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# Hard-Boiled for Hard Times in Leonardo Padura Fuentes's Detective Fiction

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**Abstract:** Focusing on Leonardo Padura Fuentes's hard-boiled fiction, this essay traces the origin and evolution of the genre in Cuba. Padura Fuentes has challenged the officially sanctioned socialist *literatura policial* that became popular in the 1970s and 1980s, creating a new model of criticism that is not afraid to confront the island's socio-economic problems. This article analyzes how in this novelist's tetralogy, the dominating rhetoric is one of scarcity, and how this constant state of lacking builds on the formulaic elements of the detective genre to reveal a social reality where crime (and its resolution) do not always have to do with the discovery of a dead body.

**Key Words:** capitalism, Cuban fiction, detective fiction, economics, hard-boiled, *literatura policial*, materialism, Padura Fuentes (Leonardo), scarcity, social criticism

If the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus pointed to the transformation of the topos of *locus amoenus* into a discourse of abundance of the New World, the desire for this newly-found cornucopia also meant the beginning of a state of privation for others. Julio Ortega traced this idea in the works of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, who early on had observed: “Y con la tierra tan rica y abundante de oro y plata y piedras preciosas, como todo el mundo sabe, los naturales della son gente más pobre y mísera que hay en el universo” (qtd. in Ortega 13). In El Inca's articulation of the new cultural model that resulted from the encounter with Europe, Ortega recognized the awareness of a condition of deprivation that tainted the idea of wealth that surrounded the resources of the recently discovered continent. Identifying scarceness in the study of the history and culture of Latin America is vital as it challenges the utopian vision once held for this continent by its natives as well as its newcomers. More importantly, it reminds us that the social and cultural reality of this land has been and continues to be the unrelenting fight for the dignified socio-economic survival of its people. A reality that precedes any other, this struggle takes center place in Leonardo Padura Fuentes's hard-boiled fiction. The state of constant lacking that permeates his crime fiction balks at the traditional rhetoric of abundance. In this essay, I explore how this paucity builds on the formulaic elements of the detective genre to reveal a social reality where crime (and its resolution) not always has to do with the discovery of a dead body.

Born in 1955, Leonardo Padura Fuentes is one of the better-known Cuban writers of detective fiction who has achieved international recognition. Winner, among many other awards, of the prestigious Premio Café Gijón de Novela in 1995 for *Máscaras*, he is the creator of the memorable character Mario Conde or “el Conde,” a police detective whose gloomy outlook on life is only forgotten through frequent alcoholic binges. Padura studied literature at the Universidad de La Habana and started working as a literary critic for a youth magazine, *El Caimán Barbudo* in the 1980s. He authored books on El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Alejo Carpentier. In 1988 he published his first work of fiction, a short novel called *Fiebre de caballos*. He worked as a journalist in different publications in Cuba writing about books, music, and culture in general until the 1990s. He has also traveled abroad as a journalist and spent time in Angola. He still writes for different periodicals outside of Cuba but has focused on his literary career since 1995

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following the success of his detective series.<sup>1</sup>

Padura's work received critical attention because his detective not only broke with the positive model created by the Cuban socialist detective novel in the 1970s and 1980s, but challenged its literary premises. As Persephone Braham explains, the Cuban government had at one time fomented crime fiction as a medium to advance its political ideology. In this fiction, crime-solving had to do with "promoting conformity with revolutionary norms, and reinforcing the unmasking and suppression of antisocial tendencies" (Braham 29). This task was carried out by members of the State who helped to restore order and to protect the ideals of the Revolution. Instead of the dilettante detective or the private eye of the classic and hard-boiled detective genre, it is the police who are in charge of solving the crime.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the state agency, the responsibility also pertains to regular civilians who are expected to zealously guard the Revolution from its many enemies. The idea to strategically deploy a literary genre for ideological purposes started in 1971 when Ignacio Cárdenas Acuña's *Enigma para un domingo* became a huge best-seller. The popularity of this book was quickly noticed by the State-owned publishing houses and the following year, the "Concurso Aniversario del Triunfo de la Revolución" was created by the "Dirección política" of the Ministry of Interior (MININT) (Sacerio-Garí 91). Encouraged by this literary competition, Cuban writers started writing and publishing *literatura policial* and the number of works exceeded that of any other Latin American country except maybe Argentina. Amelia Simpson points out that until 1971 there was virtually no one writing detective fiction in the island and while translations of American and European detective novels were available and widely read, the genre had remained a foreign practice (97).

The State-supported and ideologically motivated detective fiction had the purpose to educate its readers about the struggle against the manifestations of social inadequacy and the persistence of vices from the past. However, this ideological straightjacket, evident in the collectivization of the investigation of the crime and the stress on counterrevolutionary activities (i.e., the criminal as enemy of the State), was later blamed for the poor quality of Cuban detective fiction (Sacerio-Garí 93). Stephen Wilkinson breaks down further the many shortcomings of this early practice, including the author's lack of expertise, the absence of adequate criticism regarding this literary genre, the practice of both State and self-censorship, and the indiscriminate publication of minor works (125, 154–56) and notes that Padura was already critical of Cuban detective fiction in the early 1980s, making him one of the first writers to recognize and criticize the excesses of early Socialist Cuban detective fiction: "Pero, ¿se le ha hecho la crítica? ¿se le ha analizado seria, consciente, rigurosa y desembozadamente?" (qtd. in Wilkinson 154). Expanding the judgment to Cuban literature in general, he denounced the negative consequences of a clearly divided ideological stance where writers who wrote inside and outside the island were pitted against each other, as well as those who wrote for or against the Revolution. For Padura, this narrow perspective only offers readers a very limited and Maniquean view of reality, rejecting any ideological extreme since he believes in the value of nuanced narratives (Epple 49–50).<sup>3</sup>

Voicing his opposition to the Cuban Socialist detective novel and its ideological restriction, Padura wrote his first crime fiction, *Pasado perfecto*, in 1991. Inspired by its reception, he conceived a detective series, a tetralogy representing the four seasons ("Las cuatro estaciones") of a calendar year. He followed his first novel with *Vientos de Cuarema* (1994), *Máscaras* (1995), and finally, *Paisaje de otoño* (1998), recently translated to English. In order of original publication, the translated titles are *Havana Blue* (2007), *Havana Gold* (2008), *Havana Red* (2005), and *Havana Black* (2006). In these novels we follow the adventures of el Conde who can be portrayed as the anti-hero of the traditional Cuban detective fiction. Even if he is part of the police, he resembles the private eye of the hard-boiled genre: el Conde is tough and displays a good measure of (even if sometimes self-destructive) cynicism. A heavy drinker, he is a lonely man with a tortured soul. Unlike the idealized hero of impeccable morality that populates Cuba's officially sanctioned crime fiction, el Conde does not see such a clear divide between right or wrong nor does he believe in the infallibility of the law. He can be described as a loser who spent most of his life making the wrong decisions and his only hope is to return to his earlier dream of

becoming a writer. Regardless of his personal limitations, however, what makes him distinct from the other Cuban police detectives is his open and frequent questioning of the lost dreams of the Revolution: “¿[C]uándo, cómo, por qué, dónde había empezado a joderse todo?” (*Paisaje de otoño* 26). Interestingly, as I analyze in Padura’s novels, the dream that has ceased to exist is articulated by pecuniary clues that not only sustain his detective fiction but ultimately reveal an important socio-economic reality of contemporary Cuba.<sup>4</sup>

What Padura rejects is the portrayal of a Cuba that he does not recognize. Refusing this idealized view of society where people work harmoniously to defend the Revolution, the novelist questions the premise on which prior Cuban detective novels were created. Instead, he is interested in a detective genre that can focus on the social and political hopelessness of the present (Epple 60). Padura is captivated by the critical potential of crime fiction, one that recovers the social conscience that came with the hard-boiled model of Anglo-Saxon authors like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Instead of an emphasis on the resolution of the murder as an enigma—an intellectual exercise—these writers extend beyond the crime to illustrate the context in which the law is broken, pushing the formulaic structure of this genre to its limits.<sup>5</sup> Instead of remaining inside buildings solving murders that take place in private libraries, sleuthing takes private eyes to roam the underbelly of the city. Padura is not alone in this attraction as other contemporary Latin American writers have recently embraced detective fiction as a way to write about present-day issues. Novelists like Mempo Giardinelli, Hiber Conteris, Osvaldo Soriano, Ramón Díaz Eterovic, among others, have come to recognize the social function of the “neopolicial” (a term coined by the Mexican Paco Ignacio Taibo II), as a form-fitting narrative to cover current social problems.

As mentioned earlier, when Padura wrote his first detective novel, *Pasado perfecto*, his intention was to produce a different novel to the official Cuban crime fiction, one that did not include a blatant support for the country’s revolutionary principles. Believing “que si la novela policíaca se ocupaba de los lados más oscuros de la sociedad, revelar dichos lados también era posible en la novela policíaca cubana” (qtd. in Smith 69–70), he chose to tell the story of Rafael Morín, a bureaucrat of the Cuban government, whose murder reveals a store of corruption and betrayal of political ideals. To narrate this saga, Padura creates the character of Mario Conde, a police detective whose major flaw is a strong, almost pathological attachment to the past. El Conde, or the “cabrón recordador” as the writer calls him, is gifted at digging through past events because “[s]e pasa la vida recordando y buscando las razones en el pasado que determinan su presente” (qtd. in Smith 70). This character with his insistent contact with the past has been interpreted as a fictional biography of Padura Fuentes himself or even his *alter ego* (Wilkinson 162; Pérez, “Time” 54). As Ana Serra observes, as part of a generation that lived through the strictest years of revolutionary commitment in Cuba, Padura looks into the past as does el Conde to see the “unfulfilled promised of what was supposed to be a bright future [...] and now [they] find themselves still struggling” (167–68).<sup>6</sup> This exploration of the past materializes into a negative view of Cuban politics, implicating one of its bureaucrats in a ring of corruption, greed, and treason. Padura submitted *Pasado perfecto* to the MININT literary competition in 1991. Despite being told that his entry was the best, no one was awarded a prize that year. Given that the winner would have his or her work published, Padura was not surprised by the jury’s decision. The novel in question was later published in Mexico in 1994, and according to the novelist, it was this experience that persuaded him to work on his detective series.

The series, “Las cuatro estaciones,” was designed to represent each of the four seasons of 1989.<sup>7</sup> While writing *Pasado perfecto*, Padura realized how special the year had been. Besides the much-publicized execution of General Arnaldo Ochoa for his role in the drug smuggling ring, 1989 marked the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent crisis of the Cuban economy, which had been heavily subsidized by the Russians. The beginning of what was later called the “período especial,” signaled for Padura “el momento en que muchas ilusiones y esperanzas se pierden; y también se pierde la inocencia [...] hay una conmoción dentro de las estructuras oficiales del país que hacen ver que ese bloque presentado como homogéneo durante tantos años tenía

grandes resquebrajaduras: no era ni tan homogéneo ni tan perfecto como se nos decía" (qtd. in Smith 70). In his detective fiction, Padura's characters experience this loss of innocence as a painful existential void in need of an explanation. El Conde, as the protagonist, is the one most affected by it, and as pointed out by Pérez, becomes a somewhat allegorical character that "serves as a metaphor for contemporary Cuba" ("Intertextuality" 76; "Time" 57). And as a way to understand how this loss came to be, he becomes obsessed with the past: recalling it, narrating it repeatedly, questioning it, and yearning for it. The fixation with the past is obvious in his frequent internal rants:

¿Qué has hecho con tu vida, Mario Conde?, se preguntó como cada día, y como cada día quiso darle marcha atrás a la máquina del tiempo y uno a uno deshacer sus propios entuertos, sus engaños y excesos, sus iras y sus odios, desnudarse de su existencia equivocada y encontrar el punto preciso donde pudiera empezar de nuevo. ¿Pero tiene sentido?, también se preguntó, ahora que hasta me estoy quedando calvo, y se dio la misma respuesta de siempre: ¿Dónde me había quedado? (*Pasado perfecto* 56)

The connection with the past is what allows the police detective to solve his crimes, shedding light on the present and revealing many of its ongoing tragedies. While in the series, el Conde's fixation with earlier years also applies to his previous desire to become a writer, Serra correctly observes that the four books of the tetralogy serve to expose "what are arguably four of the most important pillars of the Revolution: the Ministry of Finance, the school [...], intellectuals, and the patrimony of Cuban exiles," and in fact, what each novel does is to take each one of these groups and relate it to Conde's development as an individual (162). In a quest to understand his present emptiness, the detective gathers recollections from his youth about when and how he has lost his literary passion. For example, in *Pasado Perfecto* el Conde remembers his first written piece for a student magazine, one that was censured before its publication by the school principal because of its ideological improprieties. But what is important to the narrative is not so much this first piece of writing but the role played by Rafael Morín Rodríguez, the official in charge of imports and exports who has gone missing, and who we discover was a leader in the Municipal Youth Committee in el Conde's high school and contributed to the closing of the student magazine for "lack of revolutionary commitment" (Serra 162). Morín Rodríguez also had married Conde's high-school sweetheart, Tamara Valdemira Méndez. The contrast between Morín's present corruption and his past youthful revolutionary zeal is what is denounced simultaneously in the detective police and memory work. In this memory, there can be no forgiveness for the way this experience of censorship made el Conde feel and how it shaped his life away from literature: "tenía miedo, no podía hablar pero no entendía mi culpa, si nada más había escrito lo que sentía y lo que me había pasado de chiquito, que me gustaba más jugar pelota en la esquina que ir a misa" (*Pasado* 61).

While certain clues from the past will promptly help el Conde crack the murder cases he is working on as a police detective, he will have to wait until the last novel to fully unravel his own literary mystery as he untangles the many stories of corruption that have influenced his life in different ways, both knowingly and otherwise. The duration of this resolution is important precisely because in this process el Conde is able to capture the many memories of his personal losses, including those of his close friends and their own aspirations for the future that have passed imperceptibly with the years. Andrés is the only one that constantly reminds the friends what has been lost: "[...] qué, Carlos? ¿Tú no fuiste a la Guerra de Angola porque te mandaron? ¿No se te jodió la vida encaramado en esa silla de mierda por ser bueno y obedecer? ¿Alguna vez se te ocurrió que podías decir que no ibas?" (*Paisaje* 24). It is interesting to note that these memories are, finally, the narrative that sustains Padura's detective novels and, in a metaliterary gesture, become the material for the detective's future literary career. The detective series ends when el Conde, after solving his last murder case in *Paisaje de otoño*, leaves the police department to write a novel entitled "*Pasado perfecto*: sí, así la titularía, se dijo, y otro estruendo, llegado de la calle le advirtió al escribano que la demolición continuaba, pero él se limitó a cambiar la hoja para comenzar un nuevo párrafo, porque el fin del mundo seguía acercándose, pero aún no

había llegado, pues quedaba la memoria” (*Paisaje* 259–60). Thus, the series comes full circle and the reader finds within its perimeter the memories of a generation that has seen its dreams disappear and an account of daily life during the traumatic year of 1989. In the novels, both tales become a fertile ground for criticism of Cuban politics and its economic policies.

The commotion produced by the political and economical turn of events constitutes the focus of Padura’s detective series. Interestingly, the crisis is not examined so much through the murder cases that el Conde solves in each novel, but reflected in the everyday routine of the character and his friends’ need to overcome to survive each day. Serra, as well as other critics, have pointed out these difficulties, concluding that “Conde’s well-being ultimately depends on fulfilling basic needs, such as eating, smoking cigars, and drinking coffee,” shifting the narrative from the revolutionary discourse of the past to basic survival (160; Pérez, “Intertextuality” 75; Wilkinson 168–70). I would like to argue that the emphasis on daily life of Cuban society after the end of the Cold War brings into light the author’s criticism of communism as an economic, rather than a political system. In other words, diverging from novels that engage in ideological debates about the Revolution, Padura’s detective fiction focuses on its economic realities, confronting the uneasy feeling that the crimes investigated by the police detective are often the result of the same corruption that afflicts capitalist societies, with their uneven distribution of wealth. In the novels, the clues that lead the gumshoe to untangle the murder mysteries are overwhelmingly economic in nature. Crime scenes and those involved in the investigation are always described through personal possessions or their longing for more goods. Visiting the home of the mother of the murder victim, Caridad, in *Vientos de cuaresma*, el Conde is quick to notice her belongings, as he did in the closet of the daughter, “[u]n equipo de música con dos bafles relucientes y una torre giratoria para guardar los casetes y los compactos; televisor en colores y vídeo marca Sony; lámparas ventilador en cada techo” (53). Either searching for basic supplies or other consumer goods not available in an embargoed Cuba in deep financial crisis, Padura’s characters navigate a world where obviously commodities have the same allure as in other capitalist societies, but are painfully beyond their reach. Having seen Caridad’s apartment, Manolo, el Conde’s police partner, confesses: “Quisiera tener un buen equipo de audio, con todos los ecualizadores y esas jodederas y dos bafles así, bien grandes, y acostarme en el suelo con un bafle a cada lado de la cabeza, bien pegados a la oreja, y pasarme horas oyendo música” (*Pasado* 132). The unattainability of these goods is what becomes evident in the process of the resolution of the crime. In fact, the trail that el Conde and his partner, the sergeant Manuel Palacios follow is one of scarcity, where every object identified, possessed, or desired by the characters carries multiple meanings of social injustice and struggle for economic survival. At the end, it is not surprising that the scarceness that plays as background to el Conde’s detection develops into the central motive for breaking the law. The plot-line of all four novels repeats the narrative structure in which the victim of murder is one who had access to the outside world and, therefore, access to goods and economic opportunities not available to other Cubans.<sup>8</sup>

In Padura’s detective series, the state of permanent lacking that the characters suffer is expressed through a deeper sense of loss.<sup>9</sup> The writer insists on this idea of loss and has repeated in numerous interviews that his novels are a “constancia de que hay un sueño que dejó de existir, de que las esperanzas han desaparecido,” a portrayal of hard reality of everyday life where, to put it bluntly, revolutionary ideals meet the material needs of the people (Pérez Miguel). His books reveal the casualties of the end of this dream, shaped into a state of scarcity where the search for goods and a decent standard of living, under pressing circumstances, evolves into acts of robbery, the practice of prostitution, currency trafficking and, above all, acts of violence (Epple 64). As the tetralogy and his later novels show, regardless of the different premises that lead to the act of murder, the common thread that runs through it all is a social landscape of hardship, a constant search for material goods that ultimately sheds light on the disparity of the country’s social classes. In spite of the structural changes of the 1960s aimed at the creation of a more egalitarian society, the challenges created by the economic conditions of the 1990s (and which continue today) expose the desperation and frustration generated by pervasive social inequalities.

The “período especial” that serves as a subtext in Padura Fuentes's detective novels, refers to the period of the 1990s after the Soviet bloc disappeared. Along with it went the protective shield of trade agreements and financial assistance that Cuba had enjoyed. According to Azicri, Castro's regime did not anticipate that 87 percent of its international trade would collapse almost overnight, tossing the country into a “contingency plan, conceived for a state of war emergency, when the country would be under military attack and cut off from established supply markets” (21). The writer Daniel Chavarría has described this experience as a crime committed against Cubans and denounced the austerity measures that translated into the shortage of basic means of sustenance, such as food supplies.<sup>10</sup> When the Cuban government was confronted with Gorbachev's *perestroika* (the restructuring, dismantling of the centralized economic and political system), it embarked upon its own process of reformation, paying attention to the earlier measures of the 1960s (Moreno 55). Azicri documents this attention to preserve the legacy of the revolution amid the economic restructuring demanded by the demise of the Socialist Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CAME) and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a revival by the Cuban government of the “revolutionary ideological commitment (consciousness), volunteer work, the minibrigades, and moral incentives as ways of moving away from consumerism, material incentives and mercantilism” (25). However, the population did not happily accept these decisions. People questioned these new policies even when they were supportive of the Revolution, and the speculation about the economic malaise of the country became a national obsession, and a way to vent their anger and frustration about their difficult living conditions (Azicri 43). Confronted with the hard realities of the austerity measures, intellectuals like Ambrosio Fornet also joined in the expression of the population's contradictory feelings: “I believe that the revolutionary project has to be reformulated. Don't ask me how, I don't know. But I do know that the way we originally conceived of it [...] is no longer possible. [...] How are we going to retake what is truly valuable from the project and at the same time make it economically viable? I don't know... [...]” (qtd. in Azicri 43–44).

For Padura, the criticism of these decisions is perfectly clear. He describes his generation as one that wishes to see political change in Cuba, but not ignoring the important achievements of the Revolution. Without rejecting what he calls “la esencia del proceso social,” the writer points out the feelings of disenchantment and loss that affect Cubans today, declaring that “el socialismo, tal como se practicó en el mundo, fracasó como opción universal, y eso es decepcionante” (qtd. in Epplé 65). But he clarifies that the feeling of disenchantment for Cubans is different because “seguimos dentro de determinados esquemas retóricos del socialismo cuando por debajo se está gestando un cambio acelerado hacia una economía de mercado: la retórica y los lemas van por un lado, y por otro se están vendiendo las empresas hoteleras a españoles, canadienses o mexicanos” (65).

It is this double-talk that Padura traces in his detective fiction, pointing out on the one hand the inequality of access to consumer goods and, on the other, the search for survival through alternative means that are deeply affecting the reality of the country. In this process, he is not afraid to assert that in Cuba today there is a slow but irreversible turn toward a market-oriented economics. What he criticizes in this process is how “los cubanos que viven en Cuba están quedando fuera de ese juego” (qtd. in Epplé 64). The disadvantage faced by Cubans stems not only from the entrance of foreign capital in the country that has forced the government to make concessions at the expense of its own national interests, but also the increasing “dollarization” of the Cuban economy. While this transformation has been criticized for the return of values such as individualism that is identified with capitalism that the government tried to eradicate in the 1960s, Moreno observes that the economic measures adopted after 1989 meant the “resurgence of class distinction between those with and those without access to dollars” (53, 58).

Ricardo Castells argues that what Padura shows in his first novel *Pasado perfecto* is how the political system creates a corrupt official, more in tune with his personal ambitions than the ideals of the Revolution. From this perspective, what the writer is criticizing is that despite “los muchos años de dificultades y sacrificio en la Isla, la Revolución todavía no ha logrado crear al mítico



hombre nuevo, sino que al contrario ha clonado a los mismos funcionarios corruptos de siempre” (32).<sup>11</sup> We could easily extend this characterization to the other novels of the series. However, in my opinion, what makes Padura’s detective fiction so much more compelling is how he chooses to portray this conflict. Recognizing the changes facing Cubans in their current economic situation (along with their omnipresent struggle for daily survival), the writer relates the way his characters explore, in their own way, their relationship to commodities and their access to them. There is no sense of betrayal to the ideals of the Revolution when el Conde and his friends express their desire to enjoy certain goods. Some of these commodities, not necessarily related to daily survival, could be associated with the criticism of capitalist societies and their drive for materialism. However, given the economic reality of Cuba after 1989, with its nascent tourism industry and a parallel economy where the population is divided between those who have access to American dollars and those who do not, the presence and desire for material goods becomes not a matter of ideological debate but a criticism of an economic system that is promoting social inequality.

The presence of consumer goods which are clearly not accessible to all civilians highlights the hardship of everyday life but also strengthens the criticism of social inequality that exists in Cuban society. For example, Mayor Antonio Rangel, the commissioner of the police force lusts for Davidoffs, his favorite imported cigars. When el Conde is summoned to be scolded for his unorthodox crime-solving skills, his boss is always talking about them or zealously protecting the few cigars that are available to him only because he has a daughter residing in Europe. He is obsessed with them: “Yo mismo, fumando así y haciendo otras cosas, estoy desperdiciando estos Davidoff 5000 Gran Corona de 14,2 centímetros, que se merecen una fumada reflexiva...” (*Pasado* 68). The link to the outside world provided by relatives living abroad is often determined by how kinship provides access to material goods which are otherwise not found on the island. Sometimes the issue of access taints the sleuthing itself. In *Pasado perfecto*, the reader is not sure if el Conde returns to question the spouse of the murder victim because she was his never-forgotten high-school sweetheart, or because of the possibility of enjoying a rare treat, a good glass of Ballantine’s (85–92). When the detective is inspecting the murder scene in *Vientos de cuaresma*, the telltale signs of the crime are goods that the victim owned. Her closet offers the first clue: “el ropero no era común ni corriente: blusas, sayas, pantalones, pullovers, zapatos, blúmers y abrigos que el Conde fue palpando en su calidad *made in* algún lugar lejano” (34). As a high-school educator, the victim could not have afforded all those items, but neither could have any Cuban, unless he or she had relatives living abroad or was connected with the government. More revealing of the daily struggle for basic goods is the perpetual chase for a cup of coffee in all four novels and, especially, in *Máscaras*. El Conde is exasperated by the severe rationing of coffee that seems to be everywhere except in the victim’s house where it is promptly served. He is even offered good cigars, this time Montecristos, one which the detective takes to present to his boss (*Máscaras* 88–89). The parental home of the murdered youth is a space of privilege where a diplomat resides, and wealth in this household is translated into basic goods of consumption such as coffee, tobacco, alcohol, and more importantly, access to the outside world.<sup>12</sup>

Scarceness is also related to illegality in Padura’s novels. In this case, the characters are complicit in the use of the illegal market as a source for limited supplies. It is the only way in which Josefina, the mother of el Conde’s best friend el Flaco, who is no longer thin and is confined to a wheelchair, is able to treat her son and his friends to unbelievable feasts. The police detective is afraid to inquire how this old lady manages to provide this food amid the shortage experienced by everyone. The meals are described in detail but the procurement of their ingredients remains shrouded in mystery. The lack of information is such that the reader is not sure if the banquets produced by Josefina are only a product of her senile imagination or real, thanks to the black market: “dejarse sorprender era parte del rito: lo imposible se haría posible, lo soñado se transformaría en realidad, y entonces el anhelo cubano por la comida desbordaría de pronto cualquier frontera de la realidad pautada por cuotas, libretas y ausencias irremediables, gracias al acto mágico qué sólo Josefina era capaz de provocar y estaba provocando” (*Máscaras* 77). Padura

himself does not clarify the veracity of these banquets when he says “estoy hablando de una cocina imposible en Cuba,” and only explains the context of the series' gastronomical reference: “La comida ha sido una obsesión de los cubanos durante treinta y cinco años, porque conseguirla ha sido un problema cotidiano durante la mayor parte de ese largo período. Entonces ellos hacen estos banquetes imposibles donde comen cantidades pantagruélicas y beben a su gusto. Es un sueño para los cubanos normales como ellos” (qtd. in Smith 73–74).

The notion of scarcity plays an important role in Padura's novels because it indicates the moral decay of Cuban society and the proliferation of crime. Crime is presented as something new and foreign to the island, more associated with capitalist societies (Moreno 53–55). As Castells explains, the new economy has meant the proliferation of illegal activities in the Cuban economy, and the detective fiction of the 1970s and 1980s that tried to crack down on these crimes “necesita un nuevo enfoque para retratar los cambios sociales y económicos que han ocurrido durante los últimos diez años” (24). In the investigation carried out in *Vientos de cuaresma*, we discover that drug-trafficking is part of Cuban society, as in any other Western nation. So are greed and self-serving actions motivated by easy money. They contradict socialist ideals but (as Padura recognizes) reflect the shortcomings of the economic and social reality of the country. He believes that Cuba now shares more similarities with countries with capitalist economies and is worried that Cubans are not allowed to participate in the new market-driven economy. This lack or denial of opportunity is, at the end, the more severe crime committed (and denounced) in Padura's detective series. At the conclusion of the novels, as Sara Rosell correctly observes, “nos queda la impresión de que el crimen que no ha sido resuelto es el del Estado hacia el individuo” (450).

The search for goods in these novels reflects what British economist J. M. Keynes observed about the persistence of the economic problem for humankind, relating it to the insatiable nature of their needs (326). In Padura's fiction, when the absence of goods is confronted with the goals of the Revolution and the dreams it laid for generations of Cubans, the economic problem becomes a questioning of the freedom of his fellow citizens. In other words, access to (basic) commodities is closely related to the idea of self-determination. In *Paisaje de otoño*, Andrés, the already-mentioned childhood friend of el Conde, expresses his frustration about the meaning of his life in Cuba. He defines it as lack of freedom. This comes as a surprise to the detective who considers his friend as a very successful man. A medical doctor, Andrés is married with two sons, and has received the permission from the state to own a private house and a car. However, despite the privileges he enjoys, he has finally decided to leave the island. Baffled, el Conde and his friends ask for an explanation. Andrés is tired of being part of a generation that was historically pressured to obey without questioning, first by their parents, then by their schools, then at work: “Pero a nadie se le ocurrió nunca preguntarnos qué queríamos hacer: nos mandaron a estudiar en la escuela porque nos tocaba estudiar, a hacer la carrera que teníamos que hacer, a trabajar en el trabajo en que teníamos que trabajar y siguieron mandándonos, sin preguntarnos ni una cabrona vez en la repufñetera vida si eso era lo que queríamos hacer” (*Paisaje* 25). He is unhappy because his personal ambitions and projects had been left unfulfilled, “sin el consentimiento de su individualidad” (25). In arguing that Padura questions Cuba's revolutionary ideals in economic terms, the connection between lack of individuality and opportunity of access to commodities becomes clear. If the government aims at an equitable distribution of wealth, shouldn't this also apply to equal access to society's products? As the industry of tourism and an increasingly decentralized economy are creating a double-tiered society, with those who have access to dollars and those who do not, it would be meaningful to consider how individual freedom is thwarted.

The conflictive reality of Cuba that Padura explores in his detective fiction captures the current debates that are challenging the ideological assumptions that have shaped the island's history for longer than half a century. Faced with the economic realities of the Castro regime, the author narrates the struggle of its people, and questions the corruption hardship brings. Padura does not reject the ideals of the Revolution, but questions the current Cuban economy that goes

against the premise of a Socialist state. Paul Krugman, recent Nobel-Prize winner and noted economist from Princeton who is also a columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote about the mystery of capitalism's triumph over communism in terms of its economics. He wasn't able to offer a definite explanation for this success, but he observed, "Communism failed as an economic system because people stopped believing in it, not the other way around." For Krugman, market systems work "whether people believe in them or not," but centrally planned economies need a sense of mission. Krugman attempts to answer why people stopped believing in socialism, concluding, "Capitalism triumphed because it is a system that is robust to cynicism, that assumes that each man is out for himself. For much of the past century and a half men have dreamed of something better, of an economy that drew on man's better nature. But dreams, it turns out, can't keep a system going over the long term; selfishness can." This observation, with all of its cynicism, does provide an interesting insight to Padura's novels about scarcity, consumption, and access to goods from individual standpoints. Where the loss of faith that is present in this writer's detective fiction will take Cuba, remains to be seen.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Padura Fuentes offers a detailed summary of his early literary career in his interview with Verity Smith, especially in pages 67–69. A more current review of the writer's biography and work can be found in Carlos Uxó's recently published volume on Leonardo Padura Fuentes (2007).

<sup>2</sup>The criterion for this policy is quite clear. After publishing in 1976 their very successful *El cuarto círculo*, Luis Rogelio Noguerras (1944–1985) and Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera (1943) prepared an article setting the basis of Cuban detection fiction. Regarding the detective, they wrote: "El detective o investigador principal, o sea, el protagonista, no es un aficionado brillante ni un detective particular, como Sherlock Holmes y otros que sobresalen en contraste con los jefes de policía mediocres. El investigador principal cubano forma parte de una policía eficaz, bien entrenada y bien equipada técnicamente, y se distingue por su 'moral intachable,' que le gana la admiración y el respeto del pueblo cubano, a quien representa" (qtd. in Menton, 914–15).

<sup>3</sup>Padura sees a direct relationship between this decadence and the 1971 case of Padilla, where there was a state project to reeducate artists to write works that could be considered part of the socialist agenda. He criticizes the politics of "parametración," where writers that did not oblige by standards set by the government could not work as artists or educators.

<sup>4</sup>After finishing his tetralogy, Padura Fuentes returned to his detective fiction in 2005 with *La neblina del ayer*. In this novel, el Conde investigates a murder not as part of the Cuban police department, which he leaves at the end of *Paisaje de otoño*, but as a used-book-seller. He becomes the main suspect of a crime which he needs to help solve in order to clear his name. In this last novel he works for and against the policemen he served with in the past. There is also a brief novella published in 2001, *Adiós Hemingway*, where el Conde appears for the first time as a book-seller after having left the Police Department. Both works have received critical attention in the earlier mentioned volume by Uxó. Janet Pérez expands her work on Padura Fuentes's tetralogy to include a new reading of his latest novel, where she analyzes the continuation of the deterioration of Cuban society already seen in the previous novels, one that "clearly transcends the plane of detective fiction...to enter that of political allegory" ("The Old" 56).

<sup>5</sup>Padura acknowledges that pushing the formal boundaries of this literary genre might question its definition as detective fiction, but this awareness and playfulness toward its form is also part of the genre's newly acquired postmodernist traits, making it a more effective critical tool (qtd. in Epple 61). The expansion of the detective literary genre in Padura's works becomes more clear as Janet Pérez brings our attention to the intertextual nature of the writer's novels, especially in her analysis of *Máscaras* ("Intertextuality" 76–77, 84–85).

<sup>6</sup>In her book about the concept of the "new man" in Cuban revolution and the narratives of identity around it, Serra sees Padura Fuentes's hard-boiled novel a reflection on the decadence of the ideals of the Revolution, where the detective takes the role of explaining not just the crimes committed, but his own past and by doing so, his own identity as part of a certain Cuban collective (158–59).

<sup>7</sup>Pérez sees in this organization a similarity with Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Sonatas* which are also linked with seasons. While they are both quite different, Pérez points out how both narratives express the specific season through references that indicate the passing of time: "[b]oth series paint the decay of traditional values and the decadence of the leaders of yesterday" ("Intertextuality" 73–74).

<sup>8</sup>This is the case of the bureaucrat who works in the Ministry in *Pasado perfecto*. The other victims also belong to a privileged group in Cuban society, as is the case of the daughter of a notorious journalist and business administrator for the State in *Vientos de cuaresma*, the transvestite son of a diplomat in *Máscaras*, and finally, in *Paisaje de otoño*, a former employee of the committee on appropriations after the Revolution who had defected to Miami. All these victims are, to some degree, described by or noted for their possessions. This access to goods could be expressed by differences in social class. Wilkinson opts for this interpretation affirming that

"Padura Fuentes paints a picture of Cuban society riddled with class distinction, something completely alien to the idea of a socialist project, but typical of the hard-boiled novel" (182).

<sup>9</sup>In Pérez's analyses of Padura Fuentes's works, this state is seen through the passing of time and deterioration, degeneration, decay and squalor: "seldom does Conde go out without the narrator's mentioning garbage in the streets, peeling paint and rusting vehicles, blowing dust, vacant lots, crumbling walls, collapsed buildings, long lines for the markets, the buses, almost any necessity" ("Time" 57).

<sup>10</sup>This observation came from his intervention at the conference on detective fiction I was attending, organized by the Casa de las Américas in Havana, Cuba in July of 2001.

<sup>11</sup>The concept of the "New Man" in the Cuban revolution, as previously mentioned, is well developed and analyzed in Serra's work. Especially revealing are the connections of this ideal with Padura Fuente's detective fiction in the epilogue of her study (156–75).

<sup>12</sup>Interestingly, the topic surrounding the problems of shortage is not new in Cuban detective fiction. Sacerio-Gari notes how in Luis Rogelio Noguera's *El cuarto círculo* (1976) the detectives drink coffee almost at the turn of each page when in reality coffee had become a scarce commodity and was severely rationed (96).

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