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**Author:** Ewelina Szymoniak

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**Ewelina Szymoniak\***

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5117-8947>

# The brickwork, walls and ceilings of Havana: Representations of space in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's Novel *Nothing to Do*

## Initial remarks

One could venture a thesis, though that would be a major simplification, that for many Polish readers the first association with Cuba they have is the image of a holiday paradise, like the one served in tourist brochures – sandy beaches, palm trees bathed in sunlight with perfectly blue sea in the background, Havana's colonial architecture, old American cars, fervent rhythms, slender bodies, and rum... And all that experienced in between consecutive dips in the pool of a luxurious hotel. A smaller group might also imagine cigars, bearded revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro, and the American embargo – an image which in the minds of many may, however, be just as 'exotic' as the postcard-worthy scenes from the hot Caribbean.

Somewhat contrary to this stereotypical image of Cuba, I intend to familiarise Polish readers with a completely different depiction of the Cuban reality – one devoid of any attempts at idealising it. I consider this task to be more important as by being a researcher of Latin American literature I know that many readers do not even realise that in Poland they have access to works of literature which could offer them a broader view of what Latin America is, and in this specific case: what Cuba was by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I shall discuss *Nothing to Do* (*Nada que*

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\* Ph.D. in humanities, assistant professor; University of Silesia, Faculty of Philology, Institute of Romance Languages and Translation Studies; ul. Bankowa 12, 40-007 Katowice; ewelina.szymoniak@us.edu.pl

*hacer*) by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, a novel included in the author's 1998 *Dirty Havana Trilogy* (*Trilogía sucia de La Habana*). The Polish edition of the book, translated by Piotr Fornelski, was released in 2004.<sup>1</sup>

As one might assume, the Revolution has been a fixed point of reference for Cuban literature after 1959 regardless of where it was written (on the island or outside it) or of the political inclinations of its authors (pro- or anti-revolution). However, despite the common presumption that anything associated with Cuba must be ideologically marked, I shall ignore this context for the purposes of this article, limiting myself only to a few clarifications which I consider essential for understanding the issues discussed in this article. It should not be difficult as despite the fact that the first-person narrative in *Nothing to Do* attracts readers with autobiographical references – the protagonist/narrator shares with his creator not only his profession (a journalist), but also names (Pedro Juan) and the year of birth (1950) – Pedro Juan Gutiérrez avoided any references to politics in the novel. Rather, his intention was to dissect the Cuban society of 1995, transforming into novel material that which he knew from his own experience – the everyday lives of Havanans.

It is also clear that the depicted reality is often shocking, and the mode of its presentation – dispassionate, sometimes vulgar – only amplifies that impression. It is noteworthy that Pedro Juan Gutiérrez is considered one of the leading authors of the Latin American dirty realism (*realismo sucio*)<sup>2</sup>, which has a tendency to feature autobiographical accounts and political indifference combined with a selected and significant historic event which an author would only mention, as the starting point for the story. Other elements included: the aesthetics of violence, authenticity understood as a meticulous depiction of the least important elements of everyday reality as well as the use of colloquial language, and the motif of fighting hunger where the attempts to satisfy it do not leave any space for other desires.<sup>3</sup>

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1 P.J. Gutiérrez, *Brudna Trylogia o Hawanie*, trans. P. Fornelski, Zysk i S-ka Wydawnictwo, Poznań 2004. Since all the fragments of the novel quoted in this study came from that edition of the book, in order to avoid unnecessary footnotes further in the article I shall only indicate the page number where a particular fragment can be found.

2 Please note that *dirty realism* is a controversial notion among the researchers of Latin American literature due to its blurriness and, in turn, excessive diversity of writers whose works are defined using it. There are those who argue that it is a marketing device ensuring a higher level of sales of books labelled this way rather than a literary criticism category (A. Birkenmaier, "El realismo sucio en América Latina. Reflexiones a partir de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez", *Miradas. Revista del audiovisual* 2004, issue 6, [http://www.pedrojuangutierrez.com/ensayos\\_ensayos\\_anke%20birkenmaier.htm](http://www.pedrojuangutierrez.com/ensayos_ensayos_anke%20birkenmaier.htm) (accessed on: 27.02.2019).

3 E.L. Portela, "Con hambre y sin dinero", *Crítica* 2003, issue 98, pp. 61–80.

That historic event, which serves as the backdrop for the novel, was the economic crisis which Cuba suffered due to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the resulting dissolution of the COMERCON. The crisis reached its peak in 1993, causing a complete collapse of the quality of life of Cubans due to a sharp increase in the level of poverty and social inequality. In 1993–1996, there were attempts at implementing moderate reforms focused on market development, yet they were halted; they were resumed as late as 2003.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, it should come as no surprise that the search for modes of earning money to be able to buy something to eat, the search for food which in crisis-ridden Havana was in short supply, and going out to have a drink or something to eat when the chance arises, apart from sex, are the main forms of physical activity of the novel's protagonist, requiring him to constantly move around. In fact, he is convinced that only by being on the move can he protect himself against utter stagnation: "So I need to continue to go forward. Forward if I don't want to die." (173)

It might seem that in the case of a novel which mainly astounds/stupefies/shocks readers with the narrator's/author's exhibitionism (it is not without a reason that Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's works are compared to those by Charles Bukowski), the space in which the story unfolds is not one of the most important elements of the created world. And, indeed, the descriptions of space in *Nothing to Do* are almost non-existent. Nonetheless, I wish to devote this article to this particular issue. For me, the starting point is Michel de Certeau's argument that, just like in the case of language which consists of acts of speaking, the city is established through moving.<sup>5</sup> In other words: "Though such space as a street is organised and permanent, spaces exist only thanks to movements and speeds. They are activated by entanglements of movements occurring in them. Therefore, space is created."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the goal of the article is to analyse the space which Pedro Juan creates in his wanders around Havana, adjusting the movements of his body to the moving mass of other bodies. Apparently, it is a space riddled with walls, in which walls and ceilings, sometimes falling apart and other times invisible, acquire a deeper metaphorical meaning. The theoretical foundation of my study consists of the references to the sensory literary geography as framed by Elżbieta Rybicka, of Zygmunt Bauman's and John Urry's reflections on mobility, and of the discussion of the mode of creating the literary space by Javier del Prado Biezma, a Spanish literary scholar.

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4 C. Mesa-Lago, "Problemas sociales y económicos en Cuba durante la crisis y la recuperación", *Revista de la CEPAL* 2005, issue 86, p. 183.

5 M. de Certeau, *Wynaleźć codzienność*, trans. K. Thiel-Jańczuk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2008, p. 74.

6 J. Urry, *Socjologia mobilności*, trans. J. Stawiński, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2009, p. 81.

## The sweet and bitter image of Cuba/Havana in literature

The importance of the category of space for the Latin American novel has been indicated several times, and it was emphasised in an extremely emphatic manner by Carlos Fuentes, a Mexican, one of the major writers on the continent. He basically stated that the Latin American novel was *described* by writers who had seemed to thus approach the tradition of the literature of the Europeans who came to America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and became enchanted by the tropical landscape.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting, though, that the mode of depiction of space in the novel has rarely assumed the features of idealisation – from the descriptions of hostile nature in the so-called *novela telúrica* (the novel of the land) to the depressing vision of grand cities in the Argentinian *novela urbana* (the urban novel). The gradual liberation since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century of the Latin American novel from the limitations of the documentary function imposed on it over several centuries, and from the realism used by the function in a servile capacity, has led to the emergence of a phenomenon which Carlos Fuentes called a liberation through the imagination of the literary spaces parallel to the real space.<sup>8</sup> The vision of those spaces remained, however, mostly negative (vide the doomed Macondo, the location of the story of the best known 20<sup>th</sup>-century Latin American novel, one titled *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez).

In the essay titled *The City of Columns* and devoted to Havana's architecture, a Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier quoted Alexander von Humboldt, who thus described the capital of Cuba in the early-19<sup>th</sup> century:

The view of Havana when seen from the harbor is one of the most pleasant picturesque sights on the equinoctial coastline north of the equator. The city, celebrated by travellers from all nations, lacks the luxuriant growth of the banks of the Guayaquil River or the savage majesty of the rocky coasts of Rio de Janeiro, both ports in the southern hemisphere. But Havana has a poise that, in our climes, beautifies the landscape of cultured nature. Here the majesty of vegetal forms is mixed with the organic vigor that characterizes the Torrid Zone. When beckoned by such charming impressions, the European visitor forgets the danger lurking in the heart of the populous cities of the Antilles. He attempts to understand the diverse elements of a vast landscape, contemplating the fortresses crowning the rocks east of Havana harbor (an interior lake) surrounded by villages, haciendas, and palm trees rising to prodigious heights; this city, half hidden by a jungle of masts and ships' sails.<sup>9</sup>

7 C. Fuentes, "La nueva novela hispanoamericana (selección)", [in:] *Los novelistas como críticos*, N. Klahn, W.H. Corral (eds.), Tierra Firme, México 1991, p. 76.

8 C. Fuentes, *La gran novela latinoamericana*, Alfaguara, Madrid 2011, p. 295.

9 A. Carpentier, "Miasto kolumn", [in:] idem., *Przedtaky i wariacje*, trans. J. Petry-Mroczkowska, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1982, pp. 64–65 [English version: A. Carpentier, "The City

And even though Carpentier admitted two pages further that the German traveller complained about the poor layout of Havana's boroughs, he somewhat excused his complaining with his ignorance of the "great wisdom" of Caribbean builders, dictated by "primordial necessity – the tropical necessity of playing hide-and-seek with the sun, snatching surfaces, extricating shadows (...) an ingenious multiplication of *esquinas de fraile*."<sup>10</sup>

What is important, though, is that the quoted words of Humboldt seem to foreshadow a dichotomy which shall forever enter the image of Cuba, and which was perfectly concisely expressed in 1947 by Nicolás Guillén, a Cuban poet, in one of his poems: "My homeland is sweet on the outside, / and very bitter on the inside."<sup>11</sup> At this point, I should note that for Guillermo Cabrera Infante, one of the best known 20<sup>th</sup>-century Cuban writers, Havana was the poetic miniature of Cuba, its metaphor.<sup>12</sup>

Instances of admiration of Havana, "truly beautiful in the sun", when viewed from the outside, i.e. sea-ward and visiting perspective, can also be found in the novel titled *To Have and Have Not* (1937) by Ernest Hemingway.<sup>13</sup> This feeling was also expressed by Joseph Hergesheimer in *San Cristóbal de La Habana* (1920) when he described the premonition of a traveller as he approached Havana at dawn, viewing the "sparkling green of the island emerging from the sea"<sup>14</sup> – a conviction that what he was about to see would have particular importance for him. Guillermo Cabrera Infante summarised the way Havana influenced foreigners by referring to the words of Virgilio Piñera, a Cuban writer and playwright:

Havana is like a stimulant. At least that is something on which travellers who came here one after another since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century agreed. In what sense is it a stimulant? Well, in a very sensual way – in a frenetic dance of all five senses. Havana lets you taste, see, hear, touch and smell it.<sup>15</sup>

By juxtaposing Cuba's external sweetness with its internal bitterness, Nicolás Guillén referred to the history of the island, the natural resources and climate of which triggered the attention of the Spanish, and later Americans, which resulted

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of Columns", [in:] *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, Parkinson Zamora L., Kaup M. (eds.), Duke University Press, Durham 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> My own translation of a fragment of the poem *Mi patria es dulce por fuera* (vide N. Guillén, *Obra poética 2 t.*, Ed. Letras Cubanas, La Habana 1995) [English version translated from Polish.]

<sup>12</sup> G. Cabrera Infante, "Infamia dla wymarłej Hawany", [in:] idem., *Mea Kuba*, trans. M. Małkowski, Philip Wilson, Warsaw 2004, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> E. Hemingway, *Mieć i nie mieć*, trans. K. Tarnowska, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1968, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> As quoted in G. Cabrera Infante, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

in the transformation of that heaven on Earth into a hell for social groups which fell victim to exploitation. The poet, a supporter of the Revolution, surely did not expect that after 1959, i.e. when Fidel Castro came to power, the bitter aftertaste would only become more intensive.

In a 1988 essay titled *Infamia dla wymarłej Hawany*, Guillermo Cabrera Infante quoted a Spanish reporter who thus summarised his interview with Oscar Fernández Melle, the mayor of Cuba's capital holding his office by appointment of Castro's regime in 1976–1986: "A stroll down various streets and squares of Havana proves that revolutionary justice had a terrible impact on one of the most beautiful cities in the world" whose only fault was that it was in "1959 probably one of the most developed cities in Latin America."<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Castro's government made every effort to sell to foreigners, quite literally, the image of Havana as an exotic and alluring place. For Guillermo Cabrera Infante, a born and bred Havanan (even despite the many years he spent abroad, where he eventually died), such actions were loathsome.

The old Havana in colour photographs looks like some glittered whore. There could be no sadder an end than turning the city in something laconic, a city which used to be expressive, talkative even, which used to be called La Talkana, and it was the homeland of Talkanans. Now it is inhabited by Laconicans, and Havana has become a spectre city intended for narrow-minded tourists. Its beauty no longer lies in its vitality but rather in some colourful feathers of a stuffed bird – a parrot.<sup>17</sup>

The topos of an island has existed in literature for centuries, its constitutive features being isolation from the rest of the world with the expanse ("a wall") of the ocean; a miniature world. The idea grew that it should be viewed as heaven on Earth/a lost paradise on the one hand, and a space 'marked' with atavisms, i.e. encouraging all kinds of 'civilisation' projects on the other. One should not forget that the mode of presentation of a space, location or landscape is always matched by a specific point of view. In other words, their representation has its own poetics, which is particularly important when there emerges, like in the case of Cuba's history, imperialist interests and politics, which erect the walls of divisions between groups and individuals in relation to the authorities.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between geography, the authorities, and representation is what clearly explains the dual, i.e. sweet and bitter, image of Cuba/Havana in literature, depending on whose experience it reflects and who assigns meaning to it, i.e. the dominant group or the dominated group.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>18</sup> E. Baldwin, B. Longhurst, S. McCracken, M. Ogborn, G. Smith, *Wstęp do kulturoznawstwa*, trans. M. Kaczyński, J. Łoziński, T. Rosiński, Zysk i S-ka Wydawnictwo, Poznań 2004, p. 167.



These issues, the extent of which is vast, remain mostly outside the focus of this article. However, I would like to indicate that that which seems to be connecting all the quoted fragments of texts depicting Cuba/Havana – regardless of whether they were written by foreigners or Cubans – is the mode of ‘experiencing’ the place. This comes down to the use of terminology borrowed from Elżbieta Rybicka, “the literary articulation of the sensory perception of space”<sup>19</sup> (vide quotation from a text by Virgilio Piñera). This sensory perception is also present in *Nothing to Do* and it will constitute a major point of reference for my discussion of the symbolic meaning of space created in the novel.

### Public space – the walls of Havana

As Elżbieta Rybicka noted, “the special landscape formations (mountains, seas, deserts, valleys, lakes, etc.), and regions and places connect (...) with particular and identifiable sensory perceptions, which can form the territorial identities of areas.”<sup>20</sup> And even though, as she stressed, “the human *sensorium* activates as a whole”, which means that we experience locations with all our senses at once, “the literary sensory topographies can be subjugated using individual senses: hearing, taste, smell, sight, and touch.”<sup>21</sup>

When describing in *San Cristóbal de La Habana* the capital of Cuba, Joseph Hergesheimer indicated mainly its “voice”: “approaching in staccato, clearly, because (...) it never became silent, turning at night into not much different and not less intense noise.”<sup>22</sup> Alejo Carpentier, a Cuban, confirmed that feature of Cuban streets in *The City of Columns*:

The Cuban street was always animated and garrolous, with its town criers, officious peddlers, candy sellers announced by bells bigger than the fruit stand itself, the fruit carts with their headdresses made of palm fronds like a Palm Sunday procession, the hawkers of everything known to man.<sup>23</sup>

That image of Havana, “where everything was boiling, a crowd, a buzz”<sup>24</sup>, contrasted with that depicted by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s protagonist/narrator. The sound landscape typical of literary representations of the Cuban capital is replaced by a vision of Havana resembling, as indicated in the novel, “an area devastated by

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19 E. Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich*, Universitas, Kraków 2014, p. 244.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

22 As quoted in G. Cabrera Infante, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

23 A. Carpentier, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

24 G. Cabrera Infante, *op. cit.*, p. 96.



a calamity” (215): “I slowly walked through the city. On Saturdays, there are few buses in Havana. Basically, there are none. It’s best not to care. Not to care that (...) there is not enough food, that buses do not run, that there is no work. It’s better that way.” (134)

What is significant is that in his journey through the desolate city, the protagonist of *Nothing to Do* encounters only a couple of (narrow-minded? – vide quotation from a text by Guillermo Cabrera Infante) tourists.

Fat, huge, spongy, ugly, white, red, flaking, out of this world. That was what they looked like. (...) Both got dressed as if it was autumn in some cool city on a fjord. They were sweaty, bewildered and constantly looking around. They carefully read a guidebook and then viewed a historic ship and historic planes under historic trees. They understood nothing. The guy looked at me. (...) He could not stop staring at me (135).

That scene evokes associations with the thoughts of Guillermo Cabrera Infante regarding the album *La Habana*, published in Havana in 1986, which included photographs of the city taken by Manuel Méndez Guerrero.

(...) what would happen if someone came and photographed Madrid, Barcelona or Sevilla and if they took photographs of Las Ramblas and Paseo de Garcia, or Gran Via, or the solitary tower in Girona and no one would be there, not in the streets, or in the alleys, or the gateways, or behind fences – not a single hand on a splendid knocker – no one to see, not a single soul? As if cities became deserted. Because there is (in the album) not a single urban portrait with those who co-create the city alongside the buildings, i.e. its inhabitants. We would probably think about some calamity, the outcomes of some biological warfare, a bombardment with neutrino bombs. Or maybe about some Mediaeval city decimated by the plague. No one would, of course, think that the city turned into a museum. Havana, according to *La Habana*, in the photographs by Manuel Méndez is a collection of palaces, small palaces, buildings, houses, and streets between which there is no one (apart from an inconspicuous female model even more emphatically stressing solitude) because, simply put, no one lives there any more.<sup>25</sup>

On Saturday afternoons, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s Havana is empty. In the city dominated by extreme poverty, all the sellers and shoppers vanished from the streets; all people vanished from the streets. Even the foreign tourist seems surprised by the presence of another person in the street – of a Cuban, a Havanan; he looks at him the way one looks at exhibits in a museum... or a specimen in a zoo.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

Actually, Pedro Juan tries to use this situation and attempts to sell him for dollars some useless coins with the image of *Che* Guevara. Of course, it is most convenient to interpret the protagonist's behaviour as triggered by the intention to make profit off the foreigner's naivety; to make the basic money, because in that level of poverty no one even thinks about earning something on the side. If, however, one assumes – following Elżbieta Rybicka's argument – that within the literary frame the silence of space “is a void left by former life, a trace of absence”<sup>26</sup>, one can also notice in that (desperate?) gesture of the protagonist a need to interrupt the painful, because it dominates the surroundings, torpor; a need to break the silence – an attempt which irritates the tourist. (Is it shattering the sterile and museum-like vision of Havana which he formed when viewing *La Habana*?)

The cracks in the invisible wall which separates the Havana of the propaganda albums and tourists from the Havana of Havanans appear at night when the latter ones fill the streets in search of an escape (alcohol, sex) from their everyday life spent vegetating.

As John Urry aptly noted, there are places which “particularly invite strolling and possessing the place” – “one feels invited into its nooks and crannies, or one's eye is drawn along its grand vistas.”<sup>27</sup> Certainly Malecón – Havana's sea-side promenade, which spans from the San Salvador de la Punta castle in Old Havana all the way to the Almendares River which separates Vedado (an elegant borough and an administrative centre) from Miramar (a residential borough) – seems to have everything which is necessary to be one of those places. Yet it appears that the Havana seen in 1995 ‘from the inside’ deviates considerably from the idealistic image of Havana's coast, which in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was propagated by foreigners viewing it across the sea.

(...) we went to Malecón. There was a bunch of people. The humid July heat had everyone getting out of their lairs and seeking the cool of the sea, and at the same time having some fun and listening to music. Almost the whole Malecón was swamped in darkness and full of loud music. Actually, not really music but rather a terrifying cacophony of sounds coming from every direction. The sea was completely motionless, and the air was still. Not a single gust. Nothing. Only sticky heat, crowds of people, darkness and the stench of overflowing cesspools (184).

In Gutiérrez's text, the noise of Havana's streets at night (vide the quotation from Hergesheimer) is replaced by loud music, a terrible cacophony of sounds. The accumulation of references to other unpleasant sensory perceptions – of touch (wet

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<sup>26</sup> E. Rybicka, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

<sup>27</sup> J. Urry, *op. cit.*, p. 81. [English version: J. Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge, London 2000.]

and sticky heat, still air) and of smell (the stench of overflowing cesspools) – from which one can hardly escape as they are universal, in combination with the widespread darkness, creates a rather overwhelming image of a boulevard, breaking off with the concept of a place favourable for careless strolling ‘outside of time’ – stepping into brightly lit shops, cafés, and restaurants, an ecstasy resulting from the fact that one allows themselves to be carried by the crowd.<sup>28</sup>

When reporting on his night out in Malecón, the narrator/protagonist of *Nothing to Do* reveals how, in the face of crisis, Havanans “manipulate” the plan of their city, developing their “own «tactical» ways of walking and conversing” within its scope.<sup>29</sup>

We were sitting with my Mexican Yank in the arcade of Deauville Hotel and we were drinking beer one after the other. In downtown Havana, it is unsafe to sit outside on a Sunday afternoon and drink beer with a fat, reddish and very white guy. That sixty-year-old guy must have a load of cash. A whole pack crowded around us baring their teeth as they smelled money. So, they caught our scent and attacked. First, children started asking for coins. Then, obstinate whores appeared. Their pimps offered us rum, cigarettes and aphrodisiacs. All that smuggled and super cheap. While doing that, everyone tried to tell us their story. Poverty destroyed everything and everyone, from the inside. The stage of socialism and «don't bite the hand that feeds» ended. Now, there was a different rule: «Every man's for himself.» The hell with compassion and such non-sense. (183)

The image of the impoverished crowd pressing on Pedro Juan and his companion from every direction – a crowd whose main goal was to gain some money (through prostitution, theft, or begging) to simply survive another day – is, in my opinion, only amplified by the sense of being overwhelmed and suffocating gradually. It seems that Gutiérrez changed in his novel the connotations of elements within the inside/outside opposition. Paradoxically, this fact of staying in enclosed spaces – as opposed to staying on the promenade – offers the opportunity to breathe freely, to take in a breath of fresh air.

We stepped into a pizzeria by the hotel Saint John. Clear bright premises, few people, air-conditioned. Man, it was calm! You paid in dollars though, actually, not so much, but certainly it was not accessible for the mob ready to stab you for ten bucks. We ordered two pizzas with ham and beer. We took a deep breath and smiled. I like breathing fresh, dry, nicely smelling air. Then I have a sense of luxury, comfort and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> In this instance, I am using the terminology which Bulent Diken used to describe the behaviour of Turkish immigrants living in the Danish city of Aarhus (as quoted in J. Urry, *op. cit.*, p. 81).

general bliss. You are in a place with air-conditioning and you feel light and life-giving neutrons getting into your lungs. All protons stay outside with the humid heat, noise and mindless crowds. There are no crowds here. There are few people, everyone is dressed well, chubby and speaking in lowered voices (187).

As John Urry noted (after Michel de Certeau), unlike in the case of tactics of walking which “consist of the seizing of opportunities that arise through time”, and which “serve to constitute lived space and are improvisational and unpredictable” (vide obtrusive attempts to gain money in Malecón, where all that should flourish is social life), strategies of walking “involve disciplining and regimentation, based upon notions of what are proper activities and ways of walking within and through particular spaces.”<sup>30</sup> The perfect example of such strategies in Gutiérrez’s novel are those which result from one’s knowledge of the division of Malecón (and Havana) into zones of influence of specific social groups, as if delimited from one another with the walls of sexual and racial prejudice:

The section of Malecón which begins with Maceo park is the exclusive territory of fags and lesbians. A gay 100-meter stretch. *Free love*. Further, towards Vedado, everything changes. Gays are the borderline between the dangerous zone of black power and the relative calm in Vedado, which seems alien to that chaos. But that’s not true. The plague has spread everywhere. After all, we’re all inhabitants in some way. In Vedado, anxiety lurks underneath. Dig a bit and it explodes with the same ferocity as everywhere else (186–187).

Additionally, the existence of places such as the above-mentioned Deauville Hotel (the only hotel for tourists in Centro Habana, located on the coastal promenade) and the restaurants of the hotel called Saint John’s (where you can pay only in dollars) clearly indicates that movement around the Cuban capital is intermediated by the relations of power. It is them that erect ‘walls’, i.e. they decide where and when social groups can move.

An interesting point of reference is offered by a remark by Zygmunt Bauman regarding the modern city. According to the sociologist, one of its most typical elements is the so-called architecture of fear, which takes the form of, e.g., monitored residential complexes, with boom gates, guards, and CCTV at every gate. Bauman thus defined its tasks: “Heavily armoured trenches and bunkers intended to (...) keep them [strangers] away and bar their entry.”<sup>31</sup> *Nothing to Do* helps one realise that in the case of the crisis-ridden Cuban society walls emerging from poverty are

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 80–81.

<sup>31</sup> Z. Bauman, *Płynne życie*, trans. S. Kasprzysiak, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2007, p. 116. [English version: Z. Bauman, *Liquid Life*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2005.]

just as effective as walls built of stone; poverty understood as “depriving of material goods and physical inconveniences”, as well as “inability to use that «which life has to offer»”<sup>32</sup> (vide the privilege to eat pizza with ham in an air-conditioned establishment). In this instance, there occurs a reversal of the function of the elements of yet another opposition: us versus them. The more or less visible “walls”, “moats”, and “palisades” do not protect – as they traditionally used to in cities – the inhabitants of Havana from foreigners/newcomers but, rather, newcomers/tourists from Havanans. As Bauman explained: “A tourist encounters natives for a short time, and their contact is superficial. (...) He did pay in advance for his freedom from moral duties (...)”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, tourists are not bound by the “social maps” devised by the inhabitants of a place (those only apply to natives); they can assign own meanings, seek in them opportunities for experiencing adventures, consider only that which they like as the space which they visit is for them soft and pliable.

And if that “pliability” of space in which they remain was that which differentiated a tourist from a vagabond, “for whom [in turn] the «hardness» of reality is not questionable as everywhere he is he must earn a living, i.e. «submit to necessities», and he can only avoid unpleasant things if he resorts to escaping”<sup>34</sup>, Gutiérrez’s Havanans have much in them of vagabonds.

At this point it is worth mentioning that when he wrote about the tourist and the vagabond as the metaphors of postmodern life, Zygmunt Bauman noted that despite what those notions suggest in their original meanings, “one can be (and often is) a tourist and a vagabond without ever travelling physically far”<sup>35</sup>, one does not even have to move at all. In other words, despite that movement at the core of Bauman’s concept, it can be considered in terms of its potential, a degree of mobility, the right to choose a place where one wishes to remain.

For Cubans “bound by local relations”<sup>36</sup> (island, regime, lack of money) who cannot freely move and are thus forced to accept begrudgingly every change occurring where they live/vegetate, their actual living space shrinks and closes quickly. During the day, many inhabitants of Havana do leave it, yet they do not venture far beyond the city limits. During a crisis debilitating the country, when

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32 Z. Bauman, “Bycie ubogim w społeczeństwie konsumpcyjnym”, [in:] *Bauman o popkulturze. Wypisy*, M. Halawa, P. Wróbel (eds.), Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw 2008, pp. 295–296.

33 Z. Bauman, *Etyka ponowoczesna*, trans. J. Bauman, J. Tokarska-Bakir, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 1996, p. 329.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

35 Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warsaw 2000, p. 150 [English version: Z. Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1997].

36 I am using an expression borrowed from Z. Bauman, “Mobilni i niemobilni w społeczeństwie konsumpcyjnym”, [in:] *Bauman o popkulturze. Wypisy*, M. Halawa, P. Wróbel (eds.), Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw 2008, p. 291.

the government which used to do anything to control everything now left all its citizens to fend for themselves, in order not to die of hunger they need to go to the countryside in search of food, any excess of which they later sell – illegally, since this is forbidden.

The train left a few minutes past six. Hungry and tired, I slept the night in the dark, dirty and urine-drenched cart. It was crowded. Many people were returning to Havana with hens, pigs and bananas. With bags full of rice and other provisions. Only me like some utter fool were carrying nothing. Damn it, whenever I thought about that, I felt like slamming my head on the wall. I must have been looking the wrong way. I could have found something: lemons, oranges, anything to at least make up for the ticket. There, we were released into a jungle. We were driven out with a kick in the ass (145–146).

One could venture a conclusion that by shuttling between Havana and the countryside, Pedro Juan and thousands like him only seemingly displayed an ability to move; actually, they were not moving anywhere, and the motion was rather caused by the earth on which they lived and which kept “moving away from under their feet.”<sup>37</sup> The stench of overflowing cesspools in Malecón, the urine-drenched train carts, darkness, the pressing crowd, the hustle... – always the same unyieldingly sticky and claustrophobic surroundings. As Bauman noted, unlike in the case of the inhabitants of the first world who – while being able to cover any distance without delay and in no time – keep living in time, “in the second world [the world of the non-mobiles] people live in space: languid, extensible, inviolable; a space which binds time and takes away their ability to control it”<sup>38</sup>; a space from which no one can escape.

### Private space – the walls and ceilings of everyday existence

In *Nothing to Do*, what is divided and limited is not only space in the public sphere, but also the private one – with the difference that while in the case of the former one the walls are completely real though often invisible and conventional, the latter one is, quite literally, a series of “stuffy, dark and terribly dirty rooms in sordid and half-ruined tenements.” (166)

One needs to remember that one of the main goals of the Revolution was to eliminate the class structure of the Cuban society. To achieve this, already in the initial years the authorities nationalised, expropriated, and confiscated private

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

property, seizing it for the state.<sup>39</sup> As a result, there formed a space for various instances of negligence, and the economic crisis of the early years of the 1990s ruined the residential sphere. In his novel, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez did not avoid this issue.

The lift is not working again, and it's completely dark in the stairwell. Everyone keeps stealing light bulbs, vandalising the lift, and building more and more illegal mezzanines and storage rooms to somehow fit. This whole building of ours will some day collapse. I can't stand this misery anymore. Between the fourth and fifth floor those idiots of ours shitted on the stairs. That stench of fresh shit is truly unbearable. (...) Our house used to be an elegant eight-storey building with two Boston-style façades, one from San Lázaro, the other from Malecón and the sea. Today, it looks like an aristocrat who has gone to the dogs. (...) our naive residents' council wants to close the gate to finally have peace on the stairs. But the problem is that the whole building is falling apart. Literally, not figuratively. It stands right on the sea and it crumbles due to the wind and salt spray. There is no one to repair it (216–217).

The image of Gutiérrez's house has little to do with stopping, remaining, feeling calm, being content, being in one's own place, which are all things that Martin Heidegger listed as the basic elements of this place and which differentiate it from the public space.<sup>40</sup> It is quite the opposite:

The stench of shit and urine coming from the toilet was truly unbearable. After four days without water in a house with two hundred residents and in that heat a person can really go mad (...) I closed the door to the flat and walked out to stand a bit in the street (164–165).

What certainly draws one's attention in both of the quoted descriptions is the writer's references to smells, which in the case of *Nothing to Do* transform into, as Elżbieta Rybicka would call them, "a dominant feature of the literary representation" of space, or even into Gutiérrez's "authorial signature."<sup>41</sup>

The "shitty" "cubbyholes" (both words are used in the novel), where it is difficult to breathe because of the exhalations poisoning the air, become similar to, in my opinion, cages. I associate them with traps, the walls of which move inwards, overwhelming the individuals living inside. And even though Pedro Juan confesses at some point

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<sup>39</sup> M. Fernández Pérez, "La igualdad como fundamento y propósito de la justicia social y del desarrollo en Cuba", *Cuba posible*, 25.10.2017, <https://cubaposible.com/igualdad-justicia-social-del-desarrollo-cuba/> (accessed on: 19.12.2018).

<sup>40</sup> J. Urry, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>41</sup> E. Rybicka, *op. cit.*, p. 249.



that he likes to sit by the door in closed rooms, because “when something happens, you can leave immediately” (150), it is actually impossible to run away from the stench as it is volatile and dynamic, and it “attacks” from every side; moreover, it pours out of houses into streets (the stench of overflowing cesspools). It floods the entire island (urine-drenched carts). (Is the sea the ultimate natural limit of its spread?)

As Rybicka stressed, the sensory literary geography assumes that every “sensory experience carries additional meanings; it is not only a passive reception by the senses, but also a source of information and meanings.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, allow me to venture a thesis that in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s novel the stench becomes a literary articulation of the (claustrophobic?) sensation of suffocation experienced by Havans/Cubans. In this context, it seems interesting that references to unpleasant olfactory perceptions often emerge (surprisingly?) also in Zygmunt Bauman’s texts when he wrote about the factors stratifying the modern society. For instance, he noted that: “There exists [in the society] «apartheid à rebours»: some can afford to leave the dirty and stinky areas leave there those who cannot afford to relocate.”<sup>43</sup>

The scholar argued that when the doors are closed shut from the inside, every house becomes a prison.<sup>44</sup> And I would add: for Cubans deprived of the freedom to choose their life paths, the crisis-ridden homeland is also a prison.

The ever-prolonging interruptions in power and water supply, and food and medicine shortages make the fact of staying at home basically unbearable for many inhabitants of Cuba. “They can’t just like that forget about people. This whole house is falling apart. There is no water, no gas, no food, nothing. What does that mean? How long are we supposed to live like this?” (175) one of Pedro Juan’s former neighbours asked, one who in the past (which, in my opinion, is meaningful) was a functionary of Castro’s regime.

No wonder that in such circumstances many Cubans dream about leaving their house/island. Some actually do abandon it. Zygmunt Bauman explained that in the imagination of a wanderer, be it a tourist or a vagabond, fuelled by longing, a house is a “retreat from the hurly-burly where one could shelter, where one could be unambiguously, unproblematically *chez soi* – draw the curtains, close the eyes and plug the ears to new sensations, shut the door to new adventures.”<sup>45</sup> What is interesting to me is that in the analysed novel, those dreams about a home always somehow also connect with access to fresh air. Zulema, one of Pedro Juan’s lovers, who lives hoping that the father of her child will bring her to Miami – a resident of “a tiny room, four by four meters”, “a disgusting hovel” the only “small window” of which overlooks “a corridor which stinks of dog shit, where all the time neighbours yell,

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42 E. Rybicka, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

43 Z. Bauman, “Mobilni...”, p. 289.

44 Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesność...*, p. 148.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

argue and fight” (207) – talks about her nephew who lives in Sweden and “has [there] his own house with an electric extractor of smells in the kitchen” (196). Robertico, who came to Havana from Germany on holiday to spend a few days with his family, in a “stinking rattrap without water filled with a heavy, humid and suffocating heat” (166), brings with him many packages and cardboard boxes and inside them, listed first by the narrator, a fan (actually useless as the power is out).

Unfortunately, for most Havanans, the crumbling walls and ceilings define the only possible space of residence. They have nowhere to go as they will not be accepted anywhere. As is usually the case with emigrants and refugees, to once again quote Zygmunt Bauman,

(...) there pile [in front of them] ever higher walls of immigration control, rules of permanent stay, the policies of «clean streets» and «zero tolerance». Moats separating them from their longed-for places and their dreamt salvation deepen, and all bridges prove to be drawbridges at the first attempt to cross them. (...) they travel stealthily, often illegally, and it is not rare for them to pay for a place in the crowded third class of a stinking ship unfit for sea travel more than what those first ones pay for the gold-leaf luxury of the «business class.»<sup>46</sup>

And sometimes it is also the case that even if they manage to make their way into the “nice, bright and clean” (196) world, they cannot live there as its “expanse bewilders [them]”, while they “need one small space which they would be able to grasp.” (215) It turns out that life in a dirty and stinky “cage” makes a permanent mark on the minds of many people.

Carlitos, the child of chaos, telephoned his mother and his brother every day. He cried. He could not sleep at night. He was not able to live in that Miami. He was totally not happy with his *American dream*. He spent a fortune on telephone bills, and he could not muster the will or power to do anything. He simply couldn't. He carried inside him the entire despair of chaos. His heart was as if closed behind iron bars. (159)

## Over the city – the space of personal freedom

Pedro Juan (as one of the few if not the only one) does not think about escaping Cuba: “People think [he concluded] that only someone brave can float a truck inner tube to Miami. Someone like that is not brave. They are simply suicidal.” (207) Even though he, too, is overwhelmed with the reality, he makes every effort to survive:

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<sup>46</sup> Z. Bauman, “Mobilni...”, p. 293.

People now are dirty, hungry, tattered and no one wants to talk. Everyone has just one problem: how to get some food and money to survive.

(...) But I'm still keeping my spirit up. That's good. You cannot lose hope. When you don't have it, soon you'll be worm food. I put the spiny lobster in the fridge, I poured myself a glass of water with sugar and I went to sleep. I was terribly tired.  
(225)

For him, a method for surviving – in physical as well as spiritual terms, strenuous, day by day – becomes, in my opinion, the complete acceptance of his fate as a vagabond, a person who can “plan the route for today or tomorrow at the most”, for whom “it is only important not to lose his ability to move, and it is also important to extract from every stop as much benefit as he can.”<sup>47</sup>

Contrary to how it is with pilgrims who always move in a straight line, the routes of vagabonds twist and turn; and the more limited the space through which they can move is (vide the remark on Cubans being bound with their local bonds), the more entangled these routes are. It is interesting that the route which formed as Pedro Juan wanders through Havana is defined not only by horizontal motion but also by motion within the vertical axis; many times in the novel there is talk of the need to ascend or descend stairs [“I barely managed to climb that eighth floor of mine” (146); “I descended down on foot. The lift had been out of order for years. Twelve floors” (175); “Those ten floors without a lift are really hard” (195)]. I am convinced that the space which opens in front of the protagonist/narrator of *Nothing to Do* after ascending those many floors is not meaningless for the interpretation of Gutiérrez's novel.

When discussing the topic of creating space in literature, Javier del Prado Biezma has indicated that it suggests the character of a relationship between the authorial *Self* and the material reality represented by this space.<sup>48</sup> In doing that, the Spanish researcher established a series of significant oppositions which help define this character: natural space versus social space, private space versus public space, imagined space versus real space, vertically developed space versus horizontally developed space, space constructed of soft matter versus space constructed of hard matter. Clearly, in the case of the novel analysed in this article, it is always dominated by the latter element of each opposition.

Therefore, the Havana in *Nothing to Do* is a metaphor of oppression, captivity of an individual – a space which the inhabitants of the city would like to dominate; which they would like to rule, but they cannot. Not only its streets, but also its flats prevent them from forgetting about the status of individuals in the Cuban social

<sup>47</sup> Z. Bauman, *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej*, Instytut Kultury, Warsaw 1994, p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> J. del Prado Biezma, *Análisis e interpretación de la novela. Cinco modos de leer un texto narrativo*, Editorial Síntesis, Madrid 2000, p. 41.

hierarchy. According to Zygmunt Bauman, time has no authority over excessively real space which limits the non-mobile inhabitants of the world.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, when reading Gutiérrez's novel, one might have the impression that movement conveyed by the swift narrative is unhealthy and unnecessarily accelerated as, in fact, the only thing that Havansans do is to linger down the streets of the city day after day in their emaciated bodies. Stinking and dark hallways and stairwells, stuffy and small flats where "when it rains (...) pieces of the ceiling fall on his heads", buildings which "will go to shit any moment" (173) – they all reflect the spirits of the people who inhabit them.

(...) that well-developed instinct of self-preservation is one of the faces of poverty [Pedro Juan argued]. But poverty has also other faces. Probably the most visible one is meanness and a somewhat narrowing of the spirit. You become a pathetic, greedy and conniving character. Your only concern is to survive. The hell with nobleness, solidarity, kindness, and pacifism. (161)

And this touches upon the core issue. Even though the rooms in which Pedro Juan lives here and there are the same dingy cubbyholes as all other flats presented in *Nothing to Do*, 'his' rooms possess a certain discerning feature: they are located on the roofs of buildings. This has, of course, its drawbacks as "the roof is made of eternit, so [it's] like in an oven" (217), but the advantage is a terrace, and in it sometimes a breeze and always an excellent view: of the city, the sea...

According to Javier del Prado Biezma, the symbolic reach of the literary representation of the natural landscape is likely to constitute a counterbalance for the image of the city; it is a space of an escape from the reality, a metaphor of the *Self*, freedom, and even God.<sup>50</sup> Then, when one combines it with the height which symbolises dreams escaping upwards, there emerges the effect of a release from material weight. These assumptions are actually reflected in the analysed novel:

I lived at that time in an extension on a flat roof of a high-rise near Malecón. On the twelfth floor and some sixty meters above the street. I liked to sit on the very edge of the roof dangling my legs in the air. It was simple. All you had to do was jump off of the roof onto the eaves: a beautiful eaves supported by stone gargoyles shaped as griffins and birds-of-paradise. That building of ours was old, very strong and in a Boston style, yet it was deteriorating rapidly. It was being vandalised by all those people cooped up in it somewhat trying to survive.

(...) So in the evening I jumped off onto the eaves and sat with my legs dangling over the street. I enjoyed the coolness and watched the city deep in darkness. Those were

<sup>49</sup> Z. Bauman, "Mobilni...", p. 292.

<sup>50</sup> J. del Prado Biezma, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

fantastic moments. I dreamt of jumping off, flying like a bird and feeling the freest person alive.

(...) It was a beautiful moon-lit night, a full moon, blue sky, smooth still sea, and almost deserted Malacón. I remained on that eaves like a bat, ecstatic, suspended above a void and not thinking about anything. It is wonderful to hang in the air when from the sea a cool June breeze blows towards you, and it is almost complete silence around. Then, you really don't think about anything. I can think about nothing because I feel weightless, I flow, I permeate into myself and I desire nothing. I am alone with myself. It is a true miracle among all those storms and catastrophes. A miracle happening inside me. (178)

Being “crushed by shit” (160) and “stuck in shit” (209), Pedro Juan finds the last stronghold of his freedom in a roof-top terrace or, actually, outside it, i.e. on its eaves where the view of open space is not obscured by any brickwork or wall. This surrounding is so personal that the fact of him just being there enables him to communicate with the intimate dimension of himself. Only there, in solitude, can he become himself: his internal conflict between matter and spirit subsides, a conflict which normally causes him to feel “torn”, “split into pieces” (140), like the city through which he travels.

Unfortunately, a careful analysis of the description of the views stretching in front of his eyes from the terrace indicates that the sense of freedom in the space “above the city” is deceptive.

At first glance, the first description is dominated by rather pleasant sensory perceptions, both visual and auditory ones.

I poured myself a glass of rum and I sat on the terrace. The sea is completely smooth, and the setting sun paints the fort in El Morro golden. A huge and empty tanker is setting off from the port. I can see three sailors doing something on the bow. They are collecting some things. I can hear a delicate hum of machines. The ship is so huge and moves so slowly that I can almost feel the vibrations of its metal plates. It is green-and-red all around and it moves away quickly. It disappears in the late evening fog. A guy dressed all white stands on the third deck. He leans out over the railing and watches the beautiful golden city. I, too, am watching the green-and-red ship which is moving further away and dissolves in the fog (127–128).

That seemingly innocent image hides something disturbing; even more so as the motif appears several times throughout the novel: in Gutiérrez's text, the sea is always “smooth like a tabletop” (217). If one adds to this an almost permanent water shortage in Havana, the first association one has is a standstill, a lack of flow. In one of his poems, the already mentioned Nicolás Guillén referred to blood as

a “huge sea, / which washes overs all beaches”<sup>51</sup>, thus referring to the role the ocean has played in Cuba’s history, i.e. of a channel which brought to the island all the elements which shaped its culture. In *Nothing to Do*, the Caribbean Sea – “still” (189) when viewed from the terrace or Malecón, yet rough and dangerous when trying to cross it in a boat (217) – transforms for Cubans into an impenetrable barrier. The huge and empty ship, traditionally a literary symbol of freedom, is close yet inaccessible when entering the port; the expanse of the open sea towards which it moves disappears, just as it does, into the fog. This description could not be much farther from the image of “a forest of sails and rigging”, mentioned by Alexander von Humboldt enchanted by the view of Havana’s port. The contrast between the only passenger on the ship, dressed white and admiring the city bathed in the light of the setting sun – and the emaciated Pedro Juan watching him from the terrace of a dilapidated and dirty Havana high-rise – requires one to think about moats which cannot be levelled, about isolation, desolation, and a lack of perspectives.

The second description seems to offer arguments confirming this interpretation:

From my place at the top, you can see the whole city deep in darkness. There is no wind, so still black thick smoke hangs over the stacks of the Tallapiedra power plant. The stench of ammonia fills the city silvered by the full moon glistening over that heavy and stinky cloud. There is almost no movement in the streets, a car drives through Malecón from time to time. There is silence everywhere, and calmness, and all you can hear is hollow drumming in the distance. I like this place. I can watch from it the silver sea which spreads all the way to the horizon. But I finally can’t stand that ammonia smoke. I go back into the flat and close the door. It’s still hot. The heat won’t subside until the morning. I only leave a small window from the south side opened. From there you can also see the whole city, dark and quiet suffocating below in the silver light of the moon. It looks as if it was bombarded and abandoned. It is falling apart more and more, but it is beautiful, this damn city, where I loved so much and hated just as much. (218–219)

It seems that the omnipresent stink reaches even the roof of the twelve-storey building, forcing Pedro Juan – just as one would herd an animal into a cage – to return to his flat. This might be surprising considering the fact that, as John Urry noted, high-rises erected at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Chicago were built with the specific intention to isolate their inhabitants from the stench inseparably associated with the meat industry in that case, while enabled them to view the whole city from above.<sup>52</sup> This leads me to the conclusion that if the terrace is the last place

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<sup>51</sup> Own translation of a fragment of the poem *Poema con niños* (vide N. Guillén, *Obra poética* 2 t., Ed. Letras Cubanas, La Habana 1995) [English version translated from Polish.]

<sup>52</sup> J. Urry, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

where the “horizon of own imagination [is] the only limit of freedom”<sup>53</sup> of the protagonist, then the suffocating smoke from the power plant would be a metaphor of the fear of the Cuban regime of losing its rule over individuals: “There above [– as Pedro Juan commented in another place in the novel –], everyone is terrified that some tiny area of personal freedom may suddenly expand and cover the sphere of ideology.” (169)

## Conclusion

In the 1986 essay titled *Semiology and the Urban*, Roland Barthes wrote that contrary to panoramic or functional studies, individual and personal interpretations of cities are those which distance themselves from the official meanings as only someone who truly travels the streets can appropriate some fragments of the urban text to later update them based on their own subjective view.<sup>54</sup> In other words, Barthes identified and added value to those visions of urban space in which “a glance, physical contact and the experience of an inhabitant of a city introduce dialogic interferences, (...) in a very permanent manner modifying and complementing the semantic load of the original signs.”<sup>55</sup>

*Nothing to Do* by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez meets, in my opinion, all the requirements to be one of such visions. First of all, Pedro Juan, the novel’s narrator/protagonist, who can be considered the author’s literary alter ego, does not describe Havana from the perspective of an outside observer, but, rather, by being its inhabitant who moves through its streets, who co-creates its space. He fulfils, in my opinion, a dual role. On the one hand, as I have indicated several times, he is Bauman’s vagabond, yet, on the other, considering his perception of the world and the level of awareness, he resembles, at least in terms of his attitude, the figure a 19<sup>th</sup>-century *flâneur*, an urban stroller: “The *flâneur* both seeks the essence of a place while at the same time consuming it. (...) scrutinising, detective work and dreaming set the *flâneur* apart from the rush-hour crowd.”<sup>56</sup> Secondly, the autobiographical element of the novel<sup>57</sup> enables one to read it within a category based

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53 Z. Bauman, *Dwa szkice...*, p. 22.

54 R. Barthes, “Semiology and the Urban”, [in:] *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Semiotics*, M. Gottdiener, A. Ph. Lagopoulos (eds.), Columbia University Press, New York 1986, p. 95.

55 Own translation into Polish [and from Polish into English] of a fragment of an article by L. Guerre, “Género y cartografías significantes en los imaginarios urbanos de la novela latinoamericana”, [in:] *Más allá de la ciudad letrada: crónicas y espacios urbanos*, Boris Muñoz, S. Spitta (eds.), Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Pittsburgh 2003, p. 287.

56 J. Urry, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

57 Anke Birkenmaier even mentioned a special kind of a play of identity happening between the novel’s author and its protagonist. By styling his own biography to emphasise how similar it was to that of the protagonist, Gutiérrez seemed to intend to convince readers that he was



on the experiences of everyday life of the creator of the chronicle. And thus, Pedro Juan/Pedro Juan Gutiérrez seems an individual pushed to the social margin of the city who lives there, and, at the same time, a chronicler of that life.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, *Nothing to Do* is a chronicle which *lives* in Havana, as well as a critical discourse about it. José Antonio Masoliver Ródenas saw in Gutiérrez's novel a politically neutral proof of demise<sup>59</sup>; that would be, in my opinion, the demise of the city, but also of the Cuban society. And even though the writer did not argue in his work openly in favour of any ideology, I recognised in the novel a criticism of the system at the level of the creation of the city's literary space.

When discussing the challenges of sociology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, John Urry stressed the need to develop for it a new programme which would study the "diverse mobilities of peoples, objects, images, information and wastes; and the complex interdependencies and social consequences of, those diverse mobilities."<sup>60</sup> In Havana at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Pedro Juan Gutiérrez saw it, constant moving may have been the main kind of activity of the inhabitants of the city, but it surely had nothing to do with the mobility discussed by Urry – the one which crosses social borders in completely new space-time structures. On the contrary, it occurs within strictly defined and limited structures which undergo minor modifications – ones based on the tactics of walking employed by Havanans, yet clearly enforced by the Castro regime. For the purposes of this article, I termed those structures (sometimes invisible but still very tangible) as 'walls'. If public space were in the context of the analysed novel (and, in fact, not only this particular context) a metaphor of that which is social, the private space of a house would symbolise the individual sphere, a sphere of an individual's life's perspectives – more and more limited in the case of Cubans. In my article, I termed that lack of perspectives as walls and ceilings (which are falling apart). It is inside the space defined by all those walls and ceilings that the battle for survival takes place. The more conscious individuals, like Pedro Juan, still engage in a struggle for dignity, yet for the rest it is lost from the start.

I need to point out that the key role in shaping space in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's novel is fulfilled by, in my opinion, references to olfactory perceptions which, in principle, rather "do not fit [clearly] the Western aesthetic theory."<sup>61</sup> Gutiérrez,

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the protagonist's *doppelgänger* (A. Birkenmaier, *op. cit.*) Also José Antonio Masoliver Ródenas indicated the laconic nature of the information included in the author's biosketch on the book [vide J.A. Masoliver Ródenas, "Oficio: revolcador de mierda", *Revista de Libros*, 1.08.1999, <https://www.revistadelibros.com/articulos/trilogia-sucia-de-la-habana-de-pedro-juan-gutierrez> (accessed on: 18.12.2018)].

58 E. Whitfield, "Autobiografía sucia: The Body Impolitic of *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*", *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 2002, issue 36.2, pp. 329–353.

59 J.A. Masoliver Ródenas, *op. cit.*

60 J. Urry, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

however, was perfectly aware of the symbolic load carried by them. First of all, which is clear in Zygmunt Bauman's arguments, the 'stigma' of smell is the basic criterion of social stratification, erecting walls of social divisions. Secondly, the stench, which can penetrate every part of space, accurately represents something from which there is no escaping, so it also connotes the sense of helplessness and suffocation (similar to the walls of a prison cell). On top of that, references to smell – which enables, like no other sense, a completely non-intermediated perception of the surrounding world – appeals to an experience-based community, which is understandable to every reader regardless of whether they are Cubans or people who know nothing about Cuba.

Still musty water, captivity, immobilisation, stench. Decomposition and death. A stuffed parrot (vide quotation from the text by Cabrera Infante), a dead city. Are "cities like dream [not] built of desires and fears, even if the thread of their speech is concealed, rules are absurd, perspectives are illusive, and everything hides another one inside?"<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The quotation from a text by Italo Calvin is the motto with which Gutiérrez opened *Nothing to Do*.

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Ewelina Szymoniak

## Mury, ściany i sufity Hawany Reprezentacja przestrzeni w powieści Pedra Juana Gutiérreza *Nic do roboty*

### *Streszczenie*

Ameryka Łacińska jest kontynentem, na którym stawiano i burzono przez wieki niezliczone mury podziałów etnicznych, klasowych, politycznych. Społeczeństwem, które boleśnie doświadczyło tego, czym one są, czym jest izolacja, są Kubańczycy, dla których rajską niegdyś wyspa stała się klatką. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie sposobu, w jaki sposób kreuje literacką przestrzeń Hawany, przedstawiając codzienne życie jej mieszkańców, pisarz należący do pierwszego pokolenia Kubańczyków dorastających w rewolucyjnej rzeczywistości – Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. W powieści *Nic do roboty* [*Nada que hacer*] (1998), niewidzialne, lecz doskonale namacalne mury dzielące Hawanę na strefy wpływów różnych grup społecznych, rozpadające się ściany i sufity mieszkań nie są jedynie dowodem wszechobecnej biedy, ale zdają się stanowić również metaforę relacji władzy w obrębie społeczeństwa i jego stanu ducha. Z drugiej strony, autor pokazuje, w jaki sposób świadoma jednostka próbuje wybudować wokół siebie intelektualny mur, który odgrodziłby ją od pozbawiającej woli działania nicości. Analiza oparta została o koncepcje mobilności socjologów Zygmunta Baumana i Johna Urry'ego, szkic Elżbiety Rybickiej dotyczący sensorycznej geografii literackiej oraz rozważania Javiera del Prado Biezmy o sposobach przedstawiania przestrzeni w literaturze.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przestrzeń, literatura, włączęga, krajobraz zapachowy, opresja, Hawana, Gutiérrez

## The brickwork, walls and ceilings of Havana: Representations of space in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's Novel *Nothing to Do*

### Summary

Latin America is a continent where for centuries various walls of ethnic, class, and political divisions were erected and demolished. Cubans, for whom the once paradise island became a cage, are a society which painfully experienced what those walls are as well as what isolation is. The aim of the article was to discuss the way in which Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, a writer who belongs to the first generation of Cubans who grew up in the Revolutionary reality, creates the literary space of Havana by depicting the everyday lives of its inhabitants. In the novel titled *Nothing to Do* [*Nada que hacer*] (1998), the invisible yet terribly tangible walls dividing Havana into zones of influence of various social groups, and the disintegrating walls and ceilings of flats are not the only proof of the universal poverty – they also seem to constitute a metaphor of the relations of power within the society and of the condition of its spirit. Furthermore, the author indicates how a conscious individual tries to build around themselves an intellectual wall which could separate them from the void which deprives one of the will to act. The analysis was based on the concept of mobility by Zygmunt Bauman and John Urry, on a study by Elżbieta Rybicka regarding the sensory literary geography, and on a discussion by Javier del Prado Biezma of the methods for presenting space in literature.

**Keywords:** space, literature, vagabond, landscape of scents, oppression, Havana, Gutiérrez

**Ewelina Szymoniak** – Ph.D.; employed at the Department of Canadian Studies and Literary Translation Studies, Institute of Romance Languages and Translation Studies, University of Silesia in Katowice. In her studies, she focuses on Latin American literature at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; she is also interested in the relationships between individuals and societies in the postmodern era, and the notion of literary engagement. Apart from articles in Spanish – published in Poland and abroad – she is also the author of *Los manifiestos y la cuestión del compromiso literario en las nuevas generaciones de escritores latinoamericanos* (Katowice 2009) and the editor of journals, e.g. “Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego Romanica Silesiana: Insularia”, n° 10 (Katowice 2015), and “Miedo”, n° 11, vol. 2. (Katowice 2016).