

Erick Mota's Habana Undergüater  
and Cuba's Collective Trauma of 1990 Socialism's Collapse

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Abstract:

Spanish Caribbean speculative fiction that embraces the rich oral traditions, folklore, and magical realism the region is traditionally known is not "new." Case in point: Erick Mota. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the collapse of the Cuban economy (1990-97), Cuban science fiction writers started to produce stories where their acute awareness of the impact of climate change was mixed with a shared fatalism regarding the future of the nation -political or geographical- within the new neoliberal world order. To achieve it, they embrace cyberpunk. Erick Mota's writing emerged during those years: the singular twist on his tales of hackers, IAs, extreme social inequalities, and dysfunctional state was to add the Afro-Cuban legacy of mythical creatures and ethical perspectives.

The enthralling Mota's plots and characters reflect the ongoing negotiation of Cuban national identity at the dawn of the twenty-first century to a world that feels like a post-apocalyptic future. This integration of Afro-Cuban mythology also challenges traditional Western narratives: He never justifies the choice and instead presents a universe where diverse ontologies and knowledge systems coexist. It is a liberating and subversive political project, but still full of conflicts.

This paper examines Mota's *Habana Undergüater* universe (the novel and short stories) along with his essay production to define the type of cultural knowledge he produces to address the country's long history of slavery, colonialism, postcolonialism, and racism and engage with the collective trauma of the 1990 Socialism collapse for the Cuban idea of nationhood and collective future.

In the decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the so-called socialist countries of Central, Eastern, Southeastern Europe, central Asia, Africa, and Latin America, went through a series of political, economic, and cultural reconfigurations and realignments to survive the new political landscape of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism. Cuba, the largest and once the richest of the Caribbean islands, found itself adrift in 1990, after almost three decades of strong ties with the Eastern Bloc. Every Cuban alive between 1990 and 1994 saw with horrific clarity Marx's "All that is solid melts into air" pass from prophecy to fact. Indeed, we saw all that was holy profaned; we were individually compelled to face, with sovereign senses, our real conditions of life and to rethink the relationships we had with our compatriots while surviving a grotesque and malnourished reality.

In the wake of the collapse of the world and Cuba's new postsocialist circumstance (never admitted by the government, agreed upon by scholars), Cuban speculative fiction creators embraced a bizarre combination of ideological and economic uncertainty under an ever-vigilant and repressive Police State, the dread of climate change, and the wonder at the advance of the internet. The result was a surge in production, characterized by the massive (more concurrent than coordinated) creation of stories with oblique social criticism that never directly addressed the Cuban state or its failures. Instead, there was an acute

awareness of the impact of climate change, mixed with a shared fatalism regarding the future of the nation —political or geographical— within the new neoliberal world order. We could only write about failed states, collapsed cities, corrupt government officials, flooded islands, travelers without a place to return to, or characters who had (apparently) lost every ounce of ethics and thought only in terms of greed.

Erick Mota's writing emerged during those nightmarish years. The singular twist on his take on cyberpunk was that his tales of hackers, AIs, extreme social inequalities, and dysfunctional states existed within the backdrop of Afro-Cuban deities, mythical creatures, and ethical perspectives. It was (it is) an antiracist literature as much as it is science fiction. In the fifteen years since *Havana Undergüater*'s first edition, Mota went from uchronic cyberpunk to space opera in *Under Pressure* (2008), *Cesio Radioactive's Eyes* (Red Ediciones, 2012), *Salvage Cosmos Tales* (Gente Nueva, 2014), and *Tamed Cosmos Memories* (Gente Nueva, 2016). He returns to Uchronia in his two most recent novels, *The Collapse of the Infinite Havanas* (Hypermedia, 2016) and *Mabuya's Pit* (Vestigio, 2022), but, more skeptical of human politics than before, in those stories, the very fabric of reality is called into question by the intervention of superhuman entities.

Within the diverse range of his work, perhaps the only constant in this author's writing is the feminist and anti-patriarchal perspective of his narrative. This concern is expressed in three ways. First, through strong and independent female characters, such as Kai Hunter (*Under Pressure*) or Rada Lam (*Salvage Cosmos Tales*), Olivia Pérez (*Mabuya's Pit*), or the Magician's daughters in *Havana Undergüater*. Second, through the inclusion of men who are implicitly feminist, that is, men who assume that women are their social and intellectual equals. This is the case with Juan Tomás Kirk, Kai Hunter's partner in the Cosmos saga; Tuareg, the melancholic pilot in “When it Rains in Claudia”; Diego de

Münchausen Pérez in *Mabuya's Pit*; or the team of online gamers in *Havana Undergüater*.

These men do not waste time on sexual harassment disguised as courtship, nor do they suffer insecurities about the hierarchy between genders. In Mota's stories, the characters work together without distinction of gender. If there is any sex work, the women maintain their agency by practicing it, as seen in Maya, the protagonist of the shortale "Memoirs of a Hooker," or Sakura Hacker, the *Salvage Cosmos Tales* gold digger.

The third element is that the term "family" is not limited to a single model, understood as two heterosexual, cisgender people and their biological offspring. Even though heterosexuality and monogamy remain the norm in Mota's work, his universes also include multigenerational, single-parent, and blended families. Multigenerational families are a key element in the social structure of Kai and Juan Tomás's universe (*Under Pressure*, *Salvage Cosmos Tales*, and *Tamed Cosmos Memories*), where they are referred to as clans and collectively manage their functioning. In other cases, characters decide to face motherhood without a partner, like Maya ("Memoirs of a Hooker"), Miria ("When It Rains in Claudia"), or Her ("Unfinished Business"). Finally, Mota's men are more likely to believe in families by choice than in consanguineous ones. This is already evident in *Under Pressure* (2008), through J. T. Kirk's tense relationship with his family heritage and his desperate search for affection, first in his affair with Marta Three Blades and later in his brotherhood with Kai Hunter. This sentimental drift in search of connections is repeated in "Who Will Deliver Us from Defeat?" and becomes a central element in *Havana Undergüater*, with its political institutions modeled after religious organizations.

All these elements made Mota's work a field of study where queer theory can be applied to guide inquiry on his representation of gender performance and family diversity. Queer, in *Habana Undergüater*, is a female teen who acquires legendary status by

completing the Baghdad Campaign Mission from the "USA in the Desert" videogame on their own, and an assassin more worried by his dental health than the fact that his wife was having sex with two men just minutes before he arrived home.

However, Mota's casual rejection of the conventions of monogamy, nuclear family, and traditional gender roles is not related to some queer emancipatory agenda. Instead, those practices, and others depicted in his fiction, are part of the Afro-Cuban cultural legacy. He is queer by chance, antiracist, and decolonial by will. Mota's fiction uncovers forms of gender and sexual practices that evolved in Africa and came to a violent clash with European values in the wake of the transatlantic human trafficking and the creation of the African diaspora. Africans and Afro Cubans' cultural praxis resisted the European colonial projects and everything that came after, from the very construction of 'sexuality' in the 19th century to European colonialism's heir, the Western neocolonial projects of systemic racism and diversity erasure implemented in the name of the construction of capitalism between 1902 and 1959, communism from 1960 to 1990, and the survival of the nation state under the misrule of the current military elite. This is an indigeneity that is ancestral despite not being native, because nothing can be really, authentically, native in a nation built from genocide and chattel slavery. Nevertheless, Mota's defense of Cuban transnational indigeneity emerges in conjunction with ecological concerns. It produces a deeply unsettling symbol of the ultimate inadequacy of Western positivism to understand even human creations: the digital Orishas.

*Habana Undergüater* speaks about climate change, postsocialist challenges, and neocolonial anxieties. However, the element that separates this book from the rest of twentieth-century Cuban fin de siècle cyberpunk is the presence of digital, self-evolving

creatures that haunted digital spaces and were unknowable to programmers and human-made AIs until the Yoruba theology made them comprehensible.

Incluso los evangélicos le temen a los Orishas -dijo el Mago-. Es natural, esas cosas están vivas ahí dentro. Nacieron allí, en el ciberespacio (...) Entraban y salían de todas partes. (...) Hasta que llegaron los santeros y babalawos (..) Eran brujeros hackers que comenzaban a hacer sus incursiones en la Red Neural Global. Ellos enseguida supieron qué hacer. Los reverenciaron, les dieron las ofrendas que querían y dejaron que ellos “montaran” su mente. (...) Los fantasmas de la Red se convirtieron en dioses adorados por todos. Incluso por los dueños de los servidores: los propios rusos. (2010:139-140)

The digital Orishas are not only an enthralling plot device. They reflect a specific process: the renegotiation of the Cuban national identity imaginary after the collapse of Real Socialism and its combo of Eurocentric positivist atheism. Mota's integration of Afro-Cuban mythology breaks the hegemony of official narratives of a nation that dreamed of overcoming its postcolonial condition and entering the developed world by way of Stalinist socialist policies, whitewashing and erasing the nation's African legacy. Mota challenges the Cuban state's official discourse because he does not forget the demographic, economic, religious, and ethical significance of Africa in Cuba, and won't allow his readers to forget it.

The gesture is emancipatory since its inception: the *Habana Undergüater* universe never attempts to justify itself. Mota not only writes about an alternative Cuba, where a third of Havana City is underwater thanks to a failed Russian attempt to defeat the force of the hurricane, but also about diverse ontologies and knowledge systems coexisting. The

Yoruba pantheon reigns supreme in the new space of power and knowledge: the internet. It is a liberating and subversive political project.

Mota also possesses a robust body of essays. While his fiction seeks to incorporate more than just national geography, his essays reflect on what it means to break with the paradigms of positivist science and Eurocentric literary categories. This second line of inquiry began twenty years ago with "Ciberpunk Childs" (*QUBIT*, 2005). It is possible to trace his gradual process of intellectual emancipation and the construction of a new literary model, befitting his individual expressive desires and his commitment to building community on a regional scale. He moves from claiming a connection to cyberpunk to successive attempts to define something new. First, as a variation: "Cyberpunk, a Deconstruction of Reality: Notes on a Possible 'Cuban Neo-Cyberpunk'" (*Istmo. Virtual Journal of Central American Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2011). Then as a mashup of Western and African epistemologies, "Ach   for you or May the Force be with You? Notes on the Crossroads of Writing Science Fiction in Cuba" (*DiALFa Hermes*, 2015). This process reaches the dimensions of a literary manifesto in "A New Afrofuturism in the Caribbean," the prologue he wrote for *Prietopunk: An Anthology of Caribbean Afrofuturism* (2022), where he establishes a complete genealogy for the prietopunk movement and distinguishes it in content and style from North American and African Afrofuturisms. Mota develops his ideas about prietopunk in a somewhat more general way, as an antiracist cultural resistance movement and a form of social speculation, in "The Caribbean We Dream Of: A Culturally Mestizo Future" (*Kamchatka*, 2023). From 2005 to 2023, Mota transitioned from questioning his place within the genre to creating a concrete definition of the specific kind of speculative fiction that he and other Afro-Caribbean authors envisioned, one that organically addresses the region's complex history of slavery, colonialism,

postcolonialism, racism and ecological crisis. In the Cuban case, this literature also engages with the collective trauma of the 1990 Socialism collapse for the Cuban idea of nationhood and collective future.

*Havana Undergüater* connects Cuban geographical and climate anxieties with those of other nations in the region, but also to the singular experience of being a former Soviet Union satellite state, shared only by countries in other continents. With this in mind, I read and wonder: How are queerness, postsocialism, and climate change entangled in a political project? How does the mere notion of a nation that can be queer and antiracist produce disalignments in relation to the hegemonic cis white heteropatriarchal official discourses and practices?

My answer: the critical deconstruction of the damn circumstance of water all around us -concrete or symbolic- is inseparable from the cultural material forms and its manifestations. Undergüater is far from a utopia, but the emancipatory core of this universe, where the gods who rise from the primordial digital fluid are dark-skinned and dream of knowing how the sea looks like, has the undeniable flavor of religious proselytism. The reversal of colonial conventional roles becomes a counter-narrative force that ends queering the Cuban nation while peeling its racist foundations.