

Baseball and Cuban National Identity in Leonardo Padura's Havana Quartet¹

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Abstract: The focus of this essay is on four novels written by Leonardo Padura Fuentes and published between 1991 and 1998 in Spanish and between 2005 and 2008 in English. Through an analysis of these works which are collectively known as the Havana Quartet, the essay expands upon three basic premises — the third of which is considerably less controversial than the other two. They are, first, that the concept of national sports offers a useful lens through which to examine national identity; second, that works of fiction can be useful data sources for sociological research on the relationship between sport and national identity; and, third, that baseball is the national sport of Cuba. Having outlined the theoretical bases upon which these premises are made, the essay proceeds to examine the ways in which Padura uses his central character, Havana policeman Mario Conde, and his friends to explore the place of baseball in Cuban society. Important in this regard are the use of simile, the significance of nostalgia and memories of playing and watching baseball. The essay ultimately addresses Padura's regular, yet apparently ephemeral, treatment of baseball in the Havana Quartet that serves to flag the game as exemplifying what is meant by the concepts of banal nationalism and the nationalism of everyday life.

Key words: Cuba, baseball, fiction, Padura, banal nationalism.

Resumen: Este artículo se ocupa de cuatro novelas escritas por Leonardo Padura publicadas entre 1991 y 1998 en español y entre 2005 y 2008 en inglés. El análisis de estas obras, conocidas en su conjunto como el Cuarteto de la Habana, parte de tres premisas fundamentales —de las que la tercera es la menos controvertida—, a saber: En primer lugar, que el concepto de deporte nacional ofrece una perspectiva útil para examinar la identidad nacional; en segundo lugar, que las obras de ficción pueden ser fuentes de datos útiles para la investigación sociológica sobre la relación entre el deporte y la identidad nacional; y, en tercer lugar, que el béisbol es el deporte nacional de Cuba. Después de esbozar las bases teóricas sobre las que se sustentan tales premisas, se pasa a examinar el modo como Padura se sirve de su personaje principal, el policía de la Habana Mario Conde, y sus amigos, para indagar el lugar que ocupa el béisbol en la sociedad cubana. Importante es a este respecto el empleo de

¹ The editions of the four novels which are examined in this article. They are referenced in the article according to the colour in each title.

símiles, el significado de la nostalgia y los recuerdos referidos al hecho de jugar y ver béisbol. Por último, el trabajo se ocupa del tratamiento que hace Padura del béisbol en el Cuarteto de la Habana —tratamiento regular, pero efímero—, que sirve para emplear el juego como ejemplo de lo que significan los conceptos de nacionalismo banal y de nacionalismo cotidiano.

Palabras clave: Cuba, béisbol, ficción, Padura, nacionalismo banal.

Introduction

There were boys of various ages, between twelve and sixteen of every colour and shape, and Conde thought how, if someone had stopped on that same corner, in that same district, twenty years ago, on hearing similar outcry, he'd have seen exactly what he could see now, boys of very colour and shape, except the guy celebrating or arguing most would have been him, the young Conde, grandson of Rufino Conde, or the Count as he was known to everyone (Padura, *Havana Red* 2).

Leonardo Padura Fuentes has been described as “one of Latin America’s foremost contemporary detective writers” (Zamora and Gélinas 1). As this essay shall argue, Padura is rather more than just a detective writer. However, it is certainly the case that his reputation “revolves around his series of novels dealing with the exploits of Mario Conde” (Kirk 1). Conde is a policeman who neither looks nor feels like a policeman and who constantly reveals to the reader his own concerns and frailties. Nostalgia is an ever present feature of the four novels which are collectively known as the Havana Quartet which provide the primary data upon which this essay draws.

The paper expands upon three basic premises — the third of which is considerably less controversial than the other two. They are: first, that the concept of national sports offers a useful lens through which to examine national identity; second, that works of fiction can be useful data sources for sociological research on the relationship between sport and national identity; and, third, that baseball is the national sport of Cuba. Each of these premises will be discussed prior to an examination of the place of baseball in the crime novels of Leonardo Padura Fuentes which, it will be argued, highlights the value of the concept of banal nationalism for an understanding of the significance of Cuba’s national sport and of the role of national sports more generally.

National Sports

A discussion of the concept of national sports has particular value for the study of nationalism more generally inasmuch as it necessitates some reference to the main debates in this area (Morgan; Goksøyr; Bairner, “Conservative”). For example, a primordialist interpretation of the origins of nations would allow for the possibility that national sports are bound up with the various criteria which are perceived to grant legitimacy to historic nationhood — blood ties, language, topography, the soil and so on, with some so-called national sports being linked to natural landscapes (Bairner, “National Sports”). According to theories linking the rise of nationalism to the exigencies of modernization, on the other hand, national sports are simply part of a panoply of elements that serve to legitimize the nation state. In addition, concepts such as “imagined community” and “invented tradition” can then be invoked in an attempt to explain how efforts are made to bestow some historic legitimacy on what are essentially modern responses to particular political and socio-economic exigencies. Furthermore, the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism may also be invoked in order to advance the case that the national sport implies true belonging whereas other sports that are played within the nation can be linked to what constitutes the civic nation, or more properly, the nation state, but lack the stamp of authenticity. In reality, however, no single approach can fully explain how specific sports acquire national significance.

Adopting a quantitative approach, the first criterion commonly invoked when seeking to establish that a sport is national is popularity. Although not without some merit, this approach is rendered problematic by the fact that activities which attract large numbers of participants, such as angling, walking and jogging, even if defined as sports, are largely unconnected to the nation. High participation rates combined with mass spectatorship figures in sports which have national representative teams is another matter altogether which accounts for the fact that, according to this criterion at least, association football is the national sport of the overwhelming majority of countries in the world. This in itself however makes it difficult to make any meaningful pronouncements on the relationship between the national sport and any given nation.

A second criterion is that of priority or invention. A sport may be described as national for the simple reason that it was first played in a particular nation. Historians of sport will attest to the fact that it is notoriously difficult to identify the precise place of origin of many

modern sports. For that reason alone, one might wish to add the category of uniqueness with a sport being regarded as national precisely because it is played exclusively within a specific nation, the boundaries of the latter being extended in this instance to incorporate diaspora communities. Gaelic games are good examples of this. One problem with the criterion of invention is that fact that few nations would claim to be the place of origin of any modern sports whereas Britain, and more specifically, England can be legitimately represented as the birthplace of so many sports, in their regulated and bureaucratised form, that describing each of them as an English national sport would once more render the concept meaningless. There are of course honourable exceptions — Gaelic games as recently mentioned, baseball in the United States and Australian Rules Football amongst others.

Other criteria also exist. For example, countries which were not initially responsible for the invention of a particular sport may well have enjoyed great success in that sport and/or may have exerted considerable influence on the sport's subsequent development. Both of these, often mutually dependent, factors can serve to ensure a sport's national status in a particular country. Here one thinks of rugby union in New Zealand (Patterson) and soccer in Brazil (Bellos).

Some sports represent the nation symbolically despite the fact that they may well have demonstrably failed to capture the interest of most of the people who constitute the civic nation and/or the nation state. They are played and watched by people who, in the eyes of nationalists, truly belong rather than by those whose authenticity as national beings is open to question. One thinks, for example, of cricket in England and bullfighting in Spain. In addition, and of particular significance, activities of this type may well be used by those whose role it is to promote the nation, its products and its tourism industry precisely because these national sports testify to what are projected as unique characteristics of the nation.

Arguably what are needed are alternative theories of nationalism that can provide a more nuanced approach to the concept of national sports. For example, Michael Billig's influential conception of "banal nationalism," which was described by Skey (331) as "perhaps the most influential study of everyday forms of nationhood," has helped to stimulate a trend in nationalism studies towards examining the implicit, everyday, and sometimes micro-level creation and recreation of national identity (Hearn). Billig's ground-breaking study challenged those conceptualizations of nationalism that had focused on its emergence in

extraordinary conditions. Instead, explanations of nationalism should not be limited to extreme and violent domains, but should also be understood as incorporated into mundane, everyday life practices. Billig asked how the nation continues to flag its existence even when extraordinary conditions have reached their conclusion. As Hearn (660) articulates, “ultimately Billig’s argument is not that banality reveals the true nature of nationalism, but rather the explicit ideological form, the stirring call to die for one’s country is rendered more plausible by nationalism’s banal presence.”

Billig concluded that within the nation, there exists unnoticed, routine flagging which serves to (re)produce the nation daily. “The ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced” (6) represent the mechanisms whereby there are continual reminders of nationhood in established Western nations. In many discreet ways, the citizens of a nation are continually reminded of their national belonging, whether this is through the singing of a national anthem, or simply by seeing a national flag hanging outside a public building. The habitual assumptions about belonging that permeate the media also assume that we (the viewers or readers) are part of the nation (Edensor).

In support of his argument, Billig offers a discussion of the differences between waved and unwaved flags. He claims that the “unwaved flag, which is so forgettable, is at least as important as the memorable moments of flag-waving” (10). In addition, like Edensor, he highlights the role of the press in maintaining a sense of nationhood, arguing that British national newspapers, for example, address their readers as members of the nation, and continually point to the national homeland as the home of the readers. He interprets these reminders as operating beyond the level of conscious awareness. Billig, and later Edensor, argue that most work on nations, nationalism and national identity only focuses on “the spectacular, the ‘traditional’ and the official” (Edensor 17). However, according to Edensor (17), we must not forget that, like nationalism itself, “national identity is grounded in the everyday, in the mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines and practical knowledge.” Ordinary hints of nationality act to further imprint the nation onto the people, so that it is remiss to discount the subtle displays of nationhood that citizens encounter daily (Bowes and Bairner, forthcoming). This is highly relevant to the role of baseball as Cuba’s national sport despite its invention in the United States.

Cuba's "National Pastime"

Baseball came to Cuba in the 1830s, before US intervention in the island's political affairs and was "just as much Cuban as it was American" (Huish 423). By the 1920s, it was already the national sport, situated at the heart of Cuba's 19th century nationalist movement against Spanish imperialism and later its American variant. According to Burgos (12), "the process whereby baseball became the Cuban national pastime cannot be extricated from its colonial contexts." Although the sport came to Cuba as a consequence of the close proximity to the United States, "it was soon practiced in contradistinction to the Spanish culture that *peninsulares* (those born in Spain) engaged in on the island" (Burgos 14), notable amongst which was bullfighting. Nevertheless, the adoption by the Cuban born elite, the so-called *criollos*, of baseball inevitably allowed for closer contact with a much closer colonial power and, from 1947 onwards, numerous Cuban players joined teams in the US (Pettavino and Brenner).

The first official match in Cuba was played in 1874 and the Cuban League was formed four years later. The initial teams consisted of white players only. Black players began to be admitted to the league at the start of the twentieth century, including players from the North American Negro League who joined integrated teams in Cuba. Amateur leagues flourished from the early 1930s to 1960, albeit with black players excluded until 1959.

By the time of the revolution in 1959, sport was a highly visible component in the construction of Cuban identity. It was against this backdrop that "the revolutionary government lost no time in putting sports to use as a political tool, both internally and externally" (Pettavino and Brenner 524). Fidel Castro's ability as a baseball player has been much discussed and has no doubt become the stuff of myth (Echevarría). However, in light of Cuba's pre-revolutionary history, it is little surprise that, in the years immediately following the Cuban revolution, he and his comrades were keen to build sports and recreational facilities with what at that time was the relatively novel and undeniably progressive aim of providing access to all. According to Pettavino and Brenner (523), "Cuba's national sports program, initiated in 1961, was aimed at two mutually reinforcing goals." Sporting triumphs on the international stage would attest to the success of the revolution. But, in addition, the sports programme would contribute to internal development. As Carter ("Game Changer" 7) notes, "the 1976 Cuban constitution, modelled on the earlier short-lived 1933 revolutionary constitution, clearly enshrined

sport into this reshaped Cuban society.” According to Carter (“Game Changer” 8), Castro and his colleagues “saw sport as a vital vehicle for the inculcation of revolutionary and socialist values.” In addition, the symbolism and practice of sport allowed them “to demonstrate their ‘natural’ Cubanness as means of legitimating their usurpation of the existing order while also indicating the new order of things” (Carter, “Game Changer” 5).

However, in an otherwise comprehensive and contemporary account of Cuban socialism, Gordy makes only one reference to baseball and none at all to sport in general, perhaps because of an acceptance of the widely-held and largely compelling belief that sport, by its very nature, is inimical to radical politics. Yet, other researchers have demonstrated the almost symbiotic relationship between sport and socialism in Cuba. According to Huish (421), “One of the most distinctive features of the Cuban sports model is that it is entirely state-driven,” the state’s controlling arm being the Instituto Nacional de Deportes, Educación Física y Recreación (the Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation or INDER). In this respect at least, it differs little from the model adopted in the former Soviet Union, the GDR and elsewhere. Nevertheless, as Pye (119) has argued, “The Cuban regime rejects the neo-marxist argument that sport promotes elitism and anti-collectivist ideas.” This is not to deny that Cuban sportsmen and sportswomen have had remarkable success in the post-revolution era, particularly in baseball, boxing and track and field. However, it is baseball that has been accorded the status of national sport-popular but also a constant presence.

Cuba is undeniably a sporting nation. First and foremost, however, it is a baseball nation, arguably to the same extent as Taiwan and considerably more so than the United States where it was once the unquestioned National Pastime but “it is exhausted but not dead, sacked by the NFL and many other sports and pastimes in this increasingly fragmented, heterogeneous culture” (Nathan 103). In Cuba, on the other hand, baseball remains the national sport, not least, as Carter (“The Manifesto” 247) claims, because, from the outset, the nineteenth-century *criollos* made deliberate efforts to equate the game with a nascent Cuban nationalism. It can also be characterised as the national sport, however, because it has continued to be a significant part of everyday life — a major contributor therefore to a sense of banal nationalism which is vividly captured in the fiction of Leonardo Padura.

Fiction as a Sociological Resource

As Bateman (383) notes, “Following the lead of American academics such as Michael Oriard and Christian Messenger, a number of sports historians have in recent years begun to look at imaginative literature as an important mediator of sport.” It is in this spirit, as Johnes suggests, that novels should be approached as potential sources in sport history. Novels can certainly be interpreted sociologically with a focus on the insights that they can offer and the sociological concepts that help to strengthen those insights (Bairner).

Although literature has been described as a fabrication (Bennett), the former Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway argues that in fact great fiction explores the truth better than anything. The point, therefore, is not to pursue a sociology of literature but “to see what happens when sociology and literature are reciprocally illuminated by their dissimilar, yet comparable, approaches to the same site” (Alworth 302). Therefore, much depends upon how we actually use literature and, more specifically, how we read works of fiction sociologically.

In discussing the use of fictional methods in ethnographic research, Rinehart (204) identified three kinds of writing — academic writing that seeks to replicate some sort of truth, fiction which can be based on actual events but is often the product of the writer’s interpretation of actual or imagined events, and fictional ethnography which “combines the realist goals of academic ethnography and fiction but with an eye to both instruction and feeling.” The latter, in the form of creative non-fiction, has become an increasingly accepted means of exploring the whats, the whys and the hows and is used to complement and, in some cases, supplement traditional academic writing (Sparkes and Smith). The emphasis of this approach is, according to Cheney, on establishing facts. But, in light of the criteria regularly invoked to support the use of creative nonfiction and storytelling, is there a place in the social scientific study of sport for authors of fiction whose primary objective in writing is not normally informed by social science and, indeed, may not even have sport as a major concern?

Whilst most academic writers may be cautious about the excessive use of invention even in personal narratives, others are less diffident. According to novelist Jean-Claude Izzo (38), the chronicler of Marseilles’ criminal underbelly, “imagination is a reality, sometimes more real than reality itself.” In similar vein, journalist Joe Queenan (151) writes, “Just because something isn’t true doesn’t mean you shouldn’t believe in it.” We are not talking here about the difference between

truth and lies but about “different sorts of truth” (Maitland 14) or of verisimilitude as a way of presenting truth(s). As for comparisons between fiction and creative nonfiction, and setting to one side any suggestion that either approach can uncover absolute truths, it would be wrong to deny that novelists are also researchers or that their approach is less likely to offer insights into society than more conventional data collection presented as creative nonfiction.

As C. Wright Mills (21) observed, although “their serious work embodies the most widespread definitions of human reality,” novelists often possess the sociological imagination. Therefore, because this article is primarily concerned with the type of data that is of value to social scientists — in this instance, specifically to social scientists of sport — it is argued here that we can and should add certain works of fiction to more commonly accepted data sources. Good sport-related fiction invariably reveals more about the social world in which people, play and watch sport than about the narrow world of sport alone. It is no coincidence that Philip Roth (1973) gave the title *The Great American Novel* to a work of fiction that has baseball at its core. Furthermore, baseball has been well served by other notable writers of fiction including Bernard Malamud, W. P. Kinsella, Chad Harbach, Robert Coover and Michael Chabon. Leonardo Padura’s work cannot be described as sport-related fiction; he is a crime writer whose Havana Quartet has as its central character a police detective. Nevertheless, just as serious sport fiction does not address sport alone, so crime writing often has wider concerns, with sport being one such concern in Padura’s work as will be demonstrated in the following discussion.

The paper will first consider Padura’s use of sporting similes, most notably those relating to baseball. The discussion will proceed to an examination of the relationship between baseball and nostalgia in the Havana Quartet. The next section will focus on Conde’s own playing career as documented in the novels. The concluding section comprises an analysis of experiences of Conde and his friends as baseball fans.

The Use of Simile

Padura’s use of simile offers an easy introduction to the significance of baseball in the Havana Quartet. As he thinks about a woman whom he had admired years earlier and with whom he has now been reunited, Conde observes that “Tamara’s something else, more than beautiful, nice and tasty, as delicious as the crack of a baseball cleanly hit...” (Blue 91). He thinks of an old school notebook on which he had

written some lines as being “like a forgotten pitcher sent to warm his arm up before making the decisive throw” (Gold 29). A murder that he is investigating had been committed by “something like a baseball bat, one of the old wooden sort” (Black 23). Indeed, “a single well-aimed brutal blow had been enough to put an end to the life of Miguel Forcade Mier: like a ball angrily repelled by a powerful hitter, his brain burst inside his skull, putting an end to his ideas, memories and emotions of the man who in a moment made the transition from life to death” (Black 31).

At times, Padura also reaches for other sports to enliven a description — hence, a toothless, alcoholic black man is described as having “the face of a boxer defeated in a thousand fights” (Black 115). Indeed, it is worth noting before returning to baseball that the idea of Cuba as a sporting nation more broadly is itself a feature of the Quartet. Conde’s grandfather had been a breeder of fighting cocks and he would “sometimes dream about Grandfather Rufino and his roosters and it’s a dream of death...” (Gold 92).

He’d sit on a stool in the entrance to the cockpit, and, holding the rooster in one hand, lean his legs of stone slightly backwards so the back of the stool rested against the doorpost made of *caguairán*, the hardest of Cuban woods (Gold 91).

Elsewhere, Conde describes “the street corner which harboured the cockpit where Grandfather Rufino had, eight times, put his fortune on spurs that enriched and impoverished him in equal measure” (Gold 172). It was also a time when there was “a game of dominoes in every arcade” (Black 66).

In addition to baseball, Conde and his friends played dominoes too and even ping-pong and, when relating the story of when the Count had last played baseball, Padura adds that “he also kept goal for the football eleven, defended for the basketball team, ran on the 4 x 400 relay team, as well as playing first base and third bat in the baseball team” (Black 214). Here one is reminded of Fidel Castro’s reminiscences of the place of sport in his schooldays. His school, he remembers, was wonderful, with “several basketball courts, baseball fields, track and field facilities, volleyball courts, and even a swimming pool” (Castro and Betto 109). Castro had just turned sixteen at the time and quickly began to take an active part in school sport, claiming later that he was quite good at basketball, soccer, baseball and track and field — indeed “nearly everything” (Castro and Betto 109).

In another reference to sport, we learn in *Havana Gold* that a murdered school teacher would “do PE with her group, because she played volleyball very well” (Gold 48). Later in the same novel the PE yard is described — “from the street they could see the basketball court, its bare hoops and boards worn out by all those hard throws” (Gold 179). Conde also remarks on the sporting prowess and in relation to the body shapes of people with whom he has police business — “as a lad he’d been a rower and he’d lived for a while in Guanabo, he knew something about sailing and had friends on the beach who would get him a good yacht” (Black 203). Even Conde’s boss is described with reference to sport.

He still seemed young for his age, in that tight pullover emphasising pectorals of a practiced swimmer and squash player’ (Black 30).

But it is baseball that looms largest in Conde’s life and in many of the numerous nostalgic passages in which the Quartet abound.

Baseball and Nostalgia

Song (234) describes Conde as “a police detective whose gloomy outlook on life is only forgotten through alcohol binges.” Zamora and Gélinas (6) go further, arguing that a central element in Padura’s Quartet is “the articulation of a *spleen* feeling” which, they claim is one of the many possible collateral damages of an unfulfilled country’s destiny’ (Zamora and Gélinas 9). They add that “this *spleen* feeling can be observed in most of the series” main characters, and Mario Conde is possibly the most archetypal and well-rounded illusion in this regard’.

It is undeniable that Conde is often nostalgic and that baseball regularly finds a place in his ruminations on the past.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a boy who wanted to be a writer. He lived peaceful and happy in a not very tranquil, or even beautiful dwelling, not far from here, and spent his time, like all happy boys, playing baseball in the street, hunting lizards and watching how his grandfather, whom he loved a lot, groomed his fighting cocks (Gold 111).

Similar reflections appear in *Havana Red*.

Despite the heat, August afternoons had always been the best for playing baseball on the street corner. Holiday time meant everybody

was in the neighbourhood all the time, and had nothing better to do, and the hyper-active summer sun allowed you to play on beyond eight o'clock when a game really deserved to be extended' (*Havana Red* 2-3).

Conde's memories are corroborated by an academic historian of Cuban baseball who writes, "as young boys we played everywhere: in open fields, in roads and city streets, in schoolyards" (Echevarría 4).

What makes Conde sad, however, are less the failings of the Cuban revolution than the fact that young boys are no longer playing baseball in the same spaces that he had his friends had once occupied.

Recently, however, the Count had seen few baseball games on the street corner. The boys seemed to prefer other less energetic, more sweet-smelling diversions than running, hitting and shouting for several hours under a scorching summer sun, and he wondered what boys nowadays could possibly do on long summer afternoons (*Havana Red* 3).

These are the wistful, rather the splenetic or embittered, sentiments of older sports fans all over the world who mourn the passing of what they regard as "the good old days."

Furthermore, Conde himself finds his own nostalgia irksome although not perhaps the role that baseball plays in it.

With a nostalgia he found increasingly irritating, the Count surveyed the main street in his barrio, overflowing rubbish containers, wrappings from late-night last-minute pizzas blowing in the wind, the wasteland where he'd learned to play baseball transformed into a repository for junk generated by the repair shop on the corner. Where do you learn to play baseball now? (*Blue* 6).

We read that "Conde's strolls down memory lane always ended in melancholy" and inevitably include "nights at baseball games" (*Blue* 197). Playgrounds, now empty, are sad places "without the hue-and-cry from matches, the rivalries and girls reduced to hysteria by a brilliant shot" (*Gold* 179-80). But, it is not all about sadness. Returning to the stadium after a lengthy absence,

[...] brought with it a flood of memories. The green grass shining under bluish light and the reddish turf, freshly raked for the start of the game, created a contrast of colours that is the exclusive heritage of baseball grounds (*Gold* 281).

Here Conde sits with his boyhood friend, Skinny Carlos, and gazes “at the green and brown terrain, the packed terraces, the colours of the uniforms, blue and white on the one hand, red and black on the other, and remembered that once, like Andrés, he’d decided he’d commit his life to those symbolic realms where the movement of a tiny ball was like the flux of life, unpredictable but necessary for the game to go on” (Gold 282). Conde then realises that “He’d always liked the loneliness of the centre of the park... the smells, colours, sensations, skills that came from a possible attachment to a place and time he could revisit simply by seeing and breathing with relish a unique experience” (Gold 282).

Happy memories are evoked even as Conde searches for evidence linked to a murder,

In one corner he found two gloves and a baseball helmet. So he was a baseball player as well, he thought and couldn’t stop himself picking up one of the gloves, putting it on his hand and hitting it against the other, as if he were anticipating some really big hits. Feeling nostalgia aroused by memories of his happy days as a street baseball player, the lieutenant put the glove back in its place and crouched down to see what was in some jute bags... (Black 212).

We are left in no doubt, therefore, that many of the Count’s memories relate to a time when he had been a ball player.

Conde’s Playing Career

Conde remembers the best game he ever played when “they let me take first base, despite being only the eighth batter in the line-up” (Blue 136). He was playing for his school team, the Víbora Violets, against Habana High School. He recalls,

We were zero-zero in the eighth inning when it was Skinny’s turn to bat, for he was fifth up, and he hit a drive past the shortstop and he got to second. All hell was let loose ... And it was all down to that bitch destiny, because Isidrito, who was sixth up and never blew it, made a pig’s ear out of it, was the first out, and Paulino the Bull’s Testicle, who was seventh, rolled it into Yaya’s hands who leisurely stroked it over his balls before throwing it to first base, and Paulino was the second out. Then it was my turn to hit (Blue 138).

Conde hits the ball “right down the middle of the field, real hard, like I’d never hit before, and it was like seeing the ball flying in slow motion, flying till it hit the fence right under the scoreboard, and I started to run hell for leather and it went so far I could go to third, almost enough for a homerun, they screamed, Skinny scored, then ran to third base and scooped me up in his arms” (Blue 139). However, “in the ninth innings the La Habana lot scored twice and beat us two-one. But it was the best game of my life” (Blue 139).

Some years later, Conde played his last serious game of baseball when he was at university — “he was in the third year of his degree and, as usual, volunteered to be part of the worst baseball team in the whole history of Cuban university sport” (Black 214). His team represented the School of Psychology and that day, “the Count felt he could hardly lift his arms up and failed three times with the bat when it was his turn at the end of the eighth innings and they were trailing two zero to the Philology Tigers” (Black 215). In a conscious nod in the direction of his past, Conde replaced his aluminium bat with a wooden one, much to the consternation of Skinny Carlos. This decision, in the last game he ever played, was immediately rewarded.

[...] he steadied himself, carried through his swing and the blade of the bat hit the ball and sent it hurtling into the far depths of the park on the right, so he could run like crazy round the bases ... to the jubilant cries of a skinny Carlos, who had thrown himself on the pitch shouting: “Fuck, what you need is real balls!” and hugged the Count’s three companions who had scored thanks to his great batting, which put the game at three-two in favour of the Psychologists, who finally won their only game the day Mario Conde played baseball for the last time, in the 1977 University Games (Black 216).

Whether as a player, or increasingly only as a fan, baseball matters to Mario Conde and is an important part of the glue which binds him and his friends, especially Skinny Carlos, together.

Friends and Fandom

“Baseball infected them,” Padura writes, “like a chronic passion, and the Count and his friends suffered virulent attacks” (Red 2). Conde admits his embarrassment that “as a kid, that I preferred playing baseball on the street corner to going to Mass...” (Blue 55). As an adult, Conde supports the Industriales team and “he suffered before and after

each game, even when the Industriales won, for he thought that if they won that one, they were more likely to lose the next, and he suffered eternally, in spite of all his promises to be less fanatical and to ditch baseball: it wasn't what it used to be, he would say, when Capiró, Chávez, Changa Mederos and Co played" (Blue 98). The Industriales "kept him awake worrying at night" (Blue 68). Indeed, "recently the Count was scepticism incarnate: he even tried not to go to baseball games because the Industriales played worse and worse, and luck seemed to have forsaken them, and apart from Vargas and Javier Méndez, the rest seemed second-raters, too weak in the leg to really get them into the final" (Blue 68). He and his friends are aware that they are incurable baseball fans "and the one most infected was Skinny Carlos" (Blue 98).

At this point in time, of course, Skinny is no longer skinny. He is confined to a wheelchair after getting a bullet in the back which severed his spinal cord while serving with the Cuban army in Angola in 1981. If anything, however, his situation has strengthened Skinny's love-hate relationship with baseball.

He followed the progress of the championship with a loyalty that could only be displayed by an unredeemed optimist like himself, despite the fact they'd not won a thing since the distant year of 1976 when even baseball players seemed more romantic, genuine and happy (Gold 12).

When Skinny was still skinny, another friend, Andrés, was set on being a baseball player but was now a doctor. It is thanks to him that Conde and Skinny have good seats at a match in the stadium, procured through a patient of Andrés who worked in the INDER... in a most sought-after location: right on the edge of the field, between home-plate and third base which they attend at Skinny's insistence. The match is important.

Orientales and Havanans were going to engage, once again, as if it were only a game, in a historic contest that perhaps began the day when the colony's capital was transferred from Santiago to Havana almost four hundred years ago (Gold 281).

Skinny is happy "I've not been back here for ages," he says, "stroking the arms of his wheelchair" (Gold 283). Yet, constantly, his love of baseball is conflicted. Of his beloved Industriales, he declares,

Hell, how can you spend your whole life waiting for these wankers to win a championship when they always open their legs like hookers when they really need to concentrate on winning? But I get like this because I'm an idiot, I should just give up watching bloody baseball... (Blue 162).

It is a cry from the heart that is heard regularly wherever sports fans gather, not least in Havana's Parque Central where Conde is tempted to engage in the endless debates about baseball.

He reached the Parque Central and almost decided to get entangled in the eternal arguments over baseball that raged there daily, whatever the temperature, to find a reason for yet another defeat for those bastard Industriales; balls, balls is what they're lacking, he'd have shouted in honour of Skinny, who was neither skinny nor nimble enough to be shouting on his own behalf (Blue 214).

With reference to the arguments in Parque Central, Carter ("Baseball" 117) argues that it is "this particular practice of arguing baseball and its implicit value of confrontation that marks baseball fans in Havana specifically Cuban and masculine." According to Jamail (2000 49), "Cubans call anywhere that people gather to talk baseball the *esquina caliente* (hot corner), but the park is the hottest of them all."

Although Conde's friend Skinny emerges as one of the most engaging characters in the Havana Quartet, he is no saint, especially when it comes to the issue of 'race' in Cuban baseball, as illustrated by reflections on the game between the Víbora Violets, and Habana High School.

[...] the Habana High School team ran onto the field, enormous blacks about to slay us alive as they already had other teams, but we were cocksure and shouted at the pre-game huddle, we're going to beat the skinny liquorice sticks, fuck 'em, said Skinny, and even the Moor and I thought we would (Blue 136).

With reference to the Violets' defeat, Skinny adds, "That's why you and I almost beat the lanky coal-merchants from the high school in Havana, you remember that?" (Blue 198). The expressions Skinny uses reminds the reader of the early days of baseball in Cuba and the exclusion of black players from many leagues partly due to the *criollos'* refusal to acknowledge other classes' engagement with the game which "would have diluted their own construction of baseball as

representative of a modern Cuban nation in which they would be its leaders” (Carter, 2005: 261-262).

Together with the racism, the treatment of women in the books is generally. This is not to suggest that Padura is a sexist writer but rather that he presents his key protagonists as having reactionary views about the roles that women play in society; they cook, they are beautiful and sexy or, as exemplified by one case, they are murder victims. Only the latter is represented as having had an interest in sport. Just as Padura presents the reader with an insightful depiction of the place of baseball in his characters’ lives, so here, as in relation to race, he is making sure that we appreciate that these men are flawed. Indeed, like many sports fans, they are not averse to using match attendance for the purposes of letting off steam offensive ways.

He (Conde) would have liked the chance to go to the stadium ... where you could say anything, calling the referee’s mother a whore or even your team’s manager a fucking idiot and then depart sad in defeat or euphoric in victory but relaxed, hoarse and raring to go (Blue 68).

Conclusion

As reflected in Padura’s fiction, baseball is not the only sport that is played in Cuba but for Cuban men at least it is granted enhanced status when compared with what Conde thinks of as “passing fads.”

Suddenly he enjoyed the illusion that time didn’t really exist there, because it was that side-street which had served ever since as an area for playing baseball, though some seasons would see a sly, treacherous football appear, or a basketball hoop, nailed to an electricity post. But soon baseball — with bat, hand, four bases, three rolling-a-fly or at the wall — would impose its rule not too acrimoniously, over those passing fads...’ (Red 2).

The idea of playing on a five-star ground was a dream that Conde and his friends all shared “to the day when Andrés realized his potential didn’t in fact extend to achieving such glory” (Gold 282-3).

As Javier Méndez, a former outfielder for the Industriales, so aptly put it, “You grow up with baseball all around you. It is part of being Cuban” (cited in Jamail, 1). Little can disrupt the relationship between Cuban men and baseball, the strength of which can best be illustrated by those moments when baseball has to take second place. Thus, on the

occasion of Fidel Castro's death, one mourner in the Parque Central told a foreign journalist, "today, we don't talk about baseball" (Watts).

Padura's references to baseball in many ways reflect the role that the sport plays in everyday life on the island. Even though a baseball bat is used as a murder weapon in one of the novels, baseball is otherwise seldom central to the crime stories that are told. Yet it is always there, a constant presence in the memories and in the lived reality of Mario Conde and his friends and in the places they know so well. As one author observes, "it has been said that the real Cuba lies in the shadows and alleyways of Old Havana — anywhere baseball is played" (Wendel 14).

According to Carter ("The Quality" 188), "the regular yet ephemeral nature of Cuban baseball is what drives its ability to engender cultural intimacy and fuels the politics of passion." It is Padura's regular, yet ephemeral, treatment of baseball in the Havana Quartet that flags the game as exemplifying what is meant by banal nationalism and the nationalism of everyday life. Thus, reading these novels that are not ostensibly about sport informs us in a particularly appropriate way about why and how baseball can be described as Cuba's national pastime.

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