

Mysticism and Multiplicity:
Coexisting Contradictions in *El hombre,
la hembra y el hambre*

Lori Oxford

Western Carolina University

The disintegration of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union represented the collapse of Cuba's greatest economic benefactor and ideological partner and ushered in an epoch of crisis for the island. The years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were accompanied by severe shortages of food as well as oil-derived fuels, not to mention the near absence of many contraceptive devices and medicines to treat everyday ailments. Such drastic circumstances led to an overwhelming atmosphere of depression and dissatisfaction that settled over the island, and in 1995, at the height of the Special Period, Cuba's suicide rate was the highest in the Western Hemisphere (Chappell 4). In 1994, Cuba experienced its fourth major exodus since the 1959 triumph of the Revolution, the wave of *balseiros*, in which 50,000 Cubans left the island, and many of those who remained behind grew increasingly desperate.

Cuba's Special Period fiction invariably includes elaborate descriptions of the difficulties faced by Cubans during the island's historic economic and social crisis. Although Daína Chaviano had already begun writing before the 1990s, her best-known works were created during and set amidst the acute scarcities of the Special Period, illustrating the extreme lengths to which *habaneros* must go in order to survive. Chaviano is likely the most renowned Cuban writer currently living in the United

States, although her career brought her accolades long before she left the island to live in Miami. While she is best known for her fantasy and science fiction writing, she has also worked in TV, radio, and film, garnering awards for these endeavors since 1979. Even though her writings are often not easily categorized, Chaviano's works do not bend or break genres so much as combine them; mythology, historical fiction, folktales, eroticism, fantasy, and elements of dirty realism are all combined into a unique, hybridized amalgam that conveys the difficulties of life in Special Period Havana, even as some characters manage to escape via supernatural means. Her works include poetry, short stories, a screenplay, novellas, and full-length novels. Her 1998 novel, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, portrays the desperation of the period especially well, and the reality that Chaviano represents there is a multifaceted one, recounted from different perspectives and different centuries. Given the harsh, practically apocalyptic conditions of Special Period Havana, it appears that the decades of revolutionary effort to seek social utopia have instead resulted in the converse: a dystopian society in which no good deed goes unpunished, in which an art historian must prostitute herself in order to live comfortably, even merely to survive. Havana during the Special Period is a dystopian space that incites in Claudia, the protagonist, both an obsession with escape from her dreary existence and a simultaneous (if contradictory) yearning to never abandon the setting that has made her who and what she is. The novel also makes use of Claudia's spiritual inclinations, which allow a mystical reprieve from her brutal reality. Her escapes cross only temporal frontiers, not physical ones, and she never actually leaves Havana, even in spirit. The city's multiple realities are thus emphasized, suggesting a similarly indefinable and multifaceted existence for the protagonist herself.

Claudia functions simultaneously as a Cuban everywoman and as a unique soul unable to be confined to only one dimension. For instance, two of the voices that narrate the novel, Rubén and Gilberto, woefully recount their ill-fated adventures with their respective lovers, each man one-upping the other with each new tale, when, near the novel's midpoint, it becomes clear to the reader (although not to the lovesick men) that the two women are one and the same, even though they answer to different names: Claudia and La Mora. Both men endure career transformations that are simultaneously downgrading and uplifting in a social sense: Rubén, an art professor, finds himself obligated to fabricate knick-knacks to sell to tourists at an illegal open-air market, while Gilberto abandons his career

as an economist to work as a butcher's assistant. Rubén winds up in prison for engaging in free enterprise, and Gilberto learns that fresh meat is a more valuable currency than any other when one's fellow citizens are hungry and anemic. Claudia, too, must replace one professional identity with another, as she shifts from working in a museum as an art historian to working in Havana's hotels as an erudite prostitute, a *jinetera*, laboring less for extra spending money than for bars of soap and jars of baby food. She reflects on what a fellow prostitute explains regarding the necessity of changing one's name, one's identity, in order to endure such a transformation: "[Sissi] dice que es una protección, un disfraz común entre las de su oficio, una máscara como las que usaban las geishas, esas japonesas putas y sabias que vendían su cuerpo después de atiborrarse de cultura durante años. En eso nos hemos convertido las cubanas: en las geishas del hemisferio occidental" (42). Ostensibly as a coping mechanism, Claudia learns to separate herself from her Self: "Se hacía la idea de que no era ella quien vivía todo aquello" (45), thus forging a new existence in which she can escape from her other one, even as she continues to live in both. Additionally, at multiple points in the novel Claudia even finds herself walking along the muddy, nearly empty streets of colonial Havana, existing as her twentieth-century self in an eighteenth-century reality. These dual or multiple identities or experiences reinforce the overlapping realities that in a traditional setting would exist sequentially but in Chaviano's Havana also co-occur, revealing the city as the author depicts it to be not only a heterotopian space but also a heterochronian one, at least according to Michel Foucault's vision of these concepts.¹

Claudia is also accompanied by spirits of the dead, among them an Indian and an African. The spirit of the Indian portends tragedy in Claudia's life, appearing soundlessly just before an accident that claimed the life of her parents when she was a child, then again to presage the suicide of a classmate, then once more to foretell the incident in which she

¹ Foucault introduced *heterotopia*, or "other-space," as a philosophical notion in a 1967 lecture, in which he explains why he chooses to focus on spaces, particularly his idea of heterotopian space: "I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space" (23). He goes on to explain, though, that heterotopias can become joined in some way to moments in time, which then converts them to *heterochronies*.

is fired from her job, which is related as if it were another sudden death: “la ciudadana no podía permanecer trabajando en el museo . . . Ya está, la habían matado. Estaba socialmente muerta, marcada, desterrada para siempre dentro de su propio clan” (63). The *africana* is Muba, a slave from the eighteenth century, who speaks openly, directly, and audibly to Claudia. Although Muba’s spirit often appears to her unbidden, she is able to speak to Muba and at times even summon her, eliminating the need for other individuals to act as spiritual intermediaries. Thus, Chaviano incorporates the very Cuban elements of *santería* and *espiritismo* into her narrative, illustrating what cultural materialist Raymond Williams has termed “the residual”:

The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only . . . as an element of the past but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. (122)

Williams’s idea establishes the link between present-day manifestations of culture and the conditions rooted in the past that yielded those cultural aspects. Because *santería* and *espiritismo* are so strongly centered in Cuba’s history, despite any official discourse that may have attempted to vanquish or delegitimize them, they both also fall squarely under the category of “the residual” (that is, if one considers religious expression to be a cultural process and not a merely philosophical or intellectual one).

With Muba’s influence, Claudia finds herself unexpectedly transported to eighteenth-century Havana, submerged in a reality that simultaneously is and is not her own. In this new realm—new for her, at least—Claudia, a trained art historian, is intrigued by the beauty she sees in this old world: in the colonial architecture made new, in the unspoiled nature that surrounds and fills the city, and in the traditions of west African music and dance kept alive at a festival-like event that Claudia stumbles upon during one of her visits. The movements, the sounds, the practices: all these are no longer distant elements maintained through history, as Claudia has known them and studied them, but fundamental aspects of a

belief system that many of the event's participants would have learned in Africa itself. She experiences firsthand a truly creolized religious outlook that not only maintains subjugated African practices but somehow incorporates them into a separate, regnant system imported from Europe, an incongruous blend whose vestiges she had experienced in the twentieth century. This reconciliation of the diverse belief systems is described by Margarite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert as “the active transformation through renegotiation, reorganization, and redefinition of clashing belief systems” (*Creole* 7), reflecting a heterogeneous and heterotopian reality whose apparent incompatibility has become a defining cultural characteristic of the island (and even of the region). Indeed, Fernández-Olmos and Paravisini Gebert have summarized Cuba’s religious syncretism as a “process of accommodation, preservation, and resistance” (*Sacred* 5), which happens to also coincide precisely with Claudia’s experience in the novel. In this way, the protagonist embodies a Cuban quintessence, both historical and contemporary.

Claudia’s transcendental visits, during which she learns more about Muba’s complicated circumstance as the willing black lover of a white *habanero*, do not send her as an invisible spirit into the past, but instead allow her to travel wholly, flesh and blood, into an early incarnation of the city that she simultaneously loves and scorns. This contrasting duality, this simultaneous present and past, this love and hate, are acknowledged by Claudia when she contemplates: “Para tener fe en el futuro, uno necesitaba de su pasado; pero su pasado le había sido escamoteado, reprimido y alterado” (186). It becomes clear that Claudia not only navigates both realities but also manages to do so almost simultaneously: she does travel from one setting and back via her psychical journeys, but she does so with elements from each reality constant in the other. For instance, her clothing from the present remains the same when she finds herself in the eighteenth century, but this does not generate shock in the colonial residents of the city, given that apparently the only ones aware of her presence there are her spiritual guides. The buildings, roads, city walls, and other trappings of the eighteenth-century city generally persist into the late twentieth century, allowing her to situate herself in the past based on her familiarity with the present.

During one of her colonial voyages, Claudia participates in an orgy at one of the festivals—her knowledge of history allows her to rationalize: “Lo único que puedo coger es una gonorrea o una sífilis. Y eso se me quita con dos inyecciones de penicilina” (200)—and realizes that, if she wishes,

she could manage to stay in this strangely beautiful realm and escape the tedium, the *nada*, the hunger that defines her life in her own reality, in Special Period Havana. Only later does she realize that her partner in the orgy was Onolorio, a seemingly malevolent spirit who menaces her in the present with predictions that she will be unable to break loose from the comforts afforded to her by prostitution. Aside from ominous spirits, though, there are physical dangers in the eighteenth century, in particular the recent (for Muba) British attacks on the city. Ironically, at the same time, the Claudia of the present-day is seriously considering the possibility of abandoning Havana on a raft. Her decision depends on her judgment of which danger is worse: the possibility of tragedy on a raft in the open seas, or the inevitability of a long-lived tragedy, death by a thousand shortages? Claudia thinks aloud, weighing all the options before her: “El peligro. El mar. ¿Quedarse o huir? ¿Putear o morir de hambre? *To be or not to be?* La eterna disyuntiva” (234-235). In fact, it becomes clear that the potential physical dangers of a sea escape, while certainly a daunting impediment, are not the primary reason she longs to stay in her version of Havana, despite the inexorable hardships. In a conversation with Nubia, her neighbor, Claudia reveals:

—Yo no me iría de aquí nunca.

—Eso lo dices porque nadie te exige que hagas guardias del comité, o que vayas a un desfile en la Plaza, o que hagas trabajo «voluntario» recogiendo papas, o que aplaudas cada vez que anuncian cualquier imbecilidad. [. . .]

—Yo me fuera, pero me da miedo. [. . .]

—¿Miedo a qué? No veo cómo te pueda ir peor que aquí.

—Es por mi conexión. [. . .] Puede que suene idiota, pero me parece que si salgo de la isla perderé mi protección espiritual.

—No es que suenes idiota, sino que *eres* idiota—opinó Nubia, inmisericorde. —Si el precio para librarme de esta salación fuera dejar de ver a un par de espíritus, no lo pensaría dos veces. Los fantasmas no te dan de comer ni recogen tomates por ti, ¿verdad? Pues, entonces, que asuman sus limitaciones. Es tu vida contra la de ellos, si es que tienen alguna. (214)

It is apparent from this exchange, especially Nubia's dismissal of Claudia's transcendent experiences as simply “ver un par de espíritus,” that Nubia possesses no such links to the spiritual world, or else Claudia's

predicament might elicit a more empathetic response. Instead, Nubia mocks Claudia—perhaps with good humor, but her derision is undeniable—and diminishes the significance of Claudia’s spirit guides, unaware that they have opened for Claudia a door into a realm that may serve not merely as an occasional escape from a catastrophic reality but also as a mitigating factor that equips her with the tools she needs to confront her own chaos. After their exchange, Claudia contemplates:

Se decía muy fácil, pensó Claudia, pero Muba no la seguiría al otro lado del mar; tampoco el Indio abandonaría su isla. Y sin ellos, se sentía perdida. . . como ahora. Desde hacía dos semanas ninguno había vuelto a aparecer, y su ausencia era como un color que faltaba en la urdidumbre cotidiana. Sin embargo, no eran sólo sus visiones lo que la anclaban al lugar. Últimamente había notado el paulatino aumento de un vínculo con su ciudad, algo que comenzaba a conectarla con ella: era un lazo de luz, una fuerza. Presentía que, sin esa conexión, ella misma se extinguiría. (214)

With this realization on Claudia’s part, it becomes clear to the reader that the protagonist’s links to a spiritual realm, her reverential regard for her otherworldly guides, and her dread for more sinister spirits all constitute an element that is as essential to her survival as the elaborately prepared grapefruit peel steak, an utterly unappetizing but nonetheless edible dish, is to Nubia and, presumably, to thousands of other hungry Cubans.² Claudia’s metaphysical connections are precisely what allows her to endure, if not flourish, in the crisis.

² After a conversation in which Nubia instructs Claudia on how to prepare grapefruit peel steaks, Chaviano includes an interlude titled “Donde se revelan ciertos secretos culinarios,” which elaborates on multiple techniques of converting traditionally non-edible items, such as cleaning rags or banana peels, into substances that can be plated, chewed, and swallowed, effectively fooling the palate into willful ignorance (101-103). To that end, Ariana Hernandez-Reguant offers a look at the Cuban government’s efforts to help the population make the most out of a little: “To address the emergence of malnutrition-related illnesses, the media sought to reeducate the population’s eating habits, promoting such recipes as sweet potato leaf salad, mashed banana peel, and fried grapefruit peel” (4). Luis Martínez-Fernández indicates the lengths to which the government went in an effort to provide nutrition, despite the near-inevitable comparisons with experiments that led to the creation of Frankenstein’s monster:

It is not merely the physical scarcities that make the crisis of the Special Period so insufferable, though: the insecurity produced by a constant oscillation of what-is-acceptable to what-is-prohibited wears on Claudia, and she longs for a sense of stability, of permanence, and of logical cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, she complains of constantly having to navigate “arenas movedizas, encima de un terreno que en cualquier momento puede devorar [a uno]” (258). It is understandable, then, that such a circumstance would prompt Claudia (or other Cubans, or anyone, really) to seek a realm that is firm and fixed, where truth remains the same in the past, present, and future. To that end, Claudia elaborates: “con esa incertidumbre a costas no queda otra alternativa que la inacción absoluta o el escape hacia otro mundo donde las leyes naturales sean más previsibles” (259). The irony is that Claudia can only realize the predictability of “leyes naturales” by yielding to a dimension of supernaturality, as it is her faith in her spirit companions and the world that they inhabit that permits her survival in the very real disaster that is her own world.

Later in the novel, as Claudia travels back and forth between colonial Havana and Special Period Havana, as she contemplates her possibilities of escaping the scarcities of present-day Havana, she experiences an epiphany:

Eso era lo que Muba deseaba enseñarle con aquella suerte de viaje astral que la negra sabía manejar como una experta shamana. Y Claudia comprendió que la violencia contra su tierra había hecho brotar el primer indicio de orgullo en quienes la habitaban. Por primera vez sospechó que aquel ataque había desencadenado el parto espiritual de una ciudad que comenzaba a crear su propio duende; ese que ahora mismo estaba sufriendo, que la embrujaba y la ataba cada vez más a sus calles.

Sí, vivir en ese sitio era como parir: algo terrible, pero ansiado,

“The Food Industry Research Institute developed new food items, among them *masa cárnica*, *fricandel*; [. . .] hamburger patties made of ground pork and soy (popularly ridiculed as McCastros); *cerelac*, a cereal concoction for senior citizens that had unintended laxative qualities, and *picadillo de soya*, part soy ground beef substitute, part usually inedible meat parts. [. . .] With its traditional sense of humor, the population mocked the Special Period culinary innovations as *OCNIs*: *objetos comestibles no identificados* (unidentified comestible objects)” (186).

porque de allí manaba una tibieza uterina como la que brota de la fuente materna cuando el feto está a punto de salir a la luz. ¿Cómo se puede desear un dolor que amenaza con destrozarnos y desangrarnos? Claudia no lo sabía, pero las visiones iban transformando su ciudad en un instinto, y los instintos no se explican: se temen, se padecen o se aman. (250-251)

Claudia's realization comes to her like another instance of spiritual insight: she opts finally to remain in Special Period Havana, even as she burns with scorn for the failed aspects of the Revolution that have converted the lives of her countrymen into a *nada cotidiana*, as Zoé Valdés labeled it in her 1995 novel by that title. At one point Claudia walks through Vedado, remembering revolutionary verses that she was obligated to memorize in school: "Tengo, vamos a ver, tengo el gusto de andar por mi país, dueño de cuanto hay en él," before looking up at the Habana Libre hotel, which she, as a Cuban, cannot enter, and resists the temptation to yell: "Guillén, me cago en tu madre" (289). Expressing frustration and doubt in what the Revolution represents would be as dangerous to Claudia as sacrilege and blasphemy against the Church would have been centuries earlier, and the correspondence between the two worldviews is clear. It is as if, in response to her dystopian reality and utopian revolutionary rhetoric, Claudia were attempting to construct her own personal utopia as a means of escape. Phillip Wegner explains that utopia "offer[s] a mechanism by which people will invent anew [their] communities as well as the spaces they inhabit. The utopia's imaginary community is thus not only a way of imagining subjectivity, but also a way of imagining space, thereby helping the nation-state to become both the agent and locus of much of modernity's histories" (xvi-xvii). With this, we can see the utility of utopia in the construction of Cuban identity, particularly when considering Wegner's observations alongside the course of Cuban history and the Special Period. In each of her time/space realities, Claudia is subject to a prescriptive worldview, and near the end of the novel, Claudia introduces an alternative to any official position, recognizing her own search for a truth that can sustain her:

Ya sé que los caminos del Señor son inescrutables, pero yo me he cansado de andar por ellos. He deambulado a la caza del alimento, como una fiera [. . .]. Ando en busca del Orisha Mayor, de la Gran Madre, del Supremo Arquitecto, de Aquello que pueda cubrir con su

sombra esta otra que nos ha cegado. Aceptaré cualquier cosa que aparezca porque el hambre de un ángel en desgracia es voraz; pero sospecho que Dios se ha marchado. (297-298)

The identity of the “Señor” that she names is unclear: is it “the Lord,” the Christian God, or is the “Señor” of inscrutable methods actually Fidel Castro, with all that he represents? Claudia’s admission of having tired of following the paths prescribed for her and of hunting for sustenance could refer to resistance to either brand of official ideology, be it Religion or Revolution. Either way, it is significant that Claudia ends her admission of uncertainty with a supplication to a distinct entity: “[Dios] se oculta en el corazón de las ruinas que levantaron mis antepasados. [. . .] No hay escape del paraíso . . . Olofi, Olofi, ¿por qué me has abandonado?” (298). According to Afro-Cuban religious traditions, Olofi is one of the supreme deities in the pantheon of *Regla de Ocha*, and “not knowing Olofi would mean erasure of essential Yoruba ancestral beliefs and culture” (González 962). Claudia’s desperate plea to Olofi is a Special Period rendition of Jesus Christ’s cry on the cross: “Dios mío, Dios mío, ¿por qué me has abandonado?” (Mt 27:46 Nueva Versión Internacional). The parallel supplications do not serve to render Claudia as a Christ figure so much as cement the legitimacy of the *Regla de Ocha* and simultaneously depict the desperation of Special Period Cubans who are mourning their circumstances with a sense of having been abandoned by those in power, whether human or divine.

It is no surprise, then, that Claudia and her *compatriotas* might seek solace in the supernatural, given the tumultuous reality that they inhabit. Indeed, sociologist Sylvia Pedraza explains that in the Special Period:

[There was] not only an economic crisis but also a crisis of disbelief. Cubans on the island began to feel that their leaders were less than capable and the promise of a future Communist society with a decent life for all faded. Little by little, they began going to churches—not only the Catholic church but also the many Protestant churches, the Afro-Cuban *santería* cults, the Jewish synagogues. (483)

Claudia’s version of this search for the supernatural leads her to a fantastical helix in which time bends and curves around her own social genetic inheritance, in which the answer to the question leads back to the

question itself, and apostasy is as firm and sustaining as dogma, whether religious or political.

The mystical consciousness that Claudia experiences allows her some measure of control in her life, over which otherwise she would have very little influence. She has lost her job, her livelihood, as a result of (false) accusations of counter-revolutionary ideology. She is talented and highly educated, she has experienced failed romantic relationships, and she sees her life passing by, just as the buildings around her crumble after decades of blockade-induced shortages of materials and centuries of the harsh climate native to Cuba. Her problems are worsened by external sources—for instance, by the embargo—and her only escape, ironically, consists of a journey within: the spiritual discernment that Claudia experiences serves to strengthen her bond with the Havana that has, for better or for worse, made her who and what she is. Indeed, at a fundamental level, Williams's concept of “the residual” is vital to the understanding of the significance of the beliefs and practices that appear throughout the novel. The spiritual realm that holds sway in Afro-Cuban religious traditions has become so integrated in certain aspects of Cuban life that it has become a part of the cultural and social realms, as well. The woven tapestry of Special Period life—indeed, of present-day Cuban life—exhibits enmeshed elements of that “residue,” lingering vestiges of Cuba's past, demonstrating that the island's present and past are inseparable. Claudia's spiritual companions are from a bygone era, but they propel her toward present-day decisions that could have import not merely for the individuals but also for the island as well, prompting the reader to question the nature of the relationship between flesh-and-blood Claudia and the spirits: who is the host and who is the guest? Although initially it appears that the spirit guides are visiting Claudia in her world, upon reflection a new possibility emerges, one that suggests that perhaps Claudia is merely a modern-day version of life from the past, an embodiment of a religious residual, of Williams's cultural residual. Depending on one's interpretation, Claudia's dependence on the power of the spiritual world is either a survival mechanism, a means to escape from Special Period crises, or evidence that, in Cuba, the residual is not merely cultural but psychical as well.

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