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Heretics, Heritage, Possession: Leonardo Padura's *Herejes*

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Not far into Leonardo Padura's ambitious 2013 novel *Herejes*, in a scene set in 2007, Mario Conde—the erstwhile police detective turned itinerant book-seller, blocked writer, and reluctant ad-hoc private detective—takes his new client, Elías Kaminsky, to a Havana neighborhood *solar*. Kaminsky, a large forty-four-year-old American Jewish painter (un “mastodonte con coleta”[60]), has unanswered questions about his family's Havana past and also hopes to pin down the trail of a family heirloom.¹ This heirloom is a 1647 Rembrandt canvas stolen from Elías's ancestors in 1939 in Havana and has recently surfaced in a London art auction. Elías would like to repossess the painting and donate it to a museum. In hiring Conde to help, Elías provides him photographic evidence of the painting's one-time presence in his grandparents' pre-World War II home in Krakow, Poland. But Elías also details the family's history in Cuba. In 1938, Elías's grandparents (Isaías Kaminsky and his wife Esther Kellerstein) sent Elías's father—Daniel Kaminsky then 9 years old—to a safe haven in Havana to live with his uncle Joseph Kaminsky, a leather worker known locally as

¹ Prior to the pieces in this issue, *Herejes* has yet to receive scholarly critical attention although a few brief book reviews have appeared in journalistic media. See González, for example.

Pepe Cartera. The next year, 1939, along with his six-year-old sister Judith and 934 other Jews, Daniel's parents, Isaías and Esther, fled Europe via Hamburg on the historically ill-fated trans-Atlantic MS St. Louis that docked for six days in Havana. But because of immigration chicanery, the St. Louis was unable to unload its passengers. Historically, the ship's refugees were subsequently also refused asylum in the US and Canada and returned to Europe where many died in the German concentration camps. After failing to find safe haven in Havana, according to Conde's client Elías, the fictional Isaías and Esther Kaminsky were later reported to have died in Auschwitz, whereas their daughter Judith simply vanished. While still docked in the Havana harbor in 1939, however, the Kaminskys had tried to negotiate their entry by exchanging the family Rembrandt for asylum. But a corrupt customs official simply kept the painting while denying its owners entry. Because of these events, the orphaned Daniel Kaminsky, the father of Conde's new client Elías, came of age under his uncle's care in 1940s and 1950s Havana, married a Catholic woman, and moved to Miami in 1958. Daniel's Miami move was based *not* on any political disaffection with the Revolution but on potential trouble with the law when he sought revenge against the custom's official he held responsible for his family's fate and tried to recuperate the painting. (It turns out that he accomplished neither.) Hoping to retrace the Cuban steps of his now deceased father and those of the Rembrandt now reappeared at the London auction, Elías lands on Conde's doorstep searching for answers.

Elías and Conde begin the search with the *solar* visit, to the place where Elías's father Daniel grew up and where his uncle Joseph met the mulatta woman, Caridad Sotolongo, who became his life partner. Although seen through the eyes of Elías struggling to discern the past from its present remains, this scenario is somehow familiar to die-hard Padura readers:

Como un ciego necesitado de medir con exactitud y cautela cada paso, el sudoroso mastodonte con coleta comenzó el ascenso de la sórdida escalera de la casona decimonónica de la calle Compostela, antigua propiedad de unos condes apócrifos, donde había puesto cama, mesa, máquina de coser y chavetas el recién llegado Joseph Kaminsky y donde vivió, por casi catorce años, su sobrino Daniel. El palacete, abandonado a principios del siglo XX por los descendientes de sus propietarios originales y muy pronto reciclado

como cuartería multifamiliar con cocina y baños colectivos, mostraba las marcas de la ascendente desidia y los efectos del uso excesivo y por un espacio de tiempo demasiado dilatado. En la segunda planta, donde había vivido la mulata Caridad Sotolongo, la mujer dulce que, andando el tiempo, se convertiría en la eterna y final amante de Joseph Kaminsky, la vida parecía haberse detenido en una perseverante y dolorosa pobreza de hacinados sin esperanzas. En cambio, la tercera planta, en su momento lo más noble de la edificación, donde estuvieran las habitaciones de los primeros moradores y luego el cuarto de los polacos y los de otras seis familias de blancos y negros cubanos, además de la de unos catalanes republicanos, había perdido el techo y parte de los balcones, y advertía del destino irreversible que le esperaba al resto del inmueble. Realizando el más supremo de los esfuerzos, el forastero trató de imaginarse al niño judío ascendiendo aquellos tramos de escalera que él acababa de vencer, se impuso verlo asomado al ya inexistente muro del techo del tercer piso para desde allí presenciar, en el patio interior de aquella colmena, frente a la cocina colectiva, un asalto más de la mítica pelea entre la negra Petronila Pinilla y la siciliana María Perupatto, en la cual siempre había la golosa expectativa de poder ver una teta, dos, incluso cuatro los días de más encarnizados enfrentamientos, y luego se empeñó en verlos subir a la azotea con los gemelos Pedro y Pablo, negros como tizones, y la marimacho Eloína, rubia pecosa para empinar papalotes o simples chiringas hechas con hojas de periódicos viejos. O para otros menesteres. *Pero no lo logró.* (60-61, my emphasis)

This palimpsest neighborhood scene, where incompletely erased traces of the past are still visible in wide-angle panoramas of the present, is common in Padura's fiction, particularly although not exclusively in the novels in which Conde is the protagonist. In *Cuban Palimpsests*, moreover, José Quiroga inscribes the palimpsest as a trope for the culture of Cuba's post-Soviet Special Period, where, he argues, "different temporalities colluded within the same geographic space" (10) or in the same cultural phenomena. But my own linkage of the term to Padura's narratives draws also on Joseph Roach's concept of a "vortex of behavior," a dynamic, urban space containing evident traces of the past but alive with present-tense, everyday life. In Roach's conception, these vortices of behavior link past to present in non-sequential memory traces that periodically flash up in critical, present-tense re-enactments of traditions the site conjures up (27-

29), a critique, I would add, that can cut through or offset nostalgia.² Roach's concept of the behavioral vortex also draws on anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's idea of culture as a series of porous intersections, a site where, in Roach's adaptation "cultural transmission may be detoured, deflected, or displaced" (29).³ Even as they layer past and present, these vortices of behavior, Roach argues, constitute improvisational sites of "cultural self-invention" (28). Although also juxtaposing time periods, the palimpsest scenes in Padura's Conde novels that predate *Herejes* for the most part constitute simpler overlays of present spaces with past memories, the nostalgia for which can override the present. These earlier palimpsests in Padura's Conde novels are also somewhat less dynamic as cultural intersections than the Havana *solar* scene where the erstwhile detective takes his new client Elías Kaminsky in the cited passage from *Herejes*. Here the *solar* is a vortex of cultural convergence among Afro-Cubans, Catalans, Sicilians, and exiled Jews, and the site of "cultural self-invention" where Elías's Polish great uncle, Joseph (Pepe Cartera) and his father, Daniel, recast themselves as Cubans, but still marked by their European Jewish pasts. In contrast to *Herejes*, the urban palimpsests in the earlier Padura tetralogy, *Las cuatro estaciones* (1991-1998)⁴ and *La neblina del ayer* (2005), for example, layer Havana scenes through Conde's disappointments with his own present life, interlacing the now nostalgia-enveloped days of his heady adolescence through the successive losses of his post-Soviet present: the loss of a profession, loss of material security, loss of youthful vitality, and above all the loss of faith in the Revolution's utopian promise on which he and his generation were weaned, the latter shared by Conde's closely-knit cohort of male friends, stand-ins for his (and

² Examples of such vortices of behavior for Roach, who examines them in the context of circum-Atlantic networks and cityscapes originally linked by or anchored in the slave trade, include, for example, urban boulevards, marketplaces, theatre districts, public squares, or cemeteries (28).

³ In linking Rosaldo's "busy intersection" view of culture to his own concept of a behavioral vortex, Roach sites a passage Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*: "In contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes crisscross from within and beyond its borders" (Rosaldo 20).

⁴ The *Cuatro estaciones* tetralogy includes *Pasado perfecto* (1991), *Vientos de cuaresma* (1994), *Máscaras* (1997) and *Paisaje de otoño* (1998).

Padura's) oft-named "disenchanted" generation.⁵ In Padura's more explicitly historical novels, the palimpsest morphs into a narrative structural principle with far-reaching temporal or geographical layers organizing such works as *La novela de mi vida* (2002) and *El hombre que amaba a los perros* (2009), both somehow forecasting the structural complexities of *Herejes*.

Herejes complicates the structural palimpsest in its four parts: *Libro de Daniel* recounts the Kaminskys twentieth-century family history and Conde's search for answers to Elías's questions, overlaying scenes from Havana, Krakow, and Miami and from the 1930s to 2007, with occasional allusions to seventeenth-century Amsterdam when the Kaminsky ancestors acquired the Rembrandt; *Libro de Elías*, set in Amsterdam in 1643-1648, belongs to Elías Ambrosius Montalbo de Ávila, a Sephardic Jew, whose wanderings lead him to Rembrandt's workshop as an apprentice and model for the painter's renditions of Christ, including the one eventually given to the Kaminsky family by a refugee rabbi; in *Libro de Judith* set in the summer of 2008, Yadine Kaminsky, grand-daughter of Joseph Kaminsky's (Pepe Cartera's) adopted son Ricardo Kaminsky (and thus a distant step cousin of Conde's client Elías) seeks Conde's detective skills to locate her vanished friend, Judy Torres. The eighteen-year old Judy is a brilliant student, voracious reader, and dedicated member of Havana's disaffected Emo subculture, groups of youth who gather by night, with other disaffected adolescent "tribes," on Havana's historic Calle de los Presidentes boulevard, more commonly known as Calle G.⁶ While searching for Judy, Conde learns how the Kaminsky family's Rembrandt recently left Cuba, a step in its journey to the London auction. The novel concludes with a short epilogue, "Génesis." Here Conde receives a letter from his former client Elías who reports that he has found in an Amsterdam flea market a seventeenth-century letter from the apprentice Elías Ambrosius to Rembrandt, recounting the slaughter of Jews in Poland and telling him that he is returning via a surviving rabbi the canvas in which Rembrandt had

⁵ On Conde's embodiment of the disenchantment of his generation, see Serra (162-67); Quiroga (135-36); and Fornet (76-77).

⁶ The cultural phenomenon of emos is generally traced to the US punk rock movement of the 1980s. For a detailed inquiry into rebellious contemporary youth subcultures in Cuba, see Cooke.

rendered him as Christ. With this evidence, Elías can now recuperate the family heirloom. Conde's usual epistemological quests—and his customary gatherings for food and drink with his small tribe of male friends, periodic assignations with his longstanding lover Tamara, and recurrent reflections on his own past—weave through the novel's textual palimpsests, in several footnoted references to prior Padura novels,⁷ as well as passages whose style evokes that of admired writer predecessors, such as Alejo Carpentier or Gabriel García Márquez.

But the long *Herejes* passage I cited in opening this essay does not merely complicate an early motif in Padura's fiction of overlapping time zones rendered the "vortices of behavior" of Havana's post-Soviet present. As signaled in the passage's concluding and counter-nostalgic "Pero no lo logró"—the failure of Elías to pin down his family's past from its traces in the Havana solar—*Herejes* may also point to an emergent shift in structures of feeling in Padura's predominantly Conde-centered fictional world. For all its historical density, *Herejes* connects its time zones not through the nostalgic disenchantment with lost ideals we have come to associate closely with Conde's worldview, but rather through acts of transformation and intimations of the future, a vigorous search for change-seeking trajectories and links among generations. This more nuanced view of the relationship between past and present, moreover, is embodied in the more dynamic palimpsests of *Herejes* that suggest, in turn, a more complex Padurian view of cultural change through generations or even of culture itself. Thus, although *Herejes* could easily be read as a family saga, those generational links of cultural reinvention come into view less with a genealogy chart than in the three intersecting motifs that constitute the novel's interpretive coordinates and, I would argue, its *conceptual* palimpsest of heretics, heritage, and possession, that, as interwoven by the novel, gesture toward the future.

⁷ Prior Padura novels directly referenced in *Herejes* include *La neblina del ayer* (22); *Paisaje de otoño* (34, 392, 418); *Pasado perfecto* (146, 363); *Máscaras* (460); and *La cola de la serpiente* (474).

The Heresies of Choice

Padura opens *Herejes* with a series of epigraphs, including several definitions of the word “hereje”:

HEREJE. Del gr. αἱρετικός – haitetikós, adjetivo derivado del sustantivo αἵρεσις – «división, elección», proveniente del verbo αἵρει̃σθαι – *haireísthai* «**elegir, dividir, preferir**», originalmente para definir a personas pertenecientes a otras escuelas de pensamiento, es decir, que tienen ciertas «preferencias» en ese ámbito. El término viene asociado por primera vez con aquellos cristianos disidentes a la temprana Iglesia en el tratado de Irineo de Lyon «contraherejes» (finales del siglo II), especialmente contra los gnósticos. Probablemente deriva de la raíz indoeuropea *ser con significado de «coger». En hitita se encuentra la palabra *šaru* y en galés *herw*, ambas con el significado de «botín».

Según el *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española*: HEREJE. «(Del prov. *Eretge*). 1. Com. Persona que niega alguno de los dogmas establecidos por una religión. ||| 2. Persona que disiente o se aparta de la línea oficial de opinión seguida por una institución, una organización, una academia, etc. [...]. **Cuba. Dicho de una situación: [Estar hereje] Estar muy difícil, especialmente en el aspecto político o económico.** (14; bold-faced in original)

These epigraphic definitions selected by Padura to open his novel coincide with meanings and origins attributed to the words “hereje” and “heretic” by multiple Spanish and English etymological sources, first in the conventional meaning of a person who dissents from prevailing belief systems, perhaps through membership in a new school of thought. But these definitions also offer other options. While linking the term historically with dissidents in the early Christian church, in particular the gnostics, Padura’s definition choices note that “heretic” can also apply to a dissenter from *any* institutional or ideological line. Moreover, the word’s Greek roots (the noun αἵρεσις or *haíresis* and the verb αἵρει̃σθαι or *haireísthai*) bring out two other facets of heresy: the act of “choosing” or “dividing”—as in following a different path—and, a less common association: the act of “taking” or “seizing” something as in “booty,” thus comparable, for example, to the spoils of war. Padura’s bold-faced inclusion of a contemporary, Cuba-specific connotation contextualizes the word’s changing etymology in the substance of economic and political difficulties characterizing post-Soviet Cuban cultural life. This move immediately

encourages readers to seek connections between other eras portrayed in the novel and Conde's own post-millennial present.

Consistent with the emphasis in post-Soviet Cuban fiction on individualism, the numerous heretics in Padura's novel are all proactive choosers, people who, while interpellated (in the Althusserian sense) by specific traditions, perform their own variations on whatever their cultural or ideological givens might be. These include Rembrandt, loosely connected to the Dutch Reformed church but with no formal affiliation, who elects the then unconventional aesthetic path of painting portraits of Christ from live Jewish models; Rembrandt's fictional Sephardic Jewish apprentice, Elías Ambrosius, who poses for portraiture and learns portrait-painting himself, both prohibited in Jewish Orthodox interpretations of the second commandment injunction on graven images; the Ashkenazi Jewish Isaías and Esther Kaminsky family of early twentieth-century Poland who choose to hang such a graven image—and of Jesus, no less—on the wall of their home; Daniel Kaminsky who, against his uncle's wishes, abandons Hebrew school in Havana to attend the pre-universitario high school with his Cuban friends and becomes, perhaps, the most self-aware, ostentatiously Cuban among them, and marries the Catholic love of his life, Marta Arnáez; Daniel's uncle, the Orthodox Joseph Kaminsky ("Pepe Cartera") who stretches family tradition to accommodate his non-converted mulatta life-partner, Caridad Sotolongo, and gives her child his name through adoption (Ricardo Kaminsky); and, in the novel's post-millennial Cuban present, Yadine Kaminsky and her friend Judy Torres. Rebelling against pedagogical interpellations as good socialist subjects—and what they perceive as the corrupt activity of that ideology's official espousers—Yadine and Judy join the introspective contemporary urban tribe of *emos* who wear black and pink torn attire; pierce, tattoo, and sometimes cut their bodies; and cultivate disengagement and depression as forms of self-affirmation in reaction to a life over-prescribed by the institutionalized pedagogy that has formed them.

The novel's plot links all of these heretics through a heretical object—the missing Rembrandt painting that metonymizes the serial, unorthodox enactments of choice implicit in its own creation (by the

painter and his model); display (by the Polish Kaminsky family in whose hands it eventually lands); and modes of transmission and circulation (gift-giving, barter, theft, theft, smuggling, auctioning). The Rembrandt is also an object whose status and fate—whether displayed as a work of art or stolen, bought, used to negotiate asylum through entry to a new country, or sold for profit—resides in the beliefs (traditional or heretical) of those who create it, circulate it, or assign it value. The intricacies of its circulation make the Kaminsky family’s lost Rembrandt, a heretical object, a tempting example of the etymological ties between acts of heresy and the “taking” of something that is thereby transformed into a kind of booty by the dissenting act.

The Heresies of Inheritance

The Kaminsky family’s Rembrandt, however, is not only the product of a series of heretical acts and an object transmitted over several centuries. It is also a family-based heirloom, which, as such, incarnates the connections between heresy and heritage. After all, heretics, as inscribed in the multiple definitions of “heresy,” typically challenge their heritage—familial, religious, cultural or ideological—and propel that heritage toward a different future rather than anchoring it in the past. Moreover, as Bill Schwartz notes in the *New Keywords* volume that updates Raymond Williams’s classic 1977 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, the word “heritage” has since the thirteenth-century carried both spiritual and profane connotations, for example “a people chosen by God as his peculiar possession—the ‘heritage of the Lord’” or “[i]n its more profane associations, as ‘inheritance’ or ‘heirloom’ the term refer[s] especially to property or land passed through the generations” (154). The spiritual connotation of the word “heritage” also calls to mind the concept of a “chosen people,” and in the expressive system of Padura’s *Herejes* these chosen ones could be not only the Jews but also other groups conceived (by themselves or by others) as exceptional, for example Cuba’s revolutionary generation or Conde’s disenchanting generation whose coming of age was forged by the pedagogy of revolutionary ideology.

But in the twentieth-century, “heritage” comes to refer to customs passed down by traditions and is thus allied with the notion and definition of culture itself. In this vein, Schwartz reminds us that as heritage came to signify cultural traditions, thinkers like Raymond Williams and Eric Hobsbawm underscored the construction of “traditions”—entangled in cultural projects of the present—via strategic, cherry-picking selections from the past. This process unfolds in the “politics of heritage,” as among museum curators, the designation of world heritage sites, or struggles to preserve neighborhoods (Schwartz 154). In this mode, the heretics in Padura’s novel dissent from their heritage *selectively*, choosing what to follow or not from the belief-systems and worldviews they inherit but also taking something from that inheritance with them and thus changing that heritage itself as they re-enact it within vortices of behavior that propel it toward the future. This transformation is embodied in the “booty”—like the Rembrandt painting—accrued from the serial choices made by multiple *Herejes* characters to dissent. Thus, both Joseph Kaminsky and his nephew retain selective parts of their Judaism as they acculturate to Cubanness, consequently performing new—simultaneously palimpsestic and culturally reinventive—modes of being both Jewish and Cuban, performances in which the traces of their inheritance are still visible in their present-day enactments that override the very legacies that shape them. The palimpsestic urban scenario visited by Elías Kaminsky and Conde in the passage I cited earlier—and other comparable scenes in *Herejes*—constitute the vortices of contemporary behavior (in Roach’s terms) where heritage and its unfolding heresies coincide.

Herejes conceives this transformation of heritage through heresy as both individually subjective and cultural, a process manifesting a dynamic concept of culture as intersecting, transactional, and changing. Thus, the lively 1940s and 1950s Havana of Daniel Kaminsky’s coming of age provides the stage for a personal metamorphosis:

Mientras abría las puertas de una ciudad bulliciosa en la que no existían las téticas oscuridades físicas y mentales que recordaba de Cracovia y Berlín, Daniel Kaminsky sentía como si saliera de sí mismo y habitara en otro Daniel Kaminsky que vivía sin pensar en rezos, prohibiciones, ordenanzas milenarias, pero sobre todo sin sentir el miedo pernicioso que había aprendido de sus padres. [...]

El muchacho disfrutaba su instante y era capaz de soltar unos cojones en el terreno de béisbol, nadar como un delfín entre los arrecifes del Malecón, simpatizar con los héroes de Hollywood y vivir enamorado de las nalgas de una mulata flautista de labios prometedores mientras se masturbaba observando los pelos lacios que pendían del pubis de la rusa: la combinación perfecta. (68)

Similarly, Daniel's heretical transformation parallels a more porous, hybrid conception of Jewish heritage itself, as performed in the Havana of his time: "Entre los judíos de Cuba [...] los había religiosos y escépticos, comunistas y sionistas, ricos y pobres, asquenazíes y sefardíes, unos días en guerra entre sí, otros en armonía" (72). In the expressive system of *Herejes*, such coexisting, diverse interpretations of cultural tradition unfold precisely in the kind of behavioral vortex we see in the palimpsestic Havana comparable to the *solar* scene opening this essay:

La paz y la Concordia que se vivían en Cuba, donde ser judío o dejar de serlo no parecía importarle demasiado a nadie, donde había venido a confluír polacos, alemanes, chinos, italianos, gallegos, libaneses, catalanes, haitianos, gentes de todos los confines, le entregó [a Daniel] que ni en sueños había imaginado ningún judío desde los tiempos remotos en que los sefardíes habían sido admitidos en Amsterdam. (72)

This explicit connection between Daniel Kaminsky's mid-twentieth century Havana and the seventeenth-century Amsterdam in which the Sephardic Elías Ambrosius was able to thrive (for a time) as Rembrandt's apprentice and model does not simply draw explicit parallels between two of the novel's plot lines and time periods. The link also implies that, in the novel's worldview, only certain historical moments and places offer the sufficiently tolerant context in which not only may those persecuted by a larger society find refuge but also the heresies performed against a specific cultural heritage may thrive in creative ways that unfold in cultural change. The additional linkage of such moments in seventeenth-century Amsterdam and 1940s and 1950s Havana with Judy Torres's own time in early twenty-first-century Cuba hint at the possibility that the vortices of behavior in Conde's own city—for example the Calle G meeting site for culturally dissident youth—may harbor the emergent possibility of such a creative and dynamic moment, tolerant of difference.

Padura's novel does not cast such accepting moments as either universal or enduring or such acts of creative heresy as risk free. It does, however, imply a linkage between the heretics of the novel and the heresies generated in reaction to specific *intellectual* traditions. For example, by interlacing an episode from international World War II history and Jewish history—the odyssey of the MS St. Louis—into his palimpsest of Havana, Padura rewrites Cuban history and engages in the “politics of heritage,” thus fleshing out and complicating the 1982 UNESCO designation of old Havana as a world heritage site. Considering the hardening of State-driven identity politics that accompanied the reforms required by the post-Soviet economic crisis, the novel's conception of Cuban history might itself be considered either historically or artistically heretical. And the same might be said of Padura's two previous historical novels, *La novela de mi vida* (2001), which counters the traditional literary-historiographical view of Domingo del Monte as the “founder” of Cuban literature through his promotion of anti-slavery writings with the case for José María Heredia's entitlement to that designation, and *El hombre que amaba a los perros*, which through a retelling of Trotsky's life and eventual murder, recasts the international history of Communism through connections with a Cuban character. One could also interpret the freewheeling recasting in *Herejes* of its own biblical inter-texts, the books of Daniel, Elías, and Judith, as heretical renditions of sacred texts and traditions. But even a cursory look at the status of the original biblical texts evoked in *Herejes* reveals that these books have themselves embodied the strategic “politics of heritage” in that their status as canonical or heterodox works has depended on the particular religious group that has claimed them as part of their inheritance, that is, as something concrete that they own or possess.

Heretical Possession(s)

The concept of ownership or “possession” in *Herejes*, seen also in the novel as the drive to belong or not to a particular group, weaves through and problematizes the work's dynamic between heresy and heritage. As embodied in the Kaminsky family's Rembrandt, possessions, material or cultural, constitute what a given heritage actually circulates within a group

or between generations, as well as the “booty” that a heretic may elect to take along when performing a new identity beyond the confines of a community of origin. In the fictional Cuban present of Padura’s comprehensive novelistic world, ambivalence about possessions abounds, and this intensifies in *Herejes*. This anxiety, which seems to increase in the trajectory of Padura’s Conde novels, is not surprising in an era when the Cuban state has dramatically changed the rules governing the right to buy or sell property or one’s own labor and during a period that has witnessed enormous transfers of funds and consumer goods to Cuba through remittances or deliveries by family members living off the island.⁸ As I have argued elsewhere, Conde worries that the books he tracks down for their sale by his entrepreneurial “boss” Yoyi el Palomo constitute Cuba’s cultural heritage being auctioned off to the highest bidder,⁹ which is the actual fate in *Herejes* of the Kaminsky’s family Rembrandt in the early twenty-first century London auction. Although derived in part from Conde’s view of books and libraries as sacred, this anxiety intensifies in *Herejes* where Conde seems to feel that buying and selling are themselves somehow tainted, for example when he is paid for his detection services by Elías at the rate—astronomical for Conde—of \$100 per day.

In part this unease with economic exchange derives from Conde’s revulsion at Cubans in high places who still espouse socialist principles while suborning trans-national contraband for their own profit. In the context of the novel’s foregrounding of Jewish commercial activity in both twentieth-century Havana and seventeenth-century Amsterdam, Conde’s antipathy toward commerce may even conjure up the early Christian proscription of money-lending that historically opened a space for Jewish financial enterprise, a longstanding cultural history now overlaid in Cuba with decades of socialist experience and ideology. As a one-time and perhaps lingering believer in socialist principles, Conde—even when faced by a desperate need for cash—seems to view economic exchange itself as sullyng. This aversion to the buying and selling of things or property persists in *Herejes*, where Conde appears to defend his generation’s

⁸ Padura himself comments on changes in Cuba’s economy in “¿Crece o no crece Cuba?”.

⁹ See my “Unpacking the libraries” (193-94).

participation in such commercial life not as a respectable or worthy vocation but only as the ground zero pre-requisite for survival that appears to make it marginally acceptable rather than heretical in the context of a by now more than five-decades-old socialist tradition:

Sin fuerzas ni edad para reciclarse como vendedores de arte o gerentes de corporaciones extranjeras, o al menos como plomeros o dulceros, apenas les quedaba el recurso de resistir como *sobrevivientes*. Así, mientras unos *subsistían* con los dólares enviados por los hijos que se habían largado a cualquier parte del mundo, otros trataban de arreglárselas de algún modo para no caer en la inopia absoluta o en la cárcel: como profesores particulares, choferes que alquilaban sus desvencijados autos, veterinarios o masajistas por cuenta propia, lo que apareciera. Pero la opción de buscarse la vida arañando las paredes no resultaba fácil y provocaba aquel cansancio sideral, la sensación de incertidumbre constante y derrota irreversible que con frecuencia atenazaba al ex policía y lo lanzaba, a puro empujón, contra su voluntad y deseos, a patear las calles buscando libros viejos con los que ganarse, almos, unos pesos de *supervivencia*. (24; my emphasis)

Not all of Conde's cohort share his queasiness about money: some find it astonishing that Elías wants to donate a painting with a potential market value of over a million dollars to a museum, a choice similar to Conde's decision not to plunder for resale much of the priceless private Vedado library he stumbles upon in the novel *La neblina del ayer* and instead delivers to the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí. In fact, the Conde of *Herejes* regards the increasingly affluent, self-made Yoyi el Palomo, his own de facto employer in the book-selling enterprise, as the embodiment of the ethical devolution of the once imagined Che Guevarian New Man: "Yoyi era, a todos los efectos, un ejemplar de catálogo del Hombre Nuevo supurado por la realidad del medio ambiente: ajeno a la política, adicto al disfrute ostentoso de la vida, portador de una moralidad utilitaria" (23).

The possessions that Conde reifies by imagining them as properly situated outside the economy of supply and demand are, in fact, intellectual or aesthetic ones: books, paintings, or ideas. Thus in the context of ideological heresy showcased in *Herejes*, possession can refer not just to the taking and holding of property but also to taking and holding of the hearts, minds, and even bodies of others. Being "possessed," after all, can signify "the condition of being dominated by something, as an extraneous personality, demon, passion, idea, or purpose" (*Websters Third New*

International Dictionary, Unabridged). In the context of institutionalized beliefs, dogmas, or ideologies, this possession is analogous to the condition of an ideologically interpellated subject (in the Althusserian sense), or, in a worst case scenario, to the condition of one enslaved, imprisoned, burnt at the stake in an *auto-da-fé*, sent to the camps for dissenting practices or beliefs or simply for one's cultural or physical otherness, or ostracized or expelled from one's community for ostensible heresies. In this context, parallels come to mind between the seventeenth-century expulsion of Elías Ambrosius from his Jewish family for violating the Orthodox interpretation of the second commandment as a prohibition of painting human forms and post-revolution Cuban writers marginalized (*parametrados*) or even imprisoned for writing whose style or content are officially deemed as "against" the Revolution.¹⁰ In the dynamic between adherents to and dissenters from a particular worldview or belief system, "possession" is a malleable, role-reversible concept. Thus, non-believers may see dogmatists as ideologically possessed, and those from whom they choose to dissent might refer to heretics themselves as the "possessed," for example by the devil, by another belief system, or in Cuban post-revolutionary political rhetoric for Cuban-Americans, by "the enemy," that is, by US capitalism. In this vein, older family members of the youthful *emo* in *Herejes*, Judy Torres, see her as somehow no longer herself and possessed by the urban youth tribe she has joined.

But in the ethical economy of Padura's novel, the heretics—those who struggle for *self*-possession, that is, for the freedom to believe, travel, work, dress, or make art as they please—are, if not exactly heroes, the recipients of Conde's fascination and enduring admiration. These include, above all, Elías Ambrosius, Daniel Kaminsky, and Judy Torres. Moreover, the heretics in *Herejes* are cast as future-oriented agents of cultural change, those who transform the heritage that initially possesses or owns them from a timelessly anchored tradition into something dynamic and new that marks their own self-possession and independence, a breaking away from the ideological possessions of their heritage but also from the world to

¹⁰ The concept of writing "within" or "against" the Revolution, of course, derives from Fidel Castro's renowned, line-in-the-sand-drawing lecture "Words to the Intellectuals," delivered on June 30, 1961.

which they once belonged. This passion for autonomy and his concern for his own country's future generations underlie Conde's quest to understand the missing emo, Judy, and her cohort. In the context of Padura's fictional world, Conde's lengthy exchanges with those professing to be emos in *Herejes* constitute the character's most extended conversation to date with a generation born after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In this sense, these cross-generational conversations signal Conde's emergence, even if temporary, from the bubble of his nostalgia-driven, close-knit cohort and a bona fide foray into the present-day Cuba that surrounds him, not so much in this instance to condemn, bemoan, or grieve his own generation's losses but rather to pursue genuine understanding. Moreover, Conde is self-aware and self-critical, as he expresses guilt at not having pulled himself out of his own disillusion and loss to reach out to and get to know or even support this younger generation sooner or to reflect on its possible integrity and courage:

Lo más corrosivo resultaba el hecho de que, en los últimos años, él había convivido en la misma ciudad con aquellos jóvenes y apenas se había detenido a observarlos, pues los consideraba una especie de payasos de la postmodernidad empecinados en apartarse de los códigos sociales por el recurso de hacerse *notablemente* distintos, y jamás les había concedido la profundidad de un pensamiento y unos objetivos libertarios. (430; emphasis in original).

Now paying attention, Conde situates the emos (and their counterparts in other urban tribes)¹¹ in their historical context, observing that they are the mere tip of the iceberg of a Cuban generation of "herejes con causa":

Esos muchachos habían nacido y crecido sin nada, en un país que empezaba a alejarse de sí mismo para convertirse en otro en el cual las viejas consignas sonaban cada día más huecas y desasidas, mientras la vida cotidiana se vaciaba de promesas y se llenaba de nuevas existencias [...] Los desastres de los cuales esos muchachos habían sido testigos y víctimas engendraron a unos individuos decididos a alejarse de todo compromiso y crear sus propias comunidades [...] lejos, muy lejos, de las retóricas de triunfos, sacrificios, nuevos comienzos. (442)

¹¹ Here Conde is referring the gamut of youthful groups about whom he learns through his young emo informant Yadine: "frikis, rastas, rockeros, mikis, reparteros, gámers, skaters, metaleros....y nosotros, los emos" (34).

Although disturbed by their apparent nihilistic impulses, Conde can't suppress his admiration for "unos jóvenes que, como Judy la filósofa y lideresa, se sentían capaces de echar todo al fuego [...] inclusive sus cuerpos. Porque sus almas ya eran incombustibles, más aún inapresables" (443). This determination to possess their own souls and bodies—in nonconventional hairdos, dress, and activity and even to the point of self-mutilation—triggers Conde's initial identification with the youthful generation as he recalls the official state "brujos," themselves possessed by an exaggerated version of New Man ideology, who armed with scissors sheared the locks and even the clothing of Havana youth "considerados solo por sus preferencias capilares, musicales, religiosas, o en cuestiones de vestimenta y de sexo, como lacras sociales inadmisibles en los marcos de la nueva sociedad en trámite de construcción" (355).

But Conde's fascination with and admiration for the missing emo Judy, whose trajectory and intellectual biography he reconstructs as he searches for answers about her fate, exceeds the connections of traditional or multi-generational adolescent rebellion or Conde's discovery that he and Judy were stimulated to think by some of the same books or music. To his surprise, Conde finds that he identifies with the missing teenager more broadly, in her eclectic literary and philosophical readings, her intellectual skepticism, and her vacillation between belonging to a welcoming tribe and staying free of any particular sect, as it turns out that Judy was about to leave the emos when she disappeared: "Sus ideas sobre la libertad y la pertenencia tribal [...] resultaban retadoras, *más intrincadas que unas reacciones de rebeldía postadolescente*. [...] El ex policía recordó al polaco Daniel Kaminsky y sus búsquedas de espacios de libertad para redefinirse a sí mismo. Otra extraña confluencia, pensó" (436; my emphasis). That search for spaces of autonomy, difference, and consequent change is what most draws Conde to the heretics of the past and the present who shape his epistemological journey in *Herejes*. In contrast to the bodily assaults executed by the state "brujos" on nonconformist youth of Conde's own adolescence, for Judy's generation, Conde reflects that the very shackles assumed in their pursuit of self-possession—their attempts to deform their appearance, their body, their affect, their communication—constitute

potentially productive heresies in reaction to inherited ideological homogeneity: “Pero eran *sus* grilletes, y esa propiedad maracba la diferencia. [...] La diferencia en un país que pretendía haberlas borrado y que en su realidad de todos los días se iba llenando de capas, grupos, clanes, dinastías que destrozaban la presunta homogeneidad concebida por decreto político y por mandato filosófico” (430; my emphasis).

The Genesis of a New Conde?

In the context of Padura's previous novels inhabited by the Conde we have come to know so well, it is difficult not to consider the possibility that the title for the final short “book” of *Herejes*—“Génesis”—is ironic. Consisting largely of a letter to Conde from Elías Kaminsky, which also contains a letter-within-the-letter from Rembrandt's apprentice Elías Ambrosius to his mentor, a missive that Kaminsky has now located in Amsterdam, the “Génesis” section returns to the source and origin of the painting that has linked multiple generations of heretics, thus tying up some loose plot ends and closing the loop between the novel's multiple pasts and its present. But knowing Conde as we do the word “Génesis” also conjures up the decades of new beginnings invoked by the revolutionary state in its reiterative mobilizations of Cubans to keep their eyes on the long-promised utopian future, even with all the surrounding present-day evidence that undermines that vision. Such invocations constitute the object of Conde's perpetual bitterness and disenchantment with the unfulfilled promises on which his generation was raised, disappointment exacerbated by the passing years. Based primarily on Padura's Conde tetralogy and *Adiós, Hemingway* (2001) Guillermina De Ferrari argues compellingly that Conde is stuck in precisely that moment of “infinite possibility” embodied in the Revolution's initial utopian promise, “even after it is long gone” and that his coping strategy consists of never changing. Thus Conde, De Ferrari argues, “perpetually postpone[s] the choices and disillusionments that would allow him to mature both socially and affectively. [...] Mario Conde stands for the right to not compromise any of his ideals for any reason at any point, regardless of the social sacrifices such attitude may entail” (42).

Although I would probably argue that one can tease out small movements of the needle in the ethical make-up of the earlier Conde, I agree substantially with De Ferrari's assessment of that earlier work. But in unpacking the interaction of heresy, heritage, and possession as the interpretative coordinates of *Herejes*, I have been arguing for this novel's less nostalgic approach to the layers of the past, one that—from a perspective grounded in the present—showcases moments of the past that looked toward the future by generating forward-looking change. The heretics of *Herejes* are change agents who alter their inheritance and relocate it in their own present-contexts, analogous in that sense to the reappearances of the Rembrandt painting, the novel's traveling heretical object. The Conde of *Herejes* is fascinated by this process and these connections. As De Ferrari argues, the earlier Conde was characterized by nothing so much as his “effortless capacity to conjure up the past instantaneously” (42). In the *Herejes* context, however, the passage I cited in opening this essay presents the struggle by Elías Kaminsky to conjure up the past in the Havana *solar* where his father grew up—a process closely watched by Conde, the passage's focalizer—and punctuates in conclusion Kaminsky's categorical failure to do so: “Pero no lo logró.” This deduction that irrespective of its reverberations in and legacy to the present—resonances evident in the vortices of behavior inscribed in palimpsest urban spaces—the past is irretrievably gone and the general absence of overburdening nostalgia in many of the novel's scenes from multiple pasts suggest an emergent shift in the structure of feeling emanating from Conde's fictional world. As I have shown, moreover, the novel's links between past and present—all eventually considered through Conde's perspective—highlight moments of change that point toward cultural hybridity and tolerance for difference. The cityscapes of *Herejes* stand out not for the sense of loss they generate but rather for what they reveal about the diversity, dynamism, and propensity for change that culture itself embodies.

Given that the novel situates these moments in its heretical actors so captivating to Conde, the question remains as to whether Conde himself, long committed to his own self-possession, is one of the novel's heretics.

Does he, like the heretics Joseph and Daniel Kaminsky, Elías Ambrosius, or Judy Torres, take the kind of stand that might catalyze a generational cultural shift or signal real change? *Herejes* witnesses small changes in Conde's personal life: he gets engaged to his long-term companion Tamara (although they both subsequently agree that there's no rush to change the status quo) and he is so excited by Elías Kaminsky's epistolary account of Amsterdam that, for the first time in years, he actually reflects on the possibility of traveling outside of Cuba. But, to the extent that he still takes solace in the small tribe of his friends, repeats with them some of the same conversations and rituals of friendship, and eats the same Cuban comfort foods miraculously conjured up as these *tertulias* by the mother of one of the tribe's members, on the surface Conde's behavior is much the same as it has always been. The perceivable shift appears to be attitudinal: this Conde spends less time wallowing in the losses conjured up by specters of the past and more time reflecting on the rich multiplicity of the past, the dynamics of change in multiple eras, and the potential of that change-making for the present and future. Still, it is difficult even in *Herejes* to imagine Conde as the kind of definitive risk-taker embodied in the novel's other heretics, to visualize him performing a public stand. It is not clear even in *Herejes* that Conde exhibits the necessary courage that the novel associates with the actual practice of heresy. On the other hand, in *Herejes* Conde personally lambastes Judy Torres's family—embodiments of official corruption and hypocrisy—in a more direct attack than we have seen him emit before, as he holds them responsible for the uncertain fate of Judy's generation. But what initially troubles Conde most about the emos is the possibility they seem to enact believing firmly in *nothing*, a condition he fears he may share, even as he becomes more comfortable with that possibility

It is a mistake to equate a novelist with the fictional character of his creation. But Padura has noted the affective similarities in their experience and world views: "Mario Conde no es mi *alter ego*, pero sí es en muchos sentidos la forma en la cual yo veo la realidad cubana y veo incluso la interioridad de una persona. Por eso Mario Conde reproduce muchas de mis actitudes" ("Siempre me he visto"). When asked in an interview whether, based on the content of his novels, Padura considers *himself* a

heretic, he, like Conde, hesitates on the condition of believing: “Tal vez no propiamente un hereje. Porque el hereje es alguien que practica una fe y luego disiente de ella. Yo siempre mantuve una actitud crítica respecto a lo que se vivía en Cuba. Sin excesos. Nunca he militado activamente en ningún bando: ni en el partido ni en la disidencia. Mi gran lucha ha sido siempre ser independiente” (“Leonardo Padura: ‘En Cuba’”). When pressed as to whether independence is heresy in Cuba, Padura still hedges: “Mi pensamiento es más bien heterodoxo, en el sentido que me opongo a la ortodoxia de cualquier tipo. Y eso puede llevar a la herejía” (“Leonardo Padura: ‘En Cuba’”). In the context of the connections between heresy and heritage that I have explored here, one could argue that Padura is splitting hairs with this distinction: much like heretics, after all, heterodox thinkers diverge from their heritage in pursuit of self-possession. Moreover, Padura’s claim to heterodoxy here resonates in Conde’s final thoughts in *Herejes*:

Porque si cabe la posibilidad de que, de haber existido, incluso Dios haya muerto, y la certeza de que tantos mesías hayan terminado convirtiéndose en manipuladores, lo único que en realidad queda, lo único que realidad te pertenece es tu libertad de elección. Para vender un cuadro o donarlo a un museo. Para pertenecer o dejar de pertenecer. Para creer o no creer. Incluso para vivir o para morirte. (513)

Notwithstanding Padura’s hesitation about his own identity as a heretic, there is much in Conde’s thoughts—evocative of the recitation of a creed—that not only fleshes out Padura’s definition of heterodoxy but also calls to mind the change-making enactments of their own autonomy: the quest for self-possession and to belong above all to themselves undertaken by the designated heretics in *Herejes*.

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