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## ***Ajiaco, Rum and Coffee: Food and Identity in Leonardo Padura's Detective Fiction***

**Diana Battaglia**

Leonardo Padura Fuentes is one of the most acclaimed contemporary Cuban writers, particularly known for his crime fiction series published in the 1990s and 2000s and featuring the detective Mario Conde. Padura uses crime genre conventions to represent life and society in Cuba during the years immediately before and after the disappearance of the Soviet bloc. This was a difficult time for the island, which in the 1990s lost Soviet subsidies and experienced an alarming political isolation and a deep economic crisis, which forced the government to introduce an emergency plan that rationed food, energy and transport, referred to as the *Período especial en tiempos de paz*, the Special Period in time of Peace.

Padura's novels describe the social climate in this period of crisis, inscribing themselves into a long tradition of socially-committed detective fiction, which focuses on different aspects of everyday life to create a literary picture of the reality in which they have been created. The subject of this chapter is the four novels of the *Havana Quartet*: *Pasado perfecto* (1991; [*Havana Blue*, 2007]), *Viento de Cuaresma* (1994; [*Havana Gold*, 2008]), *Máscaras* (1997; [*Havana Red*, 2005]), *Paisaje de otoño* (1998; [*Havana Black*, 2006]), plus a fifth one, *La neblina del ayer* (2005; [*Havana Fever*, 2009]), which Padura wrote some years after the quartet. These novels feature the same protagonist, Mario Conde (nicknamed The Count), and follow his and his friends' lives from 1989 onwards. Conde is a disenchanted police detective who often feels uncomfortable in his institutional position. In his job and private life Conde attempts to come to terms with the difficult Cuban post-Soviet reality which is far from the egalitarian society promised by the revolutionary ideology.

In Padura's depiction of Cubanness, the description and preparation of food and meals play an important role. In fact, one of the distinctive features of these novels –similarly to

those by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and Andrea Camilleri, for example – is the use of food, its cooking and its convivial aspect as an expression of self-definition and collective cultural reflection. Thus, the relationship between food and identity, and the use of food as a symbol of the diversity and variety of Cuban identities place Padura's work in line with recent trends of international crime fiction, which is devoting increasing attention to the representation of identity.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will stress the cultural and social significance of food, eating and drinking in Padura's novels, analyzing the ways in which the writer uses food and drink to convey his views on Cuban national identity and give a voice to his generation. I will first focus on food and argue that the novels present classical dishes of the Cuban tradition in order to recover the cultural roots of Cuban identity. I will then consider the use of alcohol as a tool to reinforce the group identity of Padura's characters and recover the collective memory and experience of Padura's generation. Finally, I will link the two aspects and show how food and drink connect the specific generational experience of the author with a wider Cuban national narrative.

### **Food and Identity**

When defining cultural identity, Stuart Hall argues: "we should think of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1990, 222). Hall here highlights two main features of cultural identity: its unstable and unfinished nature and the importance of representation in the process of identity construction. Hall explains that representation includes all the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are produced in a culture (1997, 15-16). Cultural identities, then, according to Hall, are social productions constructed through representation. Food contributes actively to this process of self-definition and representation:

it is a system of representation, or a signifying practice, that allows us to create and share meaning<sup>2</sup>; the acts of cooking, eating and drinking can be interpreted as part of the construction and re-construction of a personal and national identity.

The importance of food as a cultural code and a system of signification has been clearly stated by scholars such as Barthes: ‘an entire “world” (social environment) is present and signified by food’ (2008, p. 32); or Lévi-Strauss, who also linked food practices with identity construction. According to him, eating is more than feeding oneself: to eat is to enter a system of signs and symbols that shapes one’s collective identity (1964). More recently, other scholars, such as Serena Fusco, have stressed the link between food and cultural belonging, stating that the ways groups relate to food bespeak cultural belonging and social status within a culture. ‘Identifying with a culture is stated and reinstated through daily nutrition rituals such as, for instance, the tripartition of meals in some cultures’ (2015, p. 274). Identity construction and cultural belonging are thus stated and reinstated also through food practices. To eat is, in other words, to use a shared system of signification to inscribe oneself into a cultural and national narrative and establish relationships with other members of a society. Hence, food habits and practices are part of a shared national culture and, as such, they take part in both the construction of a personal and national identity.

Benedict Anderson, when defining national belonging and nationalism, suggested we think of a nation as an ‘imagined community’ (1983, p. 6) formed around symbols and signs that are combined to create a narrative of the nation. This national narrative provides a set of stories, images, landscapes and practices, which are then told and retold in literature, media and popular culture, and which represent the shared experiences and values that give meaning to the nation. A national gastronomic tradition can easily fit into this definition of national narrative: it can be considered, in fact, as a coherent set of food products and habits, which constitutes a dominant trait of a nation or a culture and which is constantly repeated and re-

enacted in everyday life. According to Hall, as members of a nation, we perceive our lives as inscribed into this wider narrative which gives significance and importance to our existence, connecting our everyday lives with a national history that preceded us and will continue after our death (1992, p. 293).

Barthes stresses the role of food in the creation and reiteration of a national culture and a feeling of belonging to the nation. Making reference to the French case, he states that the production and consumption of meals and traditional foods establish a direct connection between our everyday life practices and the wide national past and culture:

Food permits a person [...] to partake each day of the national past. In this case, this historical quality is obviously linked to food techniques (preparation and cooking). These have long roots, reaching back to the depth of the French past. They are, we are told, the repository of a whole experience, of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors. [...] It is fair to say that through food the Frenchman experiences a certain national continuity. By way of a thousand detours, food permits him to insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in a certain culinary 'being' of France. (2008, 32)

Local products and traditional cuisine thus become symbols of national identity and elements of self-definition and perpetuation of a national historical continuum. In Cuba, the link between food and national identity has been widely discussed in classic texts that tried to define the notion of Cubanness. In *Los factores humanos de la cubanidad* (1940), the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz uses a cooking metaphor to describe the syncretic character of Cuban identity, paying homage to a typical national dish: the *ajiaco*, a local stew formed by layers of ingredients of different origins. The various ingredients represent, for Ortiz, Cuba's historical and cultural evolution, collecting in the same pot the Spanish, Indigenous, African, Asiatic, French and Anglo-American legacies. Ortiz thus locates the bases of Cuban culture

in the constant immigrations and transmigrations, and in the adoption of multiple cultural elements which speak to one another and amalgamate to give Cubanness its special 'flavor'. Through this culinary metaphor, Ortiz clearly posits cultural mixture, hybridity and *mestizaje* (both in cultural and racial terms) as key elements of Cuban identity.

These same qualities of Cubanness are located in Padura's detective fiction in many different ways. The writer stresses the plurality and diversity of Cuban identity as a way to resist a sort of cultural homogenization which, Padura feels, has been reinforced by the revolutionary government from the late 1960s on (Cárdenas Lema, 2012). Through various political acts and cultural policies in the mid-1960s, the Revolution created an institutionalized identity model: namely, the New Man, in order to propose an image of unity and stability for the revolutionary nation. This model was supposed to be a homogenizing force that would impose itself on the social and cultural heterogeneity of Cuban society. As Antón Carrillo remarks the new Cuban nation was, in theory, absorbing the different ethnic heritages and cultural elements that coexisted on the island, mixing them and dissolving their differences in order to become an integrated nation without majorities or minorities (2012, 14). These integrating and homogenizing tendencies posited unity and conformity as a fundamental component of the revolutionary nation and a necessary condition for preserving Cuban independence. However, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, the economic crisis and the debates on nation and emigration (1994-1995), the project of a strong, unified and egalitarian nation was jeopardized and with it the idea of a centralized and stereotyped model of national identity. Padura's fiction is a product of this historical period and as such it describes the unsettling effect that the crisis had in respect of identity. At the same time, it represents contemporary Cubanness as the shifting and unstable product of these socio-political changes.

Padura uses the crime genre to contribute to the ongoing Cuban debate on national identity, exploring issues of uniformity and diversity, authority and individual agency, conformity and subversion of the hegemonic discourse and the official identity canon. In this context, I read Padura's use of traditional Cuban food and drink as a conscious attempt to pluralize the definition of Cubanness and thereby allow it to accept its different forms and internal contradictions. Eating and drinking practices are used to recover a national tradition and historical legacy, to define the wide cultural bases of Cuban identity and to represent the identity crisis and cultural shift experienced by Padura's generation in the post-Soviet period.

The first and most obvious function of food and traditional cuisines is to complement the social backdrop of the story and to set the Cuban character of the novels, bringing in the elements of syncretism, *mestizaje* and hybridity which, as previously mentioned, are essential to fully understand Cuban identity. The author presents classic dishes of the Cuban tradition and provides traditional recipes that recover the cultural roots of the nation.

Among the many recipes mentioned in the novels, one dish certainly stands out:

Josefina's<sup>3</sup>*ajiac*o:

Josefina sonreía cuando empezó a revolver la mezcla – Da para diez personas, pero con cuatro como ustedes... Esto lo hacía mi abuelo, que era marinero y gallego, y según él este ajiaco es el padre de los ajiacos y le saca ventaja a la olla podrida, *alpot-pourri* francés, al *minestrone* italiano, a la cazuela chilena, al sancocho dominicano y, por supuesto, al *borsche* eslavo, que casi no cuenta en esta competencia de sopones latinos. El misterio que tiene está en la combinación del pescado con las viandas, [...] (2001,65-66) ['Josefina smiled as she started stirring her concoction. "There's enough for ten people, but with four men like you . . . My grandfather used to make this, he was a sailor from Galicia, and according to him this ajiaco is the daddy of all ajiacos and any day beats

Castilian pisto, French pot-pourri, Italian minestrone, Chilean cazuela, Dominican sancocho and, naturally, Slav borsch, that hardly merits a place in this Latin stew competition. The secret lies in the mix of fish and vegetables”” [...]. (2008, 44)]

This passage introduces a number of different themes and topics which are leitmotifs of the entire series and contribute to the representation of life and identity in post-Soviet Cuba. Josefina is the character responsible for feeding detective Mario Conde; she is presented as the repository of the Cuban gastronomic tradition: ‘La vieja Josefina, la única persona conocida por el Conde con la capacidad mágica para operar el milagro aun en tiempos de Crisis de convertir algunos de aquellos platos de ensueño en una realidad digerible’(2005,38) [‘Old Josefina, the only person the Count knew with a magical ability to conjure up miracle even in times of Crisis and convert those dream dishes into edible realities’ (2009, 25)].

Josefina’s skills are not limited to the preparation of food. Her guests often feel hypnotized and enchanted as she tells the story of the recipe: where she learned it, from whom and why she decided to make it on that specific occasion. In the case of the *ajiaco*, she inherited the recipe from her Galician grandfather; with this simple detail, Padura stresses the trans-generational transmission of knowledge, inscribes the dish within the cultural tradition of the island, makes of Josefina a bearer of this national tradition and finally refers to the Spanish legacy. In line with what Ortiz claims, she also affirms that the secret for the preparation of the perfect *ajiaco* lies in the mix of ingredients, which she defines as being ‘nobles’ (2001, 66) [‘noble’ (2008, 44)]. The old woman is claiming the richness, variety and plurality of Cuban cultural history by telling the story of the transmission of the *ajiaco* recipe in her family.



Cooking is, thus, reinterpreted in the novels as a way to preserve the richness and variety of local and traditional culture. Many traditional Cuban dishes are in danger of extinction because of the scarcity of food products; Padura seems to be suggesting that the richness of Cuban culture is threatened by the revolutionary government's attempt to create a coherent national narrative and a standardized identity model to which every Cuban should conform. In Padura's view, this attempt to eliminate opposition and tensions, to create consensus and unity, carries as a downside the risk of excluding and forgetting an important part of Cuban social history, which does not fit with the revolutionary vision (Padura, 2013). The presence of traditional recipes and dishes in the novels is used to preserve and recover elements of Cuban history and memory that have been neglected by the revolutionary ideology.

### **Food and History**

Cooking and food also become important indicators of the specific historical moment in which the stories are set, and provide important elements for understanding the social background in which the characters act. When Josefina is later asked where she finds all the ingredients, she dismisses Conde's question with a 'No seas tan policía y saca los platos, anda' (2001, 66) ['don't be such a policeman and take the dishes to the kitchen' (2008, 142)]. This is a clear reference to the shortage and rationing of goods on the island, moving the focus to the economic crisis, the US embargo and the special economic measures adopted by the Cuban government.

Throughout the novels of the *Havana Quartet*, which are set in 1989, Josefina struggles to find the right ingredients for her dishes because of the food shortage affecting the island. Despite her skills and abilities, she often admits that she had to change or omit one ingredient of the recipe, simply because she was not able to find it. After almost every meal

at Josefina's house, an astonished Conde asks where she finds the products she serves. The skilled cook generally avoids answering the question, often teasing Conde for his curiosity, which she classifies as a professional bias. However, in the last novel of the quartet, *Havana Black*, once Conde has left his job as a policeman, the old woman finally answers: '¿De verdad tú quieres saberlo, Condesito? Pues lo saco de aquí – dijo, después de una pausa, y se tocó el sentido:– de la imaginación que tengo' (1998, 243). [““You really want to know, Condesito? Well, I get it out of here,” she said after a pause and touched her temple: “out of this imagination of mine”” (2006, 144)].

Josefina's reply reflects one of the typical traits associated with Cubans in the contemporary era: their resourcefulness and ability to find creative solutions to their everyday problems. As Rita De Maeseneer affirms, from the 1990s on Cubans were struggling with economic recession and crisis, which made it all the more difficult to satisfy their basic needs. To cope with this situation they had to 'improvise' and 'invent' or re-invent themselves every day. In culinary terms, the creativity and inventive nature of the Cubans in general, and Josefina in this specific case, reside in the ability to substitute scarce products with 'Ersatz' ones whose flavor and texture are similar to the original ingredient needed (2016, 360-1). The novels briefly mention another strategy often adopted by Cubans to obtain rare goods and products: the black market. Conde seems to suspect that the succulent meals he has at Josefina's are fueled by black market products, and the old lady's reluctance to explain who provides her with hard-to-find food at first seems to confirm this suspicion. The hidden or semi-hidden presence of the black market economy in Cuba is represented by Padura in controversial terms. Due to his role as a policeman, Conde should denounce and condemn illegal trading activities. However, from a more pragmatic perspective, the protagonist is much more indulgent since he is aware that this type of economy is often the only resource Cubans have to make a living and satisfy their basic needs.

Despite the shortage and economic difficulties, the detective eats and drinks copiously. Almost every week after finishing work, Conde goes to Josefina's house to tell his best friend Carlos, Josefina's son, about his investigations and the case he is solving at the moment. Conde's summary of his working day is always accompanied by a big dinner and a huge quantity of alcohol. These lavish meals could seem out of place in the historical setting of post-Soviet Cuba where everyday life was characterized by the lack of basic goods and services. Scholars have proposed different explanation for this phenomenon: García defines Josefina's lavish meals as simply impossible and classifies them as fantastic elements which provide a form of escapism from the daily limitation of Cuban life (2016, 482). De Maeseneer suggests that the frequent descriptions of banquets and the detective's ability to ingest huge quantities of food and drink have a critical function. For her, Padura uses exaggeration and paradox to expose, by opposition, the difficulties of daily life in Cuba (2016, 363). Nonetheless, it is important to note that while it is true that descriptions of meals and banquets are frequent in the novels, there are also many references to hunger and food shortages, as in the following passage: 'Llevabamos una semana a arroz con frijoles – recordó Carlos,– y no comíamos carne desde la última novena de pollo, que tocó hace..., ¿fue en el siglo pasado, vieja?' (2005, 128) [““We’ve been on rice and beans for a week,” recalled Carlos, “and we’ve not had any meat since our last ration of one ninth of a chicken ... which was, in the last century, right, mum?”” (2009, 80-81)].

It can be argued, then, that the representation of food in Padura's novels is always polarized and extreme. Images of abundance are juxtaposed to descriptions of deprivation and hunger. These sharp contrasts are not used to launch a frontal attack on the Cuban political system, but rather to expose, through realistic descriptions or by exaggeration and parody, the consequences of the economic crisis that hit Cuba in the 1990s. In De Maeseneer's words, the 'gastrocrítica' regarding hunger in the Special Period is more than

simple ‘Castrocrítica’, it is a reflection on the development and economic downfall of the revolutionary project, due to unexpected historical events (2016,363). Food, in its abundance or lack, is used as a means to expose the consequences that the economic crisis had on the Cuban way of life and, at the same time, to recover the gastronomical and identity roots of Cuba in order to preserve them from oblivion.

### **Alcohol, memory and identity in the Special Period**

Cooking, eating and drinking are also connected to the representation of the detective’s identity and of his generation that is embodied by Conde and his group of friends. Padura and Conde belong to the same generation, which as a consequence of the economic crisis in the post-Soviet period, faced a deep identity crisis and a feeling of frustration and disillusionment. Conde was born in the 1950s, grew up under the revolutionary system during the 1960s and 1970s, and experienced at first hand the social changes of that period. He was an active participant in the revolutionary project for the construction of a better Cuban society. However, during the late 1980s and 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing terrible economic crisis prevented Conde from achieving his personal realization. The lack of possibilities for self-improvement and the impossibility of fulfilling his dreams and ambitions led to a feeling of frustration and a sharp disenchantment. The same disillusioned mood is shared in the novels by Conde’s friends and is presented as the hallmark of a generation.

Conde shares some of the stereotypical features of the classical hard-boiled detective: he is a “lone wolf” living alone in a house in the centre of a popular area of Havana. His room is always a mess and his fridge is always empty, precisely to underline the lonely life-style of the detective:

Abrió el refrigerador y descubrió la dramática soledad de dos huevos posiblemente prehistóricos y un pedazo de pan que bien pudo haber asistido al sitio de Stalingrado. En una manteca con sabor heterodoxo de fritadas excluyentes dejó caer los dos huevos, mientras con la punta del tenedor tostaba sobre la llama las dos rebanadas que logró arrancarle al corazón de acero del pan. Puro realismo socialista, se dijo. (2001, 148) [‘He opened the fridge and eyed the dramatic loneliness of two possibly prehistoric eggs and a piece of bread that could easily be a survivor from the siege of Stalingrad. He dropped the two eggs in heterodox[sic] fat tasting of mutually hostile fry-ups, toasted the two slices of bread on a flame that managed to melt their heart of steel on the end of his fork. A hundred per cent socialist realism, he told himself’. (2008, 84)]

From this passage it is clear that there is a sharp contrast between Josefina’s fascinating descriptions of food preparation and Conde’s cooking skills and practice. Once more Josefina represents the richness and variety of Cuba’s past traditions, while Conde’s empty fridge can be read as a metaphor for the deprivations and lack of choices experienced by the character in the post-Soviet era. The eating habits of this character are often disorganized and unhealthy: when Conde is not eating at Josefina’s, he is often not eating at all; throughout the series he suffers from hunger, lack of nourishment and weight loss. Coffee and alcohol are constants in his diet. Following the genre conventions and similarly to other famous detectives (Auguste Dupin, Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe), Conde is described as a heavy drinker and heavy smoker. His eating and drinking habits are often used to underline the downside of his profession:

Bebió el café, a pequeños sorbos, y trató de imaginar cómo haría para levantarse de la cama con el amanecer. Nadie sabe cómo son las noches de un policía, pensó, presintiendo que le faltarían fuerzas para empezar de nuevo algo que ya no guardaba

ningún viso de novedad. Lamentó, como siempre, no tener alguna provisión de alcohol en la casa, pero nunca había resistido el monólogo frustrante del bebedor solitario. Para beber, como para amar, era imprescindible una buena compañía, se dijo, a pesar de su recurrencia al onanismo. (2001, 224) [‘He sipped his coffee slowly, and tried to imagine how he’d get out of bed at dawn. Nobody knows what the nights of a policeman are like, he thought, anticipating he wouldn’t have the strength to re-visit something that had lost all its novelty. As always, he regretted not having a supply of alcohol at home, but he’d never warmed to the frustrating monologue of the solitary drinker. In drink, as in love, you needed good company, he told himself, despite his onanist inclinations’. (2008, 141)]

Even though Conde barely cooks at home, he nevertheless greatly enjoys food, drinking and the social aspect associated with them. He is not a lonely eater, but always shares his meals and considers the convivial aspects an essential part of the eating experience. When in *Havana Fever* the detective receives a large sum of money, he cannot think of a better way to spend it than on inviting all his friends out for a big meal in a family-run restaurant (2009, 80-81). Food is a shared code of communication between friends, used to show love and affection for one another. Josefina’s feasts for her son and his friends demonstrate the importance of celebratory meals in Cuba and reinterpret eating as a group ritual which creates affective and social bonds. Josefina embodies the resourceful and creative Cuban mother who provides satisfactory food and nourishment for all her ‘children’, as a compensation for the lack of self-fulfillment that Carlos and his friends experience in everyday life. Throughout the series Conde repeats that he feels more love and affection towards Josefina than towards his own mother. Thus, the act of cooking for Conde transforms Josefina into a kind of second mother and reinforces the strong connection Conde has with his best friend Carlos: ‘El Conde la admiraba y la quería, a veces de un modo más tangible que a su propia madre, con la que

nunca había tenido ni la identificación ni la confianza que le inspiraba la madre del Flaco Carlos, que ya no era flaco' (2000, 31) ['The Count admired and loved her, sometimes much more tangibly than his own mother, with whom he'd never identified or trusted [sic] as he'd trusted the mother of Skinny Carlos who was no longer skinny' (2007, 26)].

Food thus allows Padura to represent emotional bonds between his characters and to trace the profile of a specific generation of Cubans born just before the Revolution and educated in the revolutionary ideology. Carlos's house is the place where the group of old friends gathers for dinners and reunions. The dinner is always a pretext for recovering the collective memory of their generation, for evaluating their present condition, and for shaping and reinforcing their group identity.

In these reunions an important role is played by alcohol, mainly rum, the quintessential national drink in Cuba. Alcohol plays a double role: it can have either a destructive or an 'analytical' function. The destructive function of alcohol is clear in the many drunken nights shared by Conde and Carlos. The two friends use alcohol to forget their problems and to cope with the dissatisfaction of their daily life. Drinking is an escape mechanism, but at the same time, it is a conscious practice of self destruction, as Josefina observes:

Los dos, sin camisa, cada uno con su vaso en la mano. Su hijo, inclinado sobre un brazo del sillón de ruedas, con todas sus masas desbordadas y húmedas, y el Conde, sentado en el piso, con la espalda recostada a la cama, sufriendo los últimos estertores de un ataque de tos. En el suelo, un cenicero humeante como un volcán y los cadáveres de dos botellas y el epílogo de otra.

– Se están matando – dijo la mujer y recogió la botella de aguardiente. (2001,195)  
['The two were shirtless, and gripping their glasses tight. Her son, slumped over the arm of his wheelchair, his flabby flesh streaming with sweat. And the Count,

sitting on the floor, back against the bed, suffering the last rattle from a coughing attack. On the ground, an ashtray steaming like a volcano and the corpses of two bottles and the epilogue to another. “You’re killing yourselves”, she said, picking up the bottle of firewater’. (2008, 123)]

The expectations, dreams and ambitions of these two school friends disappeared in the 1990s, together with the Berlin wall and the Soviet bloc, leaving the characters to face a deep identity crisis and an existential void. Unable to cope with their disillusionment the two friends try to find comfort in each other’s company and in huge doses of alcohol. Food and drink provide a means to cope with the difficult and impoverished Cuban reality in the post-Soviet era.

The second function of alcohol is to provide an opportunity to recover a shared generational memory and reinterpret the recent socio-political changes through a generational perspective. When drunk, the characters usually experience a moment of lucidity, which allows them to interpret and analyze their personal and generational history. For instance:

Desde el primer trago la experiencia ética del Conde le había advertido que aquella mezcla de ron, con amigos y viejas canciones de los Beatles, podía ser explosiva. La cena ideal que le había servido Josefina preparó los estómagos para admitir cantidades mayores de bebidas y las botellas se fueron vaciando a velocidades peligrosas. (1998, 243) [‘From the first swig the Count’s experience of drinking had warned him that this mixture of rum, friends and old Beatles songs might be explosive. The special dinner served up by Josefina had prepared their stomachs to accept a larger intake of alcohol and bottles were emptying at a dangerous rate’. (2006, 144)]

The friends’ bonding over food and alcohol often ends in a kind of collective confession of hidden frustrations and regrets. Rather than a form of escapism, alcohol seems



to have the opposite effect: it brings back memories and triggers critical reflection. Within Conde's personal sphere, among his generational peers, there is a character named Andrés who, from the second book of the series on, stubbornly expresses a generational dissatisfaction and a critical and pessimistic view of the Cuban revolutionary system:

Primero nos mandaron los padres, para que fuéramos buenos estudiantes y buenas personas. Después nos mandaron en la escuela, también para que fuéramos muy buenos, y nos mandaron a trabajar después, porque ya todos éramos buenos y podían mandarnos a trabajar donde quisieran mandarnos a trabajar. Pero a nadie se le ocurrió nunca preguntarnos qué queríamos hacer.[...] Por eso somos la mierda que somos, que ya no tenemos ni sueños y si acaso servimos para hacer lo que nos mandan...(1998, 23-24) ['First, our fathers gave us orders, to be good students and citizens. We were ordered around at school, also to make us be good, and then we were ordered to work where they wanted us to work. But nobody ever thought to ask us what we wanted. [...]. That's why we are a pile of shit, because we don't dream, we just exist to carry out our orders...' (2006, 18-19)]

Andrés regrets the impossibility of making his own decisions and his own mistakes. He attributes the responsibility for his present dissatisfaction to coercive education and the rigid state control of the 1970s. Carlos tries to tone down Andrés's criticism, but receives a harsh answer and an impious description of his physical and psychological condition:

Oye, Andrés, así tampoco – trató de salvar algo el flaco Carlos, mientras se servía más ron.

– Así tampoco ¿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? [...] Nos enseñaron a decir siempre que sí, que sí, que sí.

(1998, 24) [““Hey now, Andrés, don’t exaggerate,” said Skinny Carlos, trying to salvage a crumb of comfort, as he poured himself more rum.

“What do you mean ‘don’t exaggerate’? Weren’t you ordered to the war in Angola? Wasn’t your life fucked up and you stuck in that shitty chair because you were a good little boy who always said yes? [...] They always taught us to say yes, yes, yes”’. (2006, 17-18)]

Carlos is a war veteran; he was with the Cuban troops sent to the Angolan war, and was wounded in his first conflict and condemned to live the rest of his life in a wheelchair. His physical appearance and his relation to food and weight changed: he was a tall and skinny boy before, but as a consequence of his now sedentary life, he has become obese. Symbolically, the light-heartedness of Skinny Carlos is now overwhelmed by the weight of his body. Carlos represents a generation that took over the responsibility for promoting progress and wellbeing in Cuba, and then suffered the consequences of the Soviet collapse. Significantly, however, despite the change in his physical condition, everybody insists on using his old nickname, Skinny. This expresses a stubborn generational refusal to forget adolescent dreams and the need to remain anchored to their roots, in order to fight the existential void of the present.

Padura recognizes the importance of the Cuban intervention in maintaining Angola’s independence. However, he affirms that both physical and psychological traumas affected those who lived through the conflict. Carlos physically represents the generational trauma, the ‘mutilation’ of the generational dream and the changed psychological condition of his peers. Conde’s and Carlos’s generation has seen some of the dreams of the revolution collapse; they have lost their faith in the authorities and in the revolutionary project. They feel deceived and coerced, because, despite having done everything they were asked to do, none of them has managed to fulfill his aspirations. They believe their generation was condemned to failure

because of historico-political events beyond their control. This horrible sensation of impotence and pre-destination ultimately pushes Andrés to decide to leave Cuba. During one of the usual friends' reunions at Carlos's, always accompanied by a huge quantity of rum, Andrés informs his friends of his decision to go into exile:

Más ron, más ron – clamó entonces el Flaco, desde su silla de ruedas y después de servirse, preguntó – ¿Y qué coño hacemos ahora?

Seguir bebiendo – propuso el Conde,–

No, mejor yo voy a hacerles un cuento, otro cuento – afirmó Andrés desde su silla, pero con tal convicción en su voz que los demás hicieron silencio por un instante [...] quiero irme de Cuba.[...] La confesión de Andrés cortó los efectos del alcohol en el cerebro del Conde. Una lucidez malsana se instaló en su mente, con una interrogación sobre su propia vida. (1998, 246-251) [“More rum, more rum”, Skinny shouted from his wheelchair, and after helping himself, he asked: “And what the fuck are we going to do now?”

“Carry on drinking,” posited the Count.

“No, better that I tell you a story, another story,” interjected Andrés from his chair, with such conviction in his voice that the others fell silent for a moment, [...] ‘I wanted to leave Cuba ...’[...] Andrés’s confession killed off the impact of alcohol on the Count’s brain. An unhealthy lucidity spread through his mind, placing a question mark over his own life’. (2006, 148)]

As is made explicit by Andrés, the possibilities for self-realization for these characters have been irreversibly compromised. Unable to cope with the contradictions and complications of everyday life in post-Soviet Cuba, this generation experiences a profound feeling of alienation, and seeks refuge in shared memories and lost illusions. Alcohol is used to escape reality and trigger the remembering process. The recollection of memories, which

at the beginning can be positive and pleasant, always ends in a critical comparison between their idealistic, forward-looking past and the dissatisfying present. Despite the characters' attempts to use it as a gateway to oblivion, rum does not obliterate the past, but rather brings the memories back to confront the present. Alcohol is strongly connected to generational memory and to the critical re-examination of the Cuban revolutionary past from a generational perspective. In other words, through the eating and drinking practices of his characters, Padura connects the specific identity crisis experienced by his generation in the 1990s and 2000s with a wider crisis of the original revolutionary identity and societal model, which lost its *raison d'être* in the changed post-Soviet Cuban scenario.

## **Conclusion**

As shown in this chapter, eating and drinking in Padura's novels are important identity, cultural and social markers. They are a way to recover the richness and variety of national identity as well as to participate in an old national tradition. At the same time, they are a code shared by members of the same generation, used to testify to the specificity of their common experience. Finally, as part of a reverse mechanism, eating and drinking habits are used to expose the faults and problems of the Cuban post-Soviet system. We may conclude that the representation of food and drink is used by Padura to reflect upon the complex relationship between the different ideas about national identity and historical experiences that coexist today in Cuba.

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<sup>1</sup>As evidenced for instance by the volume edited by Krajenbrink and Quinn, 2009. *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, Amsterdam, Netherlands, and New York: Rodopi.

<sup>2</sup> For the importance of food as a cultural code, and a system of signification, see Barthes (2008), Lévi-Strauss (1964), Fusco (2015), and Anderson (1983), among others.

<sup>3</sup> Josefina or Jose is the mother of Conde's best friend *el Flaco* Carlos. She represents at the same time the cook and the mother for Carlos, Conde and their friends.