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ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO RUST: THE MATERIAL DECAY OF THE SUGAR INDUSTRY IN POST-SOVIET CUBA

The disintegration of the Cuban sugar industry after the Soviet Union's demise, as depicted in the film Melaza *(dir. Carlos Lechuga, 2012), serves as a point of departure for a more general analysis of the materiality of Cuba's post-sugar afterlife. Against the backdrop of sugar mills shuttered as a result of the 2002 "restructuring", I analyse the film's aesthetic rendering of the multilayered archaeology of loss: from the dissolution of the utopian dreams to the daily precarity of common livelihoods.*

Keywords: Cuban Revolution; sugar industry; restructuring; ruination; *Melaza*; Carlos Lechuga

Sugarcane, the perennial grass of the tropics known by its scientific name as *Saccharum officinarum*, has been synonymous with the Cuban economy since the early nineteenth century, holding sway throughout windfalls and downfalls quantifiable in millions – from the frenzy of "La danza de los millones" of 1915–1920 to the epic failure of "La zafra de los diez millones" of 1970. In recent decades sugar endured and at times flourished, always on the edge of ending, as revolutionary leaders vowed, off and on, to rid the country of its entanglement with the monoculture tainted with the stigma of enslavement and (post)colonial dependency.[1] Yet, over time, amidst the waxing and waning of ideologies, regimes, and economic fortunes, the "inexorable tenacity about the way that sugar established its grip on Cuba" (Pérez 2019, 28) transcended the material parameters of agroindustrial production and household economy to become woven into the very fabric of culture, living memory, and collective identity (*cubanidad*).[2]

On the cusp of the twenty-first century, physical reminders of the industry's *longue durée* dominance and its recent dramatic decline are easily discernible throughout the Cuban landscape. These remainders, situated on a full spectrum of ruination, range from a handful of nineteenth-century *ingenios* that have passed the stringent test of authenticity and uniqueness to be protected under the much-coveted UNESCO world heritage designation (The Valley of the Sugar Mills-Trinidad) to scores of decommissioned *centrales*[3] left to fall into disrepair; from a dwindling number of still functioning yet decaying facilities to the vast swathes of land reclaimed from the receding sugarcane by the invasive advance of the spiny and virtually indestructible shrub *marabú*.[4] In addition, some material components of the downsized sugar industry have been deemed "museum-worthy", restored and

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curated for tourist purposes outside their original rural settings, as exemplified by Havana's outdoor exhibition of old steam engines.

If we were to agree that there is such a thing as a historical watershed, the beginning of the post-sugar era in Cuba could be pinned down almost to a date. In April 2002, the Minister of the Sugar Industry (MINAZ) General Ulises Rosales del Toro launched the draconian process of "restructuring" an industry so woefully inefficient that releasing the country from its "tenacious grip" became inevitable. My paper is circumscribed by the aftermath of the demise of a mode of production and a way of life once intertwined with Cuban nationhood to such an extent that the saying *Sin azúcar no hay país* ("Without sugar, there is no country") turned into a cliché.[5] I also remain mindful of Manuel Moreno Fraginals's assertion that "without an exhaustive study of the sugar economy, there is no possibility of interpreting Cuban history" (1976, 9). More specifically, I will endeavour to deploy tools inspired by material culture studies in order to focus on the aesthetic reworking of post-sugar ruination in Carlos Lechuga's feature film *Melaza* (2012).[6] *Melaza* is by no means the only artistic reflection of/on the material decay of Cuban sugar industry and its concomitant social consequences, but its multifaceted and aesthetically rich rendition of these processes merits an in-depth critical engagement that has been lacking thus far.[7]

In order to prime the canvas on which to draw the actual analysis, I begin with a brief overview of the restructuring of the sugar industry launched under a somewhat obscure acronym of TAR (*Tarea Álvaro Reynoso*). By baptising this process with the name of Álvaro Reynoso (1829–1888), a Cuban agronomist known for his scientific work on the sugar industry (*Ensayo sobre el cultivo de la caña de azúcar*, 1862), Cuban authorities might have aimed at reinforcing the forward-looking and scientifically grounded semantics of the task (*tarea*) of economic restructuring.[8] Seen as a snapshot of time and place, TAR designated for immediate closure 71 out of 156 active sugar mills (*centrales*). Out of the 85 that were granted a reprieve, a handful (5) were earmarked for future development as museums or tourist attractions, and as many as 14 switched to the processing of sugarcane derivatives (bagasse, cattle feed). The second phase began in 2005 and was equally severe, with an additional 43 of the still active 85 *centrales* subjected to "deactivation". Within the span of three years, an estimated 120,000 sugar-industry workers lost their jobs. The numbers – even though they vary somewhat depending on the source (Álvarez Sarduy 2005; Álvarez and Pérez-López 2007; Peters 2003; Pollitt 2003) – were dumbfounding despite the usual efforts on the part of Cuban authorities to obfuscate the reality through uplifting rhetoric (Castro Ruz 2002), strategic deployment of euphemisms (restructuring, reconversion, rationalisation, deactivation, temporary closure), and occasional use of neologisms (*redimensionamiento* – resizing).

Various perspectives offered by official sources along with the graphs and pie charts that populate countless publications encapsulate with chilling precision the quantifiable aspects of the demise of the sugar industry in Cuba. However, speaking exclusively in such terms leads to an abstraction that becomes numbing and ill-suited to reflect on the actual predicament. And since relatively few studies actually delve into the lived experience of "sugar communities" impacted by TAR, the

importance of perspectives generated through artistic media, such as *Melaza*, merits attention.[9] While I will look at *Melaza*'s rendition of material and community ruination in terms of its own ethics and poetics, it needs to be considered in conjunction with the more "iconic" imagery of ruination that proliferated in the wake of the so-called Special Period in Time of Peace of the 1990s. In the decade preceding the official decommissioning of the sugar infrastructure in the countryside, the urban *corpus delicti* of Havana had turned into a physical embodiment of the wreckage of socialist utopia and served as a synecdoche for the entire island. In fact, Havana's "ruins" became so pervasive in films, photographs, scholarly publications, travelogues, journalistic accounts, and blogs that the city appeared to be slipping into the reviled category of "ruin porn" while being repackaged for sale and consumption (Dopico 2002; Birkenmaier and Whitfield 2011).

Granted, for as long as there have been ruins, there has been an inescapable fascination with material decay. It is up to writers, artists, and scholars, however, to bypass the merely voyeuristic impulse and unveil the underlying complexity of such processes. For the most part, studies of Cuban materiality, which have seen an upsurge in the wake of the Special Period, have steered away from the exoticising clichés of ruination. Drawing from this groundswell of inspiration, I have found particularly productive María Antonia Cabrera Arús's notion of bidirectionality in "understanding the effects of the reciprocal action between, on the one hand, society, a collective of human beings, and, on the other hand, the non-human environment in which this collective exists" (2013).

In my approach to a film that deals with a socio-economic decay inscribed in everyday survival I will endeavour to sustain the material turn towards the texture of the "matter" without turning away from the textual, the affective, and the socio-historical. Without going as far as to ponder the quasi-autonomous "agency" of things, I take inspiration from Arjun Appadurai (1986) "social life of things" along with Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans" (2010, viii) whereby a sense of entanglement of materiality and subjectivity prevails over the fearful symmetry of dualism. It should be clear that my "take" on the dismantling of the sugar industry concentrates on the imprint – both material and experiential – of this complex socio-economic process as it becomes decanted aesthetically through sounds and images that coalesce into a story (film) as an offshoot of history. Rather than recount the trajectory of the sugar industry in Cuba, I refer the readers to the bibliography I reference here as the most germane to my approach. Grounding my analysis in relation to a broader scholarship on Cuban sugar can provide an interdisciplinary cross-pollination that has a potential for being critically productive but, as I will also demonstrate, situating *Melaza* in dialogue with the "sugar paradigm" actually responds to the clues implanted in the film itself. Lechuga's multilayering of the "here and now" of sugar over its "archaeology" is reminiscent of what José Quiroga has referred to in a different context as the Cuban palimpsest which "does not reproduce the original, but it dismantles it, writes on top of it, allows it to be seen" (2005, ix).

It is not my intention to overstate the conceptualisation of the cinema as an artistic medium that offers, by default, a holistic engagement with materiality. I would certainly be remiss, however, not to invoke Siegfried Kracauer's much-

referenced assertion that film "brings the whole material world into play" because it intrinsically engages its mimetic capability with the corporeality of the spectator: "the material layers that present themselves in film directly stimulate the material layers of the human being" (quoted in Hansen 2012, 262). In his striking reconfiguration of the visceral experience of economic "restructuring", Lechuga builds upon the sensorial materiality embedded in the medium itself – soundtrack, dialogue, colour, texture, light – while, at the same time, he also interweaves in the interstices of words and images certain themes that lend themselves to the material culture studies approach. Beyond the previously mentioned leitmotiv of ruination, waste, and decay, the film touches upon such tropes as material heritage, domestic economy, money, labour, gendered corporeality, and materiality of state power.

At first glance, the seemingly effortless and unadorned aesthetics of *Melaza* directs attention away from the (meta)materiality of independent movie production in Cuba. Even without reading an interview with *Melaza*'s European co-producer marvelling about the "embarrassingly small" budget (Rathbone 2016) it is quite obvious that the film was made on a shoestring. To be sure, many artistic endeavours carried out in Cuba tend to mirror the "make do and mend mentality"[10] that prevails in everyday life. On one hand, the austere conditions that accompany indie filmmaking on the island might be seamlessly woven into *Melaza*'s aesthetics to the point of becoming diffused or even presented as an advantage according to the adage that scarcity is a true catalyst for invention, originality, and creativity. On the other hand, however, off-screen Lechuga has been quite vocal not only about the extreme paucity of resources but, more importantly, about the pervasiveness of government censorship (Ali 2017).

Melaza is set somewhere in the countryside, in a fictitious *central* by the same name where the livelihood of the entire community has been thrown into disarray by the shuttering of its sugar mill. The upbeat radio broadcasts that relentlessly seep in from the background emphasise the "temporary" nature of the closure, belying the stark imagery of the decommissioned plant.[11] The post-sugar afterlife of Melaza is captured primarily through the trials and tribulations of one family. A young woman, Mónica, is the head of this modest household and the only employee of the now inactive sugar mill, responsible for surveying the equipment and phoning in daily reports to her managers in Havana. Her elderly mother is confined to a wheelchair, and Mónica's partner, Aldo, is a teacher at the local elementary school, which appears to have a total of eight students, including Marla, Mónica's daughter from a previous relationship. There is no extended family to rely upon; Mónica's ex-partner is away in Nicaragua, and Aldo's mother has passed away, her premature death inscribed on the austere tombstone: "Palmira Benítez, 1943–2004".

The family's interactions with a handful of secondary characters reveal a great deal about the inner workings and daily material exchanges of the larger community that continues to be circumscribed by its almost organic connections to the now dormant sugar mill, whose distinctive silhouette looms like a silent sentinel over the horizon. The socio-economic networks, both state-authorised and informal, involve a clerk at a comptroller's office (*Oficina de control y cobro de multas*), an employee at the tiny *bodega* dispensing meagre rationed goods, a powerful

manager at a construction site, various police officers, an acquaintance trying his luck in the black-market meat trade, and a prostitute named Yamilé along with some of her clients. We also meet Yamilé's aunt, affluent enough to hire Mónica to help around the house. In contrast to the bare-bone interiors and flimsy dwellings encountered throughout the film, the elderly woman lives alone in a sprawling home, surrounded by a museum-like décor. The material remnants of a bygone era – massive furniture, dainty artefacts, stained-glass doors, artfully tiled floors – not only create a sense of redundancy and out-of-place luxury, but also suggest that the aunt's genealogy could be traced to the pre-revolutionary class of sugar-estate owners. Given the particularities of the Cuban Post-Soviet economy, it is safe to assume that the woman's comfortable lifestyle hinges on the remittances from family members living abroad.

Lechuga also avails himself of the unique capacity of the cinematic medium to convey the panopticon-like imprint of the state's overarching surveillance. The government's disciplining and propagandistic control emanates from a centralised source (Havana) in a manner akin to what Michel Foucault described as the micro-power dispersed throughout all layers of everyday life (1980, 56). There is no escape from the "eyes and ears" of the neighbourhood-based Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), and for an individual selling meat on the black market it is the matter of when, not if, they will be facing a fiercely punitive jail term. On the other hand, there is still some evidence of the community's reliance on the socialist safety net: the residual rationing system; the dilapidated school with a handful of students clad in their state-issued uniforms; a construction site for a newer school building; Marla's orthodontic device and her grandmother's wheelchair, most likely provided free of charge through the socialised healthcare system; Mónica's ongoing employment in the shuttered mill; fully paid retraining opportunities offered to laid-off workers, albeit without clear prospects of using their newly acquired abilities (such as computer skills).[12] The material disparities between various members of the community lay bare not only the frayed lifelines of the state-sponsored system but also the disintegration of whatever common revolutionary narrative might have supported it in the past.

The polysemy of the film's title – the name of a fictional sugar town resonating with material and symbolic connotations of molasses, the dark, unrefined by-product of white sugar crystallisation – captures the viscous ambivalence of food and waste, of sweet and bitter, and harkens back to the archaeology of gruelling enslaved labour, of sugar having been made, literally, with blood (Paquette 1988). *Melaza*'s opening – and closing – images of verdant sugarcane rustling in the wind might be interpreted as one of the film's discrete intertextualities, a possible reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's 1960 report from Cuba entitled *Ouragan sur le sucre* (*Hurricane over Sugar*),[13] which envisioned the unfolding revolutionary change as a likely salvation for the "diabetic island, ravaged by the proliferation of a single vegetable" (quoted in Rowlandson 2017, 21). To continue with Sartre's illness-inspired metaphor, in *Melaza* the surgical extirpation of the sugar-based livelihood leaves the community with a gaping wound, but no viable remedy in terms of economic alternatives.

In the opening sequence, as credits roll in, the camera glides along the memory wall honouring the "heroic traditions" of CAI (*Complejo Agrícola Industrial*) Melaza.

Adorned with naïve drawings of sugarcane stalks and faded sepia-toned photographs of *macheteros* the visual encoding of this mural combines the sanctum of a shrine with the decay of cracked mortar, metal frames weeping from corrosion and peeling paint in various shades of ochre. The sense of nostalgia is further heightened by the elegiac soundtrack from a well-known song, "El adiós del soldado" ("Soldier's Farewell"), accompanied by the overlays of *machete*-wielding sugar-cane cutters. Rendered almost obsolete by the modernising push for mechanisation, ironically enough the *macheteros* of *central* Melaza are memorialised amidst the idle machinery as yet another casualty not just of a battle, but of a war lost.

The centerpiece of the mural, emblazoned with a plaque dated 1973–1975, evokes the short-lived times of economic prosperity quantifiable not only by its lofty socialist targets but also some tangible growth in everyday consumption.[14] Reinforced through relentless revolutionary rhetoric,[15] that promise of modernity was, curiously enough, encapsulated by *The New York Times* correspondent, Ted Morgan, in the enthusiastic caption of his 1974 report: "The Dream of a Society Where Money Would Play Almost No Role Led to the Verge of Economic Collapse, but Sugar, the Hated Symbol of Colonialism, Is about To Make Cuba Rich." Travelling beyond Havana, Morgan offered a rare glimpse into the sugar-based "sense of economic ease" of the post-1971 era when, in the aftermath of the failed Ten Million Ton Harvest, Cuban sugar production was buoyed by the Soviet-Bloc demand and subsidies. Juxtaposing Morgan's perspective with *Melaza*'s evocation of that era allows for a broader view of the countryside, which the American reporter described as a "maze of new construction surrounded by carefully tended fields, of sugar mills, rum distilleries and tobacco curing sheds" (Morgan 1974).

Even though *Melaza* seems to briefly savour the opportunity to aestheticise ruination, what soon emerges out of the palimpsest-like stratigraphy of the past is the here and now, with a subtly cropped tableau of lovemaking between Mónica and Aldo. The young couple radiating desire amidst the petrified forest of crumbling pillars, exposed wiring, and rusted machinery, seem to defy the very process of ruination. Because of this scene alone and Mónica's otherwise diligent work routine, the "temporarily" decommissioned *central* Melaza would most likely fail Tim Edensor's test of the ruin as a site of "botanical colonization" defined as a human-made materiality that has succumbed to the invasive forces of nature (2005, 43). *Central* Melaza is a liminal place – perhaps worthy of Michel Foucault's designation of heterotopia – where dereliction is "temporarily" kept at bay by Mónica, a conscientious guardian of the material remnants of pride, production, and prosperity. Ultimately, however, ruination is as irrevocable as rust, which only requires the basic chemistry of iron, water, oxygen, time, and neglect. As the film progresses, the ongoing deterioration of mostly idle or barely clattering machinery can be gauged by the descending percentages of the functionality of the equipment as it is measured and reported daily by Mónica to her supervisors in Havana: 22 machines total, 83% operational; pumps at 72%; extractors at 45%; but something else only at 15%. Mónica's labour invested in not making it all a ruin only amplifies the pervasive sense of futility.

Away from the mill, but still in its long shadow, the family, trapped in the unremitting triage of precarity, barely stays afloat through a combination of state-issued basic goods (sugar, toiletries), occasional gifts of gratitude or solidarity (a bottle of cooking

oil given to Mónica by her friend Yamilé), petty theft of state property, and various attempts to supplement the inevitable shortages through a series of futile entrepreneurial efforts (offering English lessons, selling homemade baked goods, providing housekeeping services).[16] Legal options for gainful employment are woefully scarce: at a local construction site several men line up hoping for a temporary job, while another group is seen hacking away at the underbrush overtaking the spectral landscape once lush with sugarcane. Aldo contemplates getting into the Sisyphean labour of clearing the *marabú*, but Mónica spares him from this backbreaking work by sacrificing herself instead: she trades sex for the cash needed to pay the fine and avoid eviction. Mónica's pragmatic resilience is best captured by her prodding Aldo out of inertia: "*¿Oye, despiértate, aquí aprendes a bailar o te mueres en la pista*" ("You'd better wake up, here you either learn to dance or die on the dance floor"). As melodramatic as it may sound, it is the unmistakable power of love, tenderness, and forgiveness that keeps the affective fabric of this family almost unscathed while the world around them dissolves into corrosion and corruption.

As the camera follows the protagonists in their daily struggle, *la lucha*, on several occasions it lingers in close shots of money – bills counted, exchanged, stashed away. The complexity of money as a social construct, a material object, an exchange tool, and a symbolic embodiment of status is further exacerbated by the peculiarity of Cuba's dual currency system whereby the national peso (*moneda nacional*) is dwarfed by the nearly twenty-five-fold buying power of the Convertible Cuban Pesos (CUC), pegged to the U.S. dollar (Salas 2021).[17] Judging by the greenish banknotes in the family's piggy bank, Aldo and Mónica do not enjoy access to the CUC, but their livelihood is nonetheless impacted by the inner workings of the dual system. In close-ups of hands and banknotes *Melaza* foregrounds both the tainted materiality of the "national" currency and its humiliating weakness. Aldo and Mónica need a handful of bills to purchase just a few heavily subsidised rations at their local *bodega*, while Mónica's inability to provide change for a larger bill she gets for renting out a room to Yamilé serves as a tangible marker of economic disparities that belie the principles of socialist egalitarianism while unmasking the devalued ideology of a bankrupt system.

At the crossroads between materiality and spirituality, suffering and playfulness, in the purgatory between earth, heaven, and the workers' paradise, Lechuga crafts a curious scene in which Marla, pushing her grandmother in a wheelchair, stops by a Santería altar in the middle of the fields and takes a few coins from the offerings left for the orishas. Instead of any hint of condemnation for what might have been considered a sacrilegious transgression at another time or in a different place there is only a tacit sense of complicity shared by the director, the protagonists, and, most likely, the audience. Granted, in contrast to a foreign viewer, for the local spectator this particular scene might be perceived even more matter-of-factly, as a casual instance of child's play or, more generally, an example of the propensity to irreverent mockery that is at the very core of Cuban *choteo*.

Other than money, material signs of socio-economic distinctions are few, although a glimpse into the relatively affluent households of Yamilé's aunt as well as of the *nouveau riche* construction-site manager heightens the impression of scarcity in Mónica's and Aldo's ramshackle house. In a world that is so materially deprived that

there is hardly any redundancy to generate waste, objects become imbued with new significance by being placed out of place or charged with unexpected functions. As things reappear in their new guises they startle us with their uncanny "otherness" through a process that is not unlike *ostranen'e* ("defamiliarisation"), if we were to use Victor Skhlovski's time-honoured concept.

There is indeed, to go back to Bennett's terminology, a "lived materiality" in a mattress stored in the empty factory and retrieved as part of the ritual to create a makeshift love nest, only to be tarnished by a one-time instance of paid sex. Ironically enough, the shuttered factory, whose "productive" functionality is now dormant, becomes an "intimate" space of sexual encounters, both romantic and transactional. Everything, it seems, requires adaptability and an extraordinary expenditure of time and effort. There is an almost Sisyphean exertion in Aldo's laborious journey across the fields as he carries on his shoulders a large chalkboard borrowed from the school with the hope of offering some private English lessons at his home. Unsurprisingly, there will be no takers for this service even at a bargain price of five "national" pesos per session. In a place where poverty does not allow for the luxury of privacy, there is an unsettling poignancy to the scene when Mónica uses a red lightbulb to restage the ambiance of her home whenever she rents it to Yamilé and her clients. With one basic prop, this quasi-theatrical *mise-en-scène* allows for a symbolic demarcation between the chronotope of the family home, on one hand, and the room used for paid sex. A hulk of a rusted Soviet car, where Mónica and Aldo seek refuge just to talk, seems a bit more generic as an emblem of post-industrial decay, but it does engage, albeit fleetingly, with the material legacy of the Soviet era that has received substantive scholarly attention (Oroza 2009; Loss and González Prieto 2012; Puñales Alpízar 2013).

However, it is perhaps the derelict materiality of a swimming pool – drained of water, but nonetheless used by Aldo for a simulacrum of swimming lessons – that carries the most powerful "defamiliarised" charge. Curiously enough, the imagery of empty pools has appeared in other Cuban films[18] but, in a parodic twist of history repeating itself, Aldo's class is evocative of the swimming pools in the wealthy Miramar neighbourhood of Havana that, according to Morgan (1974), "had been emptied of water and filled with desks and chairs and blackboards to serve as classrooms" in the early days of revolutionary euphoria. Later in the film, Aldo's pupils discover that a reservoir next to the sugar mill is actually filled with water and playfully invite him for a swim in what looks like wastewater, or perhaps just murky rainwater. Nonetheless, as these crumbling structures become reclaimed and creatively repurposed we are left with a glimmer of hope that human resilience might, in the end, transcend material ruination.

Melaza covers a broad swathe of truncated utopian dreams and thwarted lives without falling into the trap of didactics. By moving his lens away from Havana into the countryside Lechuga highlights the often overlooked fact that Cuba's scramble for livelihood continues to be impacted by the inequalities embedded in its local geography. In *Melaza*, Havana floats on the horizon as a possible but improbable alternative to the way of life in the shadow of the *central*. It is an abstraction but also a magnet, where illicit activities such as selling beef on the black market or renting out a place without a permit might have gone undetected. As signalled before, the omnipresence of the ever-vigilant state

manifests itself in the punitive measures of police interventions, fines, fears of imprisonment, and threats of eviction, but also in the incessant rhythm of upbeat propaganda filling the airwaves of the local radio and reverberating from the loudspeakers. Hefty bundles of the papers *Trabajadores* and *Juventud Rebelde* – the organs of the worker's union *Central de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC) and *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas* (UJC), respectively – are literally dropped from the sky without ever enticing any readership with their forward-oriented headlines ("*!Adelante! Defendiendo la Revolución*"). Together, they encapsulate the dystopian rituals of state indoctrination, the socio-political rather than geographic distance between *central* Melaza and the centre of power, and the jarring disconnection between the official rhetoric and people's lives.

Whereas on the macroeconomic level everything is inexorably descending into inertia and ruination, in a curious attempt at reusing and recycling Mónica salvages some of the unread bundles of *Trabajadores* and *Juventud Rebelde* to make a collage for the factory bulletin board. It is unclear whether she does this out of boredom or a sense of duty, but unlike the *bricoleurs* who creatively reinvent what little they have, Mónica simply matches her cut-outs with the pre-existing categories on the board: Sports, Culture, Health, Anniversaries, Current Events, etc. Such bulletin boards used to be a feature of most socialist workplaces, often showcasing the utopian goals rather than measurable achievements of economic productivity. As *central* Melaza lingers well beyond what would have constituted a definite closure in a world ruled by the logic of profit, Mónica's attempt at recycling is as absurd as the bulletin board, completely outdated in its state-sanctioned format in spite of being constantly updated.

As I have endeavoured to show, the paucity of material possessions and the austerity of economic exchanges depicted in *Melaza* is deeply embedded in a broader archaeology of ruination, linked explicitly to the dissolution of the modernising zeal of the Cuban Revolution. The unquestionable material decay of Cuba during the post-Soviet era is often justifiably invoked as a shorthand for the systemic failure of communist utopia. No argument is likely to sway Cuban "ruinologists" (Ponte 2005) into contemplating Havana's dereliction or the shuttering of Cuban *centrales* not just as an aberration due to the insane obstinacy of one man, Fidel Castro, but as a casualty of the globalised forces of the late capitalist, post-Soviet, neoliberal world. As more studies and artistic projects are likely to emerge out of and around post-sugar Cuba, perhaps we shall see a sequel to *Melaza*, re-situated within a transnational geographic scope, somewhere between the abandoned sugar mills of Hawaii, the derelict towns of the proverbial "Rust Belt", and the vast landscapes of the former Soviet Bloc now littered with debris.

Notes

1. Referring to the "economy without sugar" during the Special Period of the 1990s, Santamaría García (2011) states that up until then "the revolution had never abandoned sugar".
2. For comprehensive overviews of sugar-inspired tropes, images, and symbols see Gómez (2019) and Mateo Palmer (2016). For the history of sugar see Moreno Fraginals (1976), Ortiz (1995), Zanetti Lecuona and García (2009), Funes Monzote (2008), Santamaría García (2011), Hagelberg and Álvarez (2006), Pérez-López (1991), Cornwell and Stoddard (2001), and Crowley (2016).

3. *Central azucarero* refers to a modern sugar mill compound, similar to a company town, integrated with railroad networks. They emerged in late nineteenth century as a result of consolidation and mechanisation of traditional mills (*ingenios*) and growing domination of US corporations (Préstamo, Menocal, and Shaw 1996, 66). Studies of the post-restructuring era include Kim (2016), Jolliffe (2012), Pérez-López and Álvarez (2005), and Chávez Salinas and Domínguez (2010). Santamaría García et al. (2019) analyse the interconnectedness between sugar, landscape, and cultural heritage. UNESCO uses two cultural heritage categories: tangible (buildings, artefacts, books, landscapes, etc.) and intangible (folklore, linguistic and cultural traditions).
4. In Cuba's post-Soviet imagery, the landscape of loss – of sugar, jobs, livelihood, dignity – has become intertwined with the indestructible materiality and invasive symbolism of this spiny and reviled shrub (*Dichrostachys cineria*). For an overview of this broad topic, which is only alluded to in *Melaza*, see Price (2015).
5. The saying is attributed to José Manuel Casanova (1884–1949), a "sugar baron" and long-term president (1933–1949) of Asociación Nacional de Hacendados.
6. In addition to interviews and reviews (Orozco 2013; García Borrego 2013; Ali 2017) for references to *Melaza* see Gómez (2019, 172–174), Price (2015, 48), Capote Cruz (2017), Muñoz Alfonso (2017), Aparicio (2019, 199–200).
7. Documentaries on sugar restructuring include *deMoler* (2004, dir. Alejandro Ramírez) and *Model Town* (2007, dir. Laimir Fano Villaescusa). Many artistic projects concentrate on the legacy of slavery and the exploitative intensity of sugar-related labour (Tania Bruguera; María Magdalena Campos Pons). A few capture specifically the sugar industry's restructuring (Teresa Ayuso and Juan Luis Morales, *Patrimonio a la deriva: Los ingenios*, 2004; Ricardo Elías, *Oro seco*, 2005–9; Marcel Molina, *La raíz que no florece*, 2009; *Desnudando el tiempo*, 2010). The theme of the decay of the *centrales* also appears in the novel *Los fantasmas de hierro* (2015) by Emerio Medina. A 2020 film *Epicentro* by Austrian-born Hubert Sauper features a long sequence depicting the decay of Central Hershey. For pertinent critical studies see Price (2015) and Paravisini-Gebert (2015).
8. What happened to Cuban sugar production in the post-Soviet era may seem reminiscent of the demise of various industries throughout the globalised world where becoming unprofitable, inefficient, uncompetitive, redundant, outdated or obsolete had left a trail of shuttered businesses, dismantled factories, and abandoned towns (Buchli and Lucas 2001; Gross 1992; Harbison 2015; Edensor 2005; Mah 2013; Stoler 2013; Harbison 2015; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014). This global reach of post-industrial ruination notwithstanding, it is crucial to recognise the weight of local specificities.
9. Major studies of the restructuring include Álvarez Sarduy (2005), Álvarez and Pérez-López (2007), González-Corzo (2015), Hagelberg and Álvarez (2006), Pérez (2019), Peters (2003), Pollitt (2003), Pérez-López and Álvarez (2005), Pérez-López (2018), Steinecke (2006). Oral history projects, albeit still relatively scarce, tend to be particularly stirring (Álvarez Rodríguez and Norberto Codina 2013; Vera Estrada 2014, 2017; Lores Santana 2018). A comprehensive listing of sugar mills and their status can be found at http://www.cubagenweb.org/mills.htm.
10. For various perspectives on this topic see Oroza (2009), Sklodowska (2016).
11. *Melaza* was filmed at the Central Amistad (shuttered) and Central Habana Libre (originally Central Habana), still in operation. For the pre-revolutionary history of the Central Habana, see Granary (1920). A lithograph of Amistad can be found in Cantero and Laplante's (1857) book *Los ingenios*. For images of Central Habana Libre see https://mapio.net/pic/p-96717356/.

12. According to Vera Estrada (2017), *Estudio como Empleo* (Study as Employment) was one of the original pillars of the restructuring scheme (TAR), but its implementation was unsuccessful.
13. See Juan Antonio García Borrego's reflection on *Melaza* and Sartre.
14. Examples of comprehensive studies of Cuban revolutionary society and economy include Mesa Lago (1993), Eckstein (1994), and Guerra (2012).
15. On materiality and socialist modernity see Cabrera Arús (2019). Ironically enough, the era of relative prosperity coincided with the imposition of Soviet-like "parameters" that in the wake of the National Congress of Education and Culture in 1971 allowed the Cuban government to tighten its grip over education, culture, and personal freedoms. The grim moniker "grey five-year period" (*quinquenio gris*) coined by Ambrosio Fornet became synonymous with the years 1971–76. See also Jorge Fornet (2013).
16. Anthropological and sociological scholarship on Cuban domestic economy is plentiful, including gendered perspectives (Kersh 2019; Padrón Hernández 2012; Safa 2009; Salas 2021). See also Capote Cruz (2017) on the depictions of women's work in Cuban film.
17. Effective January 1, 2021, Cuba eliminated the convertible peso (CUC), adopting the single official currency of Cuban peso (CUP) at the exchange rate of twenty four Cuban pesos to one USD.
18. In Lechuga's earlier short film *Los bañistas* (*Bathers*, 2010) a swimming instructor encounters a similar problem with an empty pool. In *Buscándote Habana* (2007, dir. Alina Rodríguez Abreu), a woman turns an abandoned swimming pool of a ruined Havana hotel into her living quarters.

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