

The Cuban National Library after 1959: Shaping Literary Culture and the Provincial Imperative

Carlos Riobó

Associate Professor

The City College of New York-CUNY

Department of Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures

North Academic Center, Room 5/223

160 Convent Avenue, New York, NY 10031-9198

U.S.A

Abstract

This essay traces the history of the Cuban National Library, La Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (BNJM) and the system of satellite libraries that it implemented in the Cuban provinces. These provincial libraries were meant to facilitate the literacy campaign, but also to allow cultural idioms that 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 government. The essay asks how the provinces could authentically represent their mostly rural culture to people in Havana as something other than archetype, myth, or kitsch, and to a national institution that was once known in part for high-brow culture -- the BNJM. The piece examines what criteria and methodologies were used by the provincial, or satellite, libraries to choose and collect their cultural artifacts.

Keywords: Cuba, Library, Biblioteca Nacional José Martí

This essay traces the history of the Cuban National Library, *La Biblioteca Nacional José Martí* (BNJM) and the system of satellite libraries that the BNJM 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 that 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 government. When I first heard of the project in 1999, I was intrigued by the idea that the provinces could authentically represent their mostly rural culture to people in Havana as something other than archetype, myth, or kitsch, and to a national institution that was once known in part 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, while asking a more universal question: how do the culturally marginal learn to reify and to exhibit their provincial culture to the cultural elite? And, in so doing, do they either gain or lose political agency, or do they contaminate, denature, or even lose their own cultural values?

La Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (BNJM), was founded only a few months before the founding of the Cuban 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.

¹The 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.

In 1901, the island's governor, Leonard Wood, issued military order #234 in *la Gaceta de La Habana*, establishing the National Library and naming 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. This order designated Domingo Figarola Caneda as the library's first director, the director's salary, and 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 largo plazo 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)

(It is possible that the founding of the Biblioteca Nacional was seen by the intervening government ... as one of the long-term necessary factors in modernization or Americanization ... that was carried out in Cuba in order to prepare its evolution in accordance with the immediate plans for economic and ideological penetration). (All translations are my own)

Other Cuban writers such as Juan Pérez de la Riva and Emilio Setién Quesada 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 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 private individuals. By 1940, the constitution of the same year had foreseen the establishment of "una biblioteca en cada municipio" (a library in every municipality) but the project never entirely came to fruition (Ministerio de cultura 116).

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" (great majority) of people as to how to study their own culture. This latter endeavor was accomplished, as is well known, mostly through "la campaña de alfabetización" (the literacy campaign); 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" (an initial bibliographic attempt of a national nature, a catalogue titled *Movimiento editorial en Cuba 1959-60*, for the purpose of an exhibition of books, pamphlets, and magazines that presented the output of Cuban publishing companies, ..., with which the revalorization of Cuban culture was taken up again) (García-Carranza, 1999a, 23). The library's *revaloración* approved works through its list and tacitly disavowed those not on it. The BNJM's work would become a symbol of a revalorization of cultural works and it itself would become an institution that could be used by a much greater number of people after the Cuban Revolution.

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" (Reading is an exercise that expresses and maintains a nation's culture, its spiritual strength, and its values, its ability to tolerate and its development.

To read, although it may seem a solitary experience, is to participate) (*Cuanto antes mejor* 1). Participating, however, meant that these rural peoples needed to have cultural 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, because 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" (will be produced by the change in the social conditions and the new possibilities for the elevation of society's level of culture), 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" (social and economic Revolution must inevitably also produce a cultural Revolution). 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, whose first phase ended in 1961. According to UNESCO, as cited by the Cuban Libraries Support Group (based in the United Kingdom), "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. By the twenty-first century, there were well over 400 libraries according to the website of the BNJM's own Sistema Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas, or SNBP.

Until 1959, the National Library had no link to the country's few existing public libraries. The initial step that would establish the web of provincial libraries was taken in 1962 by the *Consejo Nacional de Cultura*. At this time the *Consejo* 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" (was a pilot, that is, employees from the provincial and municipal libraries arrived there to be trained) (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 (García Carranza and Jiménez López 124). The Library's directorship developed immediate goals, foreshadowing the web of satellite libraries in 1959. I will focus briefly on 4 of the 7 here as listed by García Carranza:

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

(to study and reevaluate our cultural tradition and most especially that of the XIX century.)

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 made by the new Cuban government of 1959 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 system.

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

(to give science the place it deserved within cultural activities)

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 and not per se. As Genshaft observes, "[las] principales tareas de las bibliotecas públicas [son las de] contribuir al progreso científico técnico" (the public libraries' chief tasks are those of contributing to technical and scientific progress) (15).

- 5) propiciar la superación cultural de las grandes mayorías, desarrollando intensamente actividades encaminadas a interesarles en *el buen arte y la lectura*. (to promote the cultural betterment of the masses, developing intensely activities that are targeted toward getting them interested in fine art and reading)
- 6) hacer desaparecer el gran desnivel cultural existente entre la vida cultural de la capital y el resto de la Isla. (to make disappear the great cultural disparity that exists between cultural life in the capital and on the rest of the island). (García-Carranza, 1999b, emphasis mine)

As we read these last two goals, we must ask ourselves: are these not notions of so-called high culture? Clearly, "buen arte," and raising cultural levels are designations and activities that mark these directives with a very particular bias toward cultural variants already privileged in Havana.

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

Provincial Libraries began collecting rare and valuable manuscripts pertinent to their regions since their founding (a few were founded in the early to middle nineteenth-century as we saw above). 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..." (rescue and safekeeping of all of the documents "where the founding of each of our cities and towns appears, and those that correspond to the different stages of the growth, splendor, decline, and recovery of life in that region") (Vega García, 1996, 4). These provincial Libraries were then, after 1959, supposed to be responsible for providing the Main Library with an account of their own history, and not the 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 that corresponded to prior to 1958 until years later. And it was not 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, and at least until 2001, BNJM started visiting the provinces to teach methodology seminars, and provincial library workers were sent to visit BNJM to be trained.

In 1990 BNJM hosted the second seminar as part of this methodology training, 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. 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.

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

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.

(All published books about the province and Cuban books that contained information about it [in a complete or partial manner], those of authors born in the province, or those which contained information about them; those books published on the island between the XVIII and XIX centuries were also considered because of their great value, many of which turn out to be scarce on the Market or even unique). (Vega García, 1996, 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) (Vega García, 1996, 7). Also, this was the century with most at stake politically. 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 Special Period in Time of Peace)—an extended period of economic crisis that began in 1989 primarily due to the collapse of the Soviet Union before slightly declining in severity towards the end of the decade—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 finally 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" (the lack of financing to defray the cost of lodging and travel was the fundamental element that interrupted the advising and the methodological visits to the provincial public libraries, and therefore all of the advances made in terms of the uniformity of the processes, of the application of the established guidelines was affected) (103). Despite this greater degree of autonomy in the 1990's, by now, provincial libraries had spent, on again and off again, about thirty 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. 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 impermanent nature and 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 of Potemkin village, there are clearly many others that do not. In any case, it is not the object of this essay to question the definition of a viable library environment—Cubans "tienen que resolver" (have to get by)—after all, but to question the power relationship between, on the one hand, the urban, literate world of prestige and the cultural elites and, on the other, that of the rural, oral sector.

This essay 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 we 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 we conclude is that the cultural systems of Havana and of a typical underdeveloped province of the Island were distinct and fairly closed. The simple act of becoming literate already changed a rural culture, when that culture had been oral and generationally transmitted in many 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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