Zero Is a Lens to See: Karla Suárez's "Havana Year Zero," translated from Spanish by Christina MacSweeney

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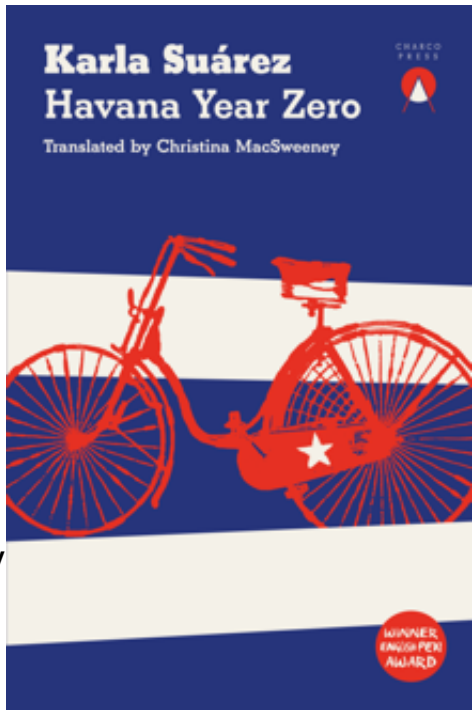
By Dorothy Potter Snyder

> *I have learned that the lines we draw to contain the infinite end up excluding more than they enfold. I have learned that most things in life are better and more beautiful not linear but fractal. Love especially.*

– Maria Popova

What's the sum total of anything – food, gasoline, hope, or love – multiplied by zero? Cuban novelist Karla Suárez addresses the mathematics of emptiness and absence in *Havana Year Zero,* the first novel available in English from this important contemporary Cuban writer and the third movement in her four-volume "Havana symphony." It is a magisterial and innovative demonstration of first-person narration: magisterial because it convinces as novelistic art must and innovative because the author fractalizes her protagonist Julia via her relationships with three men, each of whom reflects an important facet of her personality. With this structure, Suárez arguably achieves a kind of braided polyphony in a monophonic narration.



But who is "Julia"? A bored university mathematics professor, she takes her alias from French mathematician Gaston Julia, whose work on rational iterations was fundamental to the later theories of the more famous fractalist Benoit Mandelbrot. It is 1993, "Year Zero", and Julia seeks something, anything, to give her a sense of purpose. She feels empty, incorporeal: "...like a hologram, a projection of myself, and I sometimes feared that if anyone reached out their hand to my body, they'd discover I didn't exist" (14-15). Julia's search for an important historical document is the pretext for a quest to find herself.

1993 was the lowest point of the Special Period in Cuba (1991-2000) when scarcities resulting from withdrawn Russian support and the ongoing U.S. embargo of the island made life a daily struggle for the average Cuban. Ironically, however, Julia is less preoccupied with hunger and blackouts than she is with the hunt for the purloined diagram by Italian inventor Antonio Meucci, which will prove that he invented the telephone in Cuba, not Alexander Graham Bell in the United States. Shortages of food, gas, clothing, and housing plague all the characters, but "Cuba is a country of mutants with a talent for survival," says Julia. It's not empty shelves but rather inner emptiness that bedevils her. Like Julia, her lovers have their own significant lacks: Ángel, a sense of completion in his relationship with ex-wife Margarita; Leonardo, the last piece of documentation for his novel; and former tutor Euclid, historical justice for Meucci – and, by extension, for Cuba itself. Smart and sexy, Julia becomes the key "variable" upon whom all three depend to deliver what they need. But to whom will she be loyal? Whom can she trust? And what's in it for her, anyway?

In 2018, I was reporting on the Key West Literary Seminar when I interviewed Cuba's best-known contemporary writer Leonardo Padura. Sipping espresso with me in a café, the Cuban Coffee Queen, he named Suárez as one of the country's strongest women writers. She lists him in the novel's acknowledgements and gives her writer character the alias "Leonardo," while Julia takes care to dismiss any connection with the novelist. This is just one of many playful intertextualities sprinkled throughout the novel that will delight the savvy reader. But Padura, Havana's most extensive chronicler, offers a darker, sweatier take on the Special Period than Suárez, whose gaze is cooler.

Zero has an inside and an outside: it is an empty stomach, but it is also a lens to see close up from far away. Born and educated in Havana, Suárez has been writing about her city from Europe for the past twenty years (she now resides in Lisbon): "When you are sunk into a reality, an important historic reality, it's hard to see it," she says. "Distance, remoteness, gives you a certain detachment, less pain."[1] A trained engineer and classical guitarist who opted instead for the writer's life, Suárez endows her protagonist with her own obsession for order: astute readers will notice that all the chapters are between 10 and 12 pages long in English, rhythmically regular like musical phrases or waves crashing on a beach. Julia employs the same algorithmic approach to her love life as she does to the search for the document.

But why should anyone care about an old piece of paper when there is "nothing of anything. Zero transport. Zero meat. Zero hope"? Because, according to Julia, "certain phenomena can only manifest themselves when a given number of factors come into play, and we were so fucked in 1993 that we were converging on a single point. We were variables in the same equation" (1). To Julia, people are variables, and she is a "common denominator." All problems are intellectually solvable. She triangulates her

life around the Meucci document because it, too, is a common denominator. Its sheer absence matches her own emptiness and is the engine that powers relationships, self-examination, and the novel itself.

A book also has an inside and an outside, a cover and the pages within, the one who tells and one who listens. Suárez makes the fourth wall permeable, implicating the reader in the moral and intellectual universe she creates. Julia addresses us directly, alternately wary and intimate, strategically changing the names of people while simultaneously reaching a warm hand across the metaphorical table to touch us and negotiate the terms of the telling – "Can I ask you something? Do you mind if we use first names? It's just that I'm telling you very personal things…" (23). The reader becomes ensnared in Julia's paranoid universe, a surveillance state in which your best friend or lover could betray you. Bored of "trying to explain basic formulae to kids who [have] absolutely no interest in anything," Julia's hunt for the Meucci document distracts her from her own inner zero, gives her "something to hang on to, the lever capable of moving our small word, as Archimedes would put it" (11). But why is she telling all this to *us*? Zero, it turns out, can be a very complicated equation.

"A fractal," according to Mandelbrot, "is a shape made of parts similar to the whole in some way." All three men competing both for Julia's body and the document are similar to her in some way, making her one and yet many. We see her interior world as if in a house of mirrors. Ángel's desire to bring his relationship with Margarita full circle complements Julia's preoccupation with order. Leonardo's frustration with his unfinished novel parallels her lack of inspiration in her job. And mentor Euclid's quest to protect the document from being sold for food so that it may be preserved for international science reflects Julia's lost dream of being an important scientific researcher. Suárez's innovation lies precisely in revealing her narrator's inner world through the view of herself in others, making the monophonic

appear to be polyphonic. Zero is the lens through which Julia sees herself and seeks rapprochement with her own soul. Borges famously had a horror of mirrors, the simulacrum that for him was an obscene repetition of the self, obliterating reality. For Suárez, however, the mirrored self is not terrifying, especially when seen in the eyes of a lover; rather, it is a tool for discovering one's personal truth, one's self. Julia finally learns that her most trusty compass is her body, not her intellect: "[T]he best thing to do is to make love, not think, offer up the body, the body, the body, to the point of exhaustion, until you reach your limits, have nothing more to give, and the next day another body, and not thinking, not thinking, not thinking" (219). Reiteration is salvation itself; repetition is almost like a prayer.

Translator Christina MacSweeney (2016 Valle Inclan prize for Valeria Luiselli's *The Story of my Teeth*) gives Julia a voice that is smart, angry, sometimes vulgar, and always sympathetic. She privileges the blunt, primary-color vocabulary that Suárez favors and preserves the illusion that the story is being heard rather than read. Since MacSweeney is conscious of her choices regarding American versus British English, we can only deduce that it was the publisher's choice to replace "asshole" with "arsehole," "just on vacation" with "just on holiday," and a slew of other Britishisms that are sprinkled throughout the text. As a reader, I find the insistence on British voice in translations of Latin American writers distracting and inexplicable; ultimately, however, it does not harm the experience of reading this superb translation.

What's the sum total of anything multiplied by zero? Nothing, of course. But as computer algorithms teach us, when many zeroes are combined with many ones in infinite combinations, the result is the internet, global communication, shared knowledge, and new universes of possibility. In a world of zeroes, the trick is to find your one.

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Dorothy Potter Snyder writes short fiction and translates literature from Spanish. Her work has appeared in *The Sewanee Review*, *Exile Quarterly*, *Reading in Translation*, *Three Lines Press*, and *Public Seminar*, among others. Her translation of stories by Mexican writer Mónica Lavín, *Meaty Pleasures,* will be published in 2021 by Katakana Editores.

[1] "Cuando estás metido en una realidad, un momento histórico importante, es difícil de verlo. La distancia, la lejanía, te da una cierta frialdad, con menos dolor." (Translation: D.P. Snyder) Interview with Leandro Estupiñán, OnCuba News: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cLZs0Mb6wo.