

Domingo, el abuelo astral: Love and Beauty *Despite Everything*

The fulfilled human being accepts, appreciates, and glorifies life's joys *and* tribulations. This ironically inhuman task considers always the higher meaning of the good and the bad and never questions its providential origins. This outlook on life is tirelessly optimistic, kind-spirited, and immaterial. The co-protagonist of Cuban-American author Milton M. Martínez's fifth novel Domingo, el abuelo astral personifies this immortal perspective of life. Not surprisingly, this character is the deceased guardian angel of the other co-protagonist of the novel, his grandson, Leopoldo. Throughout this supernatural tale, the grandfather communicates with Leopoldo and his loved ones the lack of consequence that Cuba's dictatorial communist regime and its supposed haven for exile, the obsessively capitalistic United States, has for them in the end.

Each of the novel's chapters begins with the words "a pesar de todo" (despite everything), and these words finish Domingo, el abuelo astral. This expression signals the unconditional love that will always follow the grandfather angel and his entourage of protected family members. Throughout Domingo, el abuelo astral the narrator identifies examples of the miserable "everything" of Cuban life under Castro that the spiritual world renders trivial and powerless. The candid dialogues of the co-protagonists' dealings with their family members and friends offer glimpses into the daily rationing of food and electricity, the separation of tourists and Cuban bureaucrats from other Cubans, the distinction between Cuban "compañeros" (friends) and Cuban "ciudadanos," (citizens) and the interrogations and physical pursuit of suspected dissidents.

Amidst this stifling environment of constant vigilance and regulation, Leopoldo, as the living grandson of the grandfather who dies at the beginning of the novel and

thereafter tries to console his grandson with his knowledge of the spiritual world as a guardian angel, represents the Cuban who responds to governmental repression by creating his own consoling world of promiscuous sex. He takes control of his environment by maintaining sexual relationships with four different women at the same time. Only one woman is right for him sexually and spiritually, and Domingo tries slowly to convince him of this fact. Leopoldo's graduation from a serial dater to a committed husband mirrors on a terrestrial level his grandfather's transformation from a physical and powerless subject of Castro to a puissant being who effects change in the world he formerly inhabited.

The physical Cuba in which Domingo previously lived and in which Domingo, el abuelo astral takes place is one that continually inspires and begins to elevate its residents to the higher plane Domingo wishes they would unequivocally embrace. The novel contains various passages describing the inimitable natural beauty that pervades the island *despite* Castro's influence. These images act as visual renditions of the spiritual power of which the spectral Domingo is a constant, if not sometimes disturbing reminder. The splendor of the island's terrain contributes to the *despite everything* element that Domingo, el abuelo astral nurtures from start to finish. Cuba's pulchritude and Domingo's reassuring words pervade the text and fight the everyday realities of loveless sex and suffocating governmental authority.

Another method used to combat life under Castro's regime is the omnipresence of alcohol and tobacco. These substances and casual sex serve as temporary ways for Leopoldo and his family and friends to escape their everyday hell. Havana Club, Cuban cigars, and sexual exploration offer everyday coping skills to the Cuban people, and

Domingo works in opposition to this current in his quest to convince Leopoldo of a world possessing eternal plenitude and fulfillment. Domingo, el abuelo astral succeeds in profiling the subjugated realities of a typically Cuban family whose angelic grandfather rises to challenge that hopeless submission. The novel seeks to bring meaning to the words *despite everything* by first giving examples of the everything of Cuban existence under Castro and then progressively trying to communicate through a supernatural presence what possibilities lie beyond.

This beyond is death, and it is stated blatantly and between the lines of the novel that death is something never to be feared, for the absolute fright of death and its uncertainty produce absolute regimes of control such as Castro's. Domingo, el abuelo astral is a testament to the possibilities and hope that death can generate *despite* a stagnated life under communism *or* capitalism. Capitalism also forms a part of the *everything* Domingo resists, for the United States engages in the idolatry of material goods just as the Cuban populace deifies Castro. The novel explores the role of the United States as a false haven of exile for Cubans in its further retardation of their spiritual development. Death is every human being's perceived enemy, but Domingo's positive communication to his family through death gives them the gift of appropriating their eternal spiritual souls and discarding their volatile states of mind often brought on by their underlying fear of death.

The characters of Domingo, el abuelo astral undergo a sort of manic-depressive existence of false substance/sex-induced highs in response to everyday fear. Martínez's fifth novel portrays this kind of reality in a candid and often poetically descriptive light. Domingo, el abuelo astral follows Espacio y Albedrío (Colección Caniquí 1991) and

Sitio de Máscaras (Colección Caniquí 1987). The more recent novel recounts an escape from Cuba that brings its refugees to an island of supernatural wonder, and the other explores the potential danger of the masks constructed by citizens trying to survive Castro's rule in the 1970s and 1980s. Domingo, el abuelo astral concludes a trilogy of books by Martínez on coping with and responding to life under Castro. Domingo, el abuelo astral succeeds in painting a dynamic picture of the beauty and unconditional love of human existence *despite everything*, that is despite our inescapable enslavement as human beings to the death-fearing entities of capitalism and communism.

Elizabeth Smith Rousselle, Xavier University of Louisiana

January 11, 2001