

CHAPTER 27

La Biblioteca Nacional, Culture and Politics

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Abstract: This paper is based on my visit to the Cuban National Library, La Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (BNJM) and La Biblioteca Provincial Elvira Cape, in Santiago de Cuba, to learn about the system of satellite libraries the BNJM had implemented in the Cuban provinces.¹ These satellite or provincial libraries were meant to facilitate the literacy campaign, especially in rural areas, but also to allow cultural idioms the provinces felt represented their own culture to be collected and shared with the National Library and with city dwellers as part of a new collective national consciousness promoted by the Castro regime. I was initially intrigued by the idea that the provinces could authentically represent their mostly rural culture to people in Havana as something other than archetype or myth, and to a national institution once known for high-brow culture – the BNJM. I wanted to know what criteria and methodologies were used by the provincial, or satellite, libraries to choose and collect their cultural artifacts. This paper traces the history of both the Cuban National Library in Havana and the Cuban public libraries (also known as satellite or provincial libraries) while asking a more universal question: how do the culturally marginal learn to reify and to exhibit their provincial culture? And, in so doing, do they either gain or lose political agency, or do they contaminate, denature, or even lose their own culture?

The Cuban National Library, today's *Biblioteca Nacional José Martí* (BNJM), was founded in 1901, during the historical moment of Cuba's independence from Spain. It is no coincidence and no surprise that an institution such as a national repository of culture should have arisen dur-

1. The Cuban satellite libraries are also known as public libraries and provincial libraries. They are not to be confused with the controversial independent libraries started in 1998 to establish surreptitiously private collections for semi-clandestine public use in the homes [of private individuals] (Salazar 2). These latter libraries are not officially sanctioned by the Cuban state, but often ignored. Some of them contain books banned by the government. Some scholars have argued that it is not these libraries' books that are banned, but the libraries themselves.

ing a period as traumatic, memorable, and explorational as a country's autonomization. At such a moment, the new country was in the process of creating an official history that both rescued its colonial heritage selectively and forged a new cultural itinerary and destiny. The transformation of the country's colonial patrimony to a republican one required a corpus of works from which to fabricate a new national mythology, as well as a national warehouse within which to frame and unify these works.

La Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (BNJM), was founded only a few months before the founding of the Republic on May 20, 1902, and during a period of United States intervention on the Island. The United States's military government's occupation had been officially established in Cuba on January 1st, 1899. In 1901, the island's governor, Leonard Wood, issued military order #234 in *la Gaceta de La Habana*, establishing the National Library and naming Domingo Figarola Caneda as its director. The National Library has no foundational document. The only extant official prose is the military order referring to 1901 as the origin of the Institution and designating Figarola's salary as well as the location of the library.

It is important to underscore that the origins of the Cuban National Library are tied to U.S. intervention on the island. As Tomás Fernández Robaina suggests,

Es posible que la fundación de la Biblioteca Nacional haya sido vista por el gobierno interventor ... como uno de los factores necesarios a largoplazo dentro de la política de modernización o de americanización, ...que se llevaba a cabo en Cuba para preparar su evolución acorde a los planes inmediatos de penetración económica e ideológica. (11)

Other Cuban writers such as Juan Pérez de la Riva and Emilio Setién have suggested similar ideas. In part, the lack of a founding document and the focus on salary and location in the military order seem to suggest that the earliest, official, preoccupations were not with a grand plan and future for a "national" library. To the contrary, the order points to a paltry salary for the library's first director and inadequate space for its first building.

From its inception in 1901 until 1958, the Biblioteca Nacional had no ties to Cuba's pre-existing public libraries. There had been a handful of provincial libraries since the early nineteenth-century in Cuba, which were more akin to what we might think of as museums or archives today.

These housed private collections of various types of treasures, as well as books, belonging to a few wealthy, private individuals. By 1940, the constitution of the same year had foreseen the establishment of “una biblioteca en cada municipio” (Ministerio de cultura 116) but the project never entirely came to fruition.

The victors of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 saw in the National Library an opportunity to disseminate Revolutionary ideals as well as a symbolic institution that could be made accessible to the masses at large. By the end of 1959, the Library had already begun to be used to collect and to organize studies and documents having to do with history, literature, music, and science. The National Library endeavored to collect what it considered to represent Cuban culture and to designate it as Cuba's patrimony to be shared by all, even if that meant first educating the “grandes mayorías” of people as to how to study their own culture. This latter endeavor was accomplished, as is well known, mostly through “la exitosa y trascendental campaña de alfabetización sobre casi un millón de analfabetos y la creación de la Imprenta Nacional” (García-Carranza, “Contribución de la BNJM” 22); in part, it was also done through the Library's vast bibliographic projects, especially since the end of 1961 when it published “un primer intento bibliográfico de carácter nacional, un catálogo titulado *Movimiento editorial en Cuba 1959-60*, con motivo de una exposición de libros, folletos y revistas que mostraba la producción de las editoras cubanas,..., con lo que se iniciaba la revaloración de la cultura cubana”(García-Carranza, “Contribución de la BNJM” 23). The library's *revaloración* approved works through its list and tacitly disavowed those not on it. It would become a symbol of a revalorization of cultural works and an institution that could be used by a plurality of people.

One of the early challenges to the Cuban Revolution after 1959 was to create a consciousness among the rural and provincial peoples of having a direct, participatory role in recording their own history on a national scale; that is, of fitting within a historical continuum, within a linear and causal narrative, to which they had had little if any access previously. As the BNJM's National Reading Program states, Leer es un ejercicio que expresa y sostiene la cultura de una nación, su fuerza espiritual y sus valores, su capacidad de resistencia y *desarrollo*. “Leer, aunque parezca una experiencia solitaria, es *participar*,” emphasis mine (*Cuanto antes mejor I*). To do so, however, meant that these rural peoples needed to have cul-

tural capital or artifacts with which to enter such a narrative as subject and not just object of study. The Cuban cultural revolution needed to provide literacy, since literature (or writing) was one of the mediums through which people could both learn and create, and thereby enter recorded history. The Cubans wanted a planned culture after 1959 as an activity directed to the formation of the “new man” in the new society. This new individual “se producirá por el cambio de las condiciones sociales y las nuevas posibilidades de elevación del nivel cultural de la sociedad,” according to Sarah Escobar Carballal—professor of library science in Havana (Escobar 2), and, as Fidel Castro stated in his Speech to the Intellectuals (*Palabras a los intelectuales*) in 1961 that a “Revolución económica y social tiene que producir inevitablemente también una Revolución cultural.” This was one of Castro’s early attempts to define revolutionary Cuba’s cultural politics and the BNJM would be at the center of this culture war. A series of social changes had to be made before the public library system would be in a position to develop as an agent of cultural change. The most significant of these social changes was spearheaded by the aforementioned literacy campaign.

The first phase of Cuba’s famed literacy campaign ended in 1961. In 1959, the population of Cuba was 6 million and 24.3% were illiterate (according to the Cuban Libraries Support Group, out of the United Kingdom). In 1999 the population was 11 million, and 4.3% was illiterate. According to UNESCO, as cited by the Cuban Libraries Support Group, by 1998, Cuban educational standards were the highest in Latin America, “The campaign also began to break down barriers between urban and rural areas, blacks and whites, and between manual and white collar workers who spread across the countryside to aid in the campaign.”

In 1964 (five years after the revolution), Cuba had thirty two public libraries, which developed, partly in a response to the surge in literacy, and partly as a means of sustaining it. Between 1963 and 1970, Cuba’s economic considerations curtailed the development of public libraries, but in the 1970’s and 80’s libraries jumped from 108 in 1974 to 196 in 1980. By 1987, there were 328 public libraries in every part of Cuba. Currently, there are 413 libraries according to the website of the BNJM’s own Sistema Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas, or SNBP.

Until 1959, the National Library had had no link to the country’s few existing public libraries. It had not established an official national system

for the country's libraries. The initial step that would establish the web of provincial libraries was taken in 1962 by the *Consejo Nacional de Cultura* headed by María Teresa Freyre de Andrade. At this time, Freyre de Andrade also established the *Escuela de Capacitación Bibliotecaria* under which the National Library began operating as the methodological center and laboratory for the web of national public libraries it hoped to create. From 1961 to 1967, the reference department of the BNJM “fue piloto, pues a él llegaba personal desde las bibliotecas públicas de provincias y municipios para su entrenamiento” (Iglesias Tauler 77). From 1969 to 1975, there were national conferences to develop the central role of the National Library within the evolving system of provincial libraries even further. Until 1976, the National Library functioned as advisor or consultant to Cuba's several public libraries, giving them technical pamphlets, manuals, and other documents (Carranza y Jiménez López 124). The immediate goals of the Library's directorship foreshadowing the web of satellite libraries in 1959 were:

1) estudiar y revalorizar nuestra tradición cultural y muy especialmente la del siglo XIX.

We might reflect here for a moment to remember that this was Cuba's turbulent period of slavery and rebellion against colonial abuses. Obviously, this abusive earlier period would have resonated with the claims of the new Cuban regime of 1959 leveled against the former Cuban government and the U.S. interventionist government. This study of the nineteenth century would have reflected useful parallels for the new Cuban regime.

2) estudiar e investigar nuestras raíces culturales.

3) trabajar porque se reconociera sin reservas, el talento y la capacidad del cubano, y se valoriza adecuadamente a sus creadores.

4) dar a la ciencia el lugar que le correspondía en la actividad cultural.

We might pause here again to point out that by the early to middle 1980's, the BNJM was promoting the study of the humanities in provincial libraries as an approach to the technical sciences. As Genshaft observed, “[las] principales tareas de las bibliotecas públicas [son las de] contribuir al progreso científico técnico” (15).

5) propiciar la superación cultural de las grandes mayorías, desarrollando intensamente actividades encaminadas a interesarles en *el buen arte y la lectura*.

6) hacer desaparecer el gran desnivel cultural existente entre la vida cultural de la capital y el resto de la Isla.

As we read this list, we must, however, ask ourselves: aren't these notions of so-called high culture? Clearly, "buen arte," and reading are designations and activities that mark these directives with a very particular bias toward cultural variants already privileged in Havana.

y 7) desarrollar las posibilidades de intercambio cultural con todos los países. (García-Carranza, "Las características tipológicas," emphasis mine)

Subsequent to this period, the provincial public libraries developed sufficiently on their own so that the National Library no longer had to continue in this centralized role. The National Library was restructured after the creation of the Ministry of Culture in 1976. This latter political body set up the *Dirección de Bibliotecas* as the provincial public libraries' new governing body. In 1989, however, the National Library resumed its control of the country's public libraries. A State Board was created for the library with 4 sub-departments. The one most directly important to this talk is the *Subdirección Metodológica y Desarrollo del Sistema de Bibliotecas*, which included a methodological group and cultural programs that developed and tested new methodological focuses, prior to being implemented in the web of public libraries.²

The Collections of the Public Libraries:

Provincial Libraries began collecting rare and valuable manuscripts pertinent to their regions since their founding (some were founded in the early to middle nineteenth-century). This was seen as preserving the province's history, which equaled the nation's history. After the revolution, there was a "rescate y custodia de todos los documentos 'donde aparece la fundación de cada una de nuestras ciudades o villas, y aquellos correspondientes a las distintas etapas de su crecimiento, esplendor, decaimiento y recuperación de la vida en esa región....'" (Vega García 4). These provincial Libraries were now, after 1959, supposed to be responsible for providing the Main Library with an account of their own history, and not the

2. Dr. Eduardo Torres Cuevas is the current director of the BNJM. It now has over 3 million volumes, including 26,000 maps, over 200,000 photographs, and over 11,000 political posters used during and immediately after the Revolution.

other way around. One of the larger questions that can be asked is if the cultural material that the provinces were collecting and referring to the BNJM was a negotiated or compromised variant since it was gathered and organized according to systems valued and taught by the BNJM in Havana. The BNJM started collecting its current bibliography in 1961, the same year Castro publicly defined the tenets of the Cuban Revolution. The BNJM did not start a bibliographical collection of materials prior to 1958 until years later. And it wasn't until 1979 that the *Dirección de Bibliotecas* at the BNJM decided officially to promote an exchange with provincial libraries of bibliographic materials collected and produced in and by the provinces. The BNJM therefore did not start receiving copies of the Provincial Libraries' collections in a systematic way until 1979. Since 1989, when the BNJM became the guiding methodological center for the whole network of public libraries in the country, the National Library directed all the other libraries as far as what rare and valuable materials to collect. Shortly after 1989, BNJM visited the provinces to teach methodology, and provincial library workers were sent to visit BNJM to be trained.

In 1990, BNJM hosted a second seminar in the Eastern provincial region of Las Tunas to update the criteria for collecting and organizing rare and valuable materials according to the kind of impact these materials had on the whole Nation. Also, technical terminology was introduced, through which to categorize and define these works. Now, BNJM was providing a "national" frame. After, 1990, however, the provincial library Elvira Cape, in Santiago de Cuba (Cuba's second largest city after Havana) began serving as a second national repository, after BNJM, compiling current and retrospective national bibliographies, as a backup to BNJM. As recently as 2001, a third seminar took place that primarily focused on the use of the internet in Cuban libraries as well as to update methodology.

In 1990, the second seminar set out the following criteria for what was to be collected by provincial libraries:

Todos los libros impresos de la provincia y los cubanos que contuvieron información sobre ella (de forma total o parcial), los de autores naturales de la provincia, o los que tuvieron información sobre éstos; se contemplaron también por su alto valor los impresos en la isla en los siglos

XVIII y XIX, muchos de los cuales resultan escasos en el Mercado y hasta únicos. (Vega García 7)

With respect to the 20th century's National bibliography, however, they were directed to continue to work in tandem with BNJM since "la determinación de la rareza bibliográfica en un impreso moderno es más compleja que en uno antiguo," 'the determination of bibliographic uniqueness in modern printed matter is more complicated than that in old printed matter.' Also, this was the century with most at stake politically (Vega García 7). The *ley de depósito legal* (law of legal deposit) was enacted only in 1999 to ensure that everything published in the region was collected by that region. In theory, the law required all publishers in Cuba to give five copies of each title they published to the National Library. The National Library added a copy to their collection, sent some copies to provincial libraries, and used some copies for exchange with its extensive list of international partners. The law could not always be enforced, however, because of lack of money/resources especially during the *periodo especial*. As far as foreign printed matter is concerned, the provincial libraries were to collect that which, because of its age or special characteristics regarding the province itself or its nature, was valuable. Collecting and preserving rare and valuable materials "est[aba] sujeto a un perfeccionamiento y a una complementación práctica"—was done with both perfectionism and practicality in mind (Vega García, 1996, 8).

During the so-called "periodo especial," the BNJM suffered several setbacks, not the least of which was budgetary. It is during this period of involuntary, relaxed oversight that the provincial libraries experienced their greatest degree of freedom with regard to collections, classifications, and exhibitions. As Tomás Fernández Robaina remembers it, "la falta de financiamiento para sufragar los gastos de estancias y viajes fue el elemento fundamental que interrumpió el asesoramiento y las visitas metodológicas a las bibliotecas públicas de las provincias, y por lo tanto todo lo que se había avanzado en cuanto a la uniformidad de los procesos, a la aplicación de las normas establecidas se vio afectado" (103). Despite this greater degree of autonomy in the 1990's, services in both the BNJM and the provinces were scaled back dramatically. The readership and special programs diminished accordingly. Although this would seem like an opportune moment for provincial libraries to leave their mark on their own collections, by now, they had spent, on again and off again, about 30

years adopting the BNJM's methodologies and rationales. It was clearly too late, at this point, to move forward with significant initiatives that were not already marked by the values of the BNJM. In any case, the severe lack of funds during the *periodo especial* would have hindered any such initiatives.

The network of public libraries in the country today continues to fall under the jurisdiction of one of the National Library's divisions and has been further divided into thirteen provincial libraries, and below, municipal and branch libraries employing over 3,600 people. The network's recent improvements include air conditioning, internet service, electronic filing systems, and better coordination between the BNJM and the provinces. There are, of course, those scholars who decry the entire system of provincial libraries as nominally functional. Evidence adduced to support this point of view usually has to do with the size of the provincial library buildings and with the lack of regular users. While it is true that some provincial libraries do adhere to this classification, there are clearly many others that do not. In any case, it is not the object of this study to question the definition of a viable library environment, but to question the power relationship between the urban, literate world and that of the rural, oral sector.

This paper followed the trajectory of the Cuban revolution's library project and asked the larger question of whether a nation's culture could be defined and organized by its previously disenfranchised members without their transformation or co-optation. *How successful was the revolution's library project? What type of negotiation of identity, if any, did the provincial cultures have to undergo?* We looked at attempts to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. Ultimately, it is difficult to speak of successes of such a project because the definition of success is relative and contingent. In the end, the BNJM was successful at creating an extensive web of satellite libraries, which aided greatly in the Cuban literacy campaign. It also achieved a wide representation of provincial interests and culture within its own holdings and, by extension, within the consciousness of Havana's dwellers. The real question I would like to answer, however, is one of kind and not of degree. Ultimately, what provincial libraries were collecting and what people were reading were materials sanctioned by the BNJM in Havana.

The thesis with which I will leave you is that the cultural systems of Havana and of a typical province of the Island were distinct and fairly closed. The simple act of becoming literate already changed a rural culture, when that culture was oral and generationally transmitted in some cases. The methodological values that emanated from Havana influenced the provincial culture in question such that perhaps the results of the satellite system of libraries reflect more what BNJM thought of provincial culture than what provincial culture thought of itself.

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