

# Echos of a Past that Refuses to Die: A Conversation with Daína Chaviano

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(Translated by Manuel Fernández)

Daína Chaviano was born in Havana, Cuba, and graduated with a degree in Languages and Literature from the University of Havana. She achieved her first literary success in Cuba when she won the David Prize for Science Fiction for her short story collection *Los mundos que amo*, which had been written when she was a teenager. Later, she founded the first literary workshop on science fiction in Latin America and published the short story collections *Amoroso planeta* (1983) and *El abrevadero de los dinosaurios* (1990), the three novellas included in *Historias de hadas para adultos* (1986) and the novel *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* (1988).

Since her departure from Cuba in 1991, Chaviano has published the poetry collection *Confesiones eróticas y otros hechizos* (1994) and the collection of stories for young adults *País de dragones* (1997), for which she won the National Prize for Literature for Children and Young Adults “La Edad de Oro” but the publication of which in Cuba was cancelled due to her leaving the country. Outside of Cuba Chaviano has published the novels which constitute the “Occult Havana” cycle: *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* (1998), *Casa de juegos* (1999), *Gata encerrada* (2001) and *La isla de amores infinitos* (2006). In these novels, Chaviano combines the fantasy elements which have characterized her work throughout her artistic career with a historical preoccupation, delving philosophically into the past, the present and the future of Cuba.

Aside from her literary production, Chaviano has been—among other things—a film script writer, host of a TV show, translator, producer and reporter for Miami’s *El Nuevo Herald*.



**MF and MT:** *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre is the first novel published of a cycle of novels later known by the name “Occult Havana.” Did you intend to write a series of novels when you began to write El hombre, la hembra y el hambre?*

**DC:** I should begin by saying that although *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* (HHH) was the first novel of the series to be published, it was the third to be written. *Gata encerrada* was the first to be written and *Casa de juegos* the second.

The idea for the series was present from the beginning. For that reason, characters from one story cross with characters from the other stories. For example, Onolorio, the misogynist ghost that follows Claudia in *HHH*, has his story in *La isla de los amores infinitos*. Another example: the protagonists from the first three novels (Melisa, from *Gata encerrada*, Gaia, from *Casa de juegos*, and Claudia, from *HHH*) appear as characters in *La isla...* If anyone wishes to know the reasons for their enigmatic behavior in that novel, they can go to the novels in which they are the protagonist. More examples: in *Casa de juegos*, Gaia comes across Melisa, the protagonist of *Gata encerrada*, close to the University of Havana; Muba, the spirit of the black slave woman who protects Clausia (*HHH*), had already presented herself to Melissa (*Gata encerrada*) to give her a warning: the death of an important character in *Gata encerrada* is also mentioned in *La isla...* There are many other examples. The series was conceived as a universe whose worlds constantly interrelate.

**MF and MT:** *Elements of different beliefs and religions are incorporated into all the novels of the cycle. In “Auto da fe,” from El abrevadero de los dinosaurios, the existence of God is presented as perhaps ultimately unknowable. How would you describe your spiritual beliefs today? Have they changed over time since you wrote your first works?*

**DC:** I was a pantheistic girl, after the ancient Greeks. I believed each object had its own god keeping watch over it. I adored the Gods of Olympus, to whom I made offerings from things I found in nature (flowers, sedes, leaves, shells and the like). But I came from an atheist environment and country. Therefore when I began school, the Greek gods returned to their sacred mountain and, little by little, I became a youth without a clearly defined belief. During that phase I sought the “marvelous” in telepathy, clairvoyance, and similar things. Later I had some paranormal activities that contributed to distancing me from the materialist visión





of the universo that they taught you in school. When I wrote the story “Auto da fe,” I had already left behind my doubts about the existence of God, but I could not speak about that openly. Consequently the story is a game I tried to establish with the reader and with the censorship. A type of: “What do you think? Do I believe or not?” Keep in mind that the story is a conversation between a human journalist and one of those dinosaurs –as those who have read the book already know—are very slippery creatures that frequently mock biases, preconceived ideas and human “programming.”

My present day convictions are a result of my own experiences. Even though I believe in God, I don’t believe in a Hell or in a *post-mortem* Paradise. I believe reincarnation exists, and can answer the eternal question posed by many religious people: Why did God allow for this to happen to such a good person? God neither allows nor prevents anything. The spirit, same as the rest of the universe, evolves. And each one of our lives is an learning process. Each death, each suffering, each illness, are part of that learning process. And sometimes, as I explain in *Gata encerrada*, they are the culmination of a plan which we bring to each life. Our decisions are part of the process. Karma is one of the laws that govern that process of reincarnation. The present day neo-celts, known as *wiccans*, warn: “All the good or evil you do will be returned to you in triplicate”. I suspect they are right. But, since the topic is so vast, perhaps it’s best to look at *Gata encerrada*, the novel which best reflects my vision of the spiritual world.

**MF and MT:** *Your first writings were in fantasy and science fiction, and your novels tend to have fictional characters as protagonists, but real life people are also included. The most obvious example would be Rita Montaner in La isla de amores infinitos. In the novels written after you had left Cuba one can also identify a greater emphasis on real historical events. In what way did the incorporation of real people and events affect your way of writing?*

**DC:** In a certain way, this entry into the real and the historical has forced me to be more succinct with language. It’s also affected my descriptions, which need to be more precise and less given to daydreams. When I finish the novel I’m working on right now, I plan to return to writing fantasy. I believe only then will I know if my narrative style has changed definitively or if it was just a temporary adjustment due to the the themes I was writing dealing with.



**MF and MT:** *In El hombre, la hembra y el hambre one comes across versions of history, jokes and rumors about Cuba frequently heard in any part of Cuban Miami which for a recently arrived Cuban woman in the early nineties had to have been a bit shocking. What was your reaction when you arrived in Miami and came across experiences and perspectives so different from what you had lived and learned about in Cuba?*

**DC:** The rumors and jokes which appear in *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*—a novel the plot of which occurs completely in Cuba—come from Cuba, not from Miami. All that appears there is part of my generation's Cuban experience during the *Período Especial* (1992-94). Although I left Cuba in 1991, my memory was fresh and my personal experiences were not that different from those of the rest of the population that remained there. At any rate, while I was writing it, I requested from Cuba much up to date information ranging from theses to jokes told on the streets which helped me to fill some gaps. However, the majority of the experiences evoked in the novel are part of what I lived while I lived in Cuba.

On the other hand, what I learned about what it means to be Cuban in Miami was not shocking, in the negative sense of the word. In some cases, there were pleasing experiences of *déjà vu*. Many times, when I tried for the first time a certain type of food which I had never seen in Cuba, I recognized the taste, but that “memory” had to come from some genetic memory because I had never tried anything like that. It produced an almost ecstatic joy in me to come into contact with something unexpected which, in some way, my genes already knew.

At any rate, even though the first three novels of the series arise from my experience in Havana, if I had not arrived in Miami I would never have been able to write them. From my esoteric studies to the taste of fruits and the reconstruction of architectural monuments of Havana, the amount of information which I was able to recuperate or obtain about my country in Miami is something I would never have been able to achieve living on the island.

**MF and MT:** *Throughout the “Occult Havana” cycle, but mainly in El hombre, la hembra y el hambre, there is an evident preoccupation with history, specifically with the idea that the Cuban people have had a large part of Cuban history hidden from them. The fact that the novel includes an acknowledgement to Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals makes us think of two of his texts in particular, “La historia como arma” and Cuba/España, España/Cuba: Historia común, which also speak of how Cuban history has been kept hidden—bo the*





*years after Castro came to power—and the need to rescue the true history for the future. Could you speak to us a bit about Moreno Friginals' influence on you as a female Cuban autor of your generation, on the "Occult Havana" cycle, and on El hombre, la hembra y el hambre in particular?*

**DC:** Moreno Friginals was part of my family. At that time, his older son was married to my sister. Remember that in Cuba sons live with their parent, even when they're married, due to the housing shortage. What's more, our families lived on the same street, almost across from each other. We only needed to cross from one sidewalk to another to visit each other.

Moreno was a fabulous talker. He would frequently sit to talk with my parents on the front porch of my house. Those conversations between a historian, an economist (my father) and a psychologist (my mother) were experiences that I didn't dare miss. In that way I had the incomparable pleasure of hearing "private" conferences about Cuban history, in the rocking chairs of our front porch in Havana, from one of the greatest historians in our island's history. And this happened two or three times a week. Even in the midst of the most banal conversation, Moreno would insert comments and anecdotes which slowly changed my view of the history that I had learned in school. Later I began to work my way into some of his clases to hear him "gusanear", as we young people who would go to hear those speeches full of heresies because they contradicted everything which the oficial history affirmed. Without a doubt, Moreno was one of the few professors whose clases were assisted by students who were not taking clases with him. The classroom was full of young people, students or not, that were curious to hear him say those provoking lecture.

That's why, when I began to read his books, my ideas about Cuban history had already changed. Those family discussions and his subversive conferences had made me see Cuban reality from another perspective. Because of that I included him in the acknowledgements of my third novel. His influence on the way in which I look at events is something which will follow me always.

**MF and MT:** *Anaïs Nin figures in a certain way as an important character in Gata encerrada, and eroticism is present in a number of your novels. In which way was the work of Anaïs Nin influential in your development as a writer?*

**DC:** I discovered Anaïs when I was about 20 years old. The power of her prose produce dan enormous impact, but her reflexions impressed me even more. Many



of the ideas I found in her diaries were exact replicas of what I thought at that time. Her tastes and interests coincided in an almost scary fashion with my own. I later discovered that we had both been born under the same zodiac sign (Piscis) and under the same rising sign (Libra), which could explain—at least in astrological terms—the number of details in common to both, from the passion for psychology to our attraction for shawls, hindu skirts and gypsy style dresses, in times and surroundings in which such clothing was not in fashion... Be that as it may, I became obsessed with her. I was certain that her spirit was watching over me. I felt that it observed what I was doing... That impression gave rise to *Gata encerrada*.

Anaïs was also fascinated with the erotic as a means of psychological exploration. Unlike other authors, both male and female, who use *erotica vulgaris* for personal expression—often to scandalize others like them—, she resorted to Eros as a psychoanalytic mechanism, without a doubt influenced by her lover Otto Rank, one of Freud's principal colleagues. When I came to know Anaïs' work, Freud was already one of the great influences in my life. Thanks to my mother's library I had read his *Complete Works* various times as an adolescent. The link between the erotic and the psychological, which later expanded to the spiritual element, had also been my way of approaching the topic. So Anaïs' observations in her *Diaries* were a perfect echo of my own analyses. It shouldn't strike one as strange then that, when I set out to write this series, Anaïs' influence was of such a magnitude that the first novel wound up as a sort of *homage* to the defunct writer and a psychological portrait of her ghost, as I perceived it from my own experience in Havana, where the erotic and the spiritual went hand in hand.

**MF and MT:** *Casa de juegos is undoubtedly an erotic novel. However, along with that eroticism one can also find the idea of free love as a point of departure for a rather wrenching philosophical discussion about liberty and the need to survive in the Cuban context. How do you see that connection between sex, liberty and the need for survival in Casa de juegos and/or the other novels of the cycle?*

**DC:** *Casa de juegos is a novel about survival. That's why it's such a wrenching and even terrifying work in its treatment of eroticism. In the novel—as happened to a whole generation—Eros becomes a tool for survival, if not physically, at least emotionally. And since the setting which engenders such a defense mechanism is terrible, so is the Eros which results from it. One is the consequence of the other. I suspect that, despite its brevity and apparent structural simplicity, Casa de juegos is, probably, the most difficult novel of the series to analyze. I think it would serve*





for a dissertation in psychology or psychiatry: that's how traumatic the experience of living within a system that tried to control even most intimate moments of its citizens' lives has been for that generation.

The link between sex, liberety and survival is, without a doubt, one of the central themes of the series; but it's not the only one. It's present in the first three novels, in different ways, but it's not in the fourth novel. And it also will not be present in the fifth, because that experience has been a learning process—in the karmic sense of the term—, and when one goes through a level one needs to pass to the next if one does not wish to be condemned, like Sysyphus, to repeat a journey which will never allow one to see the other side of the mountain.

**MF and MT:** *That discussion about liberty in Casa de juegos also contains erotic, at time harrowing, scenes through which the reader is forced to accept the abject. Is this type of encounter with the abject necessary to achieve an effective change in Cuban society? Is it posible to create a new Cuban society without such a challenge to revolutionary morality by those who have been formed within that morality?*

**DC:** The abject forms part of Cuban society. As a result, erradicating it requires that it be confronted and analyzed openly. *Casa de juegos* reflects the chaos and the *modus operandi* of a sick society and of a generation that found only one weapon for survival which, at the same time, allowed it to at least partly keep its sanity in the midst of an alienating regime. I suspect my generation did nothing more than use the system's own tools to mock their custodians. Remember that at that time (the eighties and nineties) we were completely isolated. Internet access did not exist, there were no cell phones, no Twitter, no Facebook...

Each generation has found its own way to come out alive or sane from the Kafkian prison in which we were born. The rebellion of that generation was clandestine, and in many cases not conscious. Even though many young people today keep trying to escape by means that go from introspection to self-destruction, others have found different and more efficient means through which to confront the system. But, whatever means it may be done by, that "amorality" will have to be questioned if we wish to understand what was done to us and how we were damaged, psychologically speaking. To use Freudian terminology, Cuban society will have to undergo a thorough psychoanalysis, doubtlessly very painful, if it wishes to leave behind its old vices and defects, the same ones which have led our nation to its present state.



**MF and MT:** *The protagonists of your novels tend to be women, which could lead one to conclude that your work as a whole has a feminist focus. They are also, however, violated and, in the particular case of Casa de juegos, one gets the impression that the protagonist is a sexual object (among other things). Do you consider your work—we're thinking mainly of the "Occult Havana" cycle and its protagonists—can be classified as feminist?*

**DC:** I don't think the presence of a female protagonist allows a novel to be classified as feminist. In all honesty, I don't much like the concept of feminist, which at times strikes as a kind of reverse "machismo." My characters are voices through which a story is told.

*Casa de juegos* specifically is the only one of my novels which can be classified as erotic. And it's told from a feminine perspective. But beyond that, it's a story that deals with the trauma of a generation that was—and perhaps this is not merely a metaphor—repeatedly violated by a system. This is one of the origins of the multiple physical violations which appear in the novel. But it's a sado-masochistic game. There's a rare morbidity in the relationship which many Cubans of the new generations have with the system from which they have run away. Allow me to give you an example which may appear trivial, but which reveals that love-hate relationship. When they lived in Cuba, many complained about the famous Russian cartoons which they'd put on TV. After twenty or thirty years, hundreds of exiled Cubans yearn for those short films. They've even created a blog called "Russican Cartoons" ("Muñequitos rusos") in which they exchange memories and long for—in my opinion in a rather masochistic fashion—those cartoons. A similar thing has happened with many other things which were hated while we lived on the island, but which now many remember with a sickly nostalgia, as if it were a type of cultural "Stockholm Syndrome."

In a certain way, that's the relationship which the protagonist of *Casa de juegos* establishes with her surroundings and the tenants of that mansion. There's a relationship of pain-pleasure in those experiences that are truly an apprenticeship. In that sense, the novel makes reference to the so-called Greek and Egyptian mysteries of antiquity, in which the initiate passed through terrifying tests before emerging as a different creature, more in control of their own destiny. So, then, those sado-masochistic *mises en scène* which occur as part of the plot are due to neither a feminist nor a mysoginist factor. They are simply the psychological reflection of the traumas lived by a generation.





**MF and MT:** *You also are part of that Cuban society and of that generation. Is that same deep psychoanalysis what you attempt to do in the “Occult Havana” series a type of exorcism of, to paraphrase Marx, the spectres that haunt and affect present day Cuba and its many communities outside the island? Are the ghosts in the “Occult Havana” series a call to conscience about the present for that and for all the Cuban generations alive today?*

**DC:** The ghosts that appear in the “Occult Havana” cycle are reminders of what we were. They are echoes of a past that refuses to die. Without meaning to, each one resists that amnesia which could weigh us down as a nation and as individuals. The quote from Milán Kundera at the beginning of *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* is not in vain:

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.

The preceding exergue is vital to understand one of the pillars of the series: to struggle with forgetfulness and the distortion of our History, bringing to light the psychological mechanisms which have ruined Cuba’s national identity in an almost irreversible manner.

**MF and MT:** *What is your next project?*

**DC:** I don’t like to speak of what I’m writing because, if I do so, I lose the desire to tell the story. I will say only that it may be the fifth novel in the “Occult Havana” series, although I’m not even sure of that because I’ve not yet seen any of the characters from the previous novels make an appearance: that’s a fundamental requirement of the series. The plot itself will tell me if that should happen or not. Certain things, in literatura, continue being a mystery.

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