed the rum bottles and litres of *tuCola*, Cuba’s version of CocaCola, around the centre of the now ruined structure, gathering in circles, laughing and conversing loudly as if the park was theirs alone.

There was one group gathered on the edge of the raised pagoda, some dangling their legs, while others stood in front of them and another group sprawled on the stairs. I was pulled into a particular group of poets standing next to the pagoda. The people I was speaking with were not the group members I was most familiar with and they wanted to know about my research. We spoke at some length before our conversation was interrupted by a loud disagreement between two Ariete members in another circle of participants. While the details of the disagreement were not immediately clear, one of the participants walked away from the disagreement and joined our discussion. It was getting late and I felt I should get home. I said my goodbyes and left the remaining Ariete members who were merrily enjoying the rum and decided to walk straight to Linea, one of the major crossroads of Vedado, to snake my way home.

A few days later, I met with Lena to hear about what I had missed when I left and to speak about the latest books she was writing: two novels, one of an experimental form, and the other a suspense, an experimental genre for her. The first, she explained, was a story in which she was hoping to play with traditional narrative structure by producing three simultaneous storylines around the same character. The novel was about a woman named Mariana, a teenager from the countryside, who was faced with an important life decision: whether or not to join the armed forces. The plot diverges at this point. The following chapters explored three different scenarios about her future dependent on that choice. The character is named Mariana but Lena gives her nicknames in two of the plots, Ana and María, in order to keep the divergent stories clear. In the first story, the character, going by the name Ana, accepts the place at the military school and succeeds within the system. In the second story, Mariana accepts the place, but experiences a tragic accident while enrolled in the school and in the third story, the character, now María, declines the position entirely.

This character, she told me, was very much based on a similar position she was put in as a teenager when she was offered a place at a military boarding school in the country. She remembered the process of visiting the school, of seeing the bunkroom, something she described in detail, before agonizing over what decision she should make. She tells me that she was about to accept the place, but her mother frantically talked her out of it. A few weeks after deciding not to attend, she heard that one of the bunks collapsed, killing a new student while sleeping. While her decision is not something that preoccupies her, she does feel like it was a pivotal moment in her life when everything from that point forward could have been different. While she is clear that the character is not her, she also explains that she is using the character to think through her choice. The motivation to create this character stemmed from her time spent thinking about how her life would have been different if she made a different choice in that situation. 'These experiences pass through my filter,' she said. 'Sometimes I decide to just change things, but the emotional moments are the one I just let be'.[27]

[27] What she means here is that she uses the emotional moments in her life for her stories without changing them.

The other book she was writing was a book about a serial killer. She never told me his name. She noted that she has a very different relationship to this story and to this character. While the first novel she mentioned seemed to act as a sort of catharsis, a way of imagining the different outcomes of a similar decision she made in her life, this novel and the protagonist are very different to her experiences. Instead of relating to the character, she speaks of this character as 'haunting' her, which she feels when she is writing him and writing his story. She tells me that the character she has created has become so unsettling to her that she gets nervous when she is alone at home. In fact, she has claimed that writing this character has even affected the way she sees certain scenarios playing out in her life and among her friends who she knows well.

'Remember after the *peña* on Tuesday, we all went to the park?' She asked rhetorically. 'I had had a bit too much to drink by the end of our time in the park, after you left…' She continues to tell me that at the end of the event, people were getting restless and two men began disagreeing, which I remembered. The group decided to move to a different location. They split up to find some food with the idea to reconvene elsewhere later. Lena parted ways with the two men but agreed to see them both soon. Upon meeting at the next location, one of the men involved in the heated conversation did not show up. According to the other participant in the conversation, who was the last person Lena had seen with him, he had decided to go home instead. Laughing, Lena told me that in her mind, she found his disappearance very suspicious. She told me that, starting to panic, she quickly whispered to her partner, pressing him to find out what happened, insisting that she could not help but think that something bad had happened to the friend who was not there. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that something sinister had happened between the two of them when the group disbanded. She continued to recall her paranoia animatedly, with long pauses, wide eyes and a smile stressing her conviction at the time as both real and absurd. She acknowledged that the alcohol had affected her, but she blamed her odd assumptions on the new character she was currently writing. She knew both those men well and had been friends with them for over a year. Yet, as she told me, she felt inspired to see the world differently, specifically to see the world with an awareness of his murderous influence. Having read books in the genre of horror and suspense, I can relate to the idea that characters can preoccupy the mind of the reader, challenging a sense of safety. Yet what struck me about Lena's experience is

that the character she is reacting to was of her own creation. While this killer was written from her imagination, writing this character had made her aware of a world that he could occupy.

The writers I worked with understood what it meant *to be a writer* in socio-historical terms, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. Yet to be a writer is also an action or a practice. In this chapter and the last, I show how the writers I worked with participated in the praxis of writing. The last chapter considered the idea of invention and world-making as a way of reconceiving an idea as a story, concentrating on the ideas that make up the 'basic story stuff' (Eco 1979: 27) and not the plot. In this chapter, I am interested in what that idea becomes once it is written; I am interested in the relationship between a writer and their text. In order to highlight the complexity of this relationship, I look specifically at the idea of the character (*personaje)* and how the writers I knew created and related to this aspect of their invention. As I hope to highlight throughout this thesis, being a writer in Havana is comprised of different sets of relationships. Some of those relationships challenge the conception of writer for the people I worked with, while others, like the relationship between writer and character, make real and give power to the idea of writer as they create something that is both of them and independent of them simultaneously.

Personaje and Caracter

Recent anthropological interest in character has focused on what would be the Spanish form of the word '*carácter*', used to indicate a qualitative description of a person or thing, inclusive but not limited to such categorisations like temperament, personality, make-up or constitution. Reed and Bialecki (2017a and 2017b) in their introductions to two special editions noted that they are interested in 'character' both as 'artefactual dimensions of concepts we typically treat as expressions of moral personhood' (Reed and Bialecki 2017a: 161) and with regards to 'a much wider range of ethnographic objects that can be addressed, either "emicly" or "eticly" through character as a concept' (Reed and Bialecki 2017b: 305). In this chapter, I am interested in '*personaje*' or the Spanish word for fictional character or personage, but central to the way my interlocutors spoke about their *personajes* was with regards to their *carácter* or their characters' characters.

In the above anecdote, Lena told me about two characters (*personajes*) that she was currently writing. Her description of the two differed greatly. From the conversation[28] about the first novel, I was aware of the name of the character, the area in the country she was from, dilemmas she faced and was made aware of an internal struggle between patriotism and freedom that would shape her life. The character from the second novel was not named and as far as I was aware from our conversation had no background except for his tendencies to kill. What was most important about this character was not the development of a personhood, but the creation of a presence, a negative *carácter*, for lack of a better term, that was identifiably human, but very much 'other'. It was the affective quality he had on Lena and hopefully her reader that was important in the creation of this *personaje*.

Carroll (1987) writes about certain novelistic genres that are written and grouped together with the auspice of provoking 'a certain affective response' (52). Often those genres are 'named by the very affect they are trying to provoke' (*ibid:* 52), such as suspense, mystery, romance and horror. In the genre of horror,[29] the affective response is driven through the relationship of the other literary characters to the figure of horror. As Carroll writes: 'The characters of works of horror exemplify for us [the reader] the way in which to react to the monsters in the fiction. Our emotions are supposed to mirror those of the positive human characters' (*ibid:* 52). When I asked Lena whether or not she found her new heightened state of fear while writing this killer-character problematic, she said: 'It doesn't worry me. It is how it must be. If you want to scare people, you have to scare yourself first'. In this case, Lena constructs interesting relationships through the text. In the first case, she identifies a model reader, with whom she intends to share the experience of fear, or a person to whom she feels similar. In the second case, she identifies her character as an other; something dissimilar to both herself and her model reader.

In writing her killer, it seemed as if Lena had a new acute awareness of a type of malevolence belonging to this character (*personaje* and *carácter*) that now exists in her world because she had written it. She saw her community as if her killer was there: sensing the possibility

[28] I have still never seen writing samples from either work in progress

[29] Carroll (1987) notes horror is made up of 'art-horror' of which he specifically writes and 'terror'. 'Art-horror' is driven by a specific type of 'monster' and he writes about books such as Bram Stocker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Lena's story is an example of terror fiction, like the stories of Edgar Allen Poe or Hitchcock's *Psycho* (52).

of danger when home alone and distrusting the innocent disappearance of an upset friend. Unlike background biographical data or the lifecycle of the serial killer, what preoccupied her was her character's *carácter*, which came from her imagination, yet she treated as something independent to her. In fact, unlike her ability to relate to Mariana, the character of the first novel with whom she even shares certain biographical histories, it is the killer's unrelatability that gives it the terror necessary to make it affective. Although I never spoke to her about the secondary characters of the plot, according to Carroll's (1987) argument, for her to have effectively written an affect-inducing horror, Lena's emotional response and her desired response from the reader should mimic the other 'positive human characters' in the novel, indicating the breadth of possibilities of both *carácter* and *personaje* in fiction as being human-like and, paradoxically, inhumanely human-like.

What sort of thing then is a literary character? They are hard to classify as objects because they lack materiality, outside the physicality of the texts through which they are reproduced. They are human-like, but not human. A character is considered fictitious and invented by the writer, as figment of the writer, yet can also be considered an 'implied person' (Woloch 2003: 13) and seems to exist outside their creators once they have been written. In his work with members of a literary society dedicated to the British author Henry Williamson, Reed (2018) provides an ethnographic study of readers' engagement with literary character. Among the readers he worked with, he noted 'an interest or identification with secondary characters' (forthcoming: 2). Reed notes that interest in secondary characters by his interlocutors 'is fuelled by what readers find on the pages of the novels but also what is missing from them' (*ibid:* 7). According to Woloch (2003), who provides a literary theory of characterisation, the minor characters in the story allow for readers to encounter this 'implied person' within the complex, narrative 'character-system' (Woloch 2003: 13) in which they are revived and dismissed from the novel as the story dictates. Reed writes that Woloch's theory 'offers us a theory of reception precisely grounded in the reader's own act of giving attention (and neglect) to literary characters' (forthcoming, 4).

Writing on the idea of ownership of characters in the 18th and 19th century, Brewer (2005) notes historical accounts where readers engaged with literary characters inventing an 'afterlife' for

characters after the story ends. This is something he calls 'imaginative expansion' (Brewer 2005).[30] Similarly, Reed provides examples where an interlocutor produced a 'biographical exposition' of a secondary character (forthcoming, 7) and another where an interlocutor 'spoke about the importance of imagining futures for those "very minor" characters' (*ibid:* 9). Yet historically in literary criticism, the possible existence of characters outside a text has been dismissed as 'a particular bourgeois notion of personhood' (Woloch 2003: 16) and 'a naïve and pernicious tendency on the part of non-academic readers and earlier critics to talk about characters as if they were actual people' (Brewer 2005: 3). However, Brewer's (2005) research on the historical analysis of readers and Reed's work speak to situations where the supra-textural personhood of characters is very much felt by readers of fiction.

While these studies provide lenses through which to begin to understand reader relationships to some literary characters, the classification or general ontology of characters as a whole seems elusive. The work I did with writers did not seem to clarify a single way to conceive of a literary character or of their ontology but did provide insight into the construction of characters and a clear idea that characters – regardless of the human-like qualities or relatable social identities, like Mariana and the killer – seem to both be of the author and yet a thing unto themselves.

Building a character, making a person: fiction and kin

Lena, who is in her late twenties, is the only daughter of her mother and one of three children from her father. Her two brothers are younger than her and from her father's second partnership. She grew up in Las Tunas, a province in the middle-western part of Cuba, in the countryside, a place she has described at times as both idyllic and difficult. She has memories of her father packing all three children on his bicycle and driving around the town with them, as they laughed and held on tightly. She remembers speaking with him about her writing as she got older, as he too is a writer. Her

[30] Brewer (2005) defines 'imaginative expansion' as 'an umbrella term for an array of reading practices in eighteenth-century Britain by which the characters in broadly successful texts were treated as if they were both fundamentally incomplete and the common property of all' (2).

mother, though, was her primary carer. She speaks of her love for her and of a profound depth to their relationship but notes the way in which the dissolution of the partnership and her father's new relationship was difficult for her mother. Lena tells me that as the only child of her mother and as her mother never re-partnered, her mother is very dependent on their relationship, which creates a strong bond, but at times feels overwhelming. She has a very close relationship with all of her family members and speaks most often of the creativity and intelligence of her younger siblings, who she hopes will move to Havana and attend the art university at which she teaches. Her move to Havana a year prior to my meeting her had been disruptive to her relationship with her mother, who she felt was unwell in her absence. Yet she moved here to be with her partner, who she lives with in an apartment in the basement of a high-rise building in which his family – parents and grandparents – also live. She helps her partner's family cook and clean but does not have as close a relationship with them, at times their relationship is strained. Lena's partner's parents seem distrustful of her motives with their son.

Lena's family situation – separated parents, raised by her mother, half siblings, and living with her partner's family in their family home – is very common in Cuba where after the Revolution the marriage rates declined, and cohabitating partnerships rose (Safa 2005: 315). Those unions also commonly dissolved with people switching co-habiting partners throughout their life (see Andaya 2014). In broken unions, children are often raised by their mothers and 'the percentage of female-headed households has risen from 28 percent in 1981 to 36 percent in 1995 (Safa 2005: 316). Safa notes that 'in matrifocal families, the ties are stronger with consanguineal kin, especially between a woman, her children and her female kin' (*ibid:* 316). As Lena cared for her mother and her illnesses either in Havana (when she came to stay) or from a distance, she would often reiterate the importance of 'blood' ties, insinuating that through blood relations flowed responsibility and contrary to the difficulties of being the sole living kin of her sick mother, her duty to her ensures her well-being came before anything else.

Härkönen (2014) notes though that '"consanguinity" alone cannot be seen as the basis of kinship in Cuba and relationships created via care, nurture, and shared experience are equally considered as "true" kinship' (75). In fact, Härkönen believes that 'In Cuba, *social relations* focus on the notion of kinship bonds' (*ibid*: 36, italics mine) and the creation of a person in society is

dependent on both or either '"nature" – through ideas of biogenetic substances – and "nurture" – as intimate bonds that are created, reproduced, maintained and negotiated (*ibid*: 36), which may help to elucidate the way in which some of the writers I worked with spoke about their characters.

Lena is one of the writers I worked with who invoked ideas of 'kinship' or 'relatedness' (Carsten 2000) when discussing characters. Our conversation began when we were talking about some of her favourite characters. She told me that she does not have a favourite character, but rather she prefers 'human beings with conflicts'. For her, 'human beings' have a 'complete way of feeling and perceiving life, because of their past experiences or present conflicts'. She continued on, 'I try to build human beings, credible human beings'. Characters of human quality are social beings that are made up of their social networks and experiences. The idea of building or constructing [*construir*] resonates also with the notion of 'building character' (*carácter*) and speaks to the social dimension of constructed personhood, not only for the writer, but as an act of communication with the reader. In order for the character (*personaje*) to be a 'credible human being', it must communicate to the reader a sense of individual *carácter* comprised of experiences and traits that are socially recognisable of certain characteristics or social personhood. To be a literary character of credible human quality, it must be an individual constructed by a writer with certain semiotic cues that allow the reader to attribute the character (*carácter*) to the character (*personaje*).

Noting the 'fundamentally contradictory' (Wardle 2018: 316) notion of character in Jamaica, Wardle writes:

> character appears as a personal trajectory, an exemplary adventurous journey of personal coordination and *bildung* (Wardle 1999; Olwig 2018). At the same time, character is also an ontological quantum in an individual which demands "respect" depending on how that individual puts their potentially dangerous "gifts" to use in a turbid social milieu (*ibid:* 316).

As he concludes, 'Nonetheless individual character was recognized from the beginning in the Caribbean as evidence both of a search for a place in a possible society and as a measure of a person's subjective autonomy' (*ibid:* 324). In questioning Lena on how she constructs human characters, she provided me with an example of her process of deciding on characters' names.

Lena does not give her characters names when she starts writing because, as she says, 'if you think about it, names have personality'. She continued:

> 'When you say Carmen, you think about a strong woman. Sensitive inside, but strong. When you say Juan... Juan for me is a hard-working man because of my grandfather. A family man, a hard-working man, a loving husband, a loving father. When I say, Roger, I expect an egocentric man with sort of uh... idealized way of perceiving himself. Like egotistical (*ególatra*)... When I say Ana, I see a woman so fragile, so gentle, but also complex, also confused.'

Literary characters for Lena, unlike children, for instance, are allowed to develop a personality before receiving a name. The name Lena picks will need to match her idea of what traits the literary character has. I remember sitting with Lena as she listed off these name-characteristics and realized that I agreed with her. Was my idea of Carmen — in line with Lena's strong and fragile — connected to an idea about the character Carmen from Bizet? Why was my idea of Ana also gentle and complex? Why were the women so gendered by their names — strong/fragile or gentle/complex — and the men 'hard-working' and 'egotistical'? It becomes clear that the correct naming of literary character is not only an achievement on the part of the author, or a way for an author to relate more to a character, but a device through which to communicate certain traits to a reader.

Lena continues, returning to our original discussion on her favourite character. She said:

> I have a lot of characters... I think when you give the character some of your own personality you will have a loving relationship with that character. Even when you don't admit it, you have a loving relationship with yourself. When you have a character that is so similar to you, maybe you love it, maybe you hate it, if it has the best of you or worst of you depending... I have some women and men [characters] that I like, maybe I don't love them, but I like them, because they have a part of me. I have an Ana, a Roger... But I am part of Ana, part of Roger... Even when I hate some parts of Roger, I sort of know — because it is one of my children (*hijos*), I created him — I know that I still love him. He didn't exist before I wrote about him. What I am saying is I care for all of my characters, maybe I don't love them all, but I care about them. I made them because of something... I always have a purpose for a character. I always have something to say. Even when I am playing with words and names and personalities, I am saying something. Even in my first stories, when I have Carloses and Marias, names that don't mean a lot to me, just by the name on its own, I am saying something.

To return to a question of ontology. Lena seems to consider her characters in two ways. In the act of creation, she understands her characters to come from her, even to be based on parts of her personality or on her experiences. Yet she also understands them as existing apart from her. She utilises the notion of kin to explain this seeming contradiction; she likes or loves them because she created them, containing aspects of her, but they are not her. To add a tertiary level, she also acknowledges the utility of characters, as they always serve a purpose. She is as willing to play with personalities and names of these characters, just as she is to play with the words she uses to write. She does this because, ultimately, she always needs to say something, to communicate something to her reader.

As she claims, her characters feel like her children because she created them and she seems to like and dislike them as one would a 'real' person with faults and strengths. To return to Härkönen's insistence of nurture as a way of building kin relations, Lena's characters would be considered 'fictive kin' (Schneider 1984) or an example of a relation that may 'carry particular weight – socially, materially, affectively' (Carsten 2000: 1) but not through blood. Lena feels a sense of relatedness to her characters through her care, intimate bonds and shared experiences. I asked her if there are any names she would never consider using. She quickly replied that she would never use the two names she has set aside for her possible children. She told me: 'The names that represent actual human beings, the names that represent actual blood, actual children of mine, part of my blood, I am not going to use them'. I felt like I understood, but I asked her to clarify exactly why she wouldn't. She continued:

> I will never name a character with the names I chose for my children—even when I consider my characters my children too—because I cannot make my blood and flesh children find—or try to find—some part of their self in that person, who exists only because I wrote their destiny. My children will have their own names, without any possibility of that kind of analogy. They will make their own analogies and destinies.

For Lena, there is an acknowledgement of character as kin, yet her kin of blood and flesh are obviously considered qualitatively different. What distinguishes the character kin from blood kin is not necessarily the idea of consanguinity as a statement of 'true' kin relations, but rather that her children will be able to claim their destiny. She can control the lifecycle of her characters, but she

cannot or does not want to control the destiny of her children by naming them after a character whose story has already been written. It should be noted that her idea of mothering contrasts with her experience of mothers, her biological mother and her mother-in-law, as detailed above.

As I said at the start of this section, it seemed interesting that the naming of these characters, unlike the naming of children, comes after their personality is developed. Yet, was it not Lena's point that a name is never empty of meaning? Before the Revolution, naming traditions followed Spanish styles. But naming traditions changed in Cuba after the Revolution when the laws were amended and people were allowed to name their children whatever they pleased (Härkönen 2014: 96). This led to a growth of interesting and non-traditional names, which allowed Cubans to express a creativity that had been restricted before (*ibid*: 96). The creativity of Cuban names has been a point of popular interest for people outside of Cuba as can be attested with a number of news articles featuring an analysis of nomenclature on the island. *Newsweek*, in 2008, wrote a piece entitled 'Why Cubans have such unusual names' and in 2016 *The New York Times* reported on the traditions in 'The Y's and wherefores of how Cubans name their children'. The latter article specifically looked at the prevalence of names beginning with the letter 'y.' Citing the Cuban national baseball team as an example, the articles notes 'there are Yordanis, Yurisbel, Yunior, Yeniet and Yorbis: more than one-quarter of the 41 players considered for this spring's historic game against the Tampa Bay Rays in Havana had first names starting with Y' (Rosenberg, 2016) and highlight that it is probably the influence of the Soviet Union, 'with its Yevgenis and Yuris' (*ibid*). However, there are a number of Cubans who receive more traditional names.

Härkönen (2014) in her analysis of naming practices in Cuba noted that often 'Names are taken as an indication of a type of social relation or a kin connection between persons. They bear witness of a past social relationship and offer a way to create new ones' (98). She continues:

> Naming may also be a way to create a continuing presence for a marginal bond that has ceased to exist in other practices. This may be the case of a boy named after their father, which is a way to make the often marginal patrilateral ... links continue via naming practices or names may be a way to cherish the existence of a loved, deceased kin member, creating continuity in family connections. Naming thus becomes a particular way to reinforce those links that are in danger of disappearing, to retain and remember marginal kinship bonds' (*ibid*: 98).

Names can be creative and indicative of paternal relationships. Elian Gonzalez, a boy who famously became a political tool in the continuing antagonism between the United States and Cuba in the 1990s, was named Elian as a creative way to combine his father and mother's names, Elisabeth and Juan (*Newsweek* 2008). While Lena speaks about the importance of choosing characters' names, she avoids creating names as an avenue of experimentation. The possibility for her to invent a name does not come up in our discussion. Nor is she interested in inventing names for her children. I would argue that even invented names, while very Cuban, are not free of social meaning.

While Lena is adamant that there is a line that divides children of fiction from children of 'flesh and blood' and that is the ability to create destinies, Raúl, author and advisor to Grupo Ariete and Espacio Abierto, describes a different relationship to his characters. Raúl, born in 1962, grew up in Havana and still lives with his mother in the family house in the neighbourhood of Playa to the west of the city centre. He is no longer with his partner with whom he shares a son, but he is a part of his son's life, seeing him daily to take him to school. While he is known for writing science fiction and fantasy, he started practicing writing with realist short stories. The first short story he wrote was about a young man, Pablo, who, as Raúl described him, was an 'anti-Raúl'. He said this character grew in importance and 'me afianzó' or 'stuck with me' and slowly he became the central figure in his first collection of short stories. I asked him if he had a favourite character, and if Pablo was that to him. He told me, 'I am in love with all my characters because they are mine', a sentiment Lena articulated as well. He went on to speak more of his relationship with Pablo. When he was writing about Pablo's youth, he was able to explore a number of relationships and experiences through Pablo. He was able to give him his first job and his first experience with a woman. He said:

> My first favourite character was Pablo. He was like my imaginary alter-ego. I could be this other person, like another person with whom you could converse. He became more than a character. A real person. A teen. Learning life, knowing reality, experiencing his first relationship of love with a girl... And the character marked me so much. He was my first child. And I thought, 'So, so now when I have my son, he's named Pablo.'

When he did have a child, a son, he did name him Pablo. He told me of other characters who were dear (*cariño*) to him, like 'Orlando, a *mulato*, poet, a rocker' and a young girl who partakes in a satanic ritual to change her name. However, neither of these characters held the same place as

Pablo in his mind. Raúl had an interesting and changing relationship with his character, Pablo, over time. He started by creating a version of himself, in the sense that he used himself to create an 'anti-self'. Pablo became to him not a person but an 'alter-ego' for his imaginations. He created Pablo's different life events and experiences and through that act of writing, which was for him dialogic, Pablo, the characters morphed into a type of kin relation; Raúl saw this character as a father sees his son. This, of course, manifested itself in a 'blood' kin relation, when he named his son after his character.

Again, Raúl, like Lena, invoked the idea of the character as kin, as a son, where the character seemed to take on a relationship to the writer that is both of them and independent of them. Yet unlike Lena, he wanted to continue the link to his character by naming his son for it, something that Härkönen (2014) notes is common in naming practices of children in Cuba. It is the 'real' existence of characters that spoke to why Lena did not want to name her children after a character and why Raúl did. For Lena naming literary characters in memoriam of blood relations is permitted, as she did with Juan, the hard-working, good father character named for her grandfather. This was a way to 'create a continuing presence' (*ibid*: 96) of the 'real' human through the form of the character. The reverse, however, is not permitted for Lena because it allows the character to create a presence in the life of a 'real' child, which may impact their destiny. As Härkönen notes, when you name a child in Cuba for a relation (either kin or affinal) 'the child becomes not only an embodiment of past and future relationships but also a unique new entity. Naming connects with the conceptualisation of personhood as relational but simultaneously recognises the individuality of persons (*ibid:* 96). In contrast to Lena, Raúl made a strong claim of relatedness between both him, his character and his son.

Both writers spoke about their relationship to their characters as one of relatedness, both mentioned naming practices and both spoke about feeling toward their characters and the emotions that different characters evoked in them: love, admiration and hate, to name a few. In concluding our discussion on characters and writing, Raúl contemplated that something he really worried about when constructing a story was 'how am I going to shape the story so that the character can live on their own?'. The relationship between Raúl and Lena and their characters speaks to the idea of characters as being made or built by the writer, but also a sense of care,

guidance and the sharing of personality traits and life experiences which resonates with the understanding of the creation of relatedness through nurture in Cuba (Härkönen 2014). So how should I understand their relationship to their characters? Overing (1985) suggests referring to kinship claims that are 'highly abstract, philosophically important concepts, which defy definition and which share the open-endedness and inexplicitness of all theoretical terms' as '*personal kind terms*' (172). These terms she notes allow for 'modes of understanding the relationships among items in the universe [of her interlocutors] – whether between humans, animals, gods, forces of power or inanimate objects' (*ibid:*173) without subjecting them to our own understanding of what kinship means.

Writing a place for nerds in Havana

Maielis is another writer who participates in both Grupo Ariete and Espacio Abierto. She is a lecturer at the University of Havana and specializes in the history of science fiction and cyberpunk in Latin America. When I was in Havana, she was completing a project, a book of stories about nerds, called *Sobre los nerds y otras criaturas mitológicas* (2017), which has now been published with a Spanish press.

Maielis, unlike most of the other participants in Espacio Abierto, is not a scientist although her primary interest is writing science fiction. As a reader of science fiction, from within in Cuba and abroad, she finds that the science fiction printed within the country is often 'hard science fiction', based around scientific developments, facts and theories. She tells me she is 'very interested in the world of science, physics and speaking with people who have mastered that world'. Yet she feels there is a difference to being a reader and writer of the genre. She continues:

> I feel a little unable to participate in certain subjects and I have to study then when I want to do science fiction. For instance, *Juventud Técnica* [a science fiction literary journal] favours the kind of stories for their prizes that are more of hard science fiction or scientific extrapolation. I cannot do any of that and had to investigate a lot at that time, once I started to see what my story was about... Structural breaks and hyperspace. The fourth dimension. I had to study, to investigate, and to ask people.

Maielis preferred 'soft science fiction', or science fiction stemming from the soft sciences,[31] in which the publishers of the genre, both magazines and editorial houses, were less interested. Even with the research she would put in to write a piece of hard science fiction, she often encountered other writers and readers in the *talleres* and on the editorial boards of literary magazines (digital and print), who were also scientists and were heavily critical of her work. She tells me that 'the readers of science fiction are very active and very demanding. They catch your errors well. And when something is incorrect, you lose credibility… even for that which was very well narrated and for what can make you feel strongly about what the text provokes'. Maielis then decided to stick with writing something she felt comfortable with.

She found herself perpetually drawn, even 'obsessed' (*obsesionada*), with the character of the 'nerd'. Having encountered the image of the nerd, in British and American television — *'The Bing Bang Theory* and *IT Crowd*' she said — and fiction, there was something there that caught her interest and yet still felt distant. As she tells me, the character of the nerd is often times very relatable, while utilizing the 'codes of science fiction'. Here was a subject within her genre of interest, but that would allow her to focus on the narrative techniques and character development that was her strengths, rather than the speculative scientific development.

While she came to be obsessed with the image of the nerd, those that she saw from outside of Cuba lacked something relatable to her. She found them '*machisto*' (chauvinistic) and was annoyed they were always playing video and computer games, something still quite foreign to most Cubans. That was not the character she hoped to write. Instead, she recognized among her friends a type of character that felt 'lonely, isolated, and saw the world in a bit of a distorted way'. She saw characters that lacked easy 'social skills' and who took 'a lot of practice to socialise and fit in'. She wanted to write a book in which the personality of these nerds, characters she related to, came through over the stories of action, adventure and scientific extrapolation.

[31] This had been dismissively referred to as *ciencia ficcion rosada* or pink science fiction by men in Espacio Abierto meetings. This genre includes writers like Ursula K Le Guin, whose specialty is in world-building. Consider, for instance, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), of which the main character is a type of government-sponsored anthropological researcher of the future who encounters an ambisexual species on another planet. The focus is not on the science of space travel or technological or biological engineering, but rather on the encounter of a species who acts under different socio-political rules and traditions.

The idea occurred to her when she was giving a presentation at Casa de las Americas on the writing of Junot Diaz, author of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). What makes Diaz's work different for Maielis is that he is not writing science fiction, but rather is writing about a reader of the genre, and more importantly a Caribbean reader. Oscar is a nerd out of place. She tells me:

> Oscar Woa is *the* example of the nerd, but what makes him most interesting and most different to me is that he is a character that is supposed to embody the stereotypes of the Caribbean male, the Dominican descendant, and instead he is a chubby guy, lacking social skills, who spends his life reading *Lord of the Rings*.

The issue of gender and science recurs not only in Maielis's description of what she liked about Oscar Woa, but also in her description of popularized images of those who like science fiction, nerds. Moreover, I witnessed on a number of occasions the casual reference to science fiction works that were not based on hard sciences as *ciencia ficcion rosada* or pink science fiction by men scientists in Espacio Abierto. The connection between sexism in science is of course not limited to Cuba or the Caribbean (see Harraway 1989 or Harding 1991 for example), but contrary to the revolutionary belief that 1959 brought about gender equality, sexism is clearly alive in the commentary around 'soft science fiction' in the two groups I worked with. Maielis, who was only given access to a certain type of science fiction dependent on her knowledges (and reinforced through gendered references), then decided to write characters in order to create space in a genre and field that has been antagonistic to her type of interest and not representative of her presence.

In moving away from hard science fiction and encountering a trope that she related to yet felt had been unrepresentative of her experiences, Maielis wanted to create a group of characters who were all nerds, but who are distinctly *habanero* set in Havana, while utilizing the images and 'codes' of science fiction and fantasy. Or as the publisher's synopsis of the book reads: The stage, or the scenarios, in which most of these stories take place seem to belong to a strange world, an extravagant and foreign Havana; but that in the long run is as true and current as Havana's '"old cars and swaying women",[32] even if it is told in the key of science fiction' (González, 2017). When

[32] This is a very stereotypical idea of Havana, which I can only assume was written in the book description in quotations marks both to speak to a common trope and to highlight the clichéd nature of the image to describe Havana.

she conceived of the project, her writing instructor at Centro Onelio Jorge Cardoso thought her characters were fantastic and they awarded her the school's Scholarship for Creativity to continue working on it and perfecting it for a prize submission or publication.

Sitting across from me in the café, dressed in a black t-shirt, her curly hair and earrings animatedly bouncing as she speaks, I am not sure I see the stereotypical nerd of my imagination. But Maeilis would tell me that that is the point. Maeilis liked cyberpunk, robots, HP Lovecraft and JJ Abrams and believed these qualities, among others, made her a nerd. She was what was missing in the representations of the 'nerd': someone who did not correspond in dress and sociality to a type perpetuated by other forms of media. Maielis's characters came from her interest in a certain genre and her style of writing, but also came from personal experience and a feeling of isolation from nerd-like characters of popular culture. The characters she created come from life, but also from her experience as a reader and what she thought was a representational absence. She was able to reconstitute a stereotypical character that she felt had not, until perhaps Oscar Wao, spoken to her and her situation in Cuba. She created with her novel a group of characters that she can be 'obsessed' with from a world that she relates to. Unlike Lena's experience with the serial killer or Raúl's 'alter' or 'anti' character, Maielis created characters in which she found representation and people she knew, including herself.

Conclusion

To return to the question I posed earlier, what sort of thing is a literary character? The people I worked with saw their characters as multifaceted. They are a utility of the story. Yet, they are also something more. They belong to the author, but quickly seem to extend beyond them, taking on a certain strained independence. They live out certain experiences shared by the author, yet also allow an author to live through them. In this chapter, while I have explained different ways in which writers see literary characters, I do not begin to engage with the interaction of characters and readers, who seem to have a range of different relationships with fictional characters.

The creation of characters by Lena and Raúl in some ways matches the social creation of people in Cuba – through nurture, care and shared experience – which they highlighted through

the invocation of kin. Yet Lena is careful to draw a line between 'fictive' kin and consanguineal kin. Raúl who speaks of his character, Pablo, as if he were watching him grow up and live a life, used a typical Cuban naming strategy of memorialising relationships in naming his son after his character. The characters seem to be individuals, yet their individual status is created by their constructed histories, experiences and presents, and based around external (to the character) social semiotic cues that make their 'individualism' communicable, relatable and comprehensible to a reader. Yet character can have independence without relatable individuality, dependent, in the case of the killer above, on genre because those 'monsters' and 'killers' of horror are created to be scarily unidentifiable and unlike the writer, the reader and the positive characters of the text. What seems to be something articulated by all the anecdotes of the writers was the sense of ownership and belonging over the characters, yet a sense that the characters, once written, would live on their own.

PART THREE: THE WRITER AND THE AUDIENCE

CHAPTER FIVE

'It is an accessible kitchen': Shared creativity and the exchange of ideas in the *talleres*

> *'This young writer has to read more, they haven't read enough, and not just science fiction, but classics. To be a writer, to be a science fiction writer, you also have to read these kinds of realist writers, the greatest writers of the past.... you have to learn from the people who are doing well. You always have to learn from somebody. And it is best to learn from people who have done the best writing in the past. Otherwise you will get influenced by people who are not so good. And also, you have to avoid repeating what other people have done, which is getting harder and harder. The themes are once again the same. In science fiction you have to come up with some more original things, but realism is different. You have to do it your way, the way of seeing things, the way of feeling things, but the basics you have to learn from the masters. Or perhaps you are so original you can do something completely different. But even for those people, you have to learn what came before in order to disrupt it.' (Carlos)*

Carlos sat down with me to speak about the origin of the *taller* [workshop] he coordinates, Espacio Abierto, one of the few *talleres* dedicated to the genres of science fiction and fantasy in Cuba. We were speaking about the importance of these workshops, both for new writers and for some of the well-published and respected writers who still coordinate and attend the meetings. During my time in Cuba, the goals of the different participants in the workshops always interested me. Without a book market as we understand it, and thereby without looking to an ultimate goal of creating publishable and profitable work, what was the reason for attending these groups so regularly?

As Carlos pointed out, in the quote above, learning to write or to be a good writer necessitated a certain awareness of what constitutes 'good' literature for a specific genre and in general. A knowledge of what good literature looks like and an understanding of what has been published or what has been done before is important when starting to write. Published writers

often came up in both groups when people were citing narrative styles or comparable storylines. For the group Espacio Abierto, authors like Philip K. Dick, H.P. Lovecraft, and Edgar Allen Poe were often referenced as exemplars, as were classic works of fiction from Europe and the United States, such as Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, or James Joyce. Sitting through a class on narrative technique taught by Raúl (co-convenor of Espacio Abierto and asesor [advisor] of Grupo Ariete), my fieldnotes reference a litany of authors he recommends for specific styles of writing including:

> Victor Hugo as an example of an author of the 19th century who uses a lot of description. Poe is the example of someone who uses ambient description. Hemingway is an example, as a journalist, of someone who describes with minimal adjectives. Umberto Eco as a writer who writes texts hidden in stories. Lovecraft as an example of someone who goes overboard with description, '*un exagerado*' [an exaggerator].

Knowledge of the published authors of the 'classics' of both general fiction and of the science fiction and fantasy genres were what writers needed to bring with them to the *taller*, as Carlos's quote above implies. For Carlos the workshop provided a place for people to engage not only with readers' knowledge of 'good' literature, but with other writers of the same genre who could provide criticism of the writing style and structure. While writers bring knowledge of 'good' literature with them, as Grupo Ariete states in the declaration, they are not only interested in looking back, but also using the workshop as a sounding board for new ideas that may in some way 'disrupt' the *status quo* of 'good' literature in Cuba. The *talleres* were meeting places of old and new ideas.

In this chapter, I am interested in the relationship between the writer and their audience. To be a writer is to be read; yet in Havana, being a writer is also about encountering an audience to which you can convey your work through public recitation or performance. This chapter introduces in depth the two workshops I attended regularly. I hope to show the space of the talleres as a space where the writers I worked with could act as writers through the sharing of written texts and the critical reception provided. Yet I also propose that there was more to attending the talleres and being a writer in those spaces than just presenting semi-finished work for the point of receiving feedback, although that was a very central point as discussed. There was also an aspect of exchange and instruction. The talleres became a space to exchange story themes and ideas, to share writing techniques and to introduce and establish a shared body of literary knowledge. One writer

walks into the room, but with them comes their experimentation with form and structure, their experience of what works and what fails and all the writers they read who showed them what good writing looks like. As I hope to show throughout this chapter, the taller then becomes a very unique place, not a site of performed readings or editing alone, but a space filled with layers of creative exchange between those writers in the room, the canonical books and styles that shape genres, and the creative presences and spectres that each writer brings with them.

Inside the room: an introduction to two literary workshops

While in Havana, I worked with two literary workshops. I was introduced to both of them through a writing instructor and author in his own right, Raúl Aguiar. I met him after wandering, with letter of introduction in hand, into El Centro de Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso ('*el Onelio*' hereafter). Without regular access to or dependence on the internet, it is always a guess really whether certain things are open or operating on certain days or times. I decided to show up, without an appointment or announcement, one Thursday morning. The building seemed empty, except for an elderly security guard who waved me in after I explained my purpose. Upon entering, I found a small hand bell dangling on a string tied to the second floor landing just inside the entrance. I rang it and after a moment, a man in baggy pants and a t-shirt poked his head through a doorway at the top of the stairs. Upon seeing me, he waved and walked down.

Raúl had light-brown, wavy hair tied back in a low ponytail and he smiled as he listened to me carefully, arms folded across his chest, leaning back slightly. I stumbled my way through an introduction, a synopsis of my work and told him what it was I was interested in learning. It was at this quick meeting that Raúl suggested I return on Sunday and the following Saturday to attend two *talleres* in which he participates.

The two workshops share similarities, including a few participants who dutifully attend both, spending their entire weekends engaged in sharing stories and poetry. Both workshops also publish literary magazines online, although *Korad*, the digital magazine affiliated with Espacio Abierto has been 'in print' significantly longer. That said, there are some fundamental differences in the details

of how each workshop is managed and run, including the room at *el Onelio* each elect as their meeting place.

The first workshop I attended was Espacio Abierto. It has been in existence for about seven years and unusually dedicated to just science fiction and fantasy. Espacio Abierto meets on a Sunday, every two weeks. In *el Onelio*, they chose to hold the workshop in the main classroom. While the building itself was Spanish neo-colonial, the classroom at the back is the only modern extension. It had laminate floors, a wall full of metal framed windows and an air conditioning unit. There was a teacher's desk at the front of the room and during the workshop, depending on the number of people in attendance, the attendees would organize the desks around the front of the room in a semi-circle. While the workshop was founded by a few members who were still in regular attendance, they also attempted to pass the convening duties to younger members, in order to ensure the group's continuation if the founders started to participate less. A convenor would lead the meeting, and thereby be responsible for directing the order of the readings and managing the comments and criticisms after. The readings were submitted to the convenors in advance and, if possible, pre-circulated by email, but not everyone had access to the internet regularly, so only a few people were able to read the stories before attending. The readings were always picked in advance, so there was no confusion about who would read on the day.

Upon entering the first meeting, I immediately noticed the temperature of the room. The air conditioning was on high, perhaps in an effort to keep the Dengue-carrying mosquitos at bay, but it also struck me as something very sterile and uncommon in my experience of most public places in Havana. The meetings were organized similarly in a very meticulous way. The presenter would read their story and the convenor would methodically work around the circle, stopping at each attendee to ask for a comment, and encouraging those of us, me included, who were more reserved into at least giving something. As people went around the room, the writer at no point was allowed to answer the criticism. The writer was given a time at the end of all the criticism to speak to the suggestions provided throughout the feedback session. While there was no allotted time for each reader, and the readings varied in length, the way of moving around the circle, soliciting feedback, ensured that each presenter received a relatively standard number of responses. Some readings did provoke different

amounts of feedback, but every author who shared received a comment from every person in the room.

This workshop was very much based around the idea of cooperation [*cooperación*] and openness [*abierto a…*]. As Carlos mentioned when we spoke about the origins of the group during a conversation one day:

> Espacio Abierto is also very common concept in science fiction, 'open space', and Espacio Abierto is also an open space for everyone who wants to come and learn and share our literature…The only prerequisite is what participants write; they have to write science fiction or fantasy of course… but no one is excluded for anything else. You could come if you were just starting, if you were an older writer. We thought, 'let's just make it completely open'. An that's why we called it Espacio Abierto….And a lot of people came. So, OK, we are convenors. There are four to five convenors, but we are not the chiefs. OK, we always try to sit in a circular form. Every time we try and get different people to moderate the activities.

Carlos and his co-convenors wanted to create a truly 'open space' for all people to come and share and they played down the hierarchy of well-published convenors, indicated by the seating organisation (circular) and by the routine of participation. He had participated in a very close-knit *taller*, the Espiral Group, before it dissolved and he helped to create Espacio Abierto with a critical eye to the way these groups can become 'too close, too closed' and insular.

I had thought that the strict format of the group had something to with the genre and the fact that many of the members were also career scientists and engineers. The strict space for sharing, comments and responses reminded me of an academic paper presentation and when I questioned Carlos about the format, he gave a very surprising answer. The format, he says, 'is to avoid discussion and argument'. He continues:

> Cubans like to argue and we are not very good at listening to criticism. One of the problems is that Cubans have always been like that but also during the revolutionary period, this open debate, it was a little less encouraged—you couldn't express criticism against the establishment—so… we needed to defend the culture of debate, the culture of the idea and so it became a weapon, a little offensive, a little defensive, to defend ourselves. To escape this, we keep the discussion sterile (*esteril*)… I give you my opinion, so you take it and you can clarify at some point, but at the end you are going to do whatever you want with your story. Take it or leave it. Of course, there are different levels of opinions. People like Raúl, whose profession it is, who have many years of experience as professor of narrative techniques and who have been published, you naturally listen to more carefully. Or Yoss

> who has more experience and then other people give some lighter comments, but everyone expresses opinions, and everyone does what they want to do with those comments.

The 'culture of debate', which Carlos argued, was an answer to a sense of being silenced at different historical points, is temporarily silenced here to allow for equitable critique: everyone's opinion is respected. It allows people space to criticise, compliment or comment without dissolving immediately into disagreement, something that contrasts clearly with Grupo Ariete. I should stress that people are allowed to answer their criticism, it is just permitted after all feedback has been given. Carlos is positioning this sort of respectful listening as contrary to a Cuban culture in which defensive and offensive debate is central to conceptions of free discussion.

In contrast to Espacio Abierto, Grupo Ariete, the second of the two workshops I regularly attended, was started recently and conducted meetings in a much less methodical fashion. Also using *el Onelio*, Grupo Ariete met in a small, side room off of the central hallway on the first floor. It was unfurnished except for a few plastic chairs and a desk in the corner, which, when the room was not occupied by students, was often where the security guard could be found, sometimes sleeping in front of the fan. When the meetings started, everyone would collect other chairs from around the building, moving them into the room as needed. Sometimes, when the number of people attending the meeting was less than normal or during the summer months, the group would meet upstairs in Raúl's office. He had a stronger fan and the second story allowed for a better cross breeze.

Grupo Ariete is a new *taller*, started just under a year from when I first began attending. They have been organizing literary *peñas*, or public-facing literary salons, for almost the same amount of time—I attended their anniversary *peña* in March of 2016—and the first edition of their literary magazine came out in May of the same year. This group is dedicated to young writers. Unlike Espacio Abierto, they have not organized a group around genre, but rather around a purpose; the members are interested in helping and supporting each other as they try to make their entrance into the literary world of Havana, as discussed in Chapter One. They hold meetings every Saturday and literary *peñas* once a month at UNEAC.

Like Espacio Abierto, the group is open to anyone who wants to join. Yet unlike Espacio Abierto, there is a unique sense that the group members are more than just colleagues. Among the participants there are really close friendships, partnerships and even some relationships of contention, such as ex-partnerships. Almost all of the participants are either graduates or current students of the narrative course at *el Onelio*. The meetings lack the methodical organizational structure and oftentimes feel just as much like a social event as a workshop, to the dismay of some members. The meetings which can run anywhere between two and four hours, are always followed by something social. Most often, the attendees will head to a park down the road, bringing guitars, with everyone chipping in to buy some rum and *tuCola*, Cuba's version of Coca-Cola. During these social gatherings, the discussion is much less formal, although discussion on literary topics will sometimes continue as people speak about what they are reading or projects associated with work. However, there is also plenty of discussions on non-literary topics, on entertaining, individual experiences from the prior week, *chisme* [gossip] and there are always group sing-a-longs.

Grupo Ariete have a very different way of participating in the meetings. The readers are not chosen ahead of time. Instead, participants bring whatever they are working on and as soon as someone has presented, then any other person can express interest in reading next. After the reading, the criticism and suggestions are more dialogic. The reader will listen as someone presents their criticism but can jump in with an answer or response at any time. While, most of the time, a defensive reaction was silenced by the group there were times when the reader and the rest of the attendees would argue loudly, with people in the room shouting opinions over each other. In these moments, the room would quickly transition from a place where one person was providing calm, well-thought out suggestions, to a chaotic cacophony of raised voices, engaging haphazardly across and over each other. There would be people speaking to the sharer and people speaking to the side of the main discussion. As Carlos and Espacio Abierto decided to create a specific mechanism for overcoming this sort of wild transition, Grupo Ariete thrives off the congenial informality of engaging with each other in this manner. Whereas Espacio Abierto practices an *ethos* of openness, as their declaration and the name of the group suggest, Grupo Ariete is interested in debate and the forceful and powerful potential of their unique voices to experiment and disrupt the literary *palestra* [arena].

The group does have some hierarchical structure. In Grupo Ariete, they have a few people who have agreed to take on specific roles. There were five of them: a manager of the *taller* (workshop), a literary manager of the *peña* (literary salon), a music manager of the *peña*, the editor of the literary journal, *Mazorkazo*, and the graphic designer of the journal and all publicity material for the group. They are responsible for the smooth running of their respective functions. They make house-keeping announcements at the beginning or end of meetings, often soliciting help and work from the other participants as needed. The group is run in some ways like a formal, but chaotic workshop—the stories shared are well-thought out, studied pieces that people genuinely want constructive feedback on—but at other times, it can feel very much like a social gathering of friends. While meetings were always collegial, as summer approached, the gatherings became even more informal. Toward the end of my time in Havana, the height of the summer, people started bringing rum to the meetings, not just reserving drinks for the after-meeting social gatherings. This upset some of the members of the group, mostly the professional women. After one rowdy meeting in particular, I spoke with Lena who had looked exasperated at the rum-passing antics. She told me that she found at times the friendly atmosphere of the workshop counterproductive. She said:

> 'They lose so much time drinking and talking about gossipy things. This is fun, this is nice, but this is not literature. This is not a way to make noise, as we want, because we want to make noise in the literary arena [*palestra*]. If you want to make noise in the literary arena, you have to take it seriously. You have to work. After you drink, after you gossip, but first you have to workshop [*taller*]. You have to read. You have to edit, you have to be serious when you work. This is the point, the main point of the group'.

For all of the participants I spoke with and interacted with, including the ones who occasionally drink during the meetings, these sessions were treated seriously. In contrast again to the format of Espacio Abierto, the freedom of a workshop without a specific genre and the lack of sterile performance structure, lead the group to feel more experimental, as if they were there to play with boundaries and form. While Espacio Abierto might have seemed limited by the rules of science fiction and fantasy, the depth of experience in those *talleres* with the attendance of well-published authors created a different type of experimentation, one that may be bounded with strict procedure and structure but was no less creative or imaginative. There were a few members who attended both *talleres*. This is because they offered different experiences. Espacio Abierto offered the chance to share

literature in front of some well-established writers of science fiction and fantasy in Cuba, who provide good guidance and advice. Ariete was the group with comradery and a united goal to challenge literary standards in Cuba. The two groups are different types of literary outlets.

The 'culture of debate' then was something recognised and dissuaded in the context of Espacio Abierto but encouraged and perpetuated in Grupo Ariete. Yet both groups engaged in disagreements and intellectual challenges. Espacio Abierto preached openness, however, they created a very closed meeting structure. That said, the members could speak their minds freely, just in an organised manner. In contrast, Ariete provided a space without structure in which this culture of debate became central to *how* they discuss literary ideology. Yet, people were often yelled over, interrupted and ignored. Hernández (2003) locates the 'culture of debate' in Cuba as belonging, at first, to 'academic circles and cultural publications' and only recently extending, with the changes of Special Period, into less formal circles, including 'not only the social sciences, but also Cuban literature, visual arts, theatre and cinema' to say nothing of street corners and bars (131). As I suggested in the introduction, the relationships of different interlocutors toward the Revolution is very dependent on their generation and during which Cuban period they matured. Perhaps the younger Ariete members saw debate as the way to disagree. Yet I wonder also, if the debate of Ariete and the lack of debate in Espacio Abierto signifies the underlying equality and hierarchy, respectively, within each group.

A view of Espacio Abierto: openness and hierarchy

'Molly, would you like to say something', prompted Carlos. My heart started beating faster and I stuttered into motion, always hesitant to criticise and doubting my ability to truly judge the stories read aloud in Spanish, especially of a genre with which I am less than familiar.

'Yes, I liked it. But, I think you read too quickly. I liked the plot, but I didn't understand all of the details as I found the speed at which you read difficult to follow'. I knew that what I had said was relatively empty of value to the writer but saying anything was good enough to 'participate' and Carlos moved on to the attendee sitting to my left. I felt upset that I could not add more and

found the need to do more than listen stressful as times. In Espacio Abierto, there was such a demand on giving feedback. Most of the time I was not sure if what I was reading was good or bad, as I was not familiar with the genre. The science fiction always felt heavy handed, for instance I noted that day there was a story in which the powerful, omniscient leader was named 'The Eye', but I never knew if that was genre specific so was very hesitant to say anything. There were many attendees including three very well-established authors of science fiction and fantasy in Cuba, which made me feel even more foolish when it came time to sharing opinions.

The next writer to share was a writer from the provinces who had sent his work in through email to be read aloud by Carlos. When Carlos finished, he started to solicit feedback, noting he would write it down and submit it through email to the author. Trying to take notes, my hands started freezing up due to the air conditioner running on high and I sat on them to try and warm them back up. As Carlos moved around the circle, a few of the initial participants gave light praise or criticism. The story did not seem to solicit a strong reaction in them. Getting to Yoss, a very well-published author, about halfway around the circle, Carlos asks for his opinion. Stopping to think pensively, Yoss answers:

> The characters are not being introduced well enough. There isn't enough context to make them comprehensible. For instance, who is this character S.A.P.O.[33] [*por ejemplo, quien es la personaje de S.A.P.O.*]? There needs to be more context for the reader to fully understand the characters and the world of the story.

Other attendees seemed to agree as they continued to repeat the criticism as Carlos moved around the rest of circle. People repetaed: '*Que es S.A.P.O.? No entiendo... que es S.A.P.O.*?' [What is S.A.P.O.? I don't understand... what is S.A.P.O.?]. It was a point that had been well made. Agreement in the room was obvious not due to the nodding of heads or verbal concurrence, but rather due to the same comment being repeated by participants. I was unsure if this agreement was due to genuine consensus or rather due to the methodical procedure in which everyone had to say something;

[33] The name of the character of S.A.P.O. is an acronym because the character was not clearly human, but possibly a collective representation, like 'big brother' for example. I apologise for the limited description, but like the critics in the *taller,* I am not sure I understood fully who or what S.A.P.O was.

when pressured into giving criticism, repeating a well-thought out critique by a prolific author seemed safe.

Espacio Abeirto practices their openness through rigid structure. Everyone and anyone can join the group, share their work, and everyone must provide criticism. It creates a place of forced equality, which when tested seems to collapse. The forced participation of criticism was intimidating for me and also for a few other participants who regularly parroted comments previously said or said something empty of value, as I had in the vignette above. In contrast to the forced participation, the workshop provides a fantastic place to learn what constitutes good science fiction and fantasy. While the goal of the *taller* is universal participation, it seemed as if many people were there to learn, not to teach. In short, they were there to find 'exemplars' not only through reading good literature (like Poe and Lovecraft), but by hearing from and seeing how to be good science fiction and fantasy writers. Humphrey (1997) writes about exemplars as a necessary means to learning how to be a person in Mongolia – 'a person with no teacher is no-body' (34), she notes. This is something that is reflected by Carlos, the convenor of Espacio Abierto, when he noted, in the quote that opened this chapter, that 'you have to learn from the people who are doing well. You always have to learn from somebody. And it is best to learn from people who have done the best writing in the past'. While there may not be a connection between learning to write fiction and morality, as is the subject in Humphrey's paper, her examination of the teacher/disciple relationship contrasts interestingly with what is happening the Espacio Abierto *taller*. The forced participation in the group is intimidating because, while they spoke of openness and equality, the reality was that there were great differences in literary power between participants. Ignoring the differences does not create equality among the writers and could account for the reason the openness does not feel so welcoming at times for young writers. To return to my original question, people participate in Espacio Abierto for different reasons – some to learn and some to teach – but this was not reflected in the structure of the meeting.

A view of Grupo Ariete: critiques for learning and experimentation

Two weeks after I saw the hole in the roof of the building [discussed in Chapter Three], I was sitting on the ceramic floor of Raúl's office. We were in the middle of a workshop, but it felt like a lazy day and the workshop lacked the intensity it usually had when it was held in the room downstairs. People were sitting on the floor, leaning against the walls, or sitting on chairs with their legs semi-extended, slouching. It was the beginning of the summer and the new heat was slowing everything down. The fan mesmerized in the corner, adding a background rhythm to the meeting.

'El Escape,' began André, announcing the title of the short story he was about to read. And he continuesd at lightning fast pace. The room burst into chatter, some people hissing to get his attention. 'Sssssss...Slow down'. André began again, 'El Escape', but slower, trying to pronounce each word clearly, but he could not maintain it. His reading picked up speed, but the room seemed to have given up trying to slow him down. Trying to get comfortable, I rolled my head, stretching my neck. As I finished the circle, I looked down and noticed a giant ant, perhaps a carpenter ant or termite, walking toward my knee. In hopes that it would not crawl on me, I bent my knee and pulled my foot up. The insect stole my concentration. Remembering the hole in the roof, I thought about how this insect was probably a small bit of the problem. I made a quick note in my notebook: 'carpenter ant or termite crawls across the floor. Reading dystopias in a building with a precarious structure'. And I returned to the story.

André finished reading. There was a moment of silence as people roused from listening, but still no one spoke up. Isa told him that it was much better. '*Verdad* (Really)?' André questioned. '*En serio* (seriously)', Isa responded. Raúl was the first to present criticism, implying that the story needed some edits. 'It's too long', he said. 'There are a number of places where you could shorten it.' André began to interrupt, but Raúl continued, speaking over him. 'The story is an action adventures (*aventura de acción*), and there are moments of character interaction, but the story takes off at the start of the final part. Until then, there are just moments of action, action, action' he said waving his hand repeatedly in the air. 'And in these moments you are using trite, overused imagery. These images have been used often in Hollywood films, like Total Recall.' Someone interrupted with

agreement. Raúl continued, stressing the need for character development alongside the moments of action. Raúl's criticism, as he is the *asesor* or advisor of the group, is often prioritised, but it is not free from dispute or disagreement.

André seemed offended. Shaking his head, his shoulders tightened, and he reiterated the importance of the plot, summarizing why the characters need to take the actions described and why he could not edit them out. 'He is held by terrorists, he is fucked, the situation is fucked, he needs to look for an escape', he implored emotionally. His defensive stance signalled something to the workshop. The room wildly and quickly enlivened; most participants who had been watching the exchange jumped in. Even some who had seemed to be staring out of the window had an opinion. They all started talking to André at once, answering him, prodding him to take Raúl's comments seriously. 'We understand that... It's clear what's happening' shouted someone from the back corner. Yelling over them, Marlon in the front row defended the criticism put forward 'We know what kidnappers and terrorists do...' as if to say that the heart of the story is not what we know well, but what we, as readers, do not. The jumble of voices reiterated that action alone is not enough for the plot. The discussion died down as one voice persisted longest, speaking over the rest.

Raúl continued, clarifying his remarks with exact references: 'This boss, for example, what happens to him up until his death. Take me with you... '

'Why? Nothing happens to him...' said André, imploring people to understand his position.

'You know this, the author, but the people don't know this, the reader doesn't know this. You understand?' Raúl answered. The room is momentarily silent. André took in the criticism.

Lena spoke. '*Baja la guardia. No rompimos el cuento* ' – lower your guard. We aren't destroying your story – 'what we are saying is not destroying your story. It is making it stronger.'

Hearing the criticism of the story provoked me to question exactly what it is that we were sharing in this room? André reading a story he felt was completely his, yet through his sharing of it, people saw connections with Hollywood films, specifically *Total Recall*, that he did not intend. That critique while firmly based in literary criticism – clichés, trite action sequences – was also a moment of shared experience: a dependence on a film that is only visible to a reader who knows the film well and something that was unintended by the author. There was also a critique of what was

not in the room: a complete view of an important character. André, while living with the story in his head, was not bringing the full picture of the character of 'the boss' to his readers through the text. The participants were critiquing both what is brought to them through the story – Hollywood clichés – and what is not – a full understanding of 'the boss'. As participants in the room, or more specifically as representations of a reading public, they brought with them their own sets of experiences and knowledge. They provided literary criticism in the form of what not to do—prioritize action over character development—and also pointed out clearly both the unintended presences and absences in the room via the text. If people disagreed, it was up to the author to weigh the opinions presented, knowing that these audience members represented reactions of possible readers.

I had for some time been plagued by the idea that I may need to share a piece of creative writing with the group to fully feel like a participant. In so doing, I had been participating in the meetings both as an anthropologist and, as Carlos stated in the quote that opened this chapter, a new writer learning from those that are doing or have done. I had been trying to take on the criticism of others. Thinking of a story like André's – packed with action and plot – I began to wonder if stories need to be heavily plot driven at all. I must make sure to avoid trite imagery and I must remember to avoid tropes from Hollywood movies, or themes that have been used before, I thought. Finally, I must remember that the world I build in my head is only as transferable to an audience member as I can describe it in the words. Whether or not the reader is meant to infer or extrapolate from those words, nothing can exist without it being written.

Making notes in my notebook, I saw the ant again. I thought of the hole and what a fantasy or dystopia would be that, instead of depending on Hollywood action sequences, used a somewhat regular occurrence in Havana, such as a hole developing in a roof, to be something extraordinary. A hole with no end, a hole to somewhere else, or perhaps even, a hole with no answers... My notes started moving away from the room and into the possible plots and stories stemming from my experiences in this room, while I considered these critiques of André's story, the ant, and this building.

It occurred to me that the process of reading stories or poems in the workshop is not necessarily a singular or even linear act of sharing, critiquing and editing, but rather a complex

system of mutual sharing, learning and experimentation. The person being critiqued is central, but the attendees who listen to the story and provide the criticism or praise add to the compendium of shared knowledge about what a story should look like, sound like, or be. This affected the way the person who shared understood their text, but it also affected the way the other attendees saw their own texts or planned their future writing. While the person sharing is putting themselves forward, the act of critiquing is also the act of knowledge building for the participants, of what to do or what not to do in regard to their own writing. Even more, the stories shared provoked different reactions in the audience members, sparking new plot ideas and perhaps even, as I experienced, a moment where the listener is taken away from the room and into their own story-building world.

A place for 'learning and feeding': Shared creativity in the *talleres*

In Sabeti's (2018) work with a creative writing workshop, her reflections on group activities provoke an interesting question: 'What was it that I was bringing into this space if it was not a poem or short story?' (eBook). While the question comes from a position of self-conscious awareness about sharing her work with the group members (or rather not sharing as a participant observer), something with which I can relate, her answer shows the complicated interaction that occurs in these types of literary gatherings. She writes:

> the reading aloud of the texts (something they valued so highly) creates a community of speakers and listeners ... What was it that I was bringing into this space if it was not a poem or short story? I brought myself as reader, writer, and sharer in that community (2018, eBook)

Her focus is on the community, the way in which the poets 'diverge and align every two weeks' (*ibid*), and she questions what sort of criticism and co-writing is accepted, highlighting that possibly the group unites around critiques of 'technique' but leaves authorial 'inspiration' untouched (*ibid*).

Speaking of a co-authored chapter book by some of Ireland's most famous contemporary writers, Wulff (2017) highlights that 'the point here is that a writer's creativity does *not* arise in total isolation' (15). The goal of the authors she speaks of were to create a co-authored object to

analytically show how intertextuality and the canon influences how writers write. As I hope to have shown, central to the goal of the two *talleres* is the idea of education and specifically the sharing of techniques of writing through criticism, praise and knowledge of exemplar works of 'good' (and bad) literature.

After sharing an erotic short story about a man and woman in a hostel, Marlon received praise from many of the attending Grupo Ariete members. Yet booming with such certainty came Raúl's voice over the responses: '*Desnudo... Nunca usen la palabra "desnudo" en la ficción erotica*' ['Naked... never use the word "naked" in erotic fiction']. I quickly scribbled it into my notes in the off chance I decided to write an erotic story for the group at some point. Yet, there is more going on in these *talleres* than just an exchange of literary rules and techniques; there was an exchange of different types of knowledge and experience that people bring with them. When shared, this type of exchange leads to a different type of learning.

Bateson's (1987) would distinguish the different types of learning as 'proto- and deuterolearning' (133). While the rules provided in the *taller* represent a first stage of understanding of how to write, they are also learning more than the rules; they are learning the 'by-products of the learning process', the acquisition of 'insight' or the way in which the writers 'learn to learn' (*ibid*: 131). While the rules discussed in the *talleres* provide a 'blueprint' of what good writing looks like, it is the consideration and application of those rules to each's unique situation in the construction of their story that speaks to the creative process. As Bateson says, 'they acquire habits which are more subtle and pervasive than the tricks which the blueprint teaches them' (*ibid:* 129). Yet, there is also a sense of creative exchange, which goes beyond learning.

Lena spoke at length with me about her experiences of the *taller*. She stressed that the most important reason for her participation was the ability to learn from other members. She explained to me her expectations of the workshops: 'When I read there, I am myself expecting criticism. I need criticism, I need sincere criticism, sincere, pragmatic criticism, formal criticism'. She continued:

> 'When you write something, when you read something aloud for people, you expect some reaction and when you hear "that's so nice"... or even "beautiful" [*bonito*]... that is the most disgusting word. Run away when you hear that word! It means one of two things: either,

> they aren't taking you seriously or they're just too closed and are not the reader you want or the reader you were expecting'.

The *taller* is for critique. It is a place for a writer to present their work and expect engaged feedback. Yet, she clarifies her position, insisting that she does not only go for the criticism and editing help. Echoing what I felt in the *taller* with regard to my own work, both academic and fictional, she continued on:

> 'Listening to the other stories is a growing process for me, as a writer. So I take it really seriously both when I read and when I listen. For me the *taller* is really important. Even when I know I don't need it for me. I don't need it--I write by myself, I edit by myself, maybe slowly, but in a strict way--but the *taller* is a special space with other minds, with similar interest, but fresh points of view. So for me... I told you, sometimes it is not about the stories, it is... I don't have a proper way to say this. It is about inspiration, it is like the word goes into your mind and touches something. You feel illuminated. I just write it down immediately, because I cannot lose it. Believe me, when you let it be for a time, you lose it. Because your mind is so full of the things you think you eventually forget. It is an inspiration for me. I am always learning and feeding myself in the *taller*.'

I am interested in the duality of experience in the *taller*. On one level, the criticism and editing help is the purpose of the *taller*, especially evident in the structured format and feedback routines of Espacio Abierto meetings. Lena speaks also of a second level, though, especially evidenced in the chaotic exchange and dedication to experimentation of Grupo Ariete.

When I spoke to Maya, attendee of both *talleres* and the organiser for Ariete about a similar topic, she described the *talleres* as places where your mind works like a sieve [*tamice*], taking good things from the meetings and letting others flow on. She told me:

> When you take your story to the *taller*, people may say 'this story is very good'. Or on the contrary, 'how ugly, it's very bad'. But that is just one thing. In fact, we are not only working on the stories of others. When I arrive at my house [after the *taller*] I have many ideas and I look forward to writing [*tengo muchas ganas sobre todo de escribir*]. It is how the process of creation [in the *talleres*] feels more tangible. Far from learning this or that narrative technique or how to compose stories, what the *taller* offers is one way to access the panorama of young Cuban writers. It is an accessible kitchen.

Maya's cooking metaphor (the kitchen and the sieve) seems to perfectly describe the atmosphere of *talleres*. The kitchen is the room in the house in which you create something from available

ingredients and resources. What you make depends on you as much as the resources that are available in the room at that time. Describing the space of the *taller* as an 'accessible kitchen', Maya is speaking of potential: creative potential and collaborative potential. It also resonates nicely with Lena's description of inspiration in the *talleres* as an act of feeding and being fed. Like Maya, her imagery is cooperative and collaborative. You are bringing something to the *taller* and you are taking from the others in the room. It was something that I felt as well when the critiques presented of André's work led me to a different level of interaction, one in which the discussion of his work prompted me to reflect on what I could do with my work. Being in the *taller* that day made me want to write. In fact, it gave me my story and made me want to write *it*.

To return to Sabeti (2018), she conducts research with creative writers who situate their workshops in gallery spaces. They write creative works based on paintings they see, but, as she notes, the works they create do not come singularly from looking at these paintings, but rather from a 'matrix of relations' (Sabeti 2018, citing Ingold). For example, speaking in particular of the way one interlocutor describes the process of writing a poem, Sabeti notes, this poem comes not only from studying the painting in question, but also from her interlocutor's 'past, her role as a mother … the effects of visiting Mitte … We might say that one artwork reminded her of this event – a feeling – in her own life' (*ibid*). Sabeti also notes that her interlocutor's way of writing the poem is tied up with her awareness of herself as writer and what constitutes 'acceptable literary form' (*ibid*). The writers then take their work into the workshop where they receive criticism and suggestions from the other participants, a process which another interlocutor defines as 'making something, in whatever way, making it alongside other people' (*ibid*). Sabeti argues that the editorial input of the other writers changes and contributes to the works presented. This leads her to note that 'This class is not just a meeting of people; it is also a meeting of texts, of texts and people, and sometimes (though not always) of texts and artworks' (*ibid*). The idea of a workshop as 'an accessible kitchen' makes central the acts of mutual and reciprocal creativity in workshop spaces.

On one of the lackadaisical, summer Saturday meetings of Grupo Ariete, Raúl decided to share one of his stories. As the *asesor* [advisor] of this group, he does not share his own work often. He read the first chapter of a book he was working on and went on to explain the rest. He described the shape of the book as *una caja china* [a Chinese box] and attributed his idea for the form to a

woman who had presented in the *taller* before I arrived. She had written about a story about a *caja china.* After the meeting, I asked him to explain further. He developed his idea from listening to a story shared by this woman. He explained that as she described the intricacies of the particular object, it made him 'think of a story in the shape of *caja china*'. He continued:

> I started thinking about the story inside the story, how you could open up one door and find something else inside. I knew the form must have already been used so I thought of a structure based on the idea of *caja china*... but a new structure. The stories would be about the Revolution. Every ten years of the Revolution was a small datagram. One story of the sixties, the seventies, the eighties for instance, but the stories would not end. [They were connected but not self-contained.] Her idea was the idea that generated mine. The feedback for that story gave me the vision to do it. That is, you are not stealing the idea. But my idea came from a certain element of hers. Right? This is what I say [in the *talleres*]. That they can also use ideas from each other.

In the case of this final example, Raúl shows the layers of connection at work in these meetings. The idea of a Chinese box was introduced through a woman in the *taller*, through one of her stories. While the trope of the Chinese box appears in a number of classic works of literature both fictional and nonfictional (see Plato's *Symposion,* Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* for example), it was presented in a moment when it resonated with possibility for Raúl. Aware that the form of the object had been translated into story format before, Raúl was looking to learn the rules of the shape in order to change it and to make it new again. The story Raúl presented, while distinctly his own, existed due to a network of intertextual references of the box – what not to repeat – and the unknown personal experience of the woman who brought the idea into the room in the first place.

Conclusion: the *talleres,* education and co-creativity

To return to a revision on the provocation Sabeti (2018) forms in her chapter: Besides their work, what do the *taller* participants bring with them into the room? It is clear that the structure of Espacio Abierto leads to a specific type of sharing, one that is concentrated on rules of style, syntax and genre: a means of proto learning. Yet the participants, especially the accomplished authors,

bring also a form of knowledge and experience of writing, which is shared and asks for creative engagement, extrapolation and development: a type of deuteroleaning. In the chaos of the critical style of Grupo Ariete, it becomes clear that dialogic structure, although loud, permits free discourse and a type of push back on the rules. People are not just there to learn, but to disagree, to question and to push other participants. Some practicalities ('never use the word "naked" in erotic fiction!') are accepted without much thought, but the ways in which experimentation succeeded or failed is up for discussion.

Moreover, the *talleres* offer something else. Through criticism, the writers reflect on what has been said and what has been read. There is a creative collaboration between the people in the room, like 'an accessible kitchen' where different ingredients are available for creation. As Lena said about the *taller*, the author receives feedback on their work, but the audience too is engaged. For those listening, 'it is like the word goes into your mind and touches something. You feel illuminated.' If the premise of the *taller* as Carlos said, is to introduce writing practitioners, both new and old, to examples of innovative techniques, successful plots, and well-written prose and poetry, then the writers that share are not only sharing their work, but all the things—canonical works, authors or creatives of different mediums and examples of experimentation, objects of interest like the *caja china*—that provoked them to write. The room in which the taller happens, no matter how barren of furniture or coldly sterile the temperature, is full of layers of co-creativity and interaction both with the figures in the room and the spectres they bring with them.

CHAPTER SIX

'Making it interesting': Literature in performance and in print

> *I saw a group who were disorganized, they needed to focus, they needed to rethink what they wanted to get out of the group. And of course, I told them. It wasn't easy at the beginning, imagine being fresh in the group and starting with these strong ideas, strong statements. I started with them in August, and in January we had a meeting and it was a strong, problematic meeting with serious discussion, but at the end, when the group was calm, people saw our intention, mine and Abel's, to organize it and get it going in one direction. Get something for us, that makes the best peña we can. And then we organized these peñas that were conceptually different, remember mine with the dancers... I was able to do different things without losing our spirit, but also making it interesting, more interesting for the public in general (Milena)*

Milena stood in front of the small crowd of dedicated attendees of the *peña literaria* [literary salon] and a larger group of bar patrons in the courtyard café, Hurón Azul, on the grounds of the Union de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC). She was wearing a long skirt and make-up, which made her appearance more formal than usual. Introducing herself and her work, she noted that her reading would be accompanied by two dancers, who had choreographed a piece in response to the story she was about to read. Sitting in the middle of the semi-circle of chairs and tables occupied by members of Grupo Ariete and their guests, I felt a part of the group, silently listening to the readings. Yet, I could still hear loud conversations continuing behind me as noisy bar patrons who, while aware there were readings ongoing, were not interested in listening.

The two dancers, one man and one woman, were wearing clothes that resembled streetwear. The man wore tight, long shorts, and before making his way to the staging area, took off his shirt to dance bare-chested. The woman was wearing a flowing skirt and a tight, cropped top that ended above her stomach. Their advancement to the front of the crowd seemed to engage the

curiosity of the bar patrons, and some of the nosier tables toward the back became quiet. The dancers took their positions, holding them until Milena started her reading. She stood behind the pair, positioning herself in a place that was not intrusive to their movements, but was still a part of their performance.

'Comunicación', she starts. '*Carmen termina de adobar las piezas de pollo y pone el aceite a calentar…*' [Communication. Carmen finishes marinating the chicken legs and puts on the oil to heat…]. The woman dancer extends her arms and legs, dancing in a way that elicits a sense that she is moving things around, cooking while dancing. The man sits on a chair unmoving. The woman arches and strains around the stage as Milena describes the ordinary process of frying chicken. The story picks up speed as Carmen, the character, still aware of her partner's immobility and his lack of assistance, moves from cooking to the bathroom with her kitchen knife.

'*Con los dedos busca el punto donde se unen las capas del cráneo, siente la hendidura y dibuja un círculo en ese lugar con el cuchillo antes de comenzar a cortar*' [With her fingers she looks for the point where the layers of her skull unite, she feels the indentation and draws a circle in that place with her knife before beginning to cut]. The dance is beautiful, which contrasts nicely to the drama of the story, as the character Carmen, cuts a hole in her skull. The story continues, Carmen, dripping blood, finds her husband. The two performers unite as they dance an act of intercourse detailed and nuanced by Milena's reading. Her writing (and reading) depicts an act of exceptional violence and even graphic horror, as the dancers spin together, bend over one another, pulling together and pushing apart.

'Coño [shit],' says one of the bar patrons behind me as he and his friend seem shocked into silence. As far as I could tell the bar patrons are listening and watching enthralled by the spectacle. Upon finishing, it seems that everyone is clapping. The dancers and Milena applaud each other, and she takes her seat.[34]

In this chapter, I will look at how the *ethos* of each *taller* is questioned when there is a prospect that their group's reputation and work will encounter an audience. Espacio Abierto, who centred their *taller* on an ethos of openness, in fact produced a very digital literary magazine (or

[34] I have included the full reprint of the story in Appendix B of this thesis.

ezine) in which publication was very competitive, and organised *peñas literarias* [literary salons], which focused on the work of published authors. Grupo Ariete highlighted a distinction between the way they conceived of audiences depending on the medium through which the story was delivered, something I will show in a comparison of their monthly *peña,* Mazorka, with the way Milena, editor of the group's digital literary *revista* [magazine] *Mazorkazo*, spoke about her editorial choices. In both of these cases regarding Grupo Ariete, however, and like Espacio Abierto, there seems to be a difference between how the groups understood their work and how they spoke about the experience of the *talleres.* The *taller* of Grupo Ariete was conducted in a manner of chaotic individuality. Conflicting opinions, presented with passion, showed the self-confidence of the different members to speak on certain topics, and the lack of hierarchy led to a type of egalitarianism very different to the stratified openness perpetuated by the structure of Espacio Abierto. Yet, the loud, individual bravado seemed less apparent in the tone of their *peña* and *revista.* What happened to the ethos of the *talleres* when the groups made their work public?

Again dealing with the relationship between the writer and their reader or audience, this chapter contrasts the different presentations of 'writer' necessary for the people I worked to encounter an unknown audience. If an established relationship with a reader or audience is important to *being a writer*, then this chapter shows the different ways in which the writers I worked with adapted to meet the expectations of their listening public: to engage them or entertain them. In contrast to the last chapter, where the writers I knew shared their texts among known co-workers and colleagues, critiquing and creating together, this chapter looks at the moment in which their texts meet an unknown public for the first time. Unlike the medium of the book, though, the *peñas* require a specific iteration of writer and literature in order to be successful. I am interested in examining how this iteration makes real and challenges the notion of *being a writer* for this group in Havana.

Peña de Espacio Abierto and Revista *Korad*

I walked into Alma Mater, a bookshop on the corner of San Lazaro and Infanta, two main thoroughfares near the University of Havana. I looked around but could not see anyone recognizable from Espacio Abierto, so I turned to the man behind the counter. 'Excuse me, *la peña*

del grupo Espacio Abierto...' He interrupted me before I finished and pointed to a door at one end of the store. '*Gracias* [Thanks]'.

The room was windowless and chairs were set up in rows facing a front table. I waved hello to some participants I knew and took a seat. Carlos found me and introduced me to some of the other attendees. After about 10 minutes, the *peña* started. '*Buenas tardes y bienvenidos* [Good afternoon and welcome]' started one of the co-convenors of Espacio Abierto. 'We are so happy to have with us today Laura Poce, who has travelled to Cuba from Argentina.' She had come to Cuba for different reasons but was invited to speak at the *peña* while she was in Havana. The presentation continued. The author talked about her newest publication and then participated in a question and answer session. Raúl asked a number of questions, as did Abel[35], Carlos, Gretel, the editor of the imprint for science fiction and fantasy, and Yoss. They were interested in the way in which the publishing market works in Argentina. Laura spoke about royalties, about book price mark-ups and the upcoming book fair in Buenos Aires. Raúl asked about her current interests. She said she was interested in '*la mujer como un personaje, el carácter de la mujer, mujer como un lector, como una ficción*' [the woman as a fictional character, the character of the woman, woman as reader, as a fiction]. The audience seemed interested, but the conversation was controlled by the established writers in the room. The presentation lasted no more than thirty minutes, but it was obvious from the way the group interacted – with quick tonal shifts from serious to joking that would leave only certain people laughing – that the attendees in the room were comprised of two groups of people. One group who led the *talleres* and knew one another well, and the unpublished, silent group of members, who were spectators of both the visiting author and of the relationships of the co-convenors and their friends.

The *peña* organised by Espacio Abierto was markedly different from the ones I had attended for Grupo Ariete. Instead of a place to showcase the group's work, the *peña* acted as a means of discussion or edification. Authors from outside the group were invited to participate for the benefit of group members. The location of the *peña* was technically public, as it was in a bookstore where anyone could walk in and curiously stumble onto the presentation. Yet, it was not publicised.

[35] This is Abel, a well-published author who participates occasionally in Espacio Abierto *talleres*. He is different from the Abel who appears later in this chapter, a member of Grupo Ariete.

Unlike the *taller*, which had a drive for openness, the *peñas* felt insular. This is not to say they would not welcome any new additions, as they warmly welcomed me. Rather, it seemed that there was a hierarchy of who was meant to participate in the discussion, and the informality and familiarity between the co-convenors and their friends that, at times, seemed exclusive.

Similarly, the digital magazine organised by the group *Korad* had been in publication for years. It had a dedicated website and accepted submissions from around the country. It also included both Yoss and well-published author Daína Chaviano[36] as editorial collaborators, which extended the attention and readership the magazine received. For members of Espacio Abierto, especially those just starting to write, attending meetings to learn the craft of writing science fiction and fantasy did not guarantee a publication in *Korad*. In fact, publication in *Korad* was considered an important milestone in the career of a new, Cuban writer of science fiction and fantasy, and one of prestige. Sitting in my living room drinking coffee, Carlos and I were talking about the prospects of young writers in Espacio Abierto. We were speaking about why people stop coming to the *talleres.* He told me: 'If the thing they write is never up for any contests, isn't selected for anthologies, isn't selected for *Korad*, they aren't going anywhere, and they get tired and realize [that they may not be good writers].'

[36] Chaviano is a fantasy author who moved to Miami when she garnered success in publishing outside of Cuba. She is a part of the generation of writers of the 1990s who left Cuba, referenced in the first chapter as one of the generations proceeding Grupo Ariete to which they compared themselves.

Figure 6.1: Cover Illustration for Korad 23 (accessible at https://korad.cubava.cu)

Again, in contrast to the *talleres* of Espacio Abierto, the editorial board of *Korad* is selective in who they allow to publish. In fact, it is only in being selective that they have been able to achieve this kind of success with their digital publication. The magazine has enough of a following to warrant an annual prize for which the winning stories receive 500 CUP (or around 20 CUC/USD), and the publication (again digital only) of the winning texts in the *revista*. This prize is in line with other national prizes and is incredibly valuable to any young writer hoping to catch the attention of the publishing system in Cuba.

I have introduced the *peña* and the *revista* of Espacio Abierto in order to contextualise the group outside of the *taller*. The *taller*, as discussed in the previous chapter, espouses an ethos of openness. However, the *peña* and the *revista* serve a different function for the group. The *peña* provides a space for long-term members of the group, most of whom are published, to listen to visiting authors speak about varying topics, including current interests and techniques. If, like Laura Poce from Argentina, the visiting authors come from outside Cuba, then the group is able to learn about publishing trends and the book market in other places. The *revista*, which is a project edited and maintained by the co-convenors of Espacio Abierto, is a way for the group to elevate their position within the literary field in Cuba, offering prestigious prizes and well-selected new

works of fiction. The participation in the *taller*, then, is different from the participation in the other Espacio Abierto spaces.

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn my attention to the *peña* and *revista* of Grupo Ariete. I have chosen to do so because both of these outlets concentrate on the work of group members specifically. These diverse forums provide an interesting counterpoint to my discussion of the *talleres*, whereby the group members think differently about their writing and the way in which it meets various types of audiences in alternate spaces.

Peña Mazorka

In March of 2015, Grupo Ariete organized the first public reading of their works, Peña Mazorka, which, as Milena references in the opening quote, had the goal of presenting their work and the group's 'spirit' to the literary community. In the quote, Milena speaks about a moment that occurred before I worked with the group, but which seemed like a pivotal moment with regard to their sense of identity. Around this time, the group published a first anthology, the publisher of which was interested in understanding what made the group special. This prompt led them to create their declaration, which I discussed in Chapter One. While deciding upon and defining their 'spirit', they also had discussions about getting the group 'going in one direction' with regards to their *peña.*

The monthly *peñas* of Grupo Ariete are held on the grounds of UNEAC (the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba). This venue was organised through Raúl, who holds union membership. In contrast to the image invoked in their declaration, that of a battering ram breaking down the walls of Cuban literary institutions and the ethos of *experimentación* in the *talleres*, the choice to hold the Peña Mazorka on the grounds of the elite writer's union seemed conservative. It did, however, provide the group with an opportunity to literally bring their work to the steps of the literary old guard. Yet this choice of locale, and the expected audience associated with the place, affected how the group members conceived of their work, with their *ethos* manifesting differently in the ways they constructed their presentations.

Olszewska (2015) writes of a consciousness, amongst the Afghan poets she worked with in Iran, about ideas of reception during the process of creation. Over time, she notes, their awareness of reception changed the way in which they wrote. Citing Bakhtin (1986), she writes of his theory of speech genres, and specifically his theory of 'addressivity' in spoken communication. In this theory, he argues that utterances are always intended for a specific addressee, which means that those utterances and the addressee are constitutive (*ibid*: 99), and that utterances are historically and socially contingent (*ibid*: 99). Much of Bakhtin's work is concerned with the *consummation* of work through the dialogic relationship between the participating agents and subjects, whether that is the author and reader, the author and hero or character (see Bakhtin 1990), or even the author and the literary canon (see Holquist 1990). Building on Bakhtin's work, Olszewska writes: 'The same is true of poetic genres' (2015: 97). Highlighting two poets with whom she worked, she noted that the differences in their poetic choices, structures, and styles, is due to a 'shift in their intended audiences and their sharply contrasting expectations of what poetry is and what it should do' (*ibid*: 97). Part of the work of being a poet, amongst her interlocutors, is 'establishing connections with sympathetic audiences for their works', and, it is only 'after this new audience is found and the creative process adjusted to meet its expectations, [that] successful artists can eventually gain respect' (*ibid:* 111-112). In this chapter, I show the ways in which my interlocutors adjusted their work in order to meet their understanding of audience expectation in the *peña* and the *revista.* In fact, it is only the authors who adjusted their work for the audience who were able to be consummated as authors in the *peña,* as those who did not were simply ignored.

Sprawled over the corner of Calle 17 and Calle H in the neighbourhood Vedado, UNEAC feels like a creative oasis. Situated in an old colonial mansion, it comprises different creative departments—writing, film, fine arts, music—and spaces for their members to hold conferences and workshops. There is a cafeteria, which serves food for those attending any formal event on the grounds, as well as a garden café and bar, Huron Azul, which is open to the public and provides a place for cheap beers, Cuban tea and coffee, and rum. In the evenings, there are weekly programs or special events, often musical, which the public can attend for a small entrance fee. The grounds around the building are incredibly well maintained. Palm fronds and succulents push through the high colonial fence and the house is almost hidden by tall, shade-giving trees. The space where

Peña Mazorka is held, is to the side of the main, original building, near the bar toward the back of the garden. Between the bar and the old mansion, there are a number of wrought iron tables and chairs. The red-tiled patio is surrounded by trees and bushes that provide nice coverage from the sun and separate the space from the road on the other side of the fence. The readings were organized around the shallow steps, on the side of the main house. These steps led to a veranda, where the attendees were able to retreat in the event of stormy weather during the rainy season.

Around these steps, the patio opened up a bit more, allowing space for a microphone set up and a few chairs to be placed in front of the group. While the readers occupied the empty space at the bottom of the steps and their audience claimed the nearest tables, there were still a number of tables closer to the bar that were often unoccupied by *peña* attendees. While the *peña* drew its own crowd of about thirty people, the time and day—after work on a Tuesday—meant that there were often a number of other patrons of the garden bar who had not come for the reading. These patrons would mostly be artists, members or employees of UNEAC and would be there socialising, drinking and chatting loudly, regardless of the obvious salon taking place around them. It was not uncommon to be acutely aware of the silence of the immediate space surrounding the performance while being fully aware of the laughter and loud banter coming from the tables of the bar patrons. The spaces were not separate, but rather, in competition.

Figure 6.2 Audience at Peña Mazorka, photo from Raúl Aguiar

While the *peña literaria* stemmed from the *taller*, they were very different entities. Originally, I was under the impression that the *peña* was a place for oral publication, or a way to broadcast one's individual work when the medium of print was not as accessible, but in fact, the group treated the event as a form of *publicidad* [publicity]. They distributed flyers advertising the *peña* and decided on free entry to encourage attendees. Often, however, the listening audience consisted solely of group members and their *conocidos* [acquantainces]. The UNEAC members, and workers stopping by the bar at the end of the day signified their unknown 'public'. The *peña*, then, may be a way to present work publicly, but only specific types of work and in specific ways. As Raúl concisely explained it to me as we talked in his office one day:

> In the *taller*, it does not matter if you read well or poorly. It doesn't matter how you read. We are there to criticize the story. But the *peña* is different. The *peña* is a show or spectacle [*espectáculo*[37]]. You can't read a story that is too literary, that is too long. Not something that is too philosophical either. There are stories that are rich, that are beautiful for publication, but not for the *peña*... But the reading is important too. Fernando read really well. He

[37] *Espectáculo* can be translated as show, spectacle or even performance. I have decided to use it as show and spectacle interchangeably throughout because I think what they are doing sits somewhere in between the definitions of these two English words. It is a show, but the goal of using certain themes, especially violence and sexuality, along with music, theatre or dancing, speaks to the awareness of a need to claim attention, as I discuss later in this chapter.

projected his voice. But André read very poorly. And that time we lost the audio... it was terrible. No one was projecting enough to keep the audience engaged.

The *peña* is a literary '*espectáculo*' and requires the author not just to read any piece, but to read a piece of appropriately entertaining work in an engaging manner. A writer has a certain understanding about the duty they have in the *peña*, not only one of writer to reader, but also one of performer to their audience. The notion of the spectacle, though, was not solely for engaging the audience who purposefully attended Peña Mazorka, but was an attempt to win the attention of those in the garden who had come to socialise and encountered the *peña* by chance. Often, in one of what seemed like the cruellest forms of criticism, the patrons of the bar would listen to some of the more engaging writers perform, turning back to their boisterous conversation as other presented. Those writers who tended to be shy or quiet, even in the setting of the *taller,* became almost invisible to all but the most dedicated listener in the gardens of UNEAC.

Figure 6.3: Ramuf on the steps of UNEAC

A reading and a spectacle: The anniversary *peña*, March 2016

Over the course of the year of putting on these *peñas*, the members of Grupo Ariete decided to include musical acts between the readings, for the purpose of engaging the audience. On one occasion, Raúl performed his new *trovas*, a type of Cuban ballad that is very poetic, but mostly they brought in new, often avant-garde, bands.[38] The anniversary *peña* for Grupo Ariete, in March of 2016, involved an experimental band Ramuf (or *fumar*, the verb 'to smoke' spelt backward) and most of the writers attempted to integrate a performance into their readings. There was a large crowd of both attendees of the *peña* and bar patrons, mixing together throughout the garden. Once again, the non-performance related noise could be overwhelming at times. Many readers overcame the bar noise to an extent, and Ramuf's innovative performances in the interludes, which used radio static and gargled water as instruments, captured the curiosity of most.

Stefany, Abel and Nelson moved to the front to read. The group had decided that reading in threes would keep the attention focused for longer, as moving writers to and from the stage provided an unintended lapse in which chatter would begin. Stefany read a poem called 'This is not a poem'. 'Are you nervous?' I whispered as she sat, waiting her turn. She shook her head yes, with wide eyes. '*Pero me gusta leer poemas más que historias cortas'* [But I like to read poems more than short stories], stressing that it involved less time in front of the audience. As she read, she included moments where she acted out what she read. When she mentioned a high-pitched laugh, she paused, laughingly screeching. She pulled a face in disgust, as the poem depicted. It felt like more than a reading; it felt very much like a performed piece.

Abel[39] read next, and asked Javier to join him on stage. Javier came up with his guitar. Abel read methodically, articulating clearly, but decided against a dramatized reading as Stefany had done. His story was about boredom and death. Lying on a bed with a loaded gun by his bedside, the protagonist gave himself continual tests to decide whether he should kill himself. A coin toss and whether a mosquito would leave a room in a minute or not, were some of the scenarios to decide his fate. Abel reads:

[38] Something that is reflected as a goal in Ariete's *Declaración de Principios*

[39] A reprint of Abel's story has been included in Appendix C.

> Necesito un evento que me garantice grandes probabilidades de morir. Ahora sí, al fin, cómo no lo había pensado antes, cantaré Her Majesty, de los Beatles, si antes de terminar no empieza a llover, me vuelo la cabeza, eso sí funcionará, la ciudad lleva un mes de sequía y hoy anunciaron un día sin lluvia, con cielo despejado. Empiezo a cantar: [I need an event that guarantees me the highest probability of dying. Now, finally, how had I not thought of it before, I will sing 'Her Majesty' by the Beatles, if before it ends it has not started raining, my head will fly, that will work, the city has been dry for a month and today They announced a day without rain, with clear skies. I begin to sing:]

Javier started strumming his guitar and, on perfect pitch, began: 'Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl...' before singing the chorus. Abel continued reading; you could hear the audience becoming captivated, as silence spread throughout the bar. His story shifted to the graphic description of a sexual scene. The explicit content, and his deadpan demeanour elicited a few whistles and scoffing laughs from around the space. He had their attention.

After he finished reading, Nelson was next to read. '*Candela*,' he said, speaking to the audience, '*que dificil seguir a ellos*' [Shit, how difficult to follow them]. The audience participated, laughing, but as Nelson read, he did so without the spectacle, and the incidental audience immediately went back to their drinking and conversation, as the bar noise increased with laughter and loud, post-work chatter.

I spoke with Milena after the readings, in order to understand better the reason for the different types of performances. She told me: 'When you go to Huron Azul for Mazorka, maybe you don't have a lot of people there eager to hear you, but if you have one person there, you have the respect of that person and you have to give the best *espectáculo* of your literature that you are able to give'. While most of the readers, like Nelson, seemed not to react to the growing noise disruption during their readings, Milena made it obvious that the writers were, in fact, aware of the less than 'eager' crowd. 'How does the experience of the *peña* differ from the *taller*?' I asked her. 'When I am in the taller, sometimes, I am not confident' she said, 'I was afraid to share my work because the group was so open with criticism to anyone... but in the *peña*, I am a *personaje* [character]'. In trying to understand further, I wanted her to clarify what she meant when she said that she was a 'character'. She continued:

> 'In the *peña*, I am a writer who tries to be attractive, not only in the reading, but in myself, physically... I use my body, my voice, my whole being to attract the public. I try to be nice, like, sexy, in my ways. Maybe I am not sexy, maybe I am not attractive for people who are looking for petite women and legs and makeup, but in my own style, I am trying to be, always trying to be attractive, interesting at least, and I read with intention and I stand up. If I see the public, thinking and talking, and losing attention, I stand up, and I read louder and I act and present my story with a comment. "Thank you for being so attentive with us"... I am being ironic, I know, but people need these kind of messages first to pay attention to you. So I know, the *peña* is a show [*espectáculo*]. And I hope, maybe not with our *peña* in UNEAC, but at some point in my life, I will be able to organize a big spectacle [*espectáculo*]'.

This assertion of individual character in the face of an unwelcoming crowd is something Wardle (2018a) writes about in relation to social settings in the Caribbean. He calls them acts of 'contrapuntality' and 'talkover' (*ibid:* 320). As he continues: 'Entering the shared space the newcomer may not be greeted, welcomed or otherwise 'allowed in' at all ... Instead, the entrant begins to 'make a noise', that is, starts to 'talk' their own character over the rhythm of the situation-in-process' (*ibid:* 320). For Milena, the readings at UNEAC are unique; she is attempting to gain attention through her character, but she ultimately wants to guide that attention toward her work. To catch the audience, to attract them, she takes on the persona of a character.

In a certain environment, the writer cannot hide behind the words they present. In different literary salons I attended, in bookstore for the *peña* of Espacio Abierto for instance, the audience assumes a different quality. At times they still talk or continue side commentaries, but usually they are told, equally loudly, to stop being noisy by another attendee. Yet, those are unique places where literary readings are expected, and people listen to the words of the writers as they read. In Hurón Azul, at UNEAC, however, the writer, as Milena pointed out, needs to be something more: a character in their own right, putting on an *espectáculo.*

The Spanish word *espectáculo* can be defined as both 'show' and 'spectacle' and I have chosen to do so in this thesis because Peña Mazorka is both. Upon asking for clarification on her usage of the word, Milena provided the English word 'spectacle' purposefully as her definition. However, Peña Mazorka means different things for different group members, and members participate in the production differently. Beeman (1993) writes about the categorization of theatre and spectacle as different than other performances based on the three categories. He writes:

> The use of three descriptive dimensions – efficacy vs entertainment in intent, participation vs observation in the audience's role and symbolic representation vs literal self-presentation in the performer's role – thus permits a rough distinction between theatre and spectacle, on the one hand, and other performance forms, on the other (*ibid:* 379).

While all readers believe the *peña* is for the entertainment of an observing audience, some readers, like Milena, see themselves as a 'character' purposefully changing their appearance and presentation style, as well as the medium of delivery (i.e. not just a reading) to attract an audience. Yet, other readers, like Nelson, decide to read their work, doing so more clearly and loudly than he would normally read in the *taller*, but not disguising himself or changing the medium of his story. The performance of some members, and the reading of others, seems to challenge the notion of performance, or show, as altered space or symbolic reality (Turner 1986), as the *peña* as a whole is not one singular entity. Instead, the different conceptions of the *peña* for group members are reflected in the reception by the audience who, have differing reactions to readers, deem some worthy of their attention and others not.

MacAloon (1984) defines what constitutes spectacle as something that must be oriented around the visual, must be 'of a certain size and grandeur' (*ibid: 234)*, must 'institutionalise the bicameral roles of actors and audiences, performers and spectators' (*ibid:* 234), and must be of 'dynamic form... [so] the spectators must be excited in turn' (*ibid:* 244). In the case of Mazorka, the notion of 'size and grandeur' is of course inapplicable and, perhaps, problematises their definition of the *peña* as spectacle. However, the interesting relationship between audience and writer speaks to exactly why certain readings seem spectacular and others do not: Milena's and Abel's readings, for instance, engaged the audience with contrasting audio-visual cues. The violence of Milena's story contrasted with the beauty of the dance, eliciting verbal acknowledgement of awe from a participatory audience. Abel's explicit, heterosexual sex scene, which dehumanized the woman character, directly followed an interlude of the sweetly strummed chorus of 'Her Majesty' by the Beatles. The audience responded with whistles and scoffs, but in appreciation of the performance. Why then do Milena, Raúl, Stefany and Abel, to name a few, treat these literary readings as spectacles, whilst others do not? Not only is a spectacle impossible without an audience – or as

MacAloon writes, if either the audience or presenter 'is missing, there is no spectacle' (1984:243) – but the audience in Peña Mazorka is absent without the spectacle; the two seem to be mutually constitutive in the space of the *peña*. I should note that this of course relates to the audience of bar patrons and not the audience of group members and their acquaintances who dutifully watch all readers. Yet, it is the former audience that is of the most interest to the members of Grupo Ariete, as it constitutes a certain type of 'public', one comprised of artists within the hierarchy of UNEAC and independent of the readers who already know their work.

As Turner (1986) writes 'performances, particularly dramatic performances, are the manifestations par excellence of human and social processes' (84). Yet, unlike Turner's conception of social drama (1986), the hopes of Grupo Ariete for these performances are not as a means of reintegration, but rather as a means of disruption. In his work with Cuban baseball fans, Carter (2008) writes specifically about what the spectacle of the sport offers the people who attend or watch the games. He writes, quoting MacAloon, 'A spectacle "is about seeing, sight, and oversight" (MacAloon 1984: 270) but is also about being seen' (*ibid:* 187). Carter argues that baseball is a 'spectacle of *cubanidad'* (*ibid:* 187), which reflects not only the health of the state, socialism and Cuban society, but also a culture of disagreement about the aforementioned that plays out through different groups when they '*descutir pelota'* (*ibid*: 188) or argue about the game. As he writes, 'spectacles often result in a temporary mediation of social conflict, producing heightened tension between different groups as actors and spectators debate the significance, meanings and outcomes of particular events' (*ibid:* 188). The spectacle becomes one such place through which a community engages in a critical discussion.

Like Carter's baseball fans using the game to unite and engage in a debate of the sport *cum* the state, socialism, and quotidian Cuban experience, the space of UNEAC brings together the writers of Grupo Ariete, who are attempting to upend the literary *status quo*. By using the specific type of performance of spectacle, the writers are attempting to be seen by the bar patrons, the exact people they are both hoping to attract, and with whom they fundamentally disagree. The notion of 'being seen', then, is both literal and metaphorical and, importantly, a mechanism of disruption. While the *peñas,* from which the vignettes above originate, were slowly evolving toward a complete spectacle after a year of development, the idea of *creating* a spectacle was recent.

suggested by Raúl and fostered through Milena and her partner Abel, the form was still in its infancy when I left fieldwork. As the performances change and become more spectacular, what will happen to the literature presented? What is sacrificed through the adoption of the medium of spectacle? While it is through spectacle that Grupo Ariete can claim the space of Hurón Azul and the attention of UNEAC members who are sitting there, the attempt to move away from their foundational conception of literature (see Declaration of Principles), deciding to avoid anything 'too long', 'too literary' or 'too philosophical', to quote Raúl, seems to undermine who they are as a group.

La revista *Mazorkazo*: Publishing and literary responsibility

Before starting the meeting on the 9th of April, Milena asked to speak about the *revista* Mazorkazo, which she had been working on as editor, with Claudia completing the graphic design and formatting. People were moving in and out of the room, smoking outside and chatting, or welcoming new arrivals with a kiss. Milena was trying to get everyone's attention to speak about what she had decided for this issue, but was continually interrupted.

'This issue will just feature our work. Our writing will not be split up by genre, but instead the focus will be on introducing us.' Someone asked her to announce the list of work that would be included. She started reading titles and authors, moving down her list of submissions. One title, she suggested, was too long, and asked for an edit. The writer conceded. Pedro, who had just written a non-fiction report on the book fair, wanted to include that. But Milena insisted that this issue would only feature poetry and short stories. He started to disagree, insisting his submitted piece was very short, but Raúl interrupted, 'whose work is the shortest?' Milena acknowledged that it was Pedro's and Claudia's pieces. The back and forth discussion continued.

'No, not this time', Raúl insisted in finality, 'the *revista* has been designed'. Claudia showed the mock ups of the magazine to the group on her computer. The first edition of *Mazorkazo* was a mix of bright colours, avatars and artwork contributing to and highlighting each story.

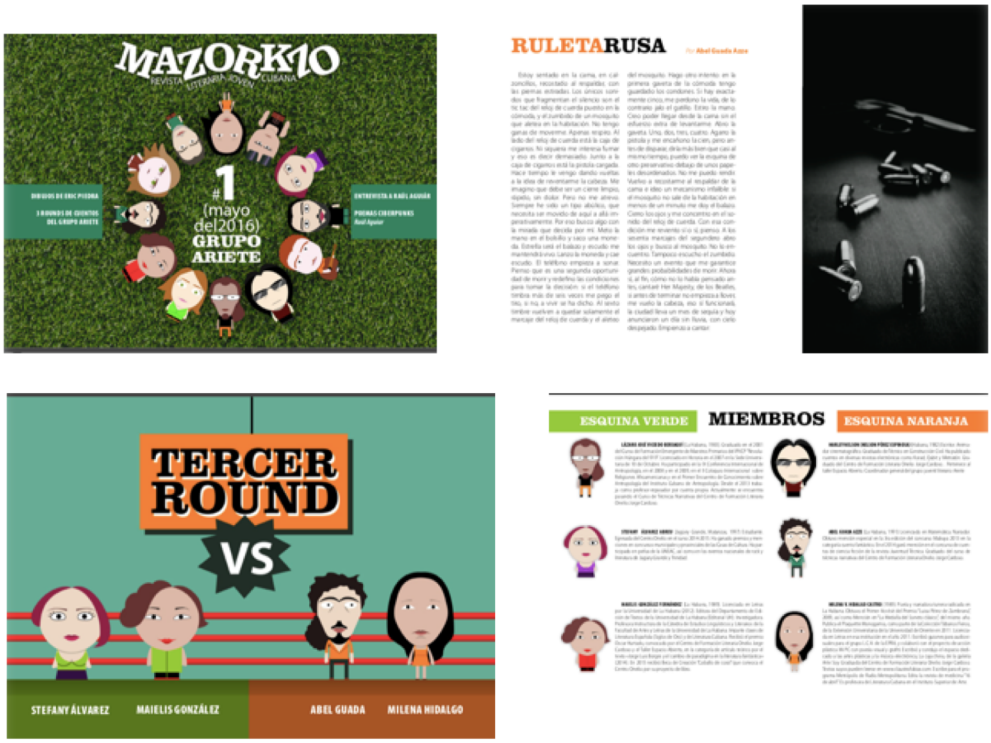


Figure 6.4 : Images from the digital magazine *Mazorkazo*, accessible here: https://www.facebook.com/mazorkazo/

Each writer was given a cartoon avatar, who, like a caricature, both resembled and exaggerated features of the writer they were based upon. None were smiling; they all looked aggressive and ready to fight. Some writers' avatars were given props, like Pollo and his guitar or Pedro and his sunglasses. Each was also given a biographical space at the end where they could write a professional summary, include references to other published work and mention any prizes they had won. The emphasis here was on the writer, not as a performer, but as a contributor to the Cuban literary scene.

Milena was editor-in-chief, a role she had been elected to by Raúl (the *asesor*) and appointed by the group, after months of collective discussion about the magazine had amounted to no action. She was given this task because of her passion for the project, her desire to begin the work immediately, and, due to her experience as a writer and instructor at El ISA (Higher Institute of Art), where she taught Cuban literature. As Maya said during an interview, Milena, was given the role because she was serious and organized, but Raúl also had a voice with regard to editorial

choices and long-term goals. The task, although it came with power, was also extra work that not many people were willing to take on. Milena solicited help regularly from the group, although often their assistance did not amount to much. Milena herself spoke to me about the process of creating the magazine and the different difficulties she faced. As related to me by Raúl and Maya as well, Milena herself spoke about the way she came into the role as editor of the magazine. Over *agua fresca* (watermelon juice), sitting on the floor of her apartment, she explained that being editor is not easy. She said: 'So I am the editor of the magazine. I am doing a lot of work, believe me, I am editing all the stories all the time, I am struggling with the others and it is so hard'. I was curious what she meant by struggling with the others. She told me she occupied contradictory roles: in the group she is an equal participant, but as the magazine editor, she is in a position of hierarchy. When she received the submitted stories, she critiqued them, asking for edits or rewrites, like an editor of a book may do when given a manuscript. She explains:

> They are human beings... I am not giving them criticism but am giving suggestions for rewriting things sometimes. I know this could be interpreted as trespassing...I am always doing this for the best end: So sometimes some of them take my edits, and change the story, and others don't want to change it. They say they disagree, they don't see the story that way. And I have to respect their will. The reality is when I say this is not going to be published because it doesn't have publishable quality, they have to present something else... For the first edition, we allowed everything, but the second edition is not going to be the same. In the second edition I have to be more exigent. I have to insist more. It has my name on it as editor. I respect myself, I respect all of them, but I respect myself too...

Her idea of respect as editor is tied into her conceptions of value and what sort of literary value is expected in the literary arena in Havana. She cannot just publish anything when her name is attached as editor.

In the preamble or introduction to the first edition, Milena and members of the group weighed in to create a short statement about their goals for the magazine. Imitating some of the language from their declaration, they write:

> We are Ariete, a group of young people, graduates of the Literary Training Centre Onelio Jorge Cardoso; a clan of multiple wills conjoining to be noticed in the literary arena; the freshest thing in the Cuban writer's promotion. We intend to take our words from the box of traditional writing with work that begins to take force, to bear fruit.

> Here is the first issue of Mazorkazo, the first attack of Ariete in magazine format. The texts that we bring here may seem like a threat of inexperienced violence, do not make mistakes, it's just the preamble (Grupo Ariete, *Mazorkazo,* 2016).

Grupo Ariete saw themselves as an avant-garde group of young writers who challenged the static hierarchy of the literary structure in Cuba. The magazine, like the *peña*, seemed a positive and necessary move for the group to take in order to start disrupting this system; these public productions were the first steps of getting their work into the Cuban literary arena, or at least the Havana literary scene. Yet, contrary to their claims of unity and experimentation in this preamble and in their declaration, Milena spoke of contention and differing notions of value when their work faced reception.

The theme of the issue was an attack or a fight, as is obvious from their preamble. Playing on another recognizable, contemporary, Cuban spectacle, the magazine is split into different boxing rounds with different writers taking either a 'green' or 'orange' corner as their stories are introduced into the arena. It is interesting they decided to organise it so their stories and avatars are fighting each other, but the choice of boxing ring has more do with the aesthetics of the fight itself, the individuality and celebrity of the sport's participants and the entrance of the fighters onto a stage. Like the *peña*, the point of the *revista* is publicity or getting their work into the hands of a non-*taller* audience. Instead of creating a live spectacle, they have based their work around the spectacle of a fight. They are entering arena as individual wills, conjoining and fighting. They are challenging, they are attacking, and they are a force to be reckoned with. Like the discussion surrounding the group itself, the *taller*, and the *peña*, the magazine is settled on upending, disrupting and creating an entrance for the group.

'For us, the magazine is both an experiment and a serious project. We are experimenting, and we are making our project by experimenting', Milena told me. Her manner of editing the *revista* stemmed from the combined idea of the endeavour as experimentation *and* a serious project. She introduced a type of hierarchy into the communal project. How does one know when experimentation is happening and what forms of experimentation constitute a serious project? When dealing with experimental literature, how does one mediate ideas of literary value as one breaks down the doors of the stale literary arena? While the goals of experimentation flourished in

the *taller*, to publish (or to present) work to a possible public, evoked compromise in the group's revolt against hierarchies of value.

Conclusion: experimentation and value

The *peña* and the *revista* are both utilized by Grupo Ariete for the means of publicising their literature and advancing their goals of disruption in the literary arena. Yet there were also stark contrasts between the goals articulated in their statement documents, like their declaration and the preamble to the *revista,* and the way these forms of publication function. Corresponding to their specific mediums, performance and print, each means of conveying the literature becomes dependent on the form they take, and makes a clear statement about the relationship between writer and their public. As Raúl laid out in his description the *peña,* there is a certain type of text that appeals to that specific way of sharing. It needs to focus on the goal of entertainment, captivating a hard-to-win audience. As Milena spoke about her role as editor, it became apparent that, for her, there was experimentation as a serious project, which is what she looked for in submitted work, and experimentation that is not. As there are no set rules about what constitutes good or serious writing, the editor becomes the arbiter of value, something that seems to challenge the basic organization and ethos of Grupo Ariete.

Similarly, the *peña* and *revista* of Espacio Abierto challenge the group's commitment to openness. The *peña* functions as a means of encouraging group members to engage in larger literary discussions by inviting non-member writers to present on their work. While anyone is welcome to attend, the events are not publicised and the discussion during the events highlights the insular and close relationship of the co-convenors and their friends. The *revista*, unlike the *taller*, is not usually open to developing writers. The annual prize is competitive, and offers prizes, prestige and publication opportunities similar to awards given by other major literary institutions around the country. This sets very high standards for those who can publish in the magazine.

Both the *peña* and the *revista* of Espacio Abierto participated in the literary *arena* (to use the Grupo Ariete terminology) of Havana and such participation required a commitment to the literary hierarchy of that space. While the *peña* drew a stark line between those who published and those

who did not, evidenced by who interacted in the meeting, the *revista* reified the literary system of value. I do not offer this as a critique, or even a statement that the *revista* and *peña* should work otherwise. Rather I am interested in the contrast of the ethos of each *taller* with the actions taken by members in their respective *revistas* and *peñas*. The analysis makes obvious the power of the literary *status quo* and the role of publication – either through print or oral performance – in supporting the notions of value inherent to the publishing arena that both *talleres* were hoping to dismantle. To return to Bakhtin, Holquist provides an interesting comparison between Bakhtin and Marx. He writes:

> In Bakhtin's philosophical anthropology, to be human is *to mean*. Human being is the production of meaning, where meaning is further understood to come about as the articulation of value ... For Marx, value always shows a "relation between persons as expressed as a relation between things." It is at the level of social relations that the true meaning of value and exchange must be sought (1990: *introduction*)

Considering Grupo Ariete specifically, if they wanted to create a space for their members in the literary arena through disruption of the current standards of value in Cuba, how did the *peña* and *revista* achieve this? In one sense, the idea of *spectacle* allowed the writers to claim the attention of UNEAC members, provoking and prodding a system that has not yet let them in. Yet, in adjusting their work to meet the desire for entertainment of their audience, they compromised to meet the values they were hoping to upend. In order for the members to become writers (with an audience), *to mean* in the context of literary Havana, was to re-subscribe to a system of values they were trying to disrupt, something I talk about more in the following chapters.

PART FOUR: THE WRITER AND THE PUBLISHING SYSTEM

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘An object of cultural value’: The value of books and the author

Within a few days of arriving in Havana, I went to one of the most iconic bookstores in the city: La Moderna Poesía. Having read about it and having seen pictures of the amazing art deco building design, I was shocked when I walked in to find a wide-open floorplan with hardly any books. I was quickly approached by a sales woman who presumably saw my confusion. She asked if she could help me find something, and I asked if she had a recommendation for a short story collection. She led me to a few different titles, although there was not much to pick from, and recommended a collection by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. I asked why him and not a Cuban writer. She told me she had studied philology at the University of Havana and he was one of her favourites. She handed me the book and I looked at it, flipping through the pages before buying it. It was not what I wanted. I wanted something Cuban, but I felt helpless among empty shelves, not recognizing any of the few titles that were available and having a sense that this may be the *only* short story collection in the store. The pages of the book she had handed me were see-through when held up to the light and the cover was flimsy; it reminded me of a pre-print galley we would receive in publishing, a step up from bound A4 pages, but nowhere near the quality of a book meant to be sold. I saw $12 written on the inside of the front cover. It was not what I had expected when I walked in, but I felt I could not back out and $12 felt like a small price to pay as I settled into the first book experience of fieldwork. I walked to the woman and handed her

$12CUC, which she put in the bag of money she was wearing around her waist. She smiled, and I walked out.

I never went into La Moderna Poesía again as I came to learn that it was no longer a central bookstore in Havana. I attended events in other shops around the city like Alma Mater for the Espacio Abierto *peña* and Librería Fayad Jamis, which was also in Havana Vieja, across from the Institute of the Book. Both had much fuller stock, although still comparatively empty. Most of the people I knew never went into the *librerías*, the state-run bookshops, and instead often found pleasure in picking through the wares of *libreros*, the booksellers, whose stock seemed to overflow from the tiny spaces the stores occupied. Often sold from the front room of a bookseller's home, with *libreros* you could find amazing books: pre-Revolutionary printings, Cuban titles that had grown in acclaim over the years or books foreigners had brought on trips. I thought it was interesting how the worker in Moderna Poesía had given me a Nicaraguan author, published by Casa de las Americas, the imprint that publishes foreign works, instead of a Cuban author. Comically, I reflected on my naivete as I paid in the wrong currency, $12CUC for something that cost $12CUP or $0.50CUC, and how as I held the book, the quality of it made me doubt its literary worth. I realise now how little I had understood about the Cuba publishing system.

Figure 7.1 From inside a *librero*

While the writers I worked with spent time speaking with me about experimentation and craft, and how the reality of publishing in Cuba oftentimes led them to understand most if not all of what they wrote may never appear in book form, the book was still a treasured object for them as readers and writers. Yet there was confusion as well about what exactly the book constituted to readers, writers and the publishing system. In this chapter, I am interested in the relationship between the writer and the book. I am interested in the materialisation of work in book form and in the book as a social object of specific value in creating and reaffirming the idea of writer. In the first two chapters, I wrote about how the two groups I worked with situated themselves historically in Cuba and in the space of the city; the relationship between writers and the context of *being a writer* in Havana. In Chapters Three and Four, I looked at the way the writers saw themselves in relation to their work, to their ideas and the production of those ideas into text; those chapters explored the way my interlocutors saw the writer as creator and studied the relationship between the writer and their praxis. In Chapters Five and Six, I was interested in showing how the writers I worked with conceived of and encountered the reader and how those moments of communication challenged how they hoped to be a writer against the reality of public expectation; the relationship between writer and their audience. In these final two chapters, I am interested in the way the writers see

their relationship to the publishing system in Cuba, to the product of that system, the book, and how they ultimately define writer against ideas of socialism, capitalism and their ideal book market. In this chapter, I am interested in using discussions about the book as a means of entering into further analysis about value and about the contradictions the writers I worked with seemed to feel about Cuban goals for literature, the creeping presence of private markets and the growing connectedness with foreign, book markets through the internet.

The book as an object interests me as a focus because it is the means through which the writer and the reader communicate and connect; while the text is the creation of the writer, the book becomes necessary as the object through which the writer reaches their audience.[40] However, as I hope to have shown in Chapter One, the book has always been a difficult achievement for Cuban fiction writers, sparking the creation in parallel of *talleres, peñas* and *tertulias.* In this chapter, I will show how the book still obstructs the way writers can be writers in Cuba. While the book is the thing that makes text a commodity in the Anglo-American publishing system, it is treated starkly differently in Cuba. Understanding how the writers I worked with see books then becomes central to a macro understanding of how ideas of writers are challenged by notions of book markets and ideas of value. I will look specifically at moments surrounding Havana's Feria Internacional del Libro [International Book Fair].

Prize winner to 'published' author at the Feria Internacional del Libro

Ale was one of the first writers who agreed to meet with me. A fan of comic books, horror, science fiction and fantasy and a graduate of the writing course at El Centro Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso ['*el Onelio*'], he had been a participant in both Espacio Abierto and Grupo Ariete. These days, however, he only occasionally attended the workshops. When he did, though, he was always welcomed with enthusiasm, an example of the success new writers can achieve with persistence. The year I was working in Havana, Ale had been awarded the Premio Calendario [the Calendar Prize] in the category of science fiction and fantasy for his first novel. I had heard about the award

[40] For a history of how readers have used books, I recommend Manguel's *A History of Reading* (1996).

ceremony not from Ale, who was humble about his win, but from another writer in the workshop. The ceremony would happen during Havana's book fair and I excitedly planned to attend.

Taking place annually, the Feria Internacional del Libro happens in February and takes over the city for ten days, before traveling around the country bringing literary events to the provinces. The majority of the events occur in the Forteleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, across the port from Havana Vieja. The old fort, which has been used since its construction as a fort, jail and now event space, sits on a cliff top overlooking the city and onto the Strait of Florida. Inviting publishers from around Latin America and the world, the fair's main attraction is sales. Publishers bring copies of books, mostly remainder,[41] which they can sell heavily discounted to the Cuban public. Magazine distributors bring old editions, some fifteen or twenty years out of date, selling for $.50 (CUC/USD) and stationery companies bring old day planners, which Cuban students use as notebooks. The publishers fan out, setting up shops around the colonial stone steps, in the towers, camped in old ramparts and small, arched, colonial storerooms. While the fair includes a number of different events, such as book launches, award ceremonies, readings and roundtables, the main attraction at the Forteleza is the imported, international market through the material (books and magazines) available.

[41] Remainder copies are the copies of books that are left in the warehouse and/or that have been returned to a publisher from booksellers when they stop selling. Publishers then liquidate the books through major discount or pulp the books. The price of remainder copies is about the price of books in Cuba so the publishers are not taking a loss of profit necessarily, just finding an eager audience for books not selling in home markets.

Figure 7.2: A stall from Mexico at the fair

The Premio Calendario is one of the most prestigious prizes for young authors awarded through the Associación Hermanos Saíz (AHS), the state-sponsored cultural institution dedicated to promoting young, Cuban talent in the arts. I arrived at the presentation room late, hot and flustered. Neglecting how long it may take to get around the crowds of people. The very packed room, unlike most of the fort, was entirely enclosed from the outside and air conditioned. The room was still damp though and had a distinctly musty smell. It also had a strange yellow tint, as orange-peach coloured curtains protected the cool room from the direct, afternoon sunlight. As the program began, I stood with the group of journalists in the back and watched, waiting for them to announce the prize winner for science fiction.

Ale was sitting near the front in a t-shirt and white, woven, Panama-style hat. The t-shirt was printed with a fantastical graphic, although I did not recognize the reference. The hat, although very traditional in style, had at the front a blood-stained smiley face, referencing the comic book series *The Watchmen*. As his name was announced he walked forward, shook hands with the awarder and posed for a portrait-style photograph with award plaque and flowers in hand. While he said

nothing, he looked incredibly happy and walked slowly back to his seat to allow for the next recipient to take the stage. After the presentation, he met with friends and family and I left him with plans to discuss the event later.

Ale, as it turned out, was only one of four science fiction and fantasy writers to receive the Premio Calendario, as the category for those genres had only recently been added to the award. Traditionally the award was given in the categories of poetry, realist fiction, non-fiction and essay. The inclusion of a prize for science fiction and fantasy spoke to the changing stance of the country's book publishing system toward the importance of the genre. It was slowly gaining the symbolic capital[42] that met its small, but solid base of fans among the readers and writers with whom I worked. Along with the recognition, the prize allowed immediate membership to the AHS and the publication of Ale's book.

Ale and I were sitting and having a coffee at a bookstore café – the only one in existence as far as I know in Havana and run by an expatriated woman from the United States – speaking about his win. Rocking back and forth in metal outdoor chairs, he told me about going from being a *taller* participant, still remembering his first time sharing, to being an award-winning, soon-to-be-published author. He was so pleased to have been awarded the Premio Calendario, but his sense of excitement was tempered by some realities of the publishing system in Cuba. While he was awarded the Premio Calendario for 2016, his book was long overdue for publication. The intention of the prize was that it would be distributed around the country with copies sold at the fair to occur simultaneously with his award presentation, something that seemed amiss when I could not find his book at the fair. However, he informed me that many of the books that year had been held up for publication. He was telling me that of the twelve titles scheduled to be published that year (2016) by Ámbar, the only science fiction and fantasy imprint on the island, only three had been printed so far.

He continued on, pointing out that he had heard his forthcoming novel would be published as an omnibus binding, printing two of Ámbar's titles in one binding. He sounded disappointed, noting it was not traditional for the prize winner of the Premio Calendario, but also conceded he

[42] I have decided to use the Bourdieusian term here and provide a full analysis of the way in which field logics work in terms of genre hierarchy and publishing in the next chapter.

was happy just to be published. The omnibus printing, however, was significant enough of an issue to be discussed in multiple writer circles. Subsequently, two other authors I worked with used it as an example of how even the pathway to publishing through prize winning could no longer guarantee the material certainty of your novel published as a free-standing book. The gain of the prize category for the genre of science fiction and fantasy had been a step forward for many of the writers I worked with, but the omnibus printing seemed to indicate that there was perhaps a distance to go before the publishing system saw an equality of genres.

In Cuba, national literary prizes are understood as one of the best ways to get your book published. The writers I worked with were frantically applying to any and all prizes for which they qualified. The prestige of the prize was evident in the packed presentation room for the Premio Calendario. But the prestige is only an aspect of winning; most of the writers I knew saw the prize not singularly as a title, but rather as a means to publication and a means to a book. Ale obviously felt the privilege of winning the prize and the prestige it garnered, yet there was also a sense of disappointment of the late, and as of then still unknown, publication date and the omnibus binding.

In speaking with Maya on the topic of prizes and publishing, she conveys a similar sentiment to Ale. Science fiction and fantasy writers face a much smaller selection of publishers who will accept their work and there are less prizes geared toward writers of that genre. She also acknowledged the benefits of being a writer in a niche genre; oftentimes there was less interest in genre than in a 'general fiction' or 'realism' category leading to smaller competitor pools and the benefit of having reserved prizes just for the genre.

Sitting across from me as we listen to the Havana street noise get softer and louder in waves, we talked about the idea of the market and the way it worked to get published for the first time in Cuba. Maya tells me:

> The only way to publish is through knowing people and through prizes... Still, paradoxically the situation of fantasy and science fiction is a bit more privileged with the Ámbar collection, as I said before. There is Gretel, the editor, who is quite available to us in that sense. Of course, Ámbar has its pros and cons. For example, it can take eight years to get a book published or even more than that...

She sighs using hyperbole to stress the lag between delivering a manuscript and holding your book. She continued on:

> Although it is easier apparently to publish as a science fiction and fantasy author than a young realist writer who doesn't know where [or with whom] he will publish. If you do not win any editorial contests, your work does not exist. So here [in Cuba], the trajectory is: winning a contest. In fact, there exists a kind of hierarchy of the contests that you have to win to create a name in science fiction and fantasy. It starts with the David, now that they have revitalized it, but it has not existed in 10 years, it ended shortly after it started. The new one that also awards a single unpublished manuscript with a published book, El Premio Calendario, is essential. El Calendario has its prestige… as an institution [referencing the AHS]. But besides that, the books of El Calendario are so beautiful and well-designed [her voice changes as she articulates the words slowly and with a smile: los libros del Calendario son *tan lindos y bien diseñados*.] Winning that to publish could not be better!

At this point, she goes on to mention the other prizes you could win: prizes awarded through Casa del Las Americas, UNEAC's Premio de Novela Italo Calvino, and El Premio Alejo Carpentier. In listing these other prizes, perhaps because they are not awarded specifically for science fiction and fantasy, she dismissed them. '*Ya… Italo Calvino en UNEAC, Ya… Carpentier…*' and so on. As the award for winning a literary prize is almost always publication of your book (if the prize is for a book-length submission), prizes have come to mean books. Winning a literary prize is a fantastic opportunity for writers and reflects the literary hierarchy's – comprised of academics of philology, high level employees of the Ministry of Country, published writers, and employees from the awarding institutions, like UNEAC or Casa de Las Americas – belief in a writer's work. Yet, the writers, while grateful for the respect of the different awarding institutions, want to receive recognition from readers through the medium of their book as well.

Consider, in contrast, the awarding of the most prestigious national book prize in Britain the Man Booker. An important qualification for a nomination to the Man Booker Prize is publication. For application to the 2019 prize, for instance, the book must have been published between May 2018 and April 2019 and submitted in final format (galley or PDF for those yet unpublished) to the award by October 2018. The announcement of the shortlist takes place annually in September (2019 in the case of this example). The book, by the time of the award announcement, must be published by an imprint formally established in UK, selling in pounds sterling and

distributed, when published in print, through stores nationally (see themanbookerprize.com for further information). In short, the prize can only be given to published books, easily accessible to the general public. The award then is prestigious, establishing writers as important literary voices, but is also about marketing and sales. The website states: 'It is a prize that transforms the winner's career... Both the winner and the shortlisted authors are guaranteed a worldwide readership plus an increase in book sales' ('About the Man Booker Prize, 2018). The prestige of the prize is not only about critical reception, but rather is tied directly to increased distribution of the book and thereby the reach of the author and their 'career' as writer.

Once again, in Havana there is an important stress put on the book itself. Maya speaks of the necessity of winning prizes in order to make your work 'exist', and even speaks to the different levels of prestige associated with different prizes. But her focus is still on the importance of the book. Her distrust of the imprint Ámbar is that the book could take years to publish and her creation of prize hierarchies has more to do with quality of the book published (beautifully designed for instance) than the awarding institution. Yet even winning one of the 'good' prizes has its limits, as we know from Ale, who was not content with his award. He gained critical reception and his photograph in the newspapers, but the 'real' prize was the book and that did not meet his expectations.[43]

Books in the wrong places: the difficulty of books to find readers and vice versa

One afternoon, during the fair, I attended a meeting of the science fiction and fantasy authors. It was a meeting for genre authors, both published and unpublished, to get together and speak about the state of the genre. Organized by Gretel, Ámbar's editor, the room focused on a discussion of progress, fears and qualms. Like a democratic town hall meeting, anyone who had a comment was invited to speak and in order to keep things genial, they passed around an oversized, cloth top hat,

[43] I should clarify that while digital versions of books are passed around through memory sticks, the publishing system in Cuba was not able, at that time, to produce eBooks.

reminiscent of sketches of the Hatter's hat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; only those who had, and preferably wore, the hat could speak.

In the listing on the Book Fair programme, the meeting was titled: *Encuentro de Autores Infanto-Juvenil* [Meeting of Children and Young Adult Authors]. The meeting was held outside, at the Sociedad Cultural de Jose Marti. The discussion centred on the concerns that science fiction and fantasy were still was not being taken seriously in Cuba, reflecting concerns voiced by Ale and Maya above. They were annoyed that all books in the genre were categorised as children's and young adult fiction and worried that their books were placed in children's sections of bookstores and libraries, as the topics broached in their writing were not all suitable for children. They spoke about their frustrations with the publishing industry and the genre's lack of space. The end of their discussion, however, focused on the slow production of books. People questioned the possibility of digital publishing and eBooks, referencing Amazon's self-publishing program, which caused scoffing from a woman directly to my right. In speaking with her afterward, she said that she was weary of Amazon and their power, but also that Amazon and the international digital publishing market is mostly still impossible for Cuban authors as the payment system requires a bank account and the embargo would forbid Cuban bank accounts as qualifying. While the meeting was full of complaints, it was also full of laughter and fun.

Figure 7.3: Meeting of Young Adult and Children's writers

Alana, a prize winning and published author, reflected to me her concerns with publishing distribution as well. Sitting away from the street, she recounted to me the hardships she felt as a writer and reader in Cuba. As a person who works in IT, she has access to the internet daily through work and is good with digital technology. She writes fanfiction, science fiction and fantasy with her latest novel winning the 2015 Premio David. For a few weeks, she went on tour with the Fería

Internacional del Libro and UNEAC to promote her win throughout the provinces. Before she left, she told me she was very excited about the trip. She looked forward to meeting readers and fans, but realistically was excited about seeing Cuba and getting a sponsored chance to travel around the country. I asked her why she was dismissive of the readers and she provided an anecdote. She said that she works with a number of people who have teenage children and these children are interested in science fiction and fantasy. 'Where do we find books, shows or activities to appeal to them?' her co-workers asked her. She explained:

> If you go into the bookshops in Havana, there are four or five titles for sale in science fiction and fantasy if there are any at all. If you ask when there will be more, the people in the shop don't know; they ask you to come back later. If you go to Santiago [de Cuba] there will be more books on the shelves because there less people are reading science fiction and fantasy. There are still a lot of readers in Havana. There is a demand for the genre, but when readers do read it, they read science fiction and fantasy from the US.

In trying to clarify why readers in Cuba read books from outside instead of Cuban books, Alana noted that one major reason is '*las promociones se estan fallando*' [the system of promotions is failing]. She noted that there had not been much in the way of promotions at all, but that things are changing as she had recently been invited onto a television show to speak about her book[44]. A colleague at work saw her on television and told her the following morning, but while her appearance sparked interest, her book could not be found in stores, most likely because of low stock.

She complained that Cuban authors were still kept out of digital publishing sites, like Amazon, because of the embargo. Instead, she said that Cuban authors and readers connect with non-Cuban authors of science fiction and fantasy through forums on the website Reddit. While Cubans can encounter the pirated work of writers from outside, Cuban authors whose work is published oftentimes has significantly less reach within the country due to, what is perceived as, the failing mechanism of the publishing system, such as low print runs, uncoordinated promotions or publicity (if any at all), and an uneven distribution of titles to match areas of interest. In short, what drives the success of book publishing in the Anglo-American market is completely absent in

[44] Fiction writers are periodically invited onto news and chat shows, but not as often as musicians or actors.

Cuba. Cuban readers cannot easily encounter books by Cuban authors; or rather Cuban readers cannot easily encounter specific books by Cuban authors. Instead, following word of mouth recommendations and suggestions, books by foreign authors, available on the internet in pirated versions are passed around on flash drives, becoming the accessible books for Cuban readers.

If Cuban writers do get their books published (and they are actually distributed), there is still a concern about the likelihood of those books reaching an audience. Science fiction and fantasy is often ignored by adult readers as the books are immediately placed into the children's section at bookstore and libraries. The writers I knew preferred reading digital, pirated copies of books because they were easier to find. This made the writers I worked with question the success or even the purpose of the book as an object in Cuba.

Between literature and books: books are not commodities

I had met with Gretel at the Meeting of Children and Young Adult Authors and spoke with her about my project. She seemed willing to help, giving me her email and asking me to her contact later. She offered a tour of her office, something I was looking forward to. Unfortunately, due to her family commitments and busy work schedule, I never met with her in person. She asked me to send her my questions and she would try and answer them by email or a phone call. Given the lack of time I spent with Gretel and how formal our relationship remained, her answers to my questions speak of an official stance; the position editors and publishers in Cuba take when discussing their job functions and the publishing system.

The point of overwhelming confusion between us, however, became apparent in my question about acquisitions, and the dependence of different acquisitions on previous sales figures and successes. My question, which seemed logical to me, did not mean anything to Gretel and she expressed that in her answer. 'In Cuba, does the book industry make money, lose money or break even?' I asked. Her response, even when written down, seeps with indignation of someone who cannot understand how little I understand:

> If you have to put it in black and white on the subject of money, then you would have to say that it loses. Because a book is expensive and sells at a low price. Paper, ink, printing equipment is set to the world market price, so the printers have large print costs, but publishing houses, following the editorial policy of the State, pursue the primary purpose of enlightening [*instruir*], putting in the hands of the people an object with cultural value, not a commodity [*mercancía*]. If we sold books at the right price to make the author, the editor, the publisher rich [*enriquecer*] and to support the *commodification* of books, most of the population could not afford them and that simply is not the objective pursued by the Cuban publishing houses, but the opposite.

She has a strong disdain for the idea of books as a commodity, as highlighted if not in her answer alone, then in her decision to italicise the word 'commodification'. To her, at least officially, books are means of conveying the literature or text (which is the 'object with cultural value') to the receiver for the 'primary purpose of enlightening'. The materiality of the book is nothing but a necessary cost in achieving this. Yet, this is blatantly not the way the writers I worked with treated the concept of the book and certainly not how they came to understand the hierarchy of literature based on the materiality of the text.

While it is Gretel's job to bring the works of science fiction, fantasy and crime (the third genre covered by her imprint) to readers, she does describe an attachment to the books. When I asked if she ever followed up personally on book sales and successes, as there is no institutional mechanism for monitoring sales figures, she told me:

> Sometimes I go to the bookstores where I know booksellers and I ask, sometimes the same authors tell me that their book sold out in a specific bookstore. Even people from the provinces that I do not know email me to say that so many books arrived, or to ask which ones are going to come out this year and how much people liked it or if it sold out the first day. But I do all that in a personal way, the editors in Cuba often stop thinking of their books once we send them to the press, sometimes they do not go to the book launch presentation itself. *Every book I make is my child* and although I do not have the skills to speak in public, I force myself to participate every time I show up [to a launch] or to a book event with them [the books] (italics mine).

Reflecting the language of relatedness used by some of the writers I worked with, and examined in Chapter Four, she states, '*Cada libro que hago es mi hijo'* [every book I make is my child]. I argue that the writers' invocation of kin relation to their characters claimed both a feeling of

relatedness through their role as creator and provided an understanding of their character's independence. But to what does Gretel feel this sense of relatedness: the text, the book as an object, or the book as an idea of enlightenment? What exactly is a book in Cuba?

Books in Cuba do not have one singular meaning or representation in Cuban society. Instead of claiming the book is either a commodity or not, it is important to study the different ways in which book exchange functions according to, what Appadurai calls, the 'regimes of value' (1986). Again, the complication around the idea of book as commodity comes from the different parties – the writer, the reader and the publishing system – thinking of the book as an object in multiple ways. To the reader and the publishing system, the book may not constitute a commodity as Marx understood it and has complicated relationships to the traditional conceptions of *use value* and *exchange value*. For the publishing houses, the Ministry of Culture, and the individual literary institutes the stance is that books are not a commodity [*mercancía*]. They have a *use value*, but no economic value to the State. For Gretel, the Cuban publishing system is hugely limited in what they can create because the cost of the goods needed to make a book—the paper, the ink and the printing technology—is dictated at world prices. Yet the system here, willing to take losses, produces books as cheaply as possible, emphasizing the text as the cultural object of importance.

In considering the books sold by *libreros* – often foreign or pre-revolutionary titles – which have a high economic value, especially in relation to the normal wages of Cuban workers, I believe the notion of the book is changed again. Buying books in used stores is an incredible financial sacrifice. Yet most people I knew who bought those books, bought them for a reason more in line with notions of collection, a distinct type of ownership which is not commoditised, according to Walter Benjamin (1999 [1970]). This was apparent to me in a discussion with a book collector, who specifically keeps an eye out for books about the musician Madonna, both photographic books and biographies. He does this not because they have a specific value in Cuban society or he considers them an investment, but because they have, as he explains to me, a '*un valor symbolico*' [a symbolic value]. Benjamin speaks of collection as a reflection of the owner. He writes: 'ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them (*ibid*: 67). Collection is a type of 'relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness' (*ibid*: 60), but rather emphasizes a collection

of memories, thoughts and experiences of the owner. In contrast, the writers I worked with found a further importance in the materiality of the book. Ale is disappointed that his book will be published as an omnibus because as a winner of a prestigious prize, he expected a book of his own, regardless of the reality that his work will reach, at least some, readers. For writers, I believe the book is an even more complicated object. For the writers, the book is an object of instantiation, of their literature, but also of themselves.

Books make writers: value and a changing economy

I have highlighted here the way in which the writers I worked with spoke about the object of the book and would like to examine further what the book means to the writer. Books are an interesting art object in the sense that they are both an object in and of themselves (see Benjamin 1999 [1970]) and a means of accessing a text created by an author. In his study of readers and participants in the Henry Williamson Society, Reed (2011) looks at the practice of, what he terms, *enraptured reading*. Enraptured reading, Reed argues, allowed the readers of Henry Williamson to access or even occupy the mind of the author through the text. Speaking specifically of the groups' desires to keep Williamson in print and even recruit more readers, Reed mentions that members of the society often purchase multiple copies of the books they love, lending them out to new readers. They encourage members to 'petition publishers to re-issue out-of-print works and to lobby their local librarian to buy any new editions that do appear' (Reed 2011: 70). They do this because 'the wish to save Henry is paramount' (*ibid:* 70). Reed goes on to clarify that his interlocutors do not feel that they own Henry via ownership of the book, but rather that it is through the future existence of Williamson books that Henry, the author, will continue to exist, to reach other readers, and enrapture and engage those minds. As he continues, the society members feel they are the 'persons responsible for keeping Henry alive' (*ibid:* 73).

In looking at the relationship between author, book and reader, I am doing so in reverse. The authors I worked with imagined a 'reader'. It was not that they had a specific reader in mind. Rather it was the medium of the book that allowed the writer to reach an audience of their

imagination, or rather a reader who requires imagination in order to be known: the mass, faceless, unfamiliar reader. This contrasts interestingly with Newlyn's (2000) literary analysis of the rise of industrialisation in the United Kingdom and the 'anxiety of reception' on behalf of writers at the time who saw the rise of literacy and the introduction of an unknown reader (through publishing advancements) as a threat to their authorship. While my interlocutors similarly saw the book as a means of reaching this unknown reader, they saw readers as the means through which to gain authorship. For the writers I worked with, the book not only exists as a way to make mobile their literature and their literary voices – connecting with readers now and ideally into the unknown future as the readers of Henry Williamson show – but rather is also a comment on their value as writers.

Gretel claimed to me that the Cuban government considered books to be 'an object with cultural value, not a commodity' and I am interested in questioning the stark division of that binary. For the writers I worked with, the idea of the cultural value of the object of the book is not the same as it is for the government. Gretel considers an object with cultural value [*valor cultural*] to be something that enlightens [*instruir*] the people. Yet for the people I worked with the book is what gives them cultural value. Graeber (2013) argues that 'Value is the way the importance of our own labours – taking labour again in the broadest sense described above – becomes real to us by being realized ("realized" here being taken in its literal sense, as "becomes real") in some socially recognized form, a form that is both material and symbolic' (225). In the object of the book, the writers are able to see their labour recognized socially. Yet the value of the book to them goes even further. As Graeber continues 'Insofar as value is social, it is always a comparison; value can only be realized in other people's eyes. Another way to put this is that there must always be an audience' (*ibid:* 226). If the book is the material and symbolic recognition of the labour of the writer (and, secondarily the editor, the printers, distributors) then the writer can only gain value – social or cultural – through the reception of the book by readers. Perhaps this also speaks to Gretel's sense of pride and relatedness to the book as an object.

What I hope to have shown throughout this thesis is that contrary to their regular praxis of finding ideas, writing and editing (examples in Chapter Three, Four and Five), the writers I worked with, whether published or not, faced an uncertainty when asked if they *were* writers. In Chapter

Two, I wrote about the desire of the writers of Grupo Ariete to participate in the 'everyday spaces of life'. This, they told me, had to do not only with when they had time to write (the times of day when they could claim everyday spaces as spaces of writing), but also because there was no social value in being a writer. Being able to write was challenged by mothers who needed help with chores or family members who wanted to participate in *chisme* [gossip]. When, in Chapter Six, the writers finally encountered the possibility of an audience, with the Peña Mazorka for instance, the group members had to change their literature, incorporating dance or music, to make it more appealing. What I hope to show in this chapter is that for the writers I worked with, the book had the potential to initiate my interlocutors into the category of *writer*. The value of the book for the writers I worked with was not solely as a cultural artefact or commodity, but rather as a way of making the writers *writers*, as bringing them as writers into being. Yet it failed. The books were late for printing or appeared haphazardly in stores throughout the country. Referring back to my description of the publishing system in Chapter Two, the books were not often publicised or marketed, and the low prints runs meant that few copies ever reached readers. Moreover, the quality of the books – once printed – seemed to indicate something about the value of the author. The differing qualities of the books take on importance in two ways: the book as an instantiation of the author[45] (consider Ale and the omnibus binding) and the book as appealing to the reader-consumer.

Holbraad (2009) writes about how the introduction of dual currency in Cuba has affected the idea of necessity and the value of money. It has provoked a change in the 'paradigms of consumption' (Holbraad 2009: 2). As he writes, 'what makes 'before' [the end of Soviet support] an object of nostalgia for *habaneros* is the fact that in those times State provision guaranteed a relative equity between wages and prices: "everyone had enough"' (*ibid*: 10). After 1990, the government was unable to maintain the state subsidized provision at the same level and the monthly food rations decreased. With the creation of the dual economy, however, and the opening of *dolar*[46] stores in which Cubans could buy world goods at global market prices using the convertible peso (the CUC), the idea of what is considered a necessity has changed. Whereas in the past, the

[45] This reminds of the of a Russian folktale about an evil, immortal being named Koschei, who, in order to live forever, put his is soul in a needle, in an egg, in a chicken, in a box, at the bottom of the ocean. To kill him, you need to get his soul.
[46] Cubans call the convertible *peso* (CUC) the *dolar* because it is linked 1:1 with the USD and was created by the government during the Special Period in replacement for the temporary government allowance of USD exchange.

government controlled the way wage income was spent through need and choice, the availability of new goods (like Chinese electronics and brand-named clothing and shoes) in the convertible (or *dolar*) currency has highlighted new inequalities among Cubans and 'helped to set the goal-posts of "need" at a higher level (*ibid*: 17).

At the centre of Holbraad's argument is the idea that money acts in two ways; it is a 'measure of value on the one hand and an integrated object of consumption on the other' (2009: 11). By this he means that money as a universal measure of value has the potential to buy anything worth an equal amount, but also, in the moment of exchange, money buys something specific. He writes: 'The moment of consumption, then, eclipses the purview of possible worlds with a concrete exchange and thus imminently strips money of its transcendental character' (*ibid:* 12). This becomes important in examining how the dual-currency changes have affected the consumption habits of Cubans. Before 1990, Holbraad claims, the Cuban *peso* (CUP) could be considered a *token*, in the sense the that *pesos* 'facilitate transactions within the planned confines of what del Aguila called the "moral economy" of the state sector' (*ibid*: 13). As the convertible *peso* or *dolar* (CUC) entered the economy and some people began earning CUC through black market deals or small openings in the private-sector markets, the conception of money as a token changed.

What I want to argue is that books published by the Cuban government, using low quality materials in order to maintain highly regulated prices and remain accessible for those earning *peso* wages, are an object of the 'moral', single-tier, pre-CUC economy. It is in this economy that books *may* be considered to have just 'cultural value'. In competition with other types of goods and in conversation with the commodified books of the foreign markets, publishers in Cuba are no longer able to create an object of desire for the Cuban reader-consumer.[47] Moreover, further exchange (mostly through gifts) of books and other products from foreign markets has changed the expectation of the material value of the object of the book, not only as a creator of authorial value in and of itself, but also because it now requires a certain appeal in order to reach readers.

[47] Consider the comments by Lena and her partner on the lower quality of Raúl's reprint, referenced in Chapter 2. The edition printed in the 1980s was a higher quality of paper, binding and cover.

Conclusion: literary irrelevance

Earlier in February, I had been invited to hear a panel from the Instituto Cubano del Libro [Cuban Institute of the Book] (ICL) speak to a group of publishers from the US. The meeting between these publishing professional and the Cuban representatives was enlightening. The US publishers seemed to know so little about Cuban publishing and were interested, if not surprised at how it works. On the other hand, the Cuban representatives provided an illuminating outline of the publishing system, without speaking exactly to future business exchanges. While they laid out the mechanics of the non-profit based publishing structure, an employee from the ICL also spoke about how, going forward, they were hoping to challenge the existing model.

She spoke about the importance of reading and literacy to the Revolution and highlighted Fidel Castro's commitment to literacy with an explanation of the Literacy Campaign. She quoted the revolutionary belief that '*leer es poder*' (to read is power). She went on to explain that currently in Cuba the publishing system is hindered by the embargo and by the lack of printing materials, especially paper, and, she believes, also hindered by an outdated infrastructure. She dreams, for example, of being able to sell digital editions, but there is nothing in place that would allow that to be anything more than a dream, she says. Not only that, but there is no infrastructure in Cuba to keep data on books sold or to begin to understand what constitutes a popular book. They have no way of identifying what the readers want to read. Cubans, she argued, are bored, as their print industry, including newspapers, does not speak to their interests. She said, 'we publish in mono for a public that wants things in stereo'.

Her statements align with the opinions of the writers (and readers) I worked with. While she seemed to acknowledge and affirm the State stance that literature is as a form of enlightenment, she is also engaged with the need to speak to readers' desires. What she seems to identify is a fine line between market demands and the realisation that if no one wants the books available, then there is no enlightening the *pueblo cubano* through books. Reading and literacy, as central to the revolutionary project as she described, cannot make itself pointless by ignoring the needs of the public. Yet, she would never suggest a market alternative.

Echoing her sentiment, in recounting to me her disappointment regarding the way publishing works in this country, Maya spoke about a sense of disharmony between the writers, the readers, the publishing system in Cuba and the publishing market abroad, acknowledging the benefits of each system. She says:

> The ideal situation would be that there are publishers who care about … not only for the operation [of producing literature] but also for the quality of the literature. Yes, it is very idealistic, very nice, for the love of art and culture…no?… but it is also a market and here we are adopting, as such. There is an apathy toward books and it is not only due to what is published, but it is also about the publishers' production plans and the publication of things that have nothing to do with what is really popular literature. They do not even realise what is changing.

According to the employee of the ICL, they do realise that change is occurring, but like all sectors of the Cuban economy, no one is really sure what the future holds. Here, Maya explains that the literature published is not appealing to the readers of Cuba and Cuban publishing is becoming less relevant among readers and thereby writers. The publishing system diminishes the value of literary prizes, which no longer provide the full recognition and prestige writers desire. If the object of the book gives value to the writer in its ability to reach readers, even makes the writer a writer, then the lack of books and poor systems of distribution make Cuba a place where many live to write, but it is nearly impossible to become a writer, at least the type of writer the people I worked with imagined.

Yet is the current situation for writers in Cuba out of line with revolutionary ideology? Or have the economic changes during the Special Period created a new idea of what it means to be a writer in Cuba? Writers have always been important to the revolutionary agenda and to adapt a quote from *The German Ideology* to meet my needs: In a communist society there are no writers but only people who engage in writing among other things (Marx and Engels 2004: 109)[48]. Previous anthropological work on Cuba has shown that the Special Period has changed Cuban relationships with the outside and with ideas of the market, as I discussed in my introduction (see Pertierra 2011). The Cuban public is aware of the international market and is already participating in new 'paradigms of consumption' (Holbraad 2009: 2). This is something I discuss more in the next chapter

[48] This quote was first brought to my attention in the writing of Brandel (2016).

as I return to the Grupo Ariete declaration, look at my interlocutors' ideas of an ideal future and reconsider their reflection on the past.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘Literature is a chimera’: Literary value, the absence of the reader and the another option

In an essay in his book *Literature and Revolution* (2005 [1925]) laying out his opinion on revolutionary and socialist aesthetics, Leon Trotsky writes:

> There is no revolutionary art as yet. There are elements of this art, there are hints and attempts at it, and, what is most important, there is the revolutionary man, who is forming the new generation in his own image and who is more and more in need of this art ... The powerful fore of competition which, in bourgeois society, has the character of market competition, will not disappear in a Socialist society, but, to use the language of psychoanalysis, will be sublimated, that is, will assume a higher and more fertile form. There will be the struggle for one’s opinion, for one’s project, for one’s taste. In the measure in which political struggles will be eliminated – and in a society where there will be no classes, there will be no such struggles – the liberated passions will be channelled into technique, into construction, which also include art (229-230).

In this collection, Trotsky details his theory on the intersection of politics and cultural production and, specifically, the way in which political revolution will affect a revolution in the taste, standards and forms of art. Written in 1923 and 1924, his opinion on the state of art in the Soviet Union is perhaps not relevant to the discussion of Cuba in 2015 and 2016. Yet, what remains central to Trotsky’s claims in *Literature and Revolution* is the belief that the Revolution is totalizing; that the Revolution overthrows not only a government, but an entire system and a part of that system is art. Thereby revolutionary art must also be new. In a statement that was echoed years later in a speech given by Fidel Castro in 1961, Trostsky states:

> Our policy in art, during a transitional period, can and must be to help the various groups and schools of art which have come over to the Revolution to grasp correctly the historic meaning of the Revolution, and to allow them complete freedom of self-determination in the field of art, after putting before them the categorical standard of being for or against the Revolution' (*ibid:* 33)[49].

In attempting to unpack this claim by Trotsky, who throughout the collection of essays maintains the importance of free production of art, Keach (2005) argues that 'in historical moments when one socioeconomic order is replaced by another, literature and art have never existed outside the constraints inherent in revolutionary conflict (19).[50]

In the last chapter, I claimed that the writers I worked with understood the social value of the book differently than the official State position, and that they spoke about the object of the book as reflective of the value of the author, even a representation of the author. The relationship they spoke of, between the writer and the book, was one of mutual constitution. Unlike the different relationships explored up until this point, the book seems to be representative of a different type of 'writer', one that is created through the interaction with a specific yet unknown mass reader. This is not the writer who is established through the praxis of writing and a relationship to their text, as discussed in Chapters Three and Four, or a writer the who is made so through a relationship to the private audience in the *talleres* or the public audience of the *peñas*. It is a writer who is made through their relationship with readers through the medium of the book. In this chapter, I want to understand why the book has this particular value to the writers I worked with and why it so different than the value attributed to books by the Cuban literary infrastructure. For the writers I worked with, this issue centres on reception and the idea of literary value. In this chapter, I want to understand how literary value is created and how it reflects conceptions of social,

[49] Castro's famously said in his Speech to Intellectuals (1961): 'Within the Revolution, everything goes; against the Revolution, nothing.' Castro was not a Trotskyist and I make no claims about the intertextuality of the two of documents. Instead, I hope, as Keach (2005) does with regard to Trotsky, that the echoing reflects a reality of art in times of revolution.

[50] The year before I arrived in Havana, Leonardo Padura published a novel about Trotsky's assasination called *El Hombre Que Amaba a los Perros*. It was a reminder of the repression, fear and anxiety of being against someone's definition of the Revolution. The Cuban government printed in, but the distribution was so scarce that most of people I knew in Cuba had only heard of its existence or, if they were lucky enough, had a friend lend it to them.

economic and personal value. I will do this by returning to the discussion surrounding Grupo Ariete's *Declaración de Principios*. What is the system they want to disrupt? By discussing their dissatisfaction, they also spoke about their ideas of what an ideal publishing system would look like in Cuba. Finally, I want to conclude this thesis by questioning how the utopic vision for writers differs from the vision spoken about by Fidel Castro in 1961 and question what this says about art in revolution.

A critique of literary value and a return to Ariete's 'Declaracíon de Principios'

Grupo Ariete begin their 'Declaración de Principios' by defining the term they chose as the name of their group[51]. They create a dictionary entry for the word 'ariete', which in Spanish is a noun meaning 'a ram' as in a 'Military machine that was formerly used to beat walls, consisting of a long and very heavy beam, one end of which was reinforced with a piece of iron or bronze, usually carved in the shape of a ram's head' ('Declaración de Principios', Appendix A). They continue to define the word in relation to sport—'2. In football, centre forward'— and in relationship to naval weaponry—'3. *Sea.* Steam vessel, armoured and with a very reinforced and protruding spear, which was used to thrust with force against other ships and to sink them'. They finish with a created entry about the group:

> || **4.** Literary project of certain young Cuban narrators that is considered a space of interaction with other artistic genres such as music, dance, plastic arts or performance. || **5.** Literary magazine that brings together young people with severe and chronic artistic concerns and a desire to tear down closed doors.

From the start of the document, it becomes clear that Grupo Ariete is here for a purpose: to fight, to attack, to defend their work and to 'tear down closed doors'. The closed doors they talk about are the metaphorical doors of the literary *palestra* [arena] to continue their metaphor; those consist of

[51] For the full text in Spanish and English, please refer to Appendix A.

the doors to the publishing houses, to UNEAC, to the bookstores, for instance; all the places where new writers and readers remain absent. They explain:

> Grupo Ariete was born perhaps by chance, but, if anything, we are sure that it has been maintained thanks to stubbornness. The stubbornness [*empecinamiento*] of a group of young people who... did not resign themselves and instead put together this literary project to begin demolishing the closed doors of institutional inertia and the tedium of literary spaces without readers (Appendix A)

As I wrote about in Chapter One, Grupo Ariete constructed their declaration together during a *taller* meeting in which they discussed their relationship to the past, their concerns for the present and their hopes for the future. Their relationship to history and to the Revolution, they point out, is not one of dismissal or anger. In fact, they understand that their place in that history colours what they write; it shapes who they are as Cubans and as writers. Instead, it is the current, 'institutional' publishing structure at which they take aim. Their primary concern is in the inertia of the system and the way it has created a broken (and boring) conundrum in which 'literary spaces' are absent of a key component: readers. Grupo Ariete is not interested in changing Cuba; it is interesting in opening the doors of a literary arena [*palestra*], to quote the Ariete term, that closed itself not only to young writers, but to readers as well. Reflecting the anxiety articulated by the employee of the ICL and the criticism of Maya, both referenced in the last chapter, the group is demanding change and adaptability for writers *and* readers; they are making a claim of interdependence between the two groups.

Referring back to Chapters Five and Six (which look at the *talleres* and the *peñas* of Grupo Ariete and Espacio Abierto respectively) one might critique the idea that the literary spaces are absent of an audience. In fact, the members of the groups do have 'readers' in the idea that they present their literature to people, who, sometimes, listen and they have the other group members at the *taller* meetings. However, as I hope to have shown in the last chapter, there is a distinction between the type of readers acquired in an oral performance of written work and those acquired through the book. The readers they encounter in the *talleres* are also writers and known entities, who participate as readers not only for the pleasure of listening, but also as critics and, importantly,

because the space provides those listeners with a well of ideas from which to seek inspiration. The *peñas* provide another type of audience, but in those spaces the literature is often challenged and recreated as spectacle in order to win readers' attentions. The reader that the group wants is a reader as we have come to know it in the English-language publishing field: a mass, faceless reader who encounters the author through the medium of the printed book (see Newlyn 2000).

In speaking with Maya after the group finished writing the declaration, I wanted to understand the importance of readers and for her to explain to me why they needed the publishing structure changed. She explained:

> Seeing people who are your contemporaries, who are in more or less the same situation, we have that longing, that hope of becoming a writer. And so in nominal terms, the 'Declaration of Principles' is not about the principles that unite us, but the stubbornness of believing that literature is still a chimera[52], so it is worth investing your time and effort, as the statement ends. I believe that we have all made an act of faith, that we are going to invest time in this. And if it goes wrong or does not turn out well, we will see, but at least we are interested in taking ourselves seriously. It is not enough to say we passed the course at *el Onelio* [El Centro de Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso]. I already have the diploma from *el Onelio*; I already belong to a tradition among the young Cuban writers, but we do nothing with that unless we seriously dedicate ourselves and convince ourselves: yes, we can write. And this is not crazy. Even our relatives with published books, the government, everyone sees *el Onelio* as the qualification to be a writer. "Where are you going? *... to Onelio*, oh yes, yes" and that means you are a writer [she pauses]. We are misunderstood young people. We have not decided, in fact. I do not consider myself a writer. The other day, I don't remember who it was, told me that I was a writer, that my book had been published and everything, but that still doesn't help. I do not conceive of myself as a writer. I'm a professor. I am an editor, but writer? [shrugging] That is still not an identity I have assumed. It scares me [she pauses again]. Speaking to you has made me think what it is I need most to feel like a writer. Maybe it is just to have a book published. Actually, I don't know... my neighbour next door does not even know I write. But if I had economic recompense, media acknowledgement maybe, publicity... then maybe self-recognition, but right now, I tell you, I feel a bit of an imposter. I have trouble recognizing it...'

What is interesting about Maya's claims is that she meets the social standards of the literary *palestra* to be considered a writer. She has graduated from the prestigious course of narrative fiction at *el*

[52] Chimera in this sense is a wild belief or dream worth fighting for.

Onelio. She dedicated her free time to writing and she has published a book in Cuba. Yet, without an unknown reader, without her neighbours knowing she is a writer, without financial recompense, without a general public acknowledgement, she feels like an imposter and she cannot call herself a writer. They hope to become writers not only by putting in the effort through the group meetings, but by using those meetings to create a type of literature that appeals to readers and could remould the system. Collectively, the group stands as a battering ram, confident that it is the system that is broken not the members as writers, yet individually Maya speaks of a nagging fear.

The system they speak about is one that is based on hierarchy within an established literary system. Judges, who are well-published writers and high-ranking employees in government institutions, are the only critics; there are no book reviews in newspapers for instance and readers are not given a say through patterns of consumption. The literary elites decide what has literary value. The editors are also able to decide what books are published, although they often publish authors who have already won prizes, i.e. who have already been established as having literary value by the critics. They are also subject to government publishing plans, which distribute the resources between different types of publications. As Lena explains it to me:

> Our literati now have these different expectations of writers. And they have also a kind of a programme they have to follow. They have to publish the newest literature, but they have to publish literature that is useful as well. It is in this first group where I place us, new literature, which there is not much space for and then, the most published books are utilitarian, like cookbooks, advice books, dictionaries, self-help. Outside of that, most resources go to academic books.

This is reflected in one of their final statements in the declaration. They write:

> Our formation as a literary group responds to a strategy of insertion in a field undermined by critics who look only at their navel, of publication possibilities that depend solely on winning literary contests, of promising youth who already exceed the dedicated space and of publishing houses that publish for production plans and utilitarian demands ('Declaración de Principios, Appendix A).

The repeated imagery of 'closed doors' speak to a literary *palestra* that is cordoned off from certain groups, and I have suggested those groups are readers and new writers. What closed doors also indicate is a closed system. In this system, literary value is established and cannot be provoked or

questioned. Again, Maya, reflecting on the declaration, explains to me her understanding of the problem with the system with regard to the idea of literary value:

> [Publishing House A] is very good, it feels democratic, there is a facility to publish but... and I was speaking with Cristina the other day... they publish many bad things. There's no filter... There comes a moment when the critic is the one that has to act to somehow create a state of value: what is good, what is bad. There must be a hierarchy. Not everything is good... It is only those cornerstone works that are really going to be for posterity or for history. Other than that, it is publishing blindly. Everyone writes science fiction, everyone writes fantasy, everyone thinks they can publish. Logically you think that it's not difficult, but in [Publishing House A] there are many very bad things that are published and that are boring. So boring...

It seemed at first as if she was speaking in support of the literary hierarchy as arbiters of taste, which she is in some regards, but she speaks of new type of critics. In Cuba, there are books, but they are 'boring'. She attributes the poor decision on what to publish on the publishing houses. The literary hierarchy as it still stands are the ones who have lost the 'critical rigor' and who perpetuate publications without a standard of literary value in her opinion. She continued:

> We do not have to publish everything that an [established] author wrote. There may have been moments when he had his recognition that he did good works, but that doesn't mean that you don't have to be keep being good [to publish]. And they [publishers] are not being rigorous in that sense. And it has already happened! What must be done is a task of serious criticism and to discern what is good and what is bad. But the problem is that in this world of science fiction, for example, everyone knows everyone. It is another type of relationship, we wish to say good things of friends who publish...In short, I have also been a victim of that kind of thing. I have been asked to be on the jury of a prize, even though I knew the people submitting to it. That was not right. There is not enough quality. There is a conception of cronyism [*amiguismo*], of "you are my colleague" ... and sometimes we lose critical rigor'

What Grupo Ariete is hoping to dismantle with their battering ram are the closed doors that maintain a type of literary value that actually, according to this group of young writers, is not critically rigorous. What seems confusing, then, is who can make claims on notions of literary value? Who should judge what has value and what does not?

Maya is a university lecturer in literature and she, like all the members of Grupo Ariete and Espacio Abierto, is well-read in literature published outside of the Cuba through friends who bring or send books or through pirated copies of electronic books. Her idea of value comes from a position of academic criticism and from her awareness of a different publishing field. This is

reflected in a discussion I had with Diego, participant of Espacio Abierto. He questions the idea of what constitutes 'good' literature because he is not able to regularly keep up with what is published in the United States. 'If we had more access to US publications, we would be more competitive,' he complained. In exploring this topic more with him over coffee in my apartment, he told me his opinion on the differences between being a writer in Cuba and in the US. He said:

> I don't think I can make a fair comparison between writers in the US and in Cuba. I think there are many more opportunities in the US, but also many more writers. Of course, I am very sure there are more writing instructors in the US. Although it is difficult in the US, writers can live or reach some level of comfort to live off of what you write... Maybe, it makes writers more certain of their work, that they have to achieve greater perfection to get published in the US than in Cuba. In Cuba, although it is not easy, perhaps you can see some published work that is not the best quality. Although it is very subjective. You are obliged in the US to reach a different level of perfection.

Diego is making a specific differentiation between the idea of being a writer in Cuba and in the United States. In this context, the United States is metonymic of the publishing market. The market is the difference he is articulating between the two countries and the way in which writers live differently in the two countries. He believes that writers 'can live or reach some level of comfort', as in earn enough to live off of what they publish, in the United States and that must make writers 'more certain of their work'. This in some ways ties literary value to economic value. The publishing market requires a higher quality of literature to publish than the system in Cuba and the writers who are able to publish there must know their work is of a certain quality in order to be published. This echoes the same uncertainty Maya speaks about with regard to her self-conception as writer. What she seeks is a recognition of her work as having economic value, as being purchased *en masse* by the reader, and thereby literary value. Like Diego, she knows that the system in Cuba cannot validate that. Moreover, this is a reflection of the claim by Grupo Ariete that their closed system and 'institutional inertia', in which critics look only at their navels, has lost touch with conceptions of current tastes. These claims, I hope to show, stem from the belief of Grupo Ariete, Maya, Lena and Diego that the type of literary value they are interested in is the type conveyed by mass readers and new types of independent literary critics (professional readers) who are in some way responsible to those readers.

Literary value in a market-based publishing system

In this section, I want to return briefly to the idea of the book. For literary critics, the book has been studied almost entirely in relation to the symbolic value of the text and notions of literary value have been constructed around the symbolic value. But recent interest in the object of the book has led literary historians (see Darnton 1982; Joshi 2018) and sociologists (see Thompson 2010) to study the production and circulation of the book as a way of understanding how economic, cultural and symbolic values relate. Darnton, in his widely cited article 'What is the history of books?' (1982), diagrammed what he called the 'the communication circuit' of the publishing industry, looking specifically at the movement of the book and the types of communication that move with it on every stage of its journey between writer and reader (see Figure 8.1 below). His argument is that to understand the way in which books function in book-based societies, it is important to understand every chain in the link between 'author' and 'reader'. For the case of Cuba, I want to look specifically at the link between 'author', 'reader' and 'publisher', as all aspects of book production are state-owned and run, following the same mandates as the publisher; in essence, they function as a single unit in the communication circuit.

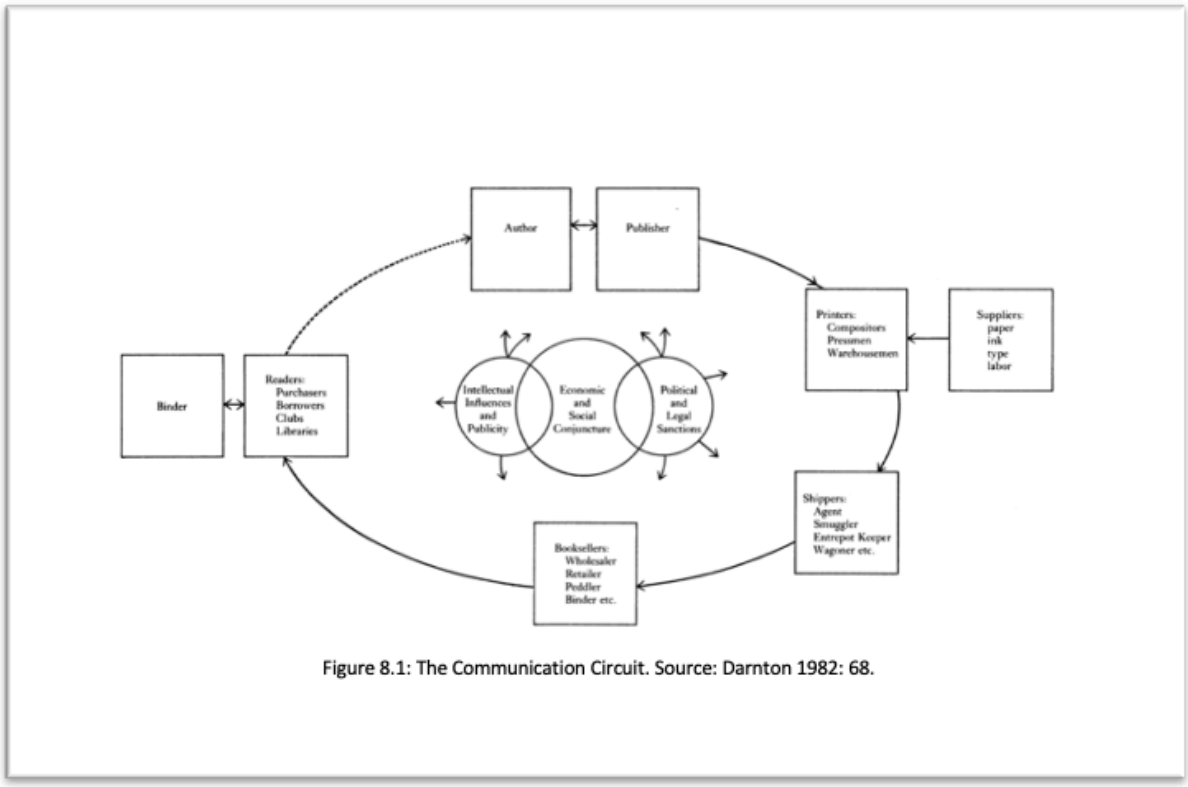


Figure 8.1: The Communication Circuit. Source: Darnton 1982: 68.

Darnton notes that he has drawn a dotted line between 'reader' and 'author' because the reader is the end stage in a cycle of consumption, yet the reader is still able to communicate with the author in certain ways, closing the circuit. He writes:

> The reader completes the circuit, because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition... Authors are readers themselves. By reading and associating with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of the literary enterprise, which affects their texts... He addresses implicit readers and hears from explicit reviewers. So the circle runs full cycle. It transmits messages, transforming them en route, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again (*ibid:* 67).

But more recent work on the study of the book has been critical of Darnton for not pushing far enough in his analysis of the power of the reader.

Literary critics have argued that readers are not only passive consumers of the literary works, but that they are the producers of the text (see Barthes 1977) and that they construct the meaning of the text through their experience of reading (see Iser 1972). But the reader can also affect the text pre-publication. In a market-based publishing system, the idea of the reader can

influence both the writing of a text and what gets published. Joshi (2018) believes Darnton's communication circuit needs to be refashioned to account not only to emphasise a stronger relationship between 'reader' and 'writer', but because 'readers today fundamentally define the circuit' (*ibid:* 231). She attributes the importance of the reader not only to developments in digital self-publishing and through examinations of fanfiction, but also because publishing is a market and decisions of what to publish, in what format and for what price are based on patterns of reader consumption.

A Cuban revision of Darnton's diagram would leave the circuit incomplete. Due to the stance that the book is not a commodity, the lack of interest in readers and their desires (although hopefully that is changing) and the incomplete or absent book sales figures, the reader has no influence at all on the type of work published and no way to communicate their literary opinions to the writers. As Darnton (1982) stresses, writers are also readers, which, in a market-based system, allows writers to engage with an 'implicit reader' before their texts meets 'explicit readers'. For the writers I worked with, as readers they were capable of imagining the desires of the 'implicit reader' but never encountered an explicit reader response.

In Thompson's (2010) sociological work on the Anglo-American publishing field, he uses Bourdieu definition of 'field logic' (1992) to understand how the publishing system works sociologically. He states: 'A field is a structured space of social positions which can be occupied by agents and organizations, and in which the position of any agent or organization depends on the type and quantity of resources or "capital" they have at their disposal' (Thompson 2010: 3-4). Thompson identifies the types of capital he is speaking about: 'economic capital'; 'human capital'; 'social capital'; 'intellectual capital'; and 'symbolic capital' (Thompson 2010: 5). This is of course very dependent on a market-based system. In the case of Cuba, certain types of capital do exist, but not in the same way as the market analysis Thompson provides. Cuban publishing creates a different idea of value based on an alternate prioritisation of types of capital. It is a system where 'social capital' and 'symbolic capital' play a much more important role in dictating what is published, where 'economic' capital is totally absent.

Thompson continues: 'the notion of field calls our attention to the fact that the power of any agent or organization in the field is dependent on the kinds and quantities of resources or

capital that it possesses' (2010: 5). In the case of the English-language publishing market, this allows for a publication of books that will be popular in the market, but that have low critical standing (reflecting books with high economic capital and low symbolic capital) and publication of books that are highly reviewed critically, but never sell (books with high symbolic capital and low economic capital). But the notion of literary value as belonging solely to work with symbolic capital is outdated. As Joshi (2018) notes, the rise of digital publishing and the growth of book-markets in new areas, like India, challenges the notion of literary value. Attempting to corner a new book market, publishers have focused on supporting 'world' literary talent, by finding authors who appeal to the critical taste of the Anglo-American publishing system. Quoting the literary journal *n+I*, she writes:

> Despite the symbolic capital that the global novel summons in its particularly metropolitan economy, the *n+I* polemic is sceptical about its influence: "World literature …canonized by the academy, has become an empty vessel for the occasional self-ratification of the global elite, who otherwise mostly ignore it' (*ibid:* 232).

Literary value is relational, but it is becoming dependent on more than just the traditional sets of relations. Readers and the market are redefining what gets published and, as such, are upending traditional systems of intellectual power.

The writers I worked with in Cuba were speaking of a certain type of literary value that was given by readers, attained only through the publication of a book (or electronic book). The desire for the type of literary value provided by the Anglo-American market is not unique to Cuban writers. In fact, Wulff (2017) writes that for Irish writers, the idea of writer success is imagined by publishing elsewhere. Quoting an interlocutor, she writes: 'The important locus of publishing is still London… Success happens in England' (*ibid:* 78). The writers I worked with though did not only want to publish outside of Cuba, but rather they wanted to change the Cuban conception of literary value to reflect developments and changes in literary tastes around the world. They want a system with a new type of critic who is not only responsible for the intellectual betterment of the readers, but also interested in appealing to their tastes. The Cuban reader, who accesses books and texts popular on the world literary market, to have a say in what is published in Cuba. They are critiquing

the type of criticism that occurs in Cuba as elitist and out of touch. In short, they want to critique the idea of literary value in Cuba and question who has the power to attribute it.

Las vacas sagradas and a desire for a third option

We had just finished a meeting of Grupo Ariete and I was walking with Alexi toward the bus stop. The walk took us along Quinta Avenida in Miramar, a boulevard with a beautiful path down the centre of the street. On either side of the path, there is grass and flowers. It is one of the most well-kept parts of Havana as the road connects most of the embassies in the city. Walking down the centre of the road, on the boulevard path, there was a sense of privacy.

We were talking in that moment about censorship. I was interested in whether it affected fiction writers in Cuba. He said that there is a level of government control. He had never experienced anything like that, but he had heard that if the government does not like some part of what someone had written, they may ask them to take it out in order to publish. I asked specifically what is was a person may have trouble writing about. He went quiet for a moment, thinking about an example. 'Well, critiques of the government mostly'. He said with a smile, 'you can't write about *la tiranía* (the tyranny) for example,' a statement full of dramatic irony.

Switching to a more sombre tone, he explained, the publishing system works to give writers who have been government favourites a continual platform for their work. He called these writers *vacas sagradas*. This was not the only time I heard of *vacas sagradas* and actually the term was used throughout my fieldwork, applied to both artists and writers, but also to people in government or bureaucrats. The term *'vaca sagrada'* in Cuban Spanish seems to refer to a person who has earned prestige and standing in their field through expertise. However, depending on who and how it is being said, the connotation changes slightly. It can be used in deference or it can be used in a resigned way to speak of 'institutional inertia' and about the special benefits retained by some, whether or not those benefits are continually earned. Alexi, like Maya's complaint of cronyism, sees the publishing system as not purely meritocratic.

Alexi insisted that this is why Cuba needed a book market; market tastes would show who was published because they were good and who was published because of social prestige. I questioned if he really wanted a market, noting the number of bad books that are published in hopes they meet the low expectations of the widest margin of people. Alexi answered with a sense of exasperation as we walked toward the bus stop: 'The industry here is run by politics, the industry in the US is run by money. Neither is ideal'. Alexi was the first person who articulated the divide between US capitalism and Cuban socialism as two systems: one driven by politics and the other by economics. Yet so many discussions with my interlocutors about writing, being a writer and publishing seemed to speak exactly to alienation from either side of this binary.

Sitting on benches at one of the few metro-city beaches in Havana, I was speaking with Anaïs about her thoughts on the possible introduction of market capitalism in Cuba. Thinking for a moment, she told me to look at the beach on which we were sitting. I was confused as to what that had to do with our discussion but did as she asked. She explained to me that the beach is interesting because it is a site that has a specific wealth of stone used in certain Santeria practices. The beach then becomes a place where people take away stones and where they return to lay out offerings to the saints. People also come here to drink and chat with friends, so the beach is filled not only with the religious artefacts and sacrifices, but also with trash people leave behind. From a distance, about fifteen metres from the water, where we sat, I could at first not see anything but the shade-giving palm trees and the beautifully coloured water hitting the rocky shore, but I began to pick out oddities as I looked more closely.

She didactically instructed me to look to either side of the inlet. There were deteriorated beach clubs currently used as government buildings. I could easily imagine the world from which they came. Design-wise they were very representative of Republican Cuban architecture of the 1930s and 1940s. One even had the remains of round, cement tables with holes in the centre where wooden, fronded umbrellas would most likely have been put. The other building had an elegant circular driveway and sat directly on the cliffs overlooking the sea in front and the beach to the side. She explained to me that before the Revolution, the beach had only been for members of those clubs, most likely foreigners, and Cubans were not permitted to go there.

'*Mira ahora. La playa esta destruida y sucia. Que es mejor? Beneficios solamente para un poco o nada para nadie? No sé*' [Look, now. The beach is destroyed and dirty. What is better? Benefits only for a few or nothing for anyone? I don't know']. She explained to me that she had struggled in the system her whole life, trying to make money as a single parent, taking care of her two daughters and her mother. She wanted the chance to work hard to make more money. She worked regularly, attempting to take on whatever extra work she could, but she still struggled. When she goes to the beach, she explained to me, she sees useless decay, dirt, but at least she can go to the beach.

We kept talking and spoke about the upcoming Feria Internacional del Libro. She enjoyed going because once a year it offered something different than the normal quality of Cuban-published books. She told me that the question of the publishing market here in Cuba really interested her and that she had heard a news story last week, criticizing the industry here for publishing books mostly on, what she described as, topics no one wanted to read: political history of the Revolution, contemporary politics, revolutionary heroes and so on. In contrast, she told me, at the fair you could find some really well-bound novels and children's books, but they often sold for very expensive prices (about $10CUC). As she pointed out, this was a price most Cubans could not afford. The books they wanted, printed in a nice way on topics of interest were impossible for most Cubans to buy, she said.

She then reached into her bag and pulled out two French editions of a Spanish language textbook. As she is a linguist, a friend had brought them to her the last time this friend was in Cuba. She said:

> Molly, look at these books. They are beautiful, colourful, and of good quality. I can't find books like this in Cuba. I am a teacher at a school for international students and we don't have books for our students. And what did this book cost 9 dollars, well euros? And I can't afford that. We could do with an industry more interested in the market here. Maybe on one side the US system is run by money, but our system is run by politics. They are opposite sides of the spectrum and both are bad.

This divide popped up again when I was having a discussion with three Ariete writers as we left the group meeting. Lena was explaining to me her ideal system of publishing for writers, which featured a compromise. We spoke about how a non-market system contained certain artistic benefits, but how it did not allow writers to *ser escritor* or be writers. Lena told me that what she

wanted was 'el mejor de los dos mundos'[53]. She continued, 'Yes, I prefer the system here, but I want to sell my books outside, get readers and earn money. Here we don't worry about the market, but we can't earn money, we can't live as writers'. We joked about the best of both worlds and how ideal it would be if new changes allowed Cuban writers to sell books abroad, leaving Cuba market-less, and permitting writers to be driven '*por el amor al arte*' [for the love of art] when living here. Leo interjected, 'it would make it a utopia for writers'.

> 'All the writers in the world would come to Cuba,' Lena said.
>
> I responded, 'Yes! An island of writers'.
>
> And she continued, 'Cuba: writer's paradise.'
>
> '...with palm trees', responded the third writer.

Literature in revolution

The divide spoken about Alexi, Anaïs and the three Ariete members – the 'two worlds' or the poles on a spectrum in which both sides are bad – is reflective of perspectives on Special Period Cuba that I discussed in the introduction. As I referenced in the introduction, the generation of writers I worked with were a unique group; the oldest were the children of the revolutionary generation and the youngest were three generations removed. The majority of people I worked with grew up in a specific time in which the end of the Soviet Union and the economic crisis that that caused along with the introduction of small market-economies drastically changed the way Cubans understood their type of socialism. As Balaisis (2016) writes: 'The late socialist period is thus constituted by an uneasy combination of old and new, revolutionary socialism, and nascent global capitalism... the ambiguity of the contemporary period... is marked by both change and stasis, transformation and immobility, old revolutionary icons and new ways of imagining them.' (28-29). While the writers I worked with never spoke about being against the Revolution, they were confused as to what the future could be or would become. The writers that I worked with seemed to occupy a space similar

[53] The best of both worlds

to that described by Holbraad (2014) as a 'binary "equivocation"' (370) with the regards to the idea of the Revolution. As Holbraad describes it: "Cuban people can so viscerally pledge allegiance to their Revolution while also being so fed up with it because the object in either case is different: 'revolution', qua object of allegiance and morbidly depressed discontent respectively, is t*wo different things*' (2014: 370). My experiences seem in many ways to match Holbraad's, although we worked with interlocutors from different generations, which produced subtle differences. As described in my introduction, the different generations of my interlocutors greatly influenced the way in which they related to the idea of the Revolution, something described by Berg (2011) in relation to different exiled or immigrant generations in Spain in relation to the idea of the nation of Cuba and reflected in the writers' discussion in Chapter One.

Like Holbraad's binary between the Revolution as on object of allegiance and one of discontent, the writers I worked with seemed to distinguish between the Revolutionary goals for literature as they were and as they are. They understood the goals of the Revolution as being out of line with the actions of the publishing system today. When they spoke about dreams and goals for Cuba, they even used imagery which resonated with statements Fidel Castro made about writers in 1961. The quote in which the three members are telling me that Cuba could be a writer's utopia, an island for writers with palm trees, reminds me of a quote from Castro I cited earlier (in Chapter Two). In his 'Speech to Intellectuals', Castro says:

> There is also the notion of organizing some recreational and working site for artists and writers, on one occasion as we were traveling about the national territory, the idea occurred to us in a very beautiful place -- the Isle of Pines -- of constructing a district, a hamlet in the midst of the pine trees for the purpose of rewarding and paying homage to writers and artists ... the idea would be to build a hamlet or village in a backwater of peace which invites one to rest, which invites one to write.

While he did not have intentions of permitting access to external market, writers were meant to occupy an important place in society, as iterated by Gretel and by the employee of the ICL, representatives of the State. Yet the writers I worked with understood what it meant to be a writer, what it meant to have value as a writer, as being something you earned from readers and not a title given by the publishing elites alone. While this could be thought of as 'uneasy combination' of global capitalist ideals and late socialist realties, as Balaisis wrote (2016: 28), I believe that they are

critiquing something deeper. The best of both worlds or the middle ground between the poles of economics and politics is the idea of revolutionary art as it should be.

While they wanted to access the book market, they did so because the market, for them, was synonymous with readers and reoriented the power to attribute value of a literary variety to readers, and away from the intellectuals propped up by out-of-touch institutional power. Bishop (2012) writes about contemporary artists involved in participatory art and affirms that participatory art is a 'a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning' with an audience (Bishop 2006: 12), similar to Barthes description of meaning production in reading, as I noted in the introduction. She continues: 'This book is predicated on the assumption that value judgments are necessary, [but] not as a means to reinforce elite culture and police the boundaries of art and non-art' (*ibid: 8).* She is interested in understanding art not only as the object or process (of creating), but as a mediating object between 'the artist and a secondary audience' (*ibid:*9). My argument is Bishop's refocus on the attribution of value and the relationship between the artist and audience is reflective of the desires of my interlocutors. The people I worked with were critical of the system of publishing in Cuba because it was as system based on distinction (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), albeit not economic class distinction, but elite distinction none the less. The market then comes to represent a democratisation of taste created by readers (a secondary audience) with power. Readers, not literary elites stuck behind the 'closed doors of institutional inertia', would be in charge of deciding what has merit and what does not.

Conclusion

To return to Trotsky's claim that at the time of his writing (1923-1924) there was no such thing as revolutionary art, I want to try to understand what art should look like in revolution. According to Trotsky (2005 [1925]), you could not force an immediate democratisation of art in times of revolution. He believed that immediate elevation of proletariat culture to the standards of art 'patronizes new working class writers and deprives them of the cultural knowledge and practice they need to develop art' (Keach 2005: 12). Instead, Trotsky argued that the system should be

completely open to both learning about the art that came before and for the creation and experimentation with new forms of art. This is very much in line with Cuban revolutionary doctrine on reading, education and (disregarding censorship) new forms of artistic production. Yet, something still went wrong. The system stopped being open in the sense that literary tastes, according to my interlocutors, are set and established in a system of distinction in a similar way to which Bourdieu's (1984 [1979]) distinction works in capitalist system. A certain class of people with cultural capital dictate tastes. They say what qualifies as having intellectual benefits for the *pueblo cubano* and what should and should not get published. What upends that control has been access to international markets and an introduction of a different set of tastes, international popular taste. The disruption then or the revolutionary act, for the writers I worked with, was the insertion of the tastes of an audience (as in readers and writers) into the Cuban literary *palestra.*

'Literature is an act of communication', Maya told me decisively. Writers want readers. But the idea of literature is a mutual creation, not only in the Barthesian sense, but because readers make writers relevant, even 'real'. The assumption of the recognition received from mass readership and the value attributed through readers and for the consideration of the tastes of readers was the only thing that could make the writers I worked with writers, at least in their mind.

Conclusion

Raúl's rules for writing description:

Observación funcional
(Observations must have purpose)
Descripción retentivo
(Memorable descriptions)
Descripción coherente – hablas de mas sencillo
(Coherent descriptions – speak simply)
Descripción precisa
(Precise descriptions)
Evitar digresiones
(Avoid digressions)
Evitar lugares comunes
(Avoid common descriptions)
Mantener la atención del lector...arrancar bien
(Hold the attention of the reader... Begin well)
No infla el tono – escriba en naturalidad
(Don't inflate the tone, write naturally)
No explica demasiado, mantener la curiosidad
(Don't explain too much, keep the reader curious)
Originalidad – tener cuidado con los objectos demasiado de la historia/de la cuenta
(Originality - be careful of the overly used objects of stories)
Tener piedad con el lector
(Have compassion for the reader)
La realidad no es importe en literatura
(Reality is not important in literature)

I would not go so far as to say that to work with writers for a year has made me a writer – I hope to have shown how difficult it is to *become a writer* in Havana. And I, personally, would not conflate my academic writing with an ability to write another genre, although, who knows, perhaps my story about the hole in the roof will materialise at some point. I have learned so much about the craft of writing and about the tools of praxis. The above rules, written on a chalkboard by Raúl during a free course he taught on narrative fiction at the Centro Hispanoamericano de Cultura, are about writing description, and I remember thinking how lucky I was, as an ethnographer, to happen upon some rules to guide my practice upon returning home. They seemed to resonate so well with expectations that I should have for my own academic work. Be precise, avoid digressions, be original, do not inflate my tone, hold the attention of the reader… and I, of course, ignored the last one. But *being a writer* meant so much more to the people I worked with than following rules, writing well, and even getting published or winning awards. They faced a paradox: they were being writers (as in practicing as writers), but they were not being writers (as in being able to claim an identity as such). *Being a writer* for them seemed like a difficulty, if not an impossibility, as long as their idea of 'writer' was defined by a type of public, large-scale social recognition.

At the start of this thesis, I said I wanted to understand, among other things, what changed to make these groups of writers so insistent on disrupting the literary *status quo*? From their own words we know they were not antagonistic toward the past and had feelings of uncertainty, but not dismissal, of a socialist future. They shunned the highbrow, artistry of the generations directly preceding them; the generations who, as Ariete members write in their declaration, were overly cynical of the past and whose literary experimentation left Cuban literature 'unrecognizable and unclassifiable' (Grupo Ariete 2016). In the Special Period, the Cuban publishing system changed (Kapcia and Kumaraswami 2012), the Cuban economy and consumption habits shifted (Holbraad 2009; Pertierra 2011) and Cuban attitudes toward time (Balaisis 2016), the Revolution (Holbraad 2014) and the idea of *afuera* (Hernandez-Reguant 2009) were altered. My interlocutors became more connected than ever. Through reading and, even in some cases, publishing, the people I worked with were not isolated in Cuba behind trade sanctions and embargos. Instead, they were well connected virtually to other readers and writers and were so well-versed on upcoming Anglo-American, Spanish and Latin American fiction that when I returned to Cuba in June and asked for

book requests, most of what they wanted had not yet been published. They had an understanding of book markets and literary expectations globally. They were participants in a global literary community, yet also felt stuck in a system that neglected any input from market trends and popular tastes, from the readers. They felt, paradoxically, both highly local and very much global, which changed their expectations in Cuba of what should have been published and what it meant to be *a writer*.

The idea of a third alternative, between capitalism and socialism, presented another possible paradox. They did not want things as they currently were (no publishing market), nor did they want the opposite (a book market). As they described it, the two opposites turned out to be different sides of the same the coin. Writing about the 'culture of debate', Hernández notes that 'those who *dissent* in Cuba exercise a fundamental right ... On the other hand, those who are *dissidents* deny their own former convictions ... They don't want to change the system, they want to liquidate it and replace with the *other one*' (129). The writers I worked with did not want to liquidate or replace, but they spoke of an ideal situation where they were not torn between *the one* and *the other one*. But what was it that they wanted? What was the third option? From what they discussed, their interest was in a revolutionary promise for publishing, Castro's 'island of the Pines', but the current system, hurt by an economic embargo, was struggling to even print books. Without books, there were no readers; without readers, what are writers?

To return to the premise of this thesis: how can you be a writer in a literary space without readers? The obvious answers, for my interlocutors, is that you cannot be. As long as the writers I worked with tied the idea of 'writer' to an idea of readership, they cannot consider themselves writers. It is through readers that their authorship is realised. This stemmed from the idea that literature is an act of communication between writers and readers. Post-modernist and deconstructionist theory had provided literary scholars with the idea that readers were necessary to complete a text, but it seemed, from my work, that readers were necessary also to complete the writer.

Looking forward: more changes

As I mentioned in my introduction, there has been a proposal for a revised constitution in Cuba. Of most interest to my interlocutors was the new law proposed by President Díaz-Canel, 'Decreto 349'. The new law has the goal of making sure artists (of all varieties) seek government permission in order to sell or perform their work publicly and ensure that they are affiliated with a cultural institution in order to commercialise their work. Many independent artists in Cuba were upset by the suggested change and have spoken out about it in interviews and articles. International aid organisations, like Amnesty International, proclaimed a new era of censorship and artistic persecution ('Cuba: New Administration's 2018). The law will go into effect in December of 2018, and time will tell what happens from there. I was able to speak with two interlocutors about the changes. One seemed as upset about the economic changes (including political salaries) as he was for the 'cultural problems' of the new constitution. The other mentioned that many people seemed really upset about it, but that it would mostly affect the development and prosperity of new entrepreneurship. Neither believed it would affect their work in Cuba or either *talleres*.

One article claims that the law's intention is to stop 'vulgar' art in Cuba (Weber 2018) and prohibits the use of particular imagery, language and symbols deemed detrimental to the greater good. Weber (2018) writes in a news article that she believes this is a way to stamp out certain types of art the government has always disliked, like reggaeton for example. This speaks to the idea of value, as discussed in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight of this thesis. The writers I worked with claimed that the literary hierarchy in Cuba was out of touch with what readers wanted and what was popular. My interlocutors looked to readers (and independent critics) as a means of democratising literary taste. If the law is a way to control types of art deemed vulgar, especially art that is popular, like reggaetón, then it speaks to the power structure of distinction and taste the writers were seeking to disrupt. Consider the example of science fiction and fantasy: it was deemed to not have the same cultural value as realist narrative fiction, and was given smaller (or no, up until recently) publishing space. Yet it was very popular among certain readers in Cuba. Once again, this problematises not only who has the power to say what should be read (or heard), but also what sort of productions constitute art.

A look at the groups today

Espacio Abierto is still going strongly. They still meet regularly and produce *Korad*. Some members of the group have branched out, starting a new project that focus on comic books and hold regular events for fantasy fans that include performances and live action role playing. Some of the comic book events have been held publicly in Fabrica de Arte, a venue that has become popular with artists and tourists alike.

Grupo Ariete has slowed down though. At least three of the members have left the country to live in Spain, two of whom were influential in the organisation of the *peña* and the *revista*. In Spain, they work on their writing still, publishing for online blogs and attending numerous literary events around the country. It would be interesting to hear their perspective of books and markets after living in Spain for over a year.

The Centro de Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso is getting a new roof. The school and the *talleres* have been displaced for the time being. Espacio Abierto now meets in a Casa de Cultura and the remaining members of Ariete meet at UNEAC.

Whether the writers are in Havana or in Madrid, working on fiction or comic books, they are still writing, critiquing and working toward the dream of *being a writer*. As Ariete concludes in their Declaración de Principios, in the face of challenges presented to them, they 'still believe that literature is a chimera on which it is worth betting [their] time and [their] efforts.'

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Appendix A

Declaración de principios del grupo literario Ariete

Ariete. (Del lat. *arĭes, -ĕtis*, carnero). m. Máquina militar que se empleaba antiguamente para batir murallas, consistente en una viga larga y muy pesada, uno de cuyos extremos estaba reforzado con una pieza de hierro o bronce, labrada, por lo común, en forma de cabeza de carnero. || **2.** En el fútbol, delantero centro. || **3.** *Mar.* Buque de vapor, blindado y con un espolón muy reforzado y saliente, que se usaba para embestir con empuje a otras naves y echarlas a pique. || **4.** Proyecto literario de ciertos jóvenes narradores cubanos que se piensa como un espacio de interacción con otros géneros artísticos como la música, la danza, las artes plásticas o el performance. || **5.** Revista literaria que agrupa a jóvenes con severas y crónicas inquietudes artísticas y ganas de derribar puertas cerradas.

El grupo Ariete nació quizás por azar, pero si de algo estamos seguros es de que se ha mantenido gracias al empecinamiento. El empecinamiento de un grupo de jóvenes que, de una forma u otra, hemos estado o estamos vinculados al Centro de Formación Literaria Onelio Jorge Cardoso. Cuando en julio de 2014 terminó el curso de técnicas narrativas de aquel año curricular, algunos no se resignaron y armaron este proyecto literario para comenzar a demoler las puertas cerradas de la inercia institucional y el tedio de los espacios literarios sin lectores.

Hoy nos vemos ante la necesidad de hacer una declaración de principios. Esto, aunque nos parece un acto un poco trasnochado, con cierto tufillo a vetusta vanguardia artístico-literaria de principios del siglo XX; o una pretensión ciertamente ingenua de trazar límites que ni siquiera tenemos del todo claros, resulta imprescindible para, al menos, marcar una trayectoria de a dónde queremos dirigirnos.

Lejos de intentar establecernos como la voz narrativa de nuestra generación, queremos esclarecer aquí un grupo de aspectos que creemos, nos distinguen como conjunto, y que, a la par, nos diferencian de otras generaciones literarias que nos precedieron u otras colectividades e individualidades que nos son contemporáneas.

1. Las historias que le interesan a los miembros del Ariete se distinguen por un regreso a lo anecdótico como central en la narración. Esto no significa que no exista una preocupación por el lenguaje o la experimentación formal, pero supone una vuelta a «la historia por contar», restándole importancia a las maneras, a las piruetas del acróbata, que hacían muchas veces perder de vista la red de la anécdota subyacente bajo cada acto.
2. Tendemos a una recolocación de los géneros narrativos. Si bien entre nosotros practicamos una alarmante promiscuidad genérica y conseguimos escribir indistintamente realismo sucio, ciencia ficción, literatura del absurdo o fantasía –por más que algunos prefieran cultivar unos géneros en detrimento de otros– solemos marcar los lindes entre estos tipos de literatura, como quien busca que las aguas retomen su nivel luego de un tsunami transgenérico anterior que hizo irreconocibles e inclasificables muchos textos de nuestro panorama literario.
3. Oponemos al cinismo de generaciones anteriores una ironía más cautelosa, pero igual de incisiva. Somos inevitablemente descreídos ante cualquier cosa que nos huela a imposición u oficialidad, pero no respondemos de una manera impulsiva y procaz, sino que cautelosamente calculamos la mortal estocada.
4. Nuestras creaciones miran al pasado sin resentimiento ni rencores. La historia de nuestra nación, ya sea lejana o reciente, nos resulta, ante todo, un útil arsenal del cual tomamos lo que nos haga falta, y no sentimos pudor ante el supuesto de tener que falsear o trastocar los acontecimientos. Nativos digitales que somos, conocemos perfectamente que todo se puede maquillar con las herramientas adecuadas.
5. Nos interesan las historias individuales, las aproximaciones subjetivas a los sucesos y no las visiones de conjunto, el friso social, el mosaico colectivo.

Ariete quiere crearse un espacio de expresión, horadar los intersticios de la oficialidad para hacer valer su voz. Nuestra conformación como grupo literario responde a una estrategia de inserción en un campo minado de críticos que miran solamente su ombligo, de posibilidades de publicación que dependen únicamente de ganar concursos literarios, de jóvenes promesas que ya rebasan la cuarentena y de editoriales que publicaban por planes productivos y exigencias utilitarias.

Es por eso que nos empeñamos en irrumpir en los espacios de la cotidianidad y tomarlos por asalto. Los hacemos en nuestras peñas mensuales en los jardines del Huron Azul en la UNEAC, lo llevamos a cabo en el ciberespacio desde las páginas de nuestra revista digital y cada vez que se nos presenta una mínima oportunidad.

Sabemos, lo tenemos claro: somos tan solo otra punta de lanza en el convulso panorama actual de la narrativa cubana, por más que nos disfracemos bajo la robusta configuración de un contundente ariete. Así que sin tantas ínfulas... somos unos jóvenes que hemos decidido unirnos, porque aún creemos que la literatura es una quimera por la que vale la pena apostar nuestro tiempo y nuestros esfuerzos.

Declaration of principles of the literary group Ariete

Ram. (From lat. *Arĭes* , - *ĕtis* , ram). m. Military machine that was formerly used to beat walls, consisting of a long and very heavy beam, one end of which was reinforced with a piece of iron or bronze, usually carved in the shape of a ram's head. || **2.** In football, centre forward. || **3.** *Mar.* Steam vessel, armoured and with a very reinforced and protruding spur, which was used to thrust into other ships and to sink them. || **4.** Literary project of certain young Cuban narrators that is considered a space of interaction with other artistic genres such as music, dance, plastic arts or performance. || **5.** Literary magazine that brings together young people with severe and continuing artistic concerns and a desire to tear down closed doors.

The group was born Ariete perhaps by chance, but if we are sure of one thing, it is that it has been maintained thanks to stubbornness: the stubbornness of a group of young people who, in one way or another, have been or are linked to the Centro de Formación Onelio Jorge Cardoso. When the course on narrative techniques for that curricular year ended in July 2014 , we did not stop and put together this literary project to begin to demolish the closed doors of institutional inertia and the tedium of literary spaces without readers.

Today we are faced with the need to make a declaration of principles. This – although it seems to us a somewhat outdated act, with a certain whiff of the ancient early twentieth century, artistic-literary avant-garde or a naïve attempt to draw limits that we do not even have at all clear – is essential to, at least, mark a trajectory of where we want to go.

Far from trying to establish ourselves as the narrative voice of our generation, we want to clarify here a perspective that we believe distinguishes us as a whole, and that, at the same time, differentiates us from other literary generations that preceded us and other contemporary collectives and individuals.

1. The stories that interest the members of Ariete are distinguished by a return to the anecdotal as central to the narrative. This does not mean that there is no concern for language and formal experimentation, but represents a return to "telling the story," downplaying the ways, like acrobatic pirouettes, which often made a reader lose sight of the network of the underlying anecdote under each act.
2. We believe in the narrative genres. Although between us we practice an alarming generic promiscuity; we manage to write indistinctly dirty realism, science fiction, literature of the absurd or fantastical. While some even prefer to cultivate genres to the detriment of others, we tend to mark the boundaries between these types of literature and will let the waters revive their level after a previous trans-generic tsunami that made many texts of our literary panorama unrecognizable and unclassifiable.
3. We oppose the cynicism of previous generations, with a more cautious irony, but no less incisive. We are inevitably unbelieving in the face of anything that smells of imposition or officiality, but we do not respond in an impulsive and proactive manner, but instead we cautiously calculate the deadly thrust.
4. Our creations look to the past without resentment or grudges. The history of our nation, whether distant or recent, is first and foremost a useful arsenal from which we take what we need, and we are not embarrassed to distort or disrupt events. Digital natives that we are, we know everything can be made up with the right tools.

5. We are interested in the individual stories, the subjective approaches to the events and not the overall visions, the social frieze, the collective mosaic.

Ariete wants to create a space of expression, to pierce the interstices of officiality in order to assert our voice. Our union as a literary group centres on a strategy of insertion in a field undermined by critics who look only at their navel, of publication possibilities that depend solely on winning literary contests, of promising youth who already overrun designed area and of publishing houses that publish for production plans and utilitarian demands. That is why we strive to break into the spaces of everyday life and take them by assault. We do this in our monthly *peñas* in the gardens of the Huron Azul in the UNEAC, we do this in cyberspace from the pages of our digital magazine, anytime we have a minimal opportunity.

We know. we have it clear: we are just another spearhead in the convulsive current panorama of the Cuban narrative, even though we disguise ourselves under the robust weapon of a forceful battering ram. So, without so many airs ... we are young people who have decided to unite, because we still believe that literature is a chimera on which it is worth betting our time and our efforts.

Appendix B

Comunicación

By Milena Hidalgo Castro

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Carmen termina de adobar las piezas de pollo y pone el aceite a calentar. Los pedazos de carne le parecen hermosos, su trabajo está comenzando a tomar forma y sabor. Cuando la grasa está lista, echa la primera pieza y se aleja un poco para evitar las salpicaduras. Una a una las coloca todas y las cubre con la tapa de cristal. Se queda quieta mirando el freír de la carne que se va recogiendo hasta ser solo la mitad de lo echado segundos antes; en esas nuevas dimensiones le recuerdan la escena de la película donde el asesino extirpa un fragmento de cerebro a su víctima, lo fríe y luego se lo da a comer. Sonríe con la boca aguada, traga la saliva con sabor a ajo y limón y destapa para dar vuelta al pollo. Ojalá la realidad fuera volteable, ojalá uno no se quemara en su aceite, piensa y mira al pasillo donde Pedro está sentado en su sillón, perdido en algún lugar inaccesible para ella. Así ha sido el último año, llega y se sienta ausente. Qué no daría ella por saber lo que piensa su esposo.

El pollo va dorándose como él prefiere, no muy frito para que la carne sea blanda y gustosa. Carmen conoce a Pedro, o al menos eso ha creído durante un tiempo. A menudo se dice que él siempre ha sido así de parco y taciturno, el misterio es su atractivo principal. Lo justifica pensando que son los años, a los cuarenta ya no se es el mismo. Pero al verlo así, tan lejos, el discurso flaquea y siente el peso de la soledad. Saca los primeros trozos fritos a la medida del paladar de su marido. Su color la hace evocar otra vez aquella escena de la película. Mira lo que todavía se fríe, bien frito para ella y traga más saliva de ajo. Se ve yendo hacia Pedro lentamente hasta tener a unos poco centímetros su nuca. Regresa a la cocina sin hacer ruido y coge el cuchillo. Con cara de villana va donde la nuca y la acaricia con ternura. Él no se percata de su presencia. Con los dedos busca el punto donde se unen las capas del cráneo, siente la hendidura y dibuja un círculo en ese lugar con el cuchillo antes de comenzar a cortar. No corta en redondo sino que levanta un cuadrado pequeño de cuero cabelludo e introduce la punta del cuchillo por la hendidura, la raja un poco hasta hacer un agujero por el que saca un pedazo de cerebro chorreante de una baba amarillenta. Pedro permanece inmóvil durante todo el proceso, sigue ausente. Ella coloca el cuero cabelludo en su lugar y regresa a la cocina. Destapa el aceite y echa el trozo de cerebro que comienza a despedir un olor distinto al de los pollos, muy parecido al olor a quemado.

Carmen aguza el olfato y mira el sartén, hace un movimiento rápido y saca sus postas que casi se achicharran por sus fabulaciones. Ríe a carcajadas mientras apaga el fogón. Mira al pasillo en busca de una reacción del marido ante su escándalo, pero no hay señales de que la oyera. Tal vez si comiese un pedazo del cerebro de Pedro podría saber qué es lo que piensa tanto. Pone la mesa y se lava las manos. Cuelga el delantal y mira el cuchillo sobre la meseta.

El olor del pollo refrito es más tenue. Carmen va al baño, arregla su peinado frente al espejo y muerde el labio mirándose a los ojos. Una mirada fija en esos del espejo que ya no son los suyos.

Escucha un pito agudo en los oídos. Le duelen. Siente un rapto de lucidez como si todo el conocimiento del mundo le viniera de golpe al cerebro en un latigazo en las sienes. Duele solo un segundo con una intensidad ajena para ella. Comienza a desnudarse y aprieta la mordida sobre el labio hasta que sangra. Se limpia con la lengua el sabor a hierro y ya desnuda regresa a la cocina, toma el cuchillo y corta la liga que le recoge el moño, lo pone de vuelta en la meseta. Con las dos manos se divide el pelo en dos partes dejando una raya por la que palpa el cráneo en busca de la hendidura. Al centro de su cabeza la descubre y coge el cuchillo, tantea con la punta hasta coincidir con el desnivel en el cráneo y lo introduce torciéndolo como un taladro de mano para perforar en círculo, poco a poco hasta la mitad. La sangre corre caliente por la raya, llega al cuello y baja por la canal de la columna para perderse entre sus nalgas y seguir pierna abajo hasta el piso. Ya está, piensa. Va tambaleándose hacia Pedro y le dice al oído "No te asustes, por favor, y haz lo que te pida". Él no responde, pero al verla desnuda con las manos llenas de sangre intenta abrir la boca cuando ella se la tapa con un beso, mientras le toca la portañuela con torpeza. Pedro siente subirle por la espina un calambre que lo inmoviliza y le endurece el sexo. Carmen lo nota, abre el zíper, desabotona y le baja los pantalones. Selo acaricia con la mano ensangrentada dejándoselo rojo. Se arrodilla, le da la espalda y él ve el hueco en la cabeza, su mandíbula desciende por el asco y frunce el ceño, pero otro calambre le sube por las piernas cambiándole el gesto a una media sonrisa. Ella arquea el torso y lo mira a los ojos al susurrarle "Métemela por ahí", se toca el hueco en el cráneo y mete un dedo para enseñarle cómo hacer. Él obedece, coge la cabeza de su mujer con ambas manos y mete solo el glande bloqueando el fluido. En el primer impacto ella abre la boca y sus pupilas se dilatan. Con cada penetración empieza a salirle un chorro amarrillo viscoso por las orejas y la nariz, corre por las comisuras de la boca y se empasta en el pelo pegado a los senos. Pedro acelera el ritmo de las arremetidas. El cerebro de Carmen es una masa cada vez menos sólida. El falo también sangra por la fricción con los bordes del cráneo. Ella abre la boca un poco más dejando salir un sonido casi musical. Su marido cierra los ojos en espera del espasmo ya cercano, le aprieta la cabeza en busca de apoyo y equilibrio. Se contrae y el calambre ahora sube a su cerebro. Eyacula entre temblores y el semen se mezcla con el batido de la materia gris de su mujer cuyos ojos amenazan con saltar de sus órbitas mientras de la boca, sin mover los labios cual si fuera una bocina,le sale ahora una voz, la voz de Pedro que dice un poema. Ella escucha al tiempo que siente salir por los oídos la simiente. Él sale del hueco de su cabeza, acaricia sus testículos y se pierde otra vez. La hendidura cierra lentamente sin sangrar y Carmen cae al suelo de costado. Su cabeza golpea duro contra el piso. Con el golpe la reproducción del texto salta como un disco dañado, y comienza desde el principio: "Una hora se extiende en la manecilla de mi reloj, una hora perdida por la mujer que ya no eres para mí, si te lo dijera sería palabra de polvo como eso que fuimos".

Pedro va al baño. Levanta la tapa del inodoro y orina sin mirar mojando el borde, salpicando el piso y su pantalón. Luego camina en zigzag hacia la mesa donde está servida la comida. Se sienta y mira el plato, coge torpemente los cubiertos. Lleva el primer bocado y mastica sin ganas hasta sentir el sabor. El pollo quedó como le gusta.

Carmen cierra los ojos y se abraza las rodillas en el piso, comienza a sentir frío. Intenta pararse. No puede porque el cuarto baila a su alrededor. Se aguanta del sillón y logra incorporarse con un dolor punzante. Todo duele. En su cabeza martillan las palabras de poema. En cada golpe el dolor se agudiza, pero es hora de la comida y a Pedro no le gusta comer solo, piensa y camina hacia la mesa apoyándose en la pared. Antes de llegar se detiene y aparta los pelos de sus senos. Entonces

sigue y se sienta a la mesa donde él mastica perdido. Por un instante se miran fijo, luego cada quien regresa la vista a su plato. Ella coge el tenedor con la mano temblorosa y pincha un trozo de pollo, se lo lleva a la boca y tantea hasta ponerlo dentro. Mastica suave y piensa que, definitivamente, su pieza no quedó muy buena.

Appendix C

Ruleta Rusa

Por Abel Guada Azze, 2018

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Estoy sentado en la cama, en cal- zoncillos, recostado al respaldar, con las piernas estiradas. Los únicos soni- dos que fragmentan el silencio son el tic tac del reloj de cuerda puesto en la cómoda, y el zumbido de un mosquito que aletea en la habitación. No tengo ganas de moverme. Apenas respiro. Al lado del reloj de cuerda está la caja de cigarros. Ni siquiera me interesa fumar y eso es decir demasiado. Junto a la caja de cigarros está la pistola cargada. Hace tiempo le vengo dando vueltas a la idea de reventarme la cabeza. Me imagino que debe ser un cierre limpio, rápido, sin dolor. Pero no me atrevo. Siempre he sido un tipo abúlico, que necesita ser movido de aquí a allá imperativamente. Por eso busco algo con la mirada que decida por mí. Meto la mano en el bolsillo y saco una moneda. Estrella será el balazo y escudo me mantendrá vivo. Lanzo la moneda y cae escudo. El teléfono empieza a sonar. Pienso que es una segunda oportuni- dad de morir y redefino las condiciones para tomar la decisión: si el teléfono timbra más de seis veces me pego el tiro, si no, a vivir se ha dicho. Al sexto timbre vuelven a quedar solamente el marcaje del reloj de cuerda y el aleteo del mosquito. Hago otro intento: en la primera gaveta de la cómoda tengo guardado los condones. Si hay exactamente cinco, me perdono la vida, de lo contrario jalo el gatillo. Estiro la mano. Creo poder llegar desde la cama sin el esfuerzo extra de levantarme. Abro la gaveta. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro. Agarro la pistola y me encañono la cien, pero an- tes de disparar, diría más bien que casi al mismo tiempo, puedo ver la esquina de otro preservativo debajo de unos pape- les desordenados. No me puedo rendir. Vuelvo a recostarme al respaldar de la cama e ideo un mecanismo infalible: si el mosquito no sale de la habitación en menos de un minuto me doy el balazo. Cierro los ojos y me concentro en el so- nido del reloj de cuerda. Con esa con- dición me reviento sí o sí, pienso. A los sesenta marcajes del segundero abro los ojos y busco al mosquito. No lo en- cuentro. Tampoco escucho el zumbido. Necesito un evento que me garantice grandes probabilidades de morir. Ahora sí, al fin, cómo no lo había pensado an- tes, cantaré Her Majesty, de los Beatles, si antes de terminar no empieza a llover, me vuelo la cabeza, eso sí funcionará, la ciudad lleva un mes de sequía y hoy anunciaron un día sin lluvia, con cielo despejado. Empienzo a cantar:

But she doesn't have a lot to say.
Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl
But she changes from day to day.
I wanna tell her that I love her a lot
But I got a bellyful of wine
Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl
Someday I'm gonna make her mine

Oh yeah, someday I'm gonna maker her...

El sonido del reloj de cuerda es aho- ra muy débil. Afuera están cayendo goterones pesados cada vez con más frecuencia. Hago otro intento: Para no dispararme es necesario que mi vecina toque a la puerta usando un turbante, unas gafas de sol, y me suplique que le deje mamármela. Miro la pistola. Las casualidades tienen un límite, pien- so. Por eso creo que ya no es casuali- dad que estén tocando la puerta. Me levanto de la cama y voy a coger un pantalón. No, no es necesario. Voy así mismo hasta la puerta, en calzoncillos, de todas formas si me pongo el pan- talón tendré que quitármelo de nuevo cuando la vecina me suplique para dar- me un par de lambiadas. Abro la puer- ta. Allí está la vecina, con el turbante y las gafas de sol. Me dice que estaba en medio de un juego de roll con su mari- do, donde ella era una libanesa cautiva y él un soldado americano, pero el muy comemierda se fue urgente al trabajo y la dejó así, con ganas de más. Agrega que me estaría muy agradecida si yo le dejara... Sí, sí, claro, le respondo, y va- mos hasta el cuarto. Esta vez declaro que la única forma de no dispararme es que la vecina llegue a un orgasmo brutal, inverosímil, mientras me la chupa.

Nos tiramos en la cama. Ella me quita los calzoncillos y se la mete en la boca. No pasa mucho tiempo hasta que me saca el semen, se lo traga y empieza a estremecerse como si la estuviesen to- cando. Los dos quedamos rematados, tendidos en la cama. Ella se asusta un poco, puedo percibirlo, cuando pasa la vista por la cómoda y ve la pistola. No te preocupes, es de fulminante, un di- seño muy realista, le digo, y veo como se relaja. Un último intento: Si la vecina se vuela los sesos guardo la pistola defi- nitivamente. Me voy quedando dormi- do, poco a poco.

Cuando despierto me siento desfa- sado. No sé cuánto tiempo estuve dor- mido. Diez minutos. Un año. Da igual. La vecina sigue en el cuarto, pero ahora está de pie, al lado de la cómoda. Coge la pistola. Se apunta a la cien mante- niendo cierta distancia, y me dice que siempre le han gustado las escenas de las películas donde la gente se suicida. Yo me levanto y la dejo en el cuarto. Voy hasta el baño. Conecto la lavadora y voy echando detergente. Si se dispara tendré que limpiar las sabanas. Es una lástima, son unas sábanas bastante lin- das, nuevas, con un estampado de muy buen gusto.