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Fraying at the Edges: Male Homosexuals, Female Prostitutes, and Suicides in Cuba's Post-Soviet Detective Fiction

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Fraying at the Edges: Male Homosexuals, Female Prostitutes, and Suicides in Cuba's Post-Soviet Detective Fiction

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An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

Fraying at the Edges: Male Homosexuals, Female Prostitutes, and Suicides in Cuba's Post-Soviet Detective Fiction
By Orosman López Bao

This study examines the portrayal of male homosexuals, female prostitutes, and suicides in Cuban society in representative works of Cuban detective fiction of the post-Soviet period. I have methodologically relied on close readings of Leonardo Padura Fuentes's *Máscaras* (1997), Amir Valle Ojeda's *Las puertas de la noche* (2001), and Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo´s *Polvo en el viento* (2005) to gauge the extent to which Cuban writers of this genre have attempted to renegotiate the place of these figures in Cuba's civic life after 1989. As sites of abjection, the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide figured prominently in Cuban nationalist discourse during its formative period in the nineteenth century and beyond. Relying on the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva on the nature of the abject, I submit that –as sites of abjection– these figures became at a critical juncture the boundaries of what would eventually become the Cuban republic. In this manner they are intrinsically a part of the nation's self-understanding. I contend that the economic hardships and ideological contradictions that Cubans experienced during the country's "Special Period in Times of Peace" threatened the nation's identity to such a degree that it prompted a reevaluation of the abject boundaries these figures represented.

To my mother and to the memory of my father

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Introduction

> Roland Barthes…is able to extrapolate on the meaning of a sign that reads simply "Steak and Chips" and arrive at an understanding of the nature of French society…. If it is possible to understand a society in some way through reference to its most popular dish, it should be possible to do so through its most popular fiction, no matter how "low" an art form this may be considered by the traditional literary establishment.
>
> —Stephen Wilkinson, *Detective Fiction in Cuban Society and Culture*

During the 1970s the Cuban government developed a military doctrine known as "la guerra de todo el pueblo" based on the need to survive a long protracted military conflict. Envisioning this type of conflict, the government coined the term "Special Period" to designate the time marked by the series of political, defensive, and economic measures that would have to be enacted to ensure the survival of the nation by relying solely on its own resources in the event of a total blockade.[1] Although the nation's integrity would never have to withstand such a military aggression, its political system would be imperiled by external forces at the end of the 1980s to such a degree, that the term "Special Period in Times of Peace" would be adopted by the Cuban government to designate a time marked by analogously draconian policies instituted in the absence of any military confrontation. In November of 1989 the East German government opened the Berlin Wall in a move that would become emblematic of the fall of the Socialist bloc. By 1991 both the Soviet Union and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) would be dissolved. As a consequence, Cuba would be deprived of its commercial ties with the Comecon member-states and the Soviet subsidies that had kept her national economy afloat for decades. The result would be a severe crisis that would

1. "Periodo especial en Cuba," Ecured, http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Periodo_especial_en_Cuba (accessed on 15 August, 2012).

force the government to implement measures that had been considered unacceptable in the past. While political leadership remained in the hands of the Communist Party, many of the changes introduced to weather the crisis amounted to concessions to a market economy that undermined the socialist order the government had promoted over the previous three decades. That ideological inconsistency, combined with an economic crisis arguably not experienced with the same intensity since the nineteenth century's wars of independence, threatened to undo the socialist definition of nation that the revolutionary government had posited as the fulfillment of Cuba's nationalist struggles. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the portrayal of the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide (that is, the individual who attempts against his or her own life, whether successfully or not) in representative works of the country's detective novel during the post-Soviet period. Therefore, it is a dissertation whose object of study is intrinsically bound to a historical timetable that begins in 1989. I suggest that crises such as the one Cubans faced as a result of the fall of the Socialist bloc are bound to bring about a reevaluation of the place occupied by the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide to the extent that these figures are implicated in Cuba's self-definition as nation.

Two premises underlie this study. The first premise is that those with whom abjection is identified in a society are implicated in how that society defines itself. Defining involves a process of classification, of referring the individual seeking the definition back to a category from which the element to be defined is distinguished by a set of qualities that sets that element apart from the others that comprise the category. This process involves establishing boundaries that demarcate the term to be defined from

others that share some of its characteristics and with which it may be confused. In the Cuban case, the relevance for this process of the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, functionally these three figures have traditionally served the demarcating function that is part of the defining process outlined above by establishing the boundaries delimiting who belongs –or should belong– to the national family. With that purpose these figures were invoked in Cuba's nineteenth-century nationalist discourse. In defining itself, the new nation excluded the first two figures and assimilated the third one. Secondly, symbolically the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide enact the liminality of their position with respect to the nation to the extent that they are abject figures as defined according to the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva.

In her *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the abject as "a twisted braid of thoughts and affects" and acknowledges the difficulty of communicating what it is, since the abject is not "a definable *object.*"[2] Thus it is easier to describe it in negative terms: "Not me. Not that. But not nothing either."[3] It resists a definition because it lies where the meaning of abjection cannot be anchored, outside the symbolic order. In fact, it marks the edge of the symbolic order. It exists in a realm where the ego would be annihilated were it to enter it, and from which the ego is protected by a feeling of nausea comparable to the one experienced before repulsive food, excrement, a festering wound, the pungent odor of sweat, or a corpse. Repulsion viscerally protects the self from the disintegration that it would suffer were it to venture outside the symbolic order and into the realm where the

2. Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia U P, 1982), 1.

3. Ibid., 2.

abject lies. Kristeva psychologically identifies the abject with the mother, of which one is part before living outside of her. Outside, the child consolidates his or her identity "thanks to the autonomy of language."[4] However –as Kristeva recognizes– the separation the child achieves is very fragile, the child is constantly at risk of falling under the sway of a maternal "power that is as securing as it is stifling." The attraction of that security is what lends a measure of ambivalence and violence to the struggle. Thus she is able to compare the struggle with "a vortex of summons and repulsion that places the one haunted but it literally beside himself."[5] Yet, even though a feeling of repulsion protects the individual from the abject, it is not lack of cleanliness –in the sense of hygiene– that is at the root of abjection, but rather "what disturbs identity, system, order… [t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[6] Society highlights the radical nature of the abject by identifying its source with terms such as defilement, food taboo, or sin, depending on the cultural context, thus confining it to a sacred domain.[7]

Because Kristeva adopts a phenomenological approach in her examination of the abject before immediately considering it within a psychoanalytic framework, her emphasis remains on the individual subject's relation to the abject rather than on the abject's social dimension that is more relevant to this argument. The abject's social dimension becomes clearer when she considers it within the context of the history of religions. Kristeva's work in this area is indebted to the structurally informed contributions of Marcel Mauss, Emil Durkheim, and Claude Levi-Strauss, but, most

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4. Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia U P, 1982), 13.

5. Ibid., 1.

6. Ibid., 4.

7. Ibid., xi.

importantly Mary Douglas, whose observations about religious defilement in primitive societies parallel those of Kristeva's about the abject.

According to Douglas, dirt is the source of defilement or religious pollution among primitive societies. Douglas identifies dirt as matter that is out of place with respect to a socially sanctioned classificatory system.[8] For Douglas, primitive societies attempt to create order of an untidy reality by exaggerating the difference between opposite categories such as inside and outside, above and below, liquid and solid, or male and female.[9] What is considered dirt defies these categories precisely by not easily conforming to them. Because the capacity to classify lies at the basis of coordination and therefore of human organization, the anomaly or ambiguity that dirt –as matter out of place– represents threatens the social group's existence at a fundamental level.[10] The social group deals with the resulting anxiety by resorting to shunting the source of dirt by suppressing it or avoiding it in a similar manner that the individual reacts toward the abject according to Kristeva. In both cases what is rejected is that which cannot be assimilated by the system of categories used as an organizing principle. Identifying Kristeva's abjection with Mary Douglas's religious pollution enables one to apply Douglas's remarks about dirt to the abject in spite of the differences separating primitive and modern societies. After all, as Douglas points out, if Westerners were to extricate their idea of dirt from pathogenicity and hygiene, they would be left with a notion of dirt

8. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (2002; repr., London: Routledge Classics 2002), 2-3.

9. Ibid., 5.

10. Ibid., xvii.

as "matter out of place."[11] In both types of society, dirt –or abjection, to use Kristeva's terminology– contravenes the relations that regulate the social order that is coextensive with group identity, thus limiting that order. It follows that, according to the criteria used to define social membership, members who are considered abject, that is, who have the potential to blur the lines of membership, may be jettisoned from the group in order to consolidate group identity. It is reasonable to assume that any redefinition of that identity is likely to involve a reevaluation of the place occupied by those elements thought to embody defilement or abjection with respect to the group.

The male homosexual, the prostitute, and the suicide are abject by virtue of their capacity to disrupt the categories that constitute the Cuban social order. The male homosexual –indeed all homosexuals– blur the distinction between male and female by undermining aspects of the socially sanctioned gender roles. Female prostitutes have a similar blurring effect on the boundaries of the family, a social unit, with corresponding consequences for aspects of social organization such as kinship and law. After all, familial relationships are fundamental in determining property and inheritance rights. The suicide chooses to cross the boundary between world of the living and the dead –possibly the most serious of all social boundaries– and doing so becomes the quintessential example of abjection with respect to the social order. Thus Kristeva is able to state: "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection."[12] In other words, the corpse is abject when there is no structure of meaning within which one may make sense of it.

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11. Douglas, 44.

12. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

The second premise underlying this study is that literature in general and, as a corollary, the detective novel in particular, tells us something about the society that produces it. In pursuing this line of inquiry I have built on the work of Persephone Braham and Stephen Wilkerson. Braham sees in Cuban detective fiction an avenue to reflect on more far-ranging cultural issues. Generally agreed to have emerged with the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"[13] in 1841, the birth of detective fiction coincides with the industrial revolution, the dominance of the bourgeoisie, scientific progress, and an increased emphasis on individualism as an ideology.[14] It appears at a time also of increased urbanization with the attendant development of police forces with greater powers of surveillance. It is therefore inextricably bound with modernity. For that reason, Braham considers the genre ideally suited to explore the ruptures inherent in the performance of modernity that the Cuban revolutionary experience entailed.[15]

Similarly conscious of the genre's social dimension, Wilkerson focuses on its mass appeal. The advent of modernity produced a mass readership, which in turn gave rise to a category of popular fiction –frequently serialized– that included detective narratives. Often disdained by literary elites, popular fiction attracted the interest of Marxist scholars who considered cultural production inseparable from other aspects of social life, including economic relations and institutional structures. Although not solely concerned with literature's aesthetic dimension, thinkers like Gramsci saw the need to

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13. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 397-431.

14. Stephen Wilkinson, *Detective Fiction in Cuban Society and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), 15-16.

15. Persephone Braham, *Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 1.

harness popular literature's capacity to reach the working classes while transforming it into an instrument of critical reflection comparable to that exercised by literary works of art. According to him, the problem that had to be faced by a new proletarian society was "how to create a body of writers who are, artistically, to serial literature what Dostoyevsky was to Sue and Soulié or, with respect to the detective story, what Chesterton was to Conan Doyle and Wallace."[16]Indebted to a Marxist tradition, Wilkerson sets out to understand the Cuban situation applying on the detective novel the tools developed to understand capitalist societies through fiction. Avoiding a reductionistic temptation, Wilkerson does not suggest that the dynamics of a complex society reveal themselves transparently in its detective fiction. Instead, benefitting from the nuanced analyses contributed by Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Stuart Hall, and Colin Mercer, Wilkerson proposes that, rather than a facile representation, detective fiction "can provide an angle of incidence from which society can be viewed in a manner that informs understanding."[17] This dissertation builds on the work of Persephone Braham and Stephen Wilkerson while broadening the scope of Kristeva's theory of the abject as it applies to the social realm by using it as a tool to make sense of the ideological and discursive changes that took place in Cuba during the post-Soviet period. I argue that, to the extent that one wants to gain an understanding of those changes through the analysis of the detective fiction, one must take into account how certain abject figures implicated in Cuba's nationalist discourse are portrayed in that fiction.

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16. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 102.

17. Wilkinson, *Detective Fiction in Cuban Society and Culture*, 17.

Furthermore, although not exclusively, those abject figures include the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide.

The place occupied by the detective novel in the island's cultural life over the past four decades makes it an effective lens through which to evaluate sociopolitical changes. Capitalizing on the popularity detective fiction enjoyed during the republican era, the revolutionary government co-opted the genre to further its own ideological ends. In 1972 the Interior Ministry (MININT) established a literary competition to commemorate the revolutionary government's ascent to power and aptly named it "XIV Aniversario Triunfo de la Revolución." Although opened to all Cubans, the call for papers was addressed in particular to members of the Interior Ministry and the Armed Forces. The guidelines published in the Armed Forces' periodical *Verde Olivo* described the works to be submitted as representative of the police detective genre, known in Spanish as *género policiaco* or *género policial*, and were to have a didactic tone. They were to be "un estímulo a la prevención y vigilancia de todas la actividades antisociales o contra el poder del pueblo."[18] Antisocial and contrary to people's power were to be seen as contrary to the state's interests, since the state was to be understood as the institutional embodiment of a popular revolution whose goal was the establishment of a new social order. As conceived by the Cuban state, the genre was to equate crime with anti-governmental action, and sedition with political dissent. The institutional bodies sponsoring the project as well as the project's stated ideological goals would have conditioned readers' reception from the project's inception. For that reason, any slight deviation from the

18. "La novela policiaca," *Verde Olivo*, October 1, 1972. 23.

officially sanctioned ideological parameters would have been that more noticeable when observed through the lens the genre provided.

The terms *policiaco* and *policial* underscore the relationship between the law enforcement establishment and the type of detective novel promoted by Cuba's MININT: the police procedural, a subgenre of detective fiction. They also point to the challenge posed by the genre's nomenclature in Spanish as well as in English. The literary genre for which Poe's creation serves as prototype is variously known in English as the *classical detective novel*, the *traditional detective novel*, or the *formal detective novel* and was chronologically the first of two main subgenres into which the detective novel may be divided.[19] It achieved its popularity as the English *whodunit* four decades later with Arthur Conan Doyle and reached its apogee with Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Ellery Queen in the interwar years.[20] At its center lies a crime whose details are elucidated by an investigator who ostensibly follows a scientific method, even though according to Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok's edited volume of essays *The Sign of Three*, the strictly rational nature of the investigator's quest is only apparent. In reality, the answers the detective reaches following what seem to be deductive and inductive processes are actually the result of intuition and fortuitous guesses.[21] Nonetheless, the detective's professed affirmation of the scientific method validates an established social order with which he identifies by virtue of his socioeconomic class. Sometimes a bon vivant, the detective of the classical detective novel is usually an idiosyncratic character

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19. José F. Colmeiro, *La novela policiaca española: teoría e historia crítica* (Barcelona: Editorial Antropos, 1994), 56.

20. Ibid., 33.

21. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, eds., *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Homes, Peirce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

who undertakes crime investigation as a hobby, not a profession, so that even when receiving an honorarium for his services, he has discretion over whether or not he chooses to accept the case. In the emotional order, he appears to lack compassion. He comes across as a cold individual who approaches the crime scene more as a puzzle than as a site of human tragedy. It is for that reason that –to the extent that the reader is able to experience the action as a game more than a portrayal of dangers that could threaten his or her own existence– the classical detective novel turns away from realism.

The second main subgenre emerged in the United States during the late 1920s and early 1930s reflecting an environment in which its readers could not help but feel implicated. It conveyed the frivolity and excessive consumerism of the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age. It also adopted at times a sensationalist tone to convey the violence, misery, and labor unrest that characterized the Prohibition Era and the Depression. As a result of the harsh reality it portrayed, it earned the monikers of *tough* or *hard-boiled*.[22] Authors such as Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler, and the editorial services of Joseph T. "Cap" Shaw were instrumental in its genesis. As editor of the pulp magazine *Black Mask,* Shaw explicitly set out to promote a detective novel different from the one created by Poe. With that purpose in mind, he oversaw the publication of the early works of Hammet, Chandler, and other early masters of the genre, including Horace McCoy, William Burnett, Raoul Whitfield, and James Cain.[23] In 1945 the editor Marcel Duhamel would start publishing the French "Série Noir" in clear allusion to the American

22. Colmeiro, 34.

23. Ricardo Piglia, introduction to *Cuentos de la serie negra*, ed. Ricardo Piglia (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina S. A., 1979), 7-8.

magazine and in so doing gave rise to the terms *film noir* and *roman noir*, from which the Spanish *novela negra* is derived.[24]

The hard-boiled subgenre is connected to the realist tradition in the United States.[25] However, because it shines a light on the most dehumanizing aspects of contemporary society, Ricardo Piglia also considers it to be heir to a socially conscious current in American letters exemplified by "Scott Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Caldwell, and Nathaniel West."[26] The differences between the hard-boiled investigator and the detective of traditional detective fiction parallel the differences between their respective subgenres. Whereas the traditional detective often is an aficionado whose economic wellbeing does not necessarily depend on his work, the hard-boiled detective tends to be a private eye for hire, who "is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all."[27] The traditional detective outperforms the officially constituted police force, but he –or she– does not doubt the integrity of that force nor of the system it purports to protect. In contrast, the hard-boiled investigator inhabits a social order where, according to Raymond Chandler,

> gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is the boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down the street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing; a world where you may witness a holdup in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather

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24. Braham, xiii.

25. Mempo Giardinelli, *El género negro* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1984), 1:32.

26. Ibid.

27. Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 18.

> than tell anyone, because the holdup men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge.[28]

In actuality, it is a social order in which legality and virtue do not always coincide, and where the investigator sometimes has to break the law in pursuit of justice because the judicial system as much as the law enforcement agencies have been corrupted by moneyed interests. The hard-boiled investigator's conscience is what ultimately guides his actions because "[q]ue haya Ley no significa que haya Justicia o Verdad. Simplemente garantiza que hay Estado, un nivel cada vez más formal en las sociedades contemporáneas."[29]

Not the product of the social order that gave birth to the traditional detective novel in the nineteenth century or of the hard-boiled variety of the 1920s and 1930s, the detective novel promoted by the MININT sets out to transform the figure of the detective in order to further the regime's vision. The socialist detective differs from both the investigator of the classical detective novel and the agent of the related spy novel of which Ian Fleming's James Bond series was a contemporary successful example. The socialist detective lacks the idiosyncrasies and ambiguous sexuality of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot while shying away from the womanizing consumeristic ways of Fleming's creation, a crucial quality, as the Cuban government identified both homosexuality and hyper-machismo with the counterrevolution. In trying to strike a balance between those two poles, the marks of the socialist detective's masculinity are his physical fitness and a

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28. Chandler, 17.

29. Daniel Link, "El juego silencioso de los cautos," prologue in *El juego de los cautos, literatura policial: de Edgar A. Poe a P. D. James*, (Buenos Aires: La Marca, 2003), 13.

sense of moderation, which he seems to only transgress by excessively smoking Cuban cigars. Thus he demonstrates his self-control except with regards to the consumption of a product identified with what is autochthonously Cuban.[30] More important for the development of the plot, the socialist detective does not undertake the investigation as an idiosyncratic individual. The Cuban economic model does not have a place for a private eye. Therefore he must operate within the law-enforcement apparatus. Within it, he is a member of an investigative team, and it is to the team that the crime's eventual solution is credited. That team not only includes his colleagues and other forensic specialists in the force, but also mass organizations such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, whose awareness of the comings and goings in a given neighborhood enables them to work as spies and informants. Lastly, the role of the individual detective is further limited to the extent that the role played by his intuition in arriving at a solution is minimized. Thus criminals are not usually identified or captured as a result of hunches and premonitions.

The formula promoted by the MININT largely gave rise to a Manichaean detective story in which the characters were either criminal and counterrevolutionary or law-abiding and supportive of the government. The conflation of political opposition and dissent with common crime is clearly revealed in Agenor Martí's characterization of the Cuban novel in the introduction to his volume of interviews about the Cuban detective novel titled *Sobre acusados y testigos*.

> [L]a literatura policial cubana refleja –y revela– un ámbito muy particular de la vida nacional durante los últimos veinte años: la lucha que el país lleva a cabo contra el imperialismo y sus órganos de espionaje, empeñados en aniquilar a la Revolución Cubana. Este es un rasgo distintivo.

30. Braham, 47.

> A la vez, el combate que se sostiene con la delincuencia, no solo como manifestación heredada de la sociedad capitalista, sino también como tentativa contrarrevolucionaria de entorpecer, dificultar e impedir el desarrollo del país.[31]

The criminal does not have a personal enemy; his enemy is the State. The purpose of the socialist detective novel is not just to entertain, but also to explore the sociological and psychological causes of crime again the socialist order.[32] Cuban writers of detective fiction generally adhered to this vision, even when there were some such as Luis Rogelio Nogueras, Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera, and the Uruguayan-born Daniel Chavarría, who produce at times "obras policiales cada vez más elaboradas desde el punto de vista formal" in the estimation of critics such as Elżbieta Skłodowska.[33]

It was not until the end of the 1980s that the Cuban detective novel would begin to morph into something very different from what the MININT set out to promote in 1972. Already in 1981 a journalist and former university student of Daniel Chavarría expressed his dissatisfaction with the socialist detective novel championed by the cultural establishment. In a paper delivered at the first Colloquium on Cuban Literature, Leonardo Padura Fuentes criticized the detective novel by calling attention to the negative effects that the ideological demands on the genre were having on the finished product.

> En la mayor parte de estas obras los personajes siguen siendo figuras de cartón-tabla, huecas, endebles y planas, elaboradas con infantil maniqueísmo; las situaciones simples; el idioma raquítico; las técnicas novelescas olvidadas; y el arte de narrar desconocido… salvándose sólo en […] su orientación ideológica, que responde sin eficacia artística a los intereses del proletariado en el poder, ya que, en última instancia, esas

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31. Agenor Martí, *Sobre acusados y testigos* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1980), 6.

32. Sara Rosell, "La (re)formulación del policial cubano: la tetralogía de Leonardo Padura Fuentes," *Hispanic Journal* 21, 2 (Fall): 448.

33. Elżbieta Skłodowska, *La parodia en la nueva novela hispanoamericana* (Amsterdam: John Bejamins Publishing Company, 1991), 112.

> obras pretenden ser un reflejo realista de la realidad, aunque luego de pasar por las manos de algunos escritores, el lector puede preguntarse: ¿de qué realidad?[34]

Not surprisingly, with the publication of his tetralogy Las Cuatro Estaciones, Padura would begin to take the genre in a different direction by the end of the decade. This new variant of the Cuban detective novel opened up a space within which it became possible to reevaluate foundational aspects of the Cuban ethos at what would arguably become a time without precedent since the establishment of the republic in 1902. Given the differences between the United States in the 1920s and 1930s and Cuba in the 1970s and 1980s, Padura's turn to the model offered by the hard-boiled novel constitutes a judicious adaptation of some of the elements of the older genre to the Cuban context. Padura revives the central role of the investigator in the character of Mario Conde. However, within Cuba's directed economy, the investigator cannot operate as a private professional charging a fee for his services as private eyes do in the works of Hammet or Chandler. Mario Conde belongs to the law enforcement establishment, and it is working as a member of the establishment that he earns a living and undertakes the investigations chronicled in Padura's novels.

Consistent with the denunciatory stance of the hard-boiled genre, Padura adopts a critical perspective towards aspects of Cuban reality that contrasts sharply with the self-congratulatory tone of the socialist detective novel even if his criticisms are carefully nuanced. They are often couched in terms that, rather than tracing society's evils to the basic ideological tenets of the regime, ascribe them to the shortcomings of individuals who have betrayed the revolution's ideals. Nevertheless, because of the pervasive role the

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34. Leonardo Padura, "Diez años de la novela policial en Cuba," in *Coloquio sobre literatura cubana: ponencias, 22-24 de noviembre de 1981* (Havana: 1981), 236-237.

State plays in Cuban society, the reader receives the impression that there is a crime at the center of the novel that remains unsolved: the crime that has been committed by the State against the individual.[35]

Padura's novel conveys a general disenchantment with life within the revolutionary process during the second half of the 1980s that echoes the official recognition that there were systemic problems to be addressed if the legacy of the revolution was going to be preserved. At the closing of the third congress of the Cuban Communist Party on December 2, 1986, Fidel Castro called for a "política de rectificación y de lucha contra las tendencias negativas" that were identified as obstacles to the workings of a directed and planned economy.[36] Those negative tendencies included factors that ranged from improperly diverting funds to not meeting labor norms, all of which were thought ultimately to interfere with socialism's capacity to make good on the promises of a better life for those who had sacrificed their lives for it. In contrast to what was found in the socialist novel, these were issues not attributed to external enemies of the revolution. Before the end of the decade the sense of disenchantment among those who had trusted in the revolutionary project would deepen with the trial, conviction, and execution of General Arnaldo Ochoa, MININT Colonel Antonio de la Guardia, and two officers named Amado Padrón and Jorge Trujillo accused of high treason for their involvement in drug trafficking. When seen in the context of the leadership's own efforts to denounce and bring to an end inefficient economic practices, corruption, and treason,

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35. Rosell, 450.

36. Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado por el comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Secretario del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba y Presidente de los Consejos de Estado y de Ministros, en la clausura de la sesión diferida del Tercer Congreso de Partido Comunista de Cuba, en el Teatro 'Carlos Marx,' el 2 de diciembre de 1986, 'Año del XXX Aniversario del Desembarco del Granma,"
http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1986/esp/f021286e.html (accessed August 22, 2012).

the critical posture of Padura's statements at the end of the 1980s lose some of their contestatory edge. Nevertheless, by adopting many of the features of the hard-boiled subgenre, he equips the Cuban detective novel with the critical tools to grapple with the much more critical challenges Cuban society would face with the advent of the Special Period. In Padura's, as well as in the hands of subsequent exponents of the genre such as Amir Valle and Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo, detective novels would become a means through which their authors would reflect on the experiences of Cubans after the demise of the Soviet bloc.

The relative freedom with which the Cuban detective novel began to evaluate contemporary Cuban society at the end of the 1980s only increased with the economic debacle that followed the disappearance of the Soviet Union and its allies. As increased economic hardship forced the government to reduce its role as the island's sole cultural patron and the need for hard currency increased, the government allowed Cuban writers, starting in 1993, to enter into contracts with foreign publishing houses without state interference.[37] Although writers living on the island still had to weigh the consequences of what they wrote, that the editorial process was not directly controlled by the Cuban state allowed authors to exhibit greater independence when portraying Cuban realities that would have been objectionable to the regime in different circumstances. The fact that by publishing abroad these writers were inserting themselves in the international book market undoubtedly had an effect too. Not only were Cuban authors free to be more critical as a result of the lack of state interference, they were also motivated to do so as

37. Esther Whitfield, *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and "Special Period" Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 14.

they appealed to an international readership familiar with a hard-boiled tradition that was critical of its own societies.

The capacity of the new Cuban detective novel to cast a critical eye on contemporary society, combined with the absence of an independent Cuban press, led Padura to acknowledge the documentary value of the literature produced during the Special Period. In response to an interviewer in 2005 who asked him if he thought fiction could fulfill the informative and critical functions of journalism, Padura noted that "cualquier persona en el futuro, para entender lo que ha pasado en la Cuba de estos años, va a encontrar una percepción mucho más cercana a la realidad en la literatura que en el periodismo" because "el periodismo ha dejado o ha sido incapaz de desempeñar" its role "principalmente por la falta de interés de los que lo dirigen en que sea un reflejo problemático de la realidad."[38] Strictly speaking, the interviewer's question pertained to literature in general, but throughout the interview the insightfulness with which Padura had captured Cuban reality in his detective novels within the literature of the period is emphasized. It is for that reason that I have chosen examples of the Cuban detective novel of the post-Soviet period to examine discursive practices that invoke the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide in contemporary Cuba. Each one of the succeeding chapters will discuss the treatment of one of these figures in a novel by a different author: the male homosexual in Leonardo Padura Fuente's *Máscaras*, the female prostitute in Amir Valle Ojeda's *Las puertas de la noche*, and the suicide in Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo's *Polvo en el viento*. I have chosen these works because they offer a rich sociological portrait in which to observe how the three abject figures lying at the center

38. Marta María Ramírez, "Leonardo Padura: con la pluma y la espada," Cuba a la mano, April 8, 2005, http://cubaalamano.net/sitio/client/article.php?id=6383 (accessed 19 August, 2012).

of this study become objects of preoccupation at a time when the sociopolitical premises under which most Cubans had lived for most of their lives were being questioned. I have also chosen them because artistically, they collectively reveal a sense of being a part of an aesthetic project with a sense of purpose.[39]

Because each of the abject figures discussed are not rare in detective literature, nor are they alien to the discursive practices that have been prevalent in all societies whose culture has been informed by the Christian tradition, each chapter will offer a brief historical overview of the particular developments of those practices in connection with Cuba's national ethos from its crucial genesis in the nineteenth century. Most of each chapter will consist of close readings of the texts in order to relate the preoccupation with those abject figures to a possible model of civic life. Each chapter will also explicitly highlight the role played by the investigator in the post-Soviet detective novel as a device that facilitates the treatment of the abject figures discussed. The investigators' life experiences during the revolutionary process contribute to their dissatisfaction and therefore to their critical view of their current situation. This is an instance in which the features of the literary genre facilitate its critical function.

Chapter 1 explores Leonardo Padura's treatment of the male homosexual in *Máscaras*. Padura's work is examined in the context of a broader cultural effort beginning in the 1980s to come to terms with the abuses perpetrated by the regime on homosexuals during its first two decades. Through it, Padura revisits the period in the 1960s and 1970s during which homosexuals were explicitly excluded by the revolution from institutional life. Through direct allusions, the creation of characters that double for

39. Leonardo Padura, *Máscaras* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1997; Barcelona: Tusquets, 1997); Amir Valle, *Las puertas de la noche* (San Juan, P. R.: Editorial Plaza Mayor, Inc., 2002); Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento* (San Juan: Editorial Plaza Mayor, 2005).

historical figures, and the reproduction of some of these historical figures' arguments, Padura recovers in the pages of *Máscaras* many of those who were ostracized in previous decades on account of their homosexuality. In dialogue with Emilio Bejel's *Gay Cuban Nation*, I vindicate the work's contestatory character by relying on José Javier Maristany's analysis of analogous ideological operations performed by works written in the course of Argentina's dictatorial regimes during the 1970s and 1980s. The literary production of this period of Argentine history sets in circulation discourses that adhere to the state's dominant narrative to different degrees, even within the same literary work. Similarly, even when *Máscaras'* plot at one level reaffirms the heterosexist and homophobic order that lay behind the repression of previous decades, the work simultaneously places in circulation a cogent discourse contrary to it that breaks the ideological monopoly of that order. I further argue that, to the extent that a reader may be familiar with the particulars of censorship in Cuba, *Máscaras* may be read so that its attack on heterosexism and homophobia functions as a decoy for a much more seditious endorsement of a pluralistic political system the government has ruled out as part of Cuba's future.

I have used the term *male homosexual*, rather than *gay*, for men who are attracted (or perceived to be attracted) to others of the same sex or gender because the term gay has identitarian associations that do not always correspond to the social and historical contexts examined in this study. As used in the United States presently, the term *gay* reflects the historical experience of American homosexuals. Notions of effeminacy and of being "out" that are culturally specific to the United States have shaped –and continue to shape– that experience. American economic and political power has contributed to

disseminate some of the manifestations of those notions with the aid of the media and entertainment industries. As a result, sexual minorities in other parts of the world have adopted aspects of the American gay identity –including the term– for various reasons that have included affirming their own identity vis-à-vis their own societies. Adoption of the term and of other aspects of the American-inflected "gay lifestyle" by populations of other nations, even those in the West, does not necessarily include the adoption of American views on sexual and social practices identified with same-sex attraction.

Just as chapter 1 considers the treatment of the male homosexual in Padura's *Máscaras*, chapter 2 focuses on the portrayal of the female prostitute in the work of Amir Valle Ojeda. Although the primary text examined is Valle's hard-boiled *Las puertas de la noche*, the inextricable relationship between the novel and the non-fictional *Jineteras* makes it impossible not to take into account how the latter illuminates the former. Valle's writing of both works overlap temporally, and both works are in dialogue with each other. As it will be explained in detail in chapter 2, the crime that constitutes the crux of the novel concerns child prostitution. However, the investigator's interviews and research in Havana's demimonde brings him in contact with a world of prostitution in which the female prostitute plays a crucial role. An answer gradually emerges from his investigations to the question that gives *Jineteras* its sense of urgency: whether the apparent acceptance of prostitution in post-Soviet Cuba marks a fundamental change in the nation's moral fiber.

Finally, I broach in chapter 3 the representation of suicide in the post-Soviet detective Cuban novel using Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo´s novel *Polvo en el viento* as a case study. In contrast to iconic examples extolled in nationalist mythology, Lunar Cardedo's

novel presents a group of young people not likely to sacrifice their lives willingly for the sake of a broader political project. The realm of the personal displaces the social in Lunar Cardedo´s novel. Taking their own lives appears to them to be a reasonable option when confronting some of life's vicissitudes. However, their perspectives of the vicissitudes that lead them to make that choice are grounded in more intimate experiences, even when those experiences are shaped by sociopolitical factors. Furthermore, I have relied on Georges Bataille's insights into the relationship between death and eroticism to illuminate how the characters in the novel may find meaning in the concurrence of sexual and self-destructive drives that are part of their experience.

Aware of the potential of Kristeva's theorization of abjection for explaining social phenomena, political scientist Norma Claire Moruzzi establishes a correspondence between the self in Kristeva's model and the nation-state. According to Moruzzi, just as the self constitutes itself in Kristeva's psychoanalytic model with respect to the abject, "the nation-state establishes itself through the convulsions of a body politic which rejects those parts of itself, defined as other or excess, whose rejected alterity then engenders the consolidation of a national identity."[40] In the Cuban case, the presence of male homosexuals and female prostitutes, two figures already proscribed by the island's Christian tradition and prevailing positivist intellectual currents at the end of the nineteenth century, was used to discredit Cuban society at the moment the island was trying to chart for itself an independent future. Clearly a liability for the nation-building project, these two marginal figures were to be jettisoned from the new polity and its legitimating discourse. Marked by the ambiguity they both represented, which confirmed

40. Norma Claire Moruzzi, "National Abjects: Julia Kristeva on the Process of Political Self-Identification," in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), 143.

their abject status, they became signposts limiting the type of citizen expected to embody the national identity. In contrast, the suicide, although arguably intrinsically abject according to Kristeva's model, was assimilated. Understandably, acute moments of crisis would test the nation's collective identity and with it the loci of abjection capable of bounding it.

Chapter 1

Revolutionary Cuba's Anti-Gay Legacy: Leonardo Padura's *Máscaras*

> "Pero el travestismo siempre, desde tiempos de los faraones, ha sido un arte. ¿Por qué voy a creer que jamás una sociedad moderna como la nuestra podrá entender ese sueño, ese modo de ser libre?"
>
> —Amir Valle, *Jineteras*

The publication of Leonardo Padura's tetralogy Las Cuatro Estaciones marked a turning point in Cuban contemporary fiction. The critic Pío Serrano saw in it "la madurez de un discurso crítico que omitía un explícito y epidérmico anticastrismo, la indagación irónica a veces, desgarrada otras, de una realidad enturbiada por la impostura, el disimulo, el enmascaramiento y el miedo."[1] Yet, the discursive qualities praised by Serrano had to cause some unease in a number of readers trying to determine that discourse's position with respect to the island's political system. Those unacquainted with Cuba's political landscape would likely attribute that unease to a lack of readerly sophistication, since it seems to betray an approach to literature that sets aesthetic questions aside to become preoccupied with where the text stands ideologically. Rather than deserve the supercilious disdain of critics, the concerns giving rise to those readers' unease are bound to be part of any attempt to understand the literary production of Cuba of the last fifty years. With respect to Padura's police novels, the discomfort is likely to grow out of a realization that his texts appear to defy the rules that Cuban artists have observed over the past few decades in order to survive the government's censure. For the capacity to determine what could be said without incurring reprisals within a system whose cultural life has been subjected to the ideological forces that gave rise to the Missile Crisis has been indispensable for those who have not wanted to jeopardize their

1. Pío Serrano, "Leonardo Padura o el desencanto," *Revista Hispano Cubana* 11 (Fall 2001), 109.

careers. Thus eleven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the essayist Victor Fowler is able to assure his readers that the demise of the Socialist bloc does not mean that Cold War metaphors do not pertain to the Cuban context, and to affirm that not to recognize it "is a mixture of ignorance with political ingenuity–and perhaps a little bit of ill intention."[2] However, even if the island's cultural politics were not as treacherous as Fowler suggests, Padura's texts must lead a critical reader to ask himself how they could have been published while others that contained milder and more indirect criticism resulted in their authors being forced to choose between exile and silence. The question is all the more salient in the case of those who –like Padura– continue living and working in Cuba and are able to travel abroad, a privilege traditionally granted those whose ideological credentials sufficiently reassure the government that their leaving the island will not become an occasion to embarrass the regime before the foreign press or to request political asylum. Although there are economic and editorial factors that partly account for the relative freedom with which Padura depicts Cuban society in his fiction, that he adopts a strategy that limits his explicit criticism to the government's treatment of homosexuals during the first two decades of the revolution might explain how he was able to avoid, in the case of *Máscaras* (1997), the measures taken against others who have adopted a similarly critical stance vis-à-vis the regime.[3] The purpose of this chapter is twofold: first, to examine how that strategy makes for a work that is susceptible to ambivalent readings of its commitment to dismantle the discourse used in the past to exclude the male homosexual from the body politic; second, to reaffirm the value of

2. Víctor Fowler Calzada, "Literary Critique: Blindness and Possibility," in *Cuban Transitions at the Millenium*, ed. Eloise Linger and John Cotman (Largo, MD: Internacional Development Options, 2000), 138.

3. Leonardo Padura Fuentes, *Máscaras* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1997; Barcelona: Tusquets, 1997). The Tusquets edition has been used for citation purposes.

Máscaras's contribution at a moment of crisis to a new vision of the nation through its portrayal of an abject figure in many ways central to Cuba's nationalist discourse.

As far back as the last decade of the eighteenth century, at a time when the lineaments of a Cuban national identity were becoming barely discernable, the male homosexual was already considered a sociopolitical liability. In 1791 an article signed with the pseudonym of "el amante del periódico" attributed to Fr. José Agustín Caballero appeared on the *Papel periódico de la Havana* with the title of "Carta crítica del hombre muger." The article was a review of a talk given by someone simply identified as a *señorita* on what she termed the "torpe vicio de la Afeminación, antiguo BOLERO, ó enfermedad que ha contaminado á una porcion considerable de hombres de nuestro País."[4] The feminization addressed is conceived in terms of dress and mannerisms: tight clothing and "*reconcomios, pepulgos y cosquillas*."[5] No effort is made to distinguish sexual orientation from the outward manifestation of gender, as it was understood in Havana at the turn of the eighteenth century. Effeminacy is not defined in terms of the sex of the object of desire, but in terms of the performative dimension that, according to Judith Butler, inheres in what constitutes gender.[6] Although the talk decried the aesthetic and natural disorder to which effeminacy supposedly pointed, important issues in their own right for a colony recently exposed to the normalizing policies of the Bourbons, the reason why such disorder required society's immediate attention was revealed by the *señorita* when she asked:

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4. "Carta crítica del hombre muger," in *La literatura en el* Papel Periódico de la Havana*: 1790-1805*, ed. Cintio Vitier, Fina García-Marruz, and Robert Friol (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1990), 75. The source's orthography has been retained.

5. Ibid., 76.

6. For an overview of Judith Butler's insight into what constitutes gendered behavior see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Rutledge Classics, 2006).

> ¿Si se ofreciera defender á la Pátria, que tendriamos que esperar en semejantes Ciudadanos o Narcisillos? ¿Podrá decirse que estos tienen aliento para tolerar las interperies de la Guerra? ¿Como han de ser varones fuertes y esforzados, decia Seneca, los que asi ostentan su ánimo mugeril y apocado? Desengañemonos, el que se cria con musicas, bayles, regalos y deleites, forzosamente degenera en femeniles costumbres.[7]

The "hombre muger" was a political liability because he would not have been capable of defending the nation, as presumably more masculine men would have. Called to be a protective barrier from the enemies of the fatherland, the homosexual would have caved in, allowing outside threats to inflict damage on the nation's body. Even though consistency has not been the hallmark of the criticisms leveled at those who have blurred gender distinctions, that the *señorita* considered an education filled with "regalos y deleites" to be the cause of effeminacy raises questions about the identity of her criticism's actual target. Many men in colonial society had upbringings marked by luxury and ease by virtue of their social class and undoubtedly did not exhibit the mannerisms and dress she associates with the "hombre muger." That inconsistency on her part could be resolved if one assumes that she actually thought that the ultimate indicator of men's effeminacy was actually not being strong enough to defend the fatherland instead of their dress and mannerisms themselves. These men were too soft and lacked the necessary vigor to withstand the demands of war.

Presumably expressing his own ideas instead of reporting someone else's as he did with the *señorita*'s, Caballero anticipated her criticism of childrearing practices. In an article titled "Carta sobre la educación de los niños," Caballero deplores the example set by some parents precisely because they encourage in their sons some of the qualities the

7. "Carta crítica del hombre muger," 77.

señorita attributes to effeminate men. Writing on March 24, 1791 under the same *nom de guerre*, Caballero states:

> Apenas habrá Casa en este País, que no tenga una Negra o un Negrito, y hé aquí la piedra del escándalo. No tomará la ama un búcaro de agua aunque esté a dos pasos del tinagéro, sino se lo trae el esclavo: á su imitación el hijo *se cría floxo y perezoso*.[8]

Caballero attributes weakness and indolence to a disdain for manual labor, a feature of colonial life that, in his opinion, was traceable to slavery and that bode ill for the island's long-term economic and moral health.[9] It is unlikely that the target of Caballero's criticism lay beyond society's attitudes regarding work and labor practices to include effeminacy given the tenor of the remainder of his article. Therefore it would be unwarranted to identify him unequivocally with a project whose objective was to exclude homosexuals from an incipient national family even if Caballero's views on effeminacy most likely did not differ from that of other men of his time with a similar cultural and religious formation. What is clear is that his article, as well as the *señorita*'s, seem to betray some anxiety about men in Cuba not conforming to a particular masculine ideal because of what that could mean for the survival of the nation either economically or on the field of battle, and that softness or slothfulness were not part of that masculine ideal.

That such gendered differences could have function as tropes for issues less easily addressed in a public forum seems highly likely. As the 2011 Queen Sofía Award laureate Fina García Marruz perceptively asks in her essay on the polemical nature of the *Periódico*, "¿No podría tratarse de la aparición, ya caracterizada en el panorama nacional, de la figura, mucho más frágil de cuerpo y más suave de maneras, del criollo,

8. "Carta crítica del hombre muger," 64-65. Italics mine.

9. Ibid., 21.

contrastando con la solidez y aspereza españolas?"[10] The *Papel periódico*, published under the aegis of then Governor Luis de las Casas and the Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana constituted a space where the leading figures of the time could speak their minds on issues of current interest benefiting from the enlightened views given impetus by the Borbonic reforms. A rhetoric that exacerbated differences between the *Peninsulares* and Creoles would have been counterproductive to the sociopolitical consensus and capital needed to promote any desired changes.

Whether in the *señorita*'s article there is a subtle identification of an emerging Cuban identity among Creoles with effeminacy must be irremediably left to the realm of conjecture. Of what there is no doubt is that almost a century later the issue crystallized again, this time on the American press. José Martí, attuned to the mores of his day, responded in a manner that further contributed to the unassimilability of the homosexual to Cuba's political body. On March 6, 1889 the Philadelphia *Manufacturer* included an article opposing Cuba's possible annexation to the United States because her men were unsuitable to fulfill "the obligations of citizenship in a great and free republic."[11] In the article's view, Cubans had compounded effeminacy with the defects they had inherited from their Spanish forebears, and "[t]heir lack of virile strength and self-respect was demonstrated by the apathy with which they had submitted to Spanish oppression for so long."[12]

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10. Fina García Marruz, "La crítica y la polémica en el *Papel Periódico de la Havana*," in *La literatura en el* Papel Periódico de la Havana*: 1790-1805*, ed. Cintio Vitier, Fina García Marruz, and Robert Friol (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubana, 1990), 37.

11. "Do We Want Cuba?" *Manufacturer*, March 16, 1889, quoted in José Martí, *Our America: Writings on Latin America and the Struggle for Cuban Independence*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 229.

12. Ibid.

Feeling compelled to rebut the insult inherent in an argument that attributed the island's political fate to the effeminacy of Cubans without lending his support to an annexionist project, Martí adopts a two-pronged approach. On one hand, he accounts for Cuban qualities that might have appeared as effeminate from an American perspective by underscoring the affinity of these qualities with aesthetic and spiritual concerns of which poetry was the highest manifestation and contrasts them favorably to the utilitarian values represented by the United States, where wealth was becoming the ultimate criterion of success. On the other, Martí appeals to the martial virtues, arguably the greatest expression of manliness, displayed by Cuban patriots of all social classes during the war they had fought against Spain from 1868-1878. Engaging the terminology used by the *Manufacturer*, Martí writes:

> We have suffered impatiently under tyranny; we have fought like men, sometimes like giants, to be freemen….
>
> But…because our halfbreeds and city-bred young men are generally of delicate physique, or suave courtesy, and ready words, hiding under the glove that polishes the poem the hand that fells the foe–are we to be considered as the *Manufacturer* does consider us, an "effeminate" people? These city bred young men and poorly built halfbreeds knew in one day how to rise against a cruel government,…to obey as soldiers, sleep in the mud, eat roots,… conquer foes with the branch of a tree, die – these men of eighteen, these heirs of wealthy estates, these dusky striplings– a death not to be spoken of without uncovering the head. They died like those other men of ours who, with a stroke of the *machete*, can send a head flying, or by a turn of the hands, bring a bull to their feet. These "effeminate" Cubans had once courage enough, in the face of a hostile government, to carry on their left arms for a week the mourning-band for Lincoln.[13]

Martí responds to the *Manufacturer´*s criticism offering an image of Cuban patriots that runs counter to the stereotyped effeminacy attributed to them by emphasizing their skills

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13. José Martí, "A Vindication of Cuba," *New York Evening Post*, March 25, 1889, in *Our America: Writings on Latin America and the Struggle for Cuban Independence*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 235-237.

and fortitude on the battlefield. In his reference to their plantation-owning background, which would have afforded some of them carefree lives filled with pleasure, Martí gives a description that belies the propensity to effeminate customs to which members of their social class were said to be inevitably inclined according to the Senecan reference of the already cited *señorita*. More importantly perhaps, Martí's allusion to the inclusiveness represented by the different social and racial strands that made up the rebel army underscores the exclusion of the homosexual from the national family.

If Martí's stance toward homosexuality is complicated by the identitarian ground he attempts to carve out for an incipient nation in the face of American modernity and its utilitarian contempt for Spanish America, the positivist cultural currents increasingly holding sway among Cuban intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century were not any more receptive to the homosexual. Enrique José Varona, disciple of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer,[14] arguably constitutes the most notable embodiment of this rejection. Of impeccable separatist credentials, Varona regarded homosexuality a vice of foreign origin to be avoided lest the national organism suffered the attendant sociopolitical ills.[15] Grounded in Martí's political thought and Varona's positivist philosophical views, the freedom envisioned for the new republic left no place for the homosexual, and to the extent that *Máscaras* proposed a political space that would include him, albeit ambivalently, the novel offered a new version of *cubanidad* during another period of national crisis.

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14. For an overview of Erique José Varona's place within the positivist currents of his day see Elio Alba Bufill, *Enrique José Varona: crítica y creación literaria* (Madrid: Hispanova de Ediciones, 1976).

15. Varona´s views on the moral danger that homosexuality poses for Cuban society are evident in his introduction to Benjamín de Céspedes's *La prostitución en la ciudad de La Habana*. [Benjamín de Céspedes, *La prostitución en la ciudad de La Habana* (Havana: Establecimiento Tipográfico O'Reilly Número 9, 1888)].

A critical perspective on works from a different sociopolitical context may explain why a work critical of the Cuban regime's treatment of homosexuals might appear ambivalent even as it attempts to dismantle that regime's homophobic discourse. Examining the Argentine literature produced during the military dictatorship that characterized the euphemistically dubbed "Proceso de Reorganización Nacional" from 1976 through 1983, José Javier Maristany notes that authors had to calibrate carefully the content of their writing in order to avoid censorship. Only then could they hope to have their work published in Argentina if they resided in the country, or have it circulate with relative ease if they were exiled. Yet, instead of cause for opprobrium for having engaged in what could be considered an act of self-censorship, Maristany recognizes in that calibration a strategy of survival without which many writers critical of the regime would have been completely silenced. Rather than capitulating before the government, he sees them establishing a "contract" with the country's political reality –sometimes unconsciously– that inevitably left a mark on the text.[16] As a consequence, their works appear sometimes ambivalent, maintaining a position with respect to the State's dominant ideology that falls somewhere between adherence and opposition.[17] The differences between the two historical moments notwithstanding, Maritany's observations about the manner in which Argentine writers positioned themselves with respect to the State's dominant discourse not only can shed light on Padura's own challenges in broaching the treatment of homosexuals by the revolutionary government, but also on the effect of *Máscaras* on Cuba's homophobic discourse.

16. José Javier Maristany, *Narraciones peligrosas: resistencia y adhesión en las novelas del proceso* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1999), 54.

17. Ibid., 14.

Maristany adopts an interdiscursive approach based on the work of Michel Pêcheux and Régin Robin, both of whom studied discursive formations and practices from the historical materialist perspective represented by Althusser. Accordingly, he proceeds from the premise that discourses are the product of social, and historical phenomena that cannot be analyzed solely taking into account their linguistic dimension.[18] Relying on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, he presupposes that political power seeks to become effective through the naming practices inherent in discourse,[19] while with Jean-Pierre Faye he maintains that discursive productions in turn act on social organizations.[20] In so doing, he distances himself from what he considers to be a Foucaultian conception of discourse. Thus, rather than seeing discourse as a closed system, he believes that "el proceso tiene un punto de partida complejo pero anclado tanto en las 'palabras' como en las 'cosas,'" que "se materializa en una textura verbal y desemboca en las cosas."[21] From this perspective, the literary text is one of a number of interdiscursive spaces lying along a continuum, where social actors struggle as they attempt to voice their respective interests while referring the reader back to literature, to a more extensive realm of non-literary discourse that embraces popular culture, and to a non-discursive sphere that includes the necessary requirements to produce that discourse.[22] In this framework, what traditionally has been regarded as literature is a much less discrete area of discourse whose critical tools conversely have a much broader

18. Maristany, 11, note 1.

19. Ibid., 42.

20. Ibid., 31.

21. Ibid., 15, note 5.

22. Ibid., 47.

field of application. Understandably, Maristany's critical approach relies on Tzvetan Todorov's insights into the literary quality of discourses, which lie outside the area properly understood as literature. With Todorov, he recognizes the presence of narrative genres in nonfictional discourses. By doing so he opens up the possibility of applying literary analysis to discursive areas normally thought to describe reality as it is and – perhaps more importantly– of sensitizing the reader to the literary quality and possible fictional nature of the discursive formations normally deemed to apprehend and control that reality objectively such as that of the State.[23]

The discursive processes described above are subjected to additional pressures when a political system establishes a censorship apparatus with the purpose of advancing the state's agenda, whether in the bureaucratic-authoritarian Southern Cone or in socialist Cuba. Regardless of the level of institutional control or the purposefulness with which the censorship is exercised, the writer's awareness of the likelihood that he or she is under surveillance as well as of the possible consequences that result from contravening the dominant discourse leads him or her in some cases to self-censorship. The film *Tiempo de revancha* (1981) captures the predicament that sometimes led Argentines during the years of the dictatorship to choose self-censorship –for the sake of security or survival– by portraying the tragedy of an ex-labor union member who cuts his own tongue in order to ensure his own silence.[24] Many resorted to generic conventions that included the fictionalization of history in the case of Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980) and Andrés Rivera's *Nada que perder* (1982). Others, like Eduardo Belgrano Rawson, used

23. Maristany, 36.

24. Federico Luppi, Haydée Padilla, Julio de Grazia, Rodolfo Ranni, Ulises Dumont, Aldo Barbero, *Tiempo de revancha*, directed by Rodolfo Aristarain ([Buenos Aires?]: Aries Cinematográfica Argentina S. A., 1981).

the adventure novel as their medium in *El naufrago de las estrellas* (1979). More significantly, some resorted to the police novel. Examples of these are Juan Carlos Martini's *La vida entera* (1981), and José Pablo Feinmann's *Últimos días de la víctima* (1979).[25] These strategies are not necessarily part of a conscious process. Utilizing concepts derived from Bourdieu's cultural sociology, Maristany defines strategy as "una práctica que no es consciente ni calculada ni mecánicamente determinada;…no…[es]…ni el producto de objetivos explícitos planteados sobre la base de un conocimiento adecuado de las condiciones objetivas ni de una determinación mecánica, pero que se ajustan objetivamente a la situación."[26] It follows that, regardless of how carefully the author may try to create a text that accurately reflects his own position with respect to the dominant discourse, the discursive constructions present in the text may contest the dominant discourse's hegemony in unpredictable ways. Clearly, the works that exhibit these characteristics are not part of what would be considered politically committed literature (*literatura comprometida*); nevertheless they can, and end up, subverting within literature the discursive monopoly imposed in other areas of life. Relying on parody, irony, generic conventions, transposition of characters, or historical and geographical recontextualization, and appealing to a certain complicity on the part of the reader, these literary works disseminate discourses that strike a dissonant chord, even when seemingly

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25. Ibid., 52. For critical studies about the impact of Argentina's "Proceso de Reorganización Nacional" see Daniel Balderston et al., *Ficción y política: la narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar* (Buenos Aires: Alianza Editorial, 1987), and Beatriz Sarlo, "Literatura y política," *Punto de Vista* 6, 19 (December 1983): 8-11. Ricardo Piglia, *Respiración artificial* (1980; repr., Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, S.A., 2001); Andrés Rivera, *Nada que perder* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982); Eduardo Belgrano Rawson, *El naufrago de las estrellas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pomaire, 1979); Juan Carlos Martini, *La vida entera* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1981); José Pablo Feinmann, *Últimos días de la víctima* ([Buenos Aires]: Ediciones Colihue, 1979).

26. Ibid., 51.

undermined by the work's plot development. I suggest that it is within this framework that the ideological operation performed by *Máscaras* should be understood.

Máscaras is part of the literature produced during the Special Period that, according to Fowler, frequently attempted to rescue marginalized voices such as those of women and homosexuals.[27] It is the latter's that this novel sets out to vindicate. Therefore, it is part of a literature that serves as conduit to discourses traditionally emanating from the periphery instead of from the centers of power. Written in 1994,[28] it is the third installment in Padura's hard-boiled tetralogy featuring Lieutenant Mario Conde. Although not the first of the author's novels to reach a foreign reading public, it is the first to be widely read outside Cuba. An early version of *Pasado perfecto*, the first novel in the series, had been published in Mexico in 1991.[29] *Máscaras*'s notoriety can undoubtedly be attributed to its winning the 1995 Café Gijón prize, but the demands of a transnational economy in which Cuba had become another marketable commodity certainly played a critical role. At one point Cuba's cultural production had enabled those opposed to the revolutionary project to indulge their nostalgia for a lost time and place, and those connected to the socialist project by "the enormous affective links the revolution produced during the 1960s"[30] to indulge theirs for a past utopia. However, by the mid 1990s there was an increasing number who expected a Cuban novel and the

27. Fowler, 138-139.

28. Valerie Smith, "A Formula for Hard Times: An Introduction to the Crime Fiction of Leonardo Padura Fuentes and an Interview with the Author," *Hispanic Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (February 2001): 71.

29. Padura, *Pasado perfecto* (Guadalajara, Mexico: Dirección de Publicaciones, Universidad de Guadalajara, 1991); Ibid, (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2000.); Smith, Ibid., 70.

30. José Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 2.

world it evoked to indulge soon their nostalgia for one of the world's last socialist redoubts not anticipated to outlast by much its former Soviet patron.

According to the critic Alonso Estenoz, in contrast to its absence for approximately two decades, homosexuality as a theme seemed to have become fashionable, a phenomenon he explains in part as a response to a foreign editorial market that became increasingly critical for the island after 1989.[31] In 1988 Roberto Uría's short story "¿Por qué llora Leslie Caron?" and Norge Espinosa's poem "Vestido de novia" for the first time since 1959 show homosexual literary characters that are central to the plot, have a positive charge, and are not subject to the perspective of a heterosexual narrator.[32] The same year, Francisco Gattorno became the first Cuban actor to portray a gay character in film in favorable terms in *El verano de la señora Forbes*.[33] Based on the novel by Miguel Barnet titled *Canción de Rachel*, the film *La bella del Alhambra* was released in 1989. The film did not portray homosexuality in positive terms, but it broached it as a subject, and that would have been considered taboo in Cuban cinema a few years before. In 1990 a poem by Abilio Estévez titled "Desnudo frente a la ventana" and Padura's short story "El cazador" followed. Whereas the former presented a queer protagonist for whom a meditation on his body remits him to instances when he deviated from the model of virility society set before him, the latter portrayed an anxious

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31. Alfredo Alonso Estenoz, "Tema homosexual en la literatura cubana de los 80 y los 90: ¿renovación o retroceso?" (paper presented at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, Miami, Fla., March 2000), 3.

32. Roberto Uría, "¿Por qué llora Leslie Caron?," in *Letras cubanas* (July-September, 1988): 236-239; Norge Espinosa, "Vestido de novia," in *Las breves tribulaciones* (Santa Clara, Cuba: Ediciones Capiro, 1992), 39-41; Alonso Estenoz, 1.

33. Ian Lumsden. *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 124; *El verano de la señora Forbes*, VHS, directed by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo (New York: Fox Lorber Video, 1995).

homosexual character whose hopes for finding a romantic relationship are dashed against his social milieu' heterosexual expectations. More significant is Senel Paz's *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo*. Published in 1991, Paz's novella set out to reconsider the place of homosexuals within the revolution and the ideological underpinnings of the repression mounted against them by the state during its first three decades. Although a film titled *Adorables mentiras* based on a script by Paz was released in 1994 satirizing homophobia in contemporary Cuba, it was Gustavo Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's film *Fresa y chocolate* that became a major popular event. Also with a screenplay by Paz based on his *El lobo*, the film was released in 1993 to packed movie houses in Cuba and expectant audiences abroad.[34]

Given the developments outlined above, the publication of *Máscaras* in Barcelona and Havana in 1997 addressing the place of the homosexual in Cuban society is not such a radical step; it is rather one more in a series of steps taken beginning at the end of the 1980s to redress the elision of homosexuals from the country's cultural landscape. In the 1990s those steps become part of larger economic and ideological adjustments the government undertakes in order to manage the pressures attendant to the Soviet collapse. According to José Quiroga, the Cuban state is led to "relax censorship controls for the sake of a mediated openness"[35] in which it became possible to criticize past political mistakes as long as no connections were made between those mistakes and the leadership

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34. Miguel Barnet, *Canción de Rachel* (Barcelona: Editorial Laia, 1979); *La bella del Alhambra*, VHS, directed by Enrique Pineda Barnet (New York: Center for Cuban Studies, 1990); Abilio Estévez, "Desnudo frente a la ventana," *Casa de la Américas* 181 (July-August 1990): 74; Padura, "El cazador," *La Puerta de Alcalá y otras cacerías* (San Juan, PR: Ediciones Callejón, 2000), 159-170; Senel Paz, *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (Mexico, D. F.: Ediciones Era, 1991); *Adorables mentiras*, DVD, directed by Gerardo Chijona ([Havana]: Video ICAIC, 1999); *Fresa y chocolate*, VHS, directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabio (Burbank, CA.: Miramax Home Entertainment, 1995); Stephen Wilkinson, "Homosexuality and the Repression of Intellectuals in *Fresa y cholate* and *Máscaras*," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 18, no. 1 (January 1999): 17-33.

35. Quiroga, 4.

and structures still in place. The atmosphere created would allow one to see the Special Period in a different ideological light. Instead of seeing it as the irremediable failure of the revolutionary project, one could see it as a time to take stock and rectify those mistakes so that in the future the revolution might still be able to deliver on its promises. Economically, this atmosphere made it possible for writers like Padura to publish abroad and to transform their criticism of the past into hard currency to the benefit of the regime and of themselves. *Máscaras* certainly seems to conform economically to this pattern but veers away from it ideologically to the extent that, in addition to reexamining past errors, it suggests that someone should be held responsible for them in the present.

Padura's novel chronicles the investigation of the death of a young man whose corpse is found in the Forest of Havana (*Bosque de La Habana*), a park located on the margins of the Almendares River as it reaches the island's northern coast. The young man had been strangled with a red silk sash that was part of the woman's outfit he was wearing. The victim appeared to be a transvestite, and the fact that the murder occurred on the day the Catholic Church celebrates the Transfiguration of the Lord seemed to highlight perversely the transformational elements of the crime. Further ignominy was heaped on the victim by violating him. The autopsy eventually revealed that two silver Cuban peso coins had been inserted in the victim's rectum. The need for a great deal of sensitivity in handling the investigation increased when, in addition to the sexually stigmatizing quality of the crime, the authorities determined that the victim was Alexis Arayán Rodríguez, the son of Faustino Arayán, a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Foreign Relations. The case is solved when the murderer is identified as the young man's father. We find later that Faustino had killed his son in a fit of anger after Alexis

threatened him with exposing his false political past. Alexis found that Faustino managed to create for himself shortly after the Revolution's triumph in 1959 the identity of an underground conspirator against the Batista dictatorship with the aid of forged documents and a couple of false witnesses. Passing for an early member of the revolutionary movement provided Faustino with the ideological credentials to benefit from the new order. Because the politically delicate nature of the case required someone who was trustworthy and experienced, the case was naturally assigned to Mario Conde, the investigator and protagonist of Padura's tetralogy.

With Mario Conde, the hard-boiled investigator returns to Cuban popular literature, and with him a new way of communicating Cuban sociopolitical reality. He is the type of detective that most of the time arrives intuitively at solutions reached from information gathered from politically and socially marginal characters. The tendency to work alone sometimes leads him to go as far as to exclude his partner from aspects of the investigations for which he, Conde, is responsible with the pretext that the presence of a second law-enforcement officer might inhibit the openness of informants from whom he has gained a measure of trust. Conde has a close relationship with his boss, Major Antonio Rangel, but it is a relationship that seems to grow out of Conde's appreciation for Rangel's human qualities regardless –or in spite of– Rangel's superior rank in the police force. For his part, the Major reciprocates Conde's affection and holds him in high esteem for his investigative accomplishments. Unfortunately, Conde finds later that even that can be used against him. When *Máscaras* opens we find Conde suspended from the force for indiscipline after resorting to a fistfight in order to settle a disagreement with a colleague who had imputed him with being the object of the Major's favoritism. In fact,

Rangel had simply distinguished Conde to the extent that he, the Major, had assigned to Conde cases that required the expertise and experience that only Conde could bring. The incident, recorded in *Vientos de cuaresma*, (2001)[36] the previous volume in the series, not only shows the nature of the relationship between Conde and the Major, but also reveals Conde as an irascible man who has difficulty controlling his temper to the point of jeopardizing his own professional future and therefore not someone who can easily subordinate emotionally charged personal concerns to the needs of the collectivity. Although not oblivious to the consequences of his actions, qualities such as loyalty, friendship, and honesty, ultimately trump for him in importance the need to maintain good relations with others at a job for which he believes himself to be temperamentally unsuited; for Conde recognizes law enforcement is not his vocation, writing is. For that reason, writing a story that is both "escuálida y conmovedora" becomes an elusive goal that he imagines he will be able to accomplish one day after leaving the force altogether.

If Conde feels alienated from his profession, he does not feel much more self-realized in other aspects of his personal life. He had a number of romantic relationships but is twice divorced and living alone when the novel begins.[37] Although his relatives do not appear as characters in the course of the novel, we learn about them through his reveries. His mother, presumably dead long ago, was a woman concerned with his religious upbringing who made sure that he was catechized and attended mass every week only to be disappointed later in life when Conde did not return to church after his first communion. His skepticism, rather than any deep-seated anticlerical or antireligious

36. Padura, *Vientos de cuaresma* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2001).

37. Ibid., *Pasado perfecto*, 55.

tendencies resulting from a Marxist worldview, kept him from returning. However, it is his paternal grandfather Rufino that figures most prominently in his recollections, and it is Rufino's name that Conde gives to the only other living being in his apartment, a fighting fish emblematic of Conde's own loneliness and difficult personality, which, like Conde, is trapped in a space it cannot leave or share.

Conde's family life revolves around Carlos and Carlos's mother, Josefina. He and Carlos have been friends since they were in high school (*preuniversitario*), and chatting with Carlos affords him the opportunity to forget the past and to indulge his nostalgia for a time when "los sueños del futuro eran posibles y frecuentes."[38] In the intervening twenty years, like many other Cubans, Conde experienced the loss of friends who went into exile, felt the pain of seeing Carlos return from the Angolan war without the use of his legs due to a bullet wound, and resigned himself to the general limitations accompanying an aging process of which he is most vividly reminded by his own incipient baldness. It is no wonder that Conde is a pessimist. He sees in the present "pruebas demasiado fehacientes de un desastre lamentable y para colmo ascendente."[39] Unfortunately, reminiscing about old times often ends in bouts of depression and drinking binges with the inevitable hangovers the morning after.

Endowing Conde with personal traits such as a marked sense of individualism, a high regard for personal loyalty, and a frequent lack of moderation, at the expense of a collectivist spirit, the observance of organizational discipline, and self-control, respectively, allows Padura to create a detective that breaks with the guidelines set for the

38. Ibid., *Máscaras*, 24.

39. Ibid., 19.

socialist detective novel by Cuba's Department of Interior in 1971. That Padura also endows him with a biography in which disenchantment often results from events traceable to government policies over the previous two decades complicates his position as criminal investigator and transforms him, in the reader's eyes, into a more powerful instrument of social inquiry. In a society where dissent had been criminalized as counterrevolutionary, Conde's critical remarks, even though expressed through the character's internal voice, have the effect of blurring the line that separates him and those who support the state and its institutions from those who oppose them. He is aware of his ambiguous position, and that leads him occasionally to identify with some of those who end up proscribed by a political system whose laws he is supposed to enforce. Such is the case in the investigation chronicled in *Máscaras*.

During his initial visit to the Arayán's home, Conde learns from the family's maid that, even though the victim's address of record was his parents', he had been living for months at the house of one Alberto Marqués. The unexpected nature of the information, combined with the furtive manner with which the maid relays it, suggests to Conde that Marqués has knowledge of key aspects of the case that could help solve it. However, interviewing Marqués presents its own challenges. Conde has a strong antipathy against anything he associates with homosexuality, and Marqués –as Conde was informed prior to his visit– is a well-known homosexual playwright. Marqués is not just important as a plot element. He is a central device for transforming *Máscaras* into one of the works of the Special Period that address the treatment of homosexuals by the revolutionary government. More than a prominent playwright in the fictive world of the novel, Marqués is a composite, melding features and discourses of some of Cuba's most notable

homosexual literary figures without becoming the fictional version of any one of them in particular. Through him they are reinserted in the cultural life from which they were exiled and share in the novel's arguments against those who tried to turn them into nonpersons. Marqués resembles Virgilio Piñera; he is "effeminate,…[has]…a delicate physique and…[shows]…a sexual preference for black men (whom he sometimes pays to pretend to come to his house and rape him)"[40]; he is someone who, though bitter, manages to preserve a sense of humor.[41] The text further associates Marqués with Piñera by suggesting that the former planned to stage a production of *Electra Garrigó* that never took place. It was for the eponymous heroine of that play that he had designed the red dress Alexis Arayán was wearing when murdered. Most importantly, Marqués's career had come to an end like Piñera's in large part as a result of his homosexuality. In addition, Marqués also serves as the conduit for Severo Sarduy's thoughts on transvestism. In the course of the novel Marqués recalls a conversation he had while visiting Paris during the spring of 1969 with someone known in the novel only as "el Recio," whose explanation of what transvestism is reproduces much of what Severo Sarduy's *La simulación* (1982) contains about mimicry.[42] In addition to evoking Sarduy by way of a pseudonym, *Recio*, that, as Persephone Braham notes in her reading of *Máscaras*, is synonymous with *Severo*,[43] the text has Marqués insist on the use by "el Recio" of the lexical variant *travestí* rather than *travesti* during his conversation, just as Sarduy does in *La simulación*. Lastly, Marqués's biography bears marks that identify him

40. Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 174.

41. Ibid.

42. Severo Sarduy, *La simulación* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, C. A., 1982).

43. Persephone Braham, *Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 59.

with Antón Arrufat in that both were condemned to internal exile as employees of a municipal library in Marianao. It is while working at that library that Marqués eventually meets Alexis and develops a friendship that grows out of the young man's admiration for him and his work.

Although initially Marqués represents for Conde only a source of information that might lead him to identify and capture Alexis's murderer, gradually the old playwright becomes a treasure trove of details regarding a period of history of which the investigator was largely ignorant. Eventually Conde is able to learn what had been the reasons for the punitive measures Marqués had endured when the old man declares sardonically: "cuando corría el año del Señor de 1971, yo fui parametrado y, claro, no tenía ningún parámetro de los que me pedían. Se imagina eso, ¿parametrar a un artista, como si fuera un perro con pedigrí?"[44] That year the repression to which homosexuals had been subjected through the previous decade culminated in the First National Congress of Education and Culture. The Congress resolved that it was necessary in order "to maintain the monolithic ideological unity of the people" to eradicate fashions, customs, extravagances, and exhibitionistic behavior that would promote any type of ideological diversionism on the part of Cuban youth.[45] It further called on the artistic and cultural establishments not to allow henceforth talent to justify the presence of homosexuals in positions that would bring them in contact with the young. Prevailing stereotypes ensured that the outcome of the Congress would be the systematic firing of artists and intellectuals, and the harassment of "anyone who indulged in 'extravagant,'

44. Padura, *Máscaras*, 54.

45. Ministerio de Educación, *Congreso de Educación y Cultura: Memorias* (Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1971), 200.

'exhibitionist,' or 'foreign behavior.'"[46] Once fired, it was very difficult for them to find suitable employment and virtually impossible to remake their careers with such an employment record.

Although prejudice against homosexuals was not unique to Cuban society and culture, the advent of the revolutionary government marked a change in the intensity and articulation of that prejudice beginning in the 1960s. A confluence of various cultural, historical, and political influences resulted in the institutionalization of the discrimination of homosexuals for the first time in Cuban history. In April 1961 Castro declared the revolution that had brought him to power a socialist one and adopted Marxism-Leninism as its political ideology. The revolution's goal was not only to transform the political system, but also to create a socialist man that would make the new political system possible. That socialist man was incompatible with homosexuality, which was considered to be a byproduct of the bourgeois society that the revolution was committed to eradicate. Certainly, the model the Soviet Union increasingly provided for Cuba after 1961 supported that view. Homosexuality had been made illegal in the Soviet Union in 1934[47] and, in spite of the gradual turn from Stalinism that took place under Khrushchev, views on homosexuality remained largely unchanged. The *machista* attitude of the Cuban leadership did not provide a needed corrective influence either. Ernesto (Che) Guevara is known to have asked rhetorically, "¿Quién coño lee aquí a ese maricón?,"[48] upon seeing a book containing the plays of Virgilio Piñera displayed on a coffee table during his 1963 visit to the Cuban embassy in Algeria.

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46. Lumsden, 75.

47. Ibid., 65.

48. Juan Goytisolo, *En los reinos de taifa* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986), 175.

The government's policy became further radicalized on November 1965 with the creation of the *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (Military Units to Aid Production), commonly known as UMAP, its acronym in Spanish. These units were made up of young men who were confined to work camps for the purpose of performing forced labor in the province of Camagüey. Although emblematic of the repression of homosexual men by the Cuban government, the units also included members of social groups the government considered subversive and who were variously called "scum" and "lumpen,"[49] among whom were devout Catholics such as Havana's current Archbishop Jaime Ortega y Alamino, and conscientious objectors such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists.[50] While refusing to comply with the draft is a defiant act against a clearly enunciated state requirement, the subversiveness that led others, including homosexuals, to be arrested was less easily defined. Leaving aside momentarily the question of whether homosexuals should have been arrested or not, the decision to arrest someone on those grounds often depended on a subjective evaluation of what constituted homosexuality, which was in turn influenced by factors such as educational level and social class. The exchange between the poet José Mario Rodríguez and the arresting officer who questioned him prior to being sent to one of the UMAP camps captures the predicament of those who became suspect. Rodríguez relates the scene during his interview with film director Orlando Jiménez Leal in the documentary *Conducta impropia*.

> ORLANDO JIMÉNEZ-LEAL (*sic*)
> ¿Hubo un interrogatorio previo a tu detención en el estadio?

49. Lumsden,72.

50. Ibid., 66.

JOSÉ MARIO

Sí, hubo un militar que me dijo, con cierta sorna, que el sabía que pertenecía a la Unión de Escritores y Artistas y que todos los intelectuales y los escritores eran maricones.

ORLANDO JIMÉNEZ-LEAL

¿Cómo es eso? ¿Por ser escritor eras maricón?

JOSÉ MARIO

¡Que todos eran maricones! Claro, no le contesté absolutamente nada porque estaba en un lugar donde había un estado represivo, ¿no? ¿Qué iba a decir? Entonces el militar me dijo que caminase, que diera la vuelta al salón y que caminase. Yo, con cierto asombro obedecí, caminé por todo el salón, le di la vuelta. Me ordenó entonces que caminara de espaldas a él y con mucha ironía me dijo: «¿Ves?, de ahora en adelante nosotros vamos a hacer de ti un hombre», como insinuando que lo que iban a hacer era corregirme la manera de caminar y que eso haría de mi un hombre *(risas)*.

ORLANDO JIMÉNEZ-LEAL

Es decir, que por la manera de caminar él detectó…

JOSÉ MARIO

(termina la frase riéndose) ¡…que había algo peligroso en mí![51]

Regardless of José Mario's actual sexual orientation, the officer had identified him as a homosexual following a logic fraught with prejudices about the manner of walking and the occupation "real" men were supposed to have according to "the most brutish expressions of traditional machismo."[52]

As early as 1961 the banning of the short film *PM* by Orlando Jiménez Leal and Sabá Cabrera Infante documented Havana's nightlife among the populace had set off a political debate over the role of art, including literature, vis-à-vis the revolution that was settled by Fidel Castro with his often quoted "Con la revolución todo; contra la revolución nada." The speech and Castro's sententious directive had in fact come as an answer to the uneasiness that in the same meetings had been voiced significantly by Virgilio Piñera about there being a widespread feeling that the government would assume

51. Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal, *Conducta impropia* (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1984), 32-33.

52. Lumsden, 60.

control of Cuba's cultural life.[53] Piñera, as many others who increasingly found themselves on a collision course with the system, had written for *Orígenes* and *Ciclón*, publications already defunct by 1959 that the regime had identified with artistic tendencies that privileged aesthetic questions over social ones,[54] and that, in Piñera's case, included a concern with that which is personal and intimate over the collective. Moreover, as Ana Serra points out in her cultural history of the Cuban revolution titled *The "New Man" in Cuba: Culture and Identity in the Revolution*, (2007)[55] Piñera's homosexual orientation, as that of other prominent Cuban writers such as José Lezama Lima, Antón Arrufat, and José Rodríguez Feo, who began to adopt a critical posture toward some of the measures taken by the Castro government, led to the identification of the homosexual and the intellectual with government disaffection. That identification colored the prism through which the political loyalty of both, writer and homosexual, would be gauged from then on. The conflation of these categories would be vividly dramatized towards the end of the decade by the reception of the heterosexual Herberto Padilla's *Fuera de juego* (1970) and the homosexual Antón Arrufat's *Los siete contra Tebas* (1968).[56] Although both works received literary prizes, both men would become nonpersons after their works were determined to contain counterrevolutionary elements. For Herberto Padilla the period of public humiliation would last longer and become a *cause célèbre*. Imprisoned and released in 1971, he delivered a staged speech in on April

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53. "Encuentro de los intelectuales cubanos con Fidel Castro (Fragmento de la primera sesión)," *Encuentro de la cultura cubana* 43 (Winter 2006/2007): 163.

54. Braham, 22.

55. Ana Serra, *The "New Man" in Cuba: Culture and Identity in the Revolution* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007) 165.

56. Herberto Padilla, *Fuera de juego* (Barcelona: El Bardo, 1970); Antón Arrufat, *Los siete contra Tebas* (Havana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1968).

27 before the *Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba* in which he named his own positions as counterrevolutionary and condemned them.[57]

However, determining who was subversive went beyond ascertaining whether someone was homosexual or a writer to include the evaluation of the individual's ability to reproduce accepted norms of public behavior. The words of the then Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, Raul Castro, exemplify the studied vagueness with which the young people shipped to the UMAP camps were characterized. According to Raul Castro, the units were made up of

> jóvenes que no habían tenido la mejor conducta ante la vida, jóvenes que por la mala formación e influencia del medio habían tomado una senda equivocada ante la sociedad y [habían] sido incorporados [to the UMAP] con el fin de ayudarlos para que [pudieran] encontrar un camino acertado que les [permitiera] incorporarse a la sociedad plenamente.[58]

Young people who had not displayed the best conduct included those who neither worked nor studied, but also those whose dress, musical taste, mannerisms, and other traits that often constitute marks of generational identity did not conform to the regime's expectations of a unified revolutionary identity. As a result of these developments, by the beginning of the 1970s the Cuban regime had managed to create a political culture where it was possible to have a semantic field that included terms such as *homosexual*, *extravagante*, Beatles, *melena*, and *pantalones tubo*, but that also included *escritor*, *artista*, José Lezama Lima, and Reinaldo Arenas, and where Marqués could have amassed a dossier with the state security apparatus that described him as

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57. "Documento No. 14," in *El caso Padilla: literatura y revolución en Cuba. Documentos*, ed. Lourdes Casal (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1971), 77-104.

58. Manuel Zayas, "Mapa de la homofobia: Cronología de la repression y censura a homosexuales, travesties y transexuales en la Isla, desde 1962 hasta la fecha," Cubaencuentro, January 20, 2006, under "1966" http://www.cubaencuentro.com/cuba/articulos/mapa-de-la-homofobia-10736 (accessed October 26, 2010).

> homosexual de vasta experiencia depredadora, apático, político y desviado ideológico, ser conflictivo y provocador, extranjerizante, hermético, culterano, posible consumidor de marihuana y otras drogas, protector de maricones descarriados, hombre de dudosa filiación filosófica, lleno de prejuicio pequeñoburgueses y clasistas.[59]

The dossier indicates that its conclusions are supposed to be the product of

> las memorias escritas, conjugadas, resumidas y hasta citadas textualmente, de varios informantes policiacos, sucesivos presidentes del Comité de Defensa de la Revolución, cuadros del remoto Consejo Nacional de Cultura y del actual Ministerio de Cultura, de la consejería política de la embajada cubana en París y hasta de un padre franciscano que en una época prehistórica fuera su confesor y de un par de amantes perversos, interrogados por causas estrictamente delictivas.[60]

Humorous hyperbole notwithstanding, the passage's description of the sources reflects how the average Cuban experiences the pervasiveness of state surveillance. It also reflects how susceptible, given the background of the contributors, the information that became part of a citizen's security dossier was to educational, class, and cultural biases similar to the ones exhibited by the soldier who interrogates José Mario in the passage excerpted above from *Conducta impropia*.

Listening to Marqués relate how he had to submit as an artist to the dictates of political bureaucrats reminded Conde of an experience he had years before. As a student, his early attempt at being a published author was censored by his high school principal because it did not conform to acceptable political guidelines. Conde and a few of his classmates belonged to a writers' workshop that, with the supervision of a teacher, set out to publish some of their works in a school journal. Conde's contribution had been an autobiographical short story titled "Domingos" in which the protagonist was made to

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59. Padura, *Máscaras*, 41.

60. Ibid., 41-42.

attend mass on Sundays by his mother instead of being allowed to play baseball like the other neighborhood children. The literary project ended in disaster when all the contributions to the first and only issue were deemed ideologically suspect by the school's administration. They were thought to be "relatos idealistas, poemas evasivos, críticas inadmisibles...[e]…historias ajenas a las necesidades del país, enfrascado en la construcción de un hombre nuevo y una sociedad nueva."[61] His own short story was singled out for allegedly dealing with a religious theme without depicting the Church as a reactionary institution. As described, the ensuing scenes paralleled the ordeals to which many intellectuals were being subjected at the time in the island's actual cultural institutions. The sponsoring teacher resigned in protest, and the student behind the idea of creating a writing workshop acquired a reputation for being "autosuficiente" and "conflictivo" that would stigmatize him henceforward. In such intimidating circumstances, the other students had either sobbed or mumbled self-incriminating words of agreement before accusations of ideological deviation they did not contemplate when they set out to contribute to the journal. The experience had been traumatic, and it clearly became a point of reference for Conde's subsequent musings on his relationship to the political system. Now the memory of that experience resurfaced to provide, with what he gleaned from the old playwright himself and from others he had interviewed as part of the investigation, the basis for the rapport that would gradually develop between the two men. That memory was all the more vivid when one takes into account that Conde still considered writing to be his vocation. The stakes had been smaller for Conde to the extent that he was a mere student without a professional life to lose when the incident

61. Padura, *Máscaras*, 66.

took place, but to the extent that he never attempted to publish anything again, the effect was as long lasting. It is no wonder that Conde could feel there was a "furtiva solidaridad de rebelde"[62] that bound him to Marqués.

The First Congress of Education and Culture had pronounced itself on more than just homosexuality. It had condemned certain fashions and tastes, and encouraged the harassment of anyone who showed a certain inclination for adopting foreign behavior. As anyone who lived in Cuba during the early 1970s recalls, music was one of the areas of popular culture where the impact of the political atmosphere that eventually found expression in the Congress's infamous resolutions was felt. As the 1970s began, the music of foreign and national bands or vocal groups that reflected the influence of rock and other musical styles that became popular in the United States in the 1950s became more rare in the state-controlled media, which was the only mass media in Cuba. No less than in other places of the Western and socialist world, that music had become identified with generational and ideological divides, and it would become accessible only through recordings that entered the island by way of those few allowed to travel abroad or through shared subsequent copies. From some of the music that could still be heard, it was clear that exceptions were clearly made by the regime in the case of music that, though stylistically related to the capitalist West, was associated with liberationist movements that the Cuban state found compatible with its political agenda. Yet, it was that music inflected by the sounds of rock and the blues, which became increasingly rare as the *Quinquenio Gris* progressed, that seems to have defined Conde and Carlos's youth. Although scenes in which they get together to listen to it and discuss the relative merits of

62. Padura, *Máscaras*, 67.

each band abound throughout the broader project of Las Cuatro Estaciones, the following from *Máscaras* captures the flavor of the passions tapped by the music as well as the nostalgia so characteristic of Padura's detective narrative. Carlos, also known by the nickname of "el Flaco," suggests that they listen to music, not knowing what else to do to bring Conde out of one of his bouts of depression.

> —¿Quieres poner música? —le preguntó entonces.
> —¿Tú quieres?
> —Era un decir. Por hacer algo, ¿no?...
> —¿Qué te gustaría oír? ¿Los Beatles? ¿Chicago? ¿Fórmula V? ¿Los Pasos? ¿Credence?
> —Anjá, Credence –fue otra vez el acuerdo: les gustaba oír la voz compacta de Tom Foggerty y las guitarras primitivas de Credence Clearwater Revival.
> —Sigue siendo la mejor versión de *Proud Mary*.
> —Eso ni se discute.
> —Canta como si fuera un negro, o no: canta como si fuera Dios, qué coño.
> —Sí, qué coño –dijo el otro, y se sorprendieron mirándose a los ojos: en el mismo instante los dos habían sentido la agresiva certeza de la reiteración morbosa que vivían. Aquel mismo diálogo, con iguales palabras, lo habían repetido otras veces, muchas veces, durante casi veinte años de amistad, y siempre en el cuarto del Flaco, y su resurrección periódica les provocaba la sensación de que penetraban en el reino encantado del tiempo cíclico y perpetuo, donde era posible imaginar que todo es inmaculado y eterno.[63]

Chronologically, the bands mentioned evoke the period running from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s, suggesting that is the cyclical and perpetual time the music allows them to conjure and inhabit. The bands mentioned are American, British, and Spanish, and, as such, they contributed to identifying their fans as xenophiles in the eyes of the contemporary cultural authorities. The band members' dress and long hair, moreover, were thought extravagant and –to the extent that they defied traditional ways of representing masculinity– effeminate. Clearly, the time for which Conde and Carlos feel nostalgic was largely part of the world condemned by the First Congress of Education

63. Padura, *Máscaras*, 14.

and Culture. It was a world rendered politically unacceptable for many of the same reasons homosexuals were, so that Conde and Marqués shared more than their experience as writers. They shared the loss of a cultural space identified by the state with homosexuality regardless of the actual sexual orientation of those who inhabited it. They also shared a loss of innocence. In the case of Conde, it was the loss of innocence associated with his youth, the youth evoked by music that had been found ideologically objectionable; in the case of Marqués, it was the loss of innocence inherent in thinking that he would have a future as an artist in Cuba in spite of his homosexuality.

Whether by consciously seeing the parallels between the censorship of his short story and that of Marqués's work, or, more subtly, by possibly intuiting the relationship between the disappearance of the world of his youth and that in which Marqués's work was possible, the text shows us a transformation in Conde's attitude toward homosexuals as he identifies the sources of his own political disenchantment with their plight. Thus whereas after visiting the crime scene and seeing Alexis's corpse Conde is able to confess to Manuel Palacios "nunca me han gustado los maricones, para que los sepas. Ya estoy prejuiciado con ésto…,"[64] after the first interview with Marqués he is able to say to Palacios "Tú sabes que no me gustan los maricones… Pero este tipo es distinto… El muy cabrón me ha puesto a pensar…."[65] The general aversion he has to overcome in order to interview Marqués begins to lose intensity as the particular qualities of the old playwright begin to outweigh the generalities of the stereotype. That allows Conde, in turn, to indulge his curiosity about homosexuality, transvestism and, generally, about the degree

64. Padura, *Máscaras*, 38.

65. Padura, *Máscaras*, 58.

to which the world he inhabits is not what it seems. He learned from Marqués that Alexis was not actually a transvestite even though he occasionally wore women's clothing. In spite of being characterized as an antisocial element on the state security records, Marqués shares with Conde, an investigator working for that same state, experiences and a sensibility that Conde never suspected. Furthermore, the playwright's effeminacy concealed a loyalty to the fatherland and fortitude that ran contrary to the weakness and political treachery that had been ascribed to homosexuals in Cuba's revolutionary discourse; as one of Conde's friends who is part of the literary establishment states: "Pues la verdad-verdad es que ese maricón…tiene unos cojones que le llegan a los tobillos. Aguantó como un hombre y se quedó aquí…y no le hizo el juego ni a los de adentro ni a los de afuera."[66] Eventually Conde finds that not even those with whom he works are what they appear. Captain Jesús Contreras, a friend and colleague whom Conde admired, turned out to be involved in bribery, illegally dealing in foreign currency, and doctoring investigations, and Maruchi, the Major's friendly receptionist with whom Conde had enjoyed a great rapport, had been in reality a mole from Internal Investigations. This personal curiosity, combined with his need to find Alexis's murderer, culminates in a scene against which the novel's denouement can be read in ways that lead to different conclusions about the ideological operation the text performs as it revisits not only the treatment of homosexuals, but also the political atmosphere that made it possible.

Aware of how interested Conde is in meeting others who were part of Alexis's social circle and of the questions that Alexis's murder had raised for him about transvestites, Marqués invites Conde to a party that he thought would satisfy Conde's

66. Padura, *Máscaras*, 64.

curiosity on both counts. Conde accepts the invitation, and that is how he ends up one evening at the house of Alquimio, a friend of Marqués whose name hints at the improbable nature of the gathering. From Poly, Alquimio's niece and Conde's guide, Conde learns who, or what, the guests were.

> [E]n aquella sala de La Habana Vieja había, como primera evidencia, hombres y mujeres, diferenciables además por ser: militantes del sexo libre, de la nostalgia y de partidos rojos, verdes y amarillos; ex dramaturgos con obra y sin obra, y escritores con ex libris nunca estampados; maricones de todas las categorías y filiaciones: locas –de carroza con luces y de tendencia pervertida–, gansitos sin suerte, cazadores expertos en presas de alto vuelo, bugarrones por cuenta propia de los que dan por culo a domicilio y van al campo si ponen caballo, almas desconsoladas sin consuelo y almas desconsoladas en busca de consuelo, sobadores clase A-1 con el hueco cosido por temor al sida, y hasta aprendices recién matriculados en la Escuela Superior Pedagógica del homosexualismo, cuyo jefe docente era el mismísimo tío Alquimio; ganadores de concurso de ballet, nacionales e internacionales; profetas del fin de los tiempos, la historia y la libreta de abastecimiento; nihilistas conversos al marxismo y marxistas convertidos en mierda; resentidos de todas la especies: sexuales, políticos, económicos, sicológicos, sociales, culturales, deportivos y electrónicos; practicantes del budismo zen, el catolicismo, la santería y un mormón y dos judíos; un pelotero del equipo Industriales que batea y tira a las dos manos; admiradores de Pablo Milanés y enemigos de Silvio Rodríguez; expertos como oráculos que lo mismo sabían quien iba a ser el próximo Premio Nobel de Literatura como las intenciones secretas de Gorbachov, el último mancebo adoptado como sobrino por el Personaje Famoso de las Alturas, o el precio de la libra de café en Baracoa; solicitantes de visas temporales y definitivas; soñadores y soñadoras; hiperrealistas, abstractos y ex realistas socialistas que abjuraban de su pasado estético; un latinista; repatriados y patriotas; expulsados de todos los sitios de los que alguien es expulsable; un ciego que veía; desengañados y engañadores, oportunistas y filósofos, feministas y optimistas; lezamianos –en franca mayoría–, virgilianos, carpenterianos, martianos y un fan de Antón Arrufat; cubanos y extranjeros; cantantes de boleros; criadores de perros de pelea; alcohólicos, siquiátricos, reumáticos y dogmáticos; traficantes de dólares; fumadores y no fumadores; y un heterosexual machista-estalinista.
>
> —Ese soy yo… ¿Y travestis? ¿No hay travestis? –preguntó, clavándole en el pecho su mirada de cazador de vampiros.
>
> —Mira, al lado de la puerta del balcón: esa es Victoria, aunque le gustan que le llamen Viki, pero de verdad se llama Víctor Romillo. Es de lo más bonita, ¿verdad? Y aquélla, la trigueña que se parece a Annia Linares: de día se llama Esteban y de noche Estrella, porque ella es la que canta boleros.
>
> —Dime una cosa: aquí hay como treinta personas… ¿Cómo puede haber tantas cosas como me dijiste?

> Poly sonrió, inevitablemente.
> —Es que practican el multioficio y hacen trabajo voluntario… Ji, ji… Mira, mira, el que está al lado de Estrella se llama Wilfredito Insula (*sic*), y es como diez de las cosas que te dije.[67]

Although somewhat lengthy, I cite in its entirety the humorous description of the motley gathering because its interminable list of random categories –some overlapping, some mutually exclusive, some complementary, some patently hyperbolic– intensifies the heterogeneity that the passage seems at pains to convey. That there are more labels than guests underscores the complexity that goes into the constitution of someone's identity and the arbitrariness of a regime that at one point associated homosexuality with a particular posture with respect to the island's political system. The apparent egalitarianism enjoyed by those present contrasts with the situation reigning in the world outside Alquimio's house and reinforces Conde's impression that one is in a place where one may breathe "una libertad de gueto, pequeña pero bien aprovechada."[68] It represents a utopian vision of Cuban civil society as a model against which the regime's past excesses are implicitly measured and against which future models of coexistence can be compared in order to test the degree to which they deliver authentic tolerance. Most of all, I cite the passage in its entirety because its paradigmatic quality serves as a point of departure for readings that account for reactions ranging from disappointment to satisfaction with the novel's ideological intervention, but that, in either case, are readings conditioned by the author's need to negotiate a censorship that, even if strategically relaxed, is nevertheless present for a Cuban writer living on the island.

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67. Padura, *Máscaras*, 143-144. The surname "Ínsula" is spelled correctly in the UNEAC edition.

68. Ibid., 145.

If, on one hand, one attributes to the passage as Emilio Bejel's reading of *Máscaras* does in *Gay Cuban Nation*, "a queer vision that questions the very stability of any definition of sexual, artistic, or political identity" and one uses Conde´s sexuality as the sole indicator of what the novel is able to accomplish ideologically, the novel concludes on a very disappointing note indeed, as it does for Bejel, for Conde's behavior reaffirms his heterosexual and *machista* identity even if at times the text entertains some ambiguity. If the night starts with Conde flirting with Poly in Alquimio's living room even though he is not completely sure of her being a woman, it ends in a scene of unbridled heterosexuality in Poly's apartment. The heterosexual nature of the scene in and of itself is not as significant as the calculated impression it seems designed to have on the reader. Instead of being described in terms that denote tenderness, love, and reciprocity, the scene consciously seems to exclude them, choosing instead to emphasize violence, domination, and Conde's heterosexist and *machista* perspectives on the sexual act. Although there is an egalitarian element introduced when both lovers are said to resemble "serpientes marinas resbalosas y malvadas,"[69] soon Poly is relegated to the category of prey that is at once ready to be consumed by, and dangerous to, its predator: at one time she is compared to a sparrow, while at another her vagina is compared to that of a whale. Poly's pleasure is derived from being the object of Conde's actions, which are described in terms of the verbs *crucificar*, *taladrar*, and *aferrar*. Her utility seems to be limited to having "una medida justa para sus proporciones"[70] and to validating with her laughter and groaning the fulfillment of Conde's desires as "macho potente y

69. Padura, *Máscaras*, 148.

70. Ibid.

victorioso."[71] The scene proves particularly unsatisfactory for one who sees the denunciation of the treatment of homosexuals in Cuba as the novel's *raison d'être* and the dismantling of gender categories and the structures –including the political ones– that support them as the only way to ensure that the abuses perpetrated against homosexuals in the past are not repeated.

On the other hand, if one sees in the institutionalization of homophobia a manifestation of a broader political atmosphere of intolerance and repression that is not inevitably the result of a heterosexist order, then Conde's self-indulgence, regardless of how objectionable it may appear, does not blunt the novel's critical edge. The passage establishes a connection between the freedom to espouse different political beliefs, and express various sexual, and gender identities, but the party at Alquimio's may then be seen not necessarily as a proposal for a world of unstable identities, but as one for a world where embodying a specific sexual identity, adhering to a given artistic current, or espousing a political ideology does not preclude one's full political participation. It is a reading that one may, moreover, see validated in the author's explanation of what he set out to accomplish by writing the novel. In an interview with Juan Armando Epple in 1994 during Medellín's *Primer Encuentro Internacional de Literatura y Música*, Padura describes *Máscaras* as "una novela de homosexuales, de máscaras, *centrada en ese fenómeno del trasvestismo* (*sic*) *moral* que se ha vivido en Cuba en este tiempo, en que las personas dicen algo y piensan otra cosa, obligadas por las circunstancias."[72] Less concerned with the ontological dimension of a category than with how that category

71. Padura, *Máscaras*, 148.

72. Epple, 58. Emphasis mine.

might be perceived with respect to the ideology sanctioned by the state, the novel alludes to a world in which people knowingly concealed their genuine affections, tastes, and convictions for fear of becoming stigmatized by those with the power to proscribe them. More importantly, it is a reading that has the virtue of not glossing over the text's consistent heterosexist and homophobic characterization of Conde, even while he inhabits the utopian environment of Alquimio's party. As Conde makes it clear to Poly in the passage cited above, he still identifies himself through a third-person narrative voice as "un heterosexual machista-estalinista,"[73] parodying the revolution's *marxista-leninista* claims, before reaffirming that identity by adding "Ese soy yo"[74] in the first person. Lest the reader is tempted not to take seriously his claim to being *machista*, thinking that it is supposed to be as ludicrous as his claim to being a Stalinist, or that it is simply part of the flirtatious banter between him and Poly, the text underscores its seriousness further down when an omniscient third-person narrative voice describes Conde's reaction upon seeing two men kissing at Alquimio's party.

> Un escalofrío dañino recorrió toda la estructura del policía cuando descubrió la pareja con total impudicia: dos hombres –según códigos jurídicos y biológicos–, de unos treinta años, ambos de bigote y pelo muy negro, unían sus labios para propiciar un tráfico de lenguas y salivas que estremeció al Conde con la violencia de una repugnancia agresiva que trató de vencer terminando de un trago su segunda copa de ron.[75]

Conde's response has the marks of the reaction that the abject elicits in the subject according to Julia Kristeva. The couple's behavior signals for him the proximity of an abjection from which he is protected by the violent repugnance that seeing them makes

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73. Padura, *Máscaras*, 144.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid., 145.

him feel. The exchange of tongues and saliva, no less than the blurring of the gender roles, attests to the collapse of the bodily and social boundaries that maintain a symbolic order within which homosexuality obviously has no place for Conde. Lastly, it is a reading more consistent with the changes the police novel underwent in Cuba at the end of the 1980s. By embodying such views, Conde breaks the model of a socialist police novel where womanizers and homosexuals tended to be associated with society's counterrevolutionary elements[76] and where the investigator was supposed to embody the virtues of a socialist environment where homosexuality and the objectification of women were vestiges of an old social system in the process of being overcome.

Granted, neither assuming that the text's goal should be to negate the stability of all aesthetic, political, and sexual categories nor ignoring Conde's sexuality as the measure of what the text is able to accomplish ideologically is enough to keep *Máscaras*'s from concluding with a reaffirmation of heterosexism. The novel still ends with Poly and Conde spending three days in her apartment doing "[a]lgo que no aburre nunca,"[77] as he provocatively states, but displacing those concerns to a secondary plane makes it possible for other elements to come into focus. For example, it is easier to see that Conde's reaffirmation of heterosexism is not designed to leave the reader with the sensation that it is the answer, albeit unsatisfactory, of the questions raised by the text, as Bejel's reading suggests. Otherwise the text would not insist on remitting the reader precisely to those questions, as the following excerpt from the novel's last paragraph shows.

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76. Braham, 45-47.

77. Padura, *Máscaras*, 231.

> Poly lo esperaba sentada en el borde de la cama, con un vaso de ron en cada mano, y el Conde sintió que era injusto sentirse feliz mientras el Flaco, que ya no era flaco, víctima de una guerra geopolítica en la que fue un peón destrozado, tenía vedadas todas las posibilidades de aquella satisfacción necesaria y sufría con la idea de que una de sus antiguas novias lo viera así, en el fondo del abismo. Acarició el cerquillo de Poly y escogió el vaso más lleno y, sin camisa, salió al pequeño balcón del apartamento en busca de un alivio para sus calores físicos y mentales y observó, en la noche incipiente, las azoteas de La Habana Vieja, erizadas de antenas, ansias de derrumbes e historias inabarcables. ¿Por qué carajo todo tiene que ser así? Pues porque todo es así y no de otra manera, Conde. ¿Será posible volver atrás y desfacer entuertos y errores y equivocaciones?[78]

Conde's questions remained unanswered, his own circuitous attempt to answer them being clearly an admission of their rhetorical character. However, by reminding us of the geopolitical causes of el Flaco's current disability, the text refers us to a broader political context to which it had been hinting as it addressed the persecution of homosexuals. Asking whether it would be possible to go back to correct the errors that brought him to the place in life where he can contemplate their ruined city and, by implication, their ruined lives, inevitably raises the question of how far back it would be necessary to go to make that correction. Would it be necessary to go back to the period prior to the Angolan War that cost el Flaco the use of his legs? Would it be necessary to go back to before 1971, the year in which Marqués's life was changed forever by the government's cultural policies? Would it be necessary to go back even further to before the Castro government declared the Marxist-Leninist character of the revolution in 1961? More importantly, once one goes back, what would correcting those errors entail? Conde never answers those questions; he does not even ask them. Nevertheless, their specter remains in the air casting doubts about a whole revolutionary process whose oppressive structures the novel

78. Padura, *Máscaras*, 233.

cannot be said to be reaffirming simply by virtue of not attempting to dismantle gender categories.

It is to Marqués that the reader must go to glimpse the insinuation of an answer to those questions. Benefiting from the opportunity that the investigation of Alexis's murder afforded and guided by the genuine curiosity that Marqués inspired in him, Conde asked him if he, Marqués, hated the police. The playwright's answer eventually takes the conversation in a direction unforeseen by Conde. Marqués explains that he did not because they were a necessary evil and that in being repressive and cruel they were just doing their job. Having exonerated the police by way of such sarcasm, Marqués proceeds to identify those who would deserve his hatred as "los policías por cuenta propia, los comisarios voluntarios, los perseguidores espontáneos, los delatores sin sueldo, los jueces por afición, todos esos que se creen dueños de la vida, del destino y hasta de la pureza moral, cultural y hasta histórica de un país…."[79] Marqués clearly alludes to those who thrive in the Cuban state's culture of surveillance and whose most notable institutional expression is the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, but some of his terms are equally applicable to those who hold substantially more power, those with sufficient authority to have sought the imposition of their own vision of what the nation was to be morally, culturally, and historically without outside interference and without limitations on their power, as an owner would have with respect to his own property. In Cuba, where the top leadership of its one political party had remained virtually unchanged for the preceding thirty years, that meant a very small and easily identifiable group indeed. Moreover, he is drawing attention to the fact that behind those key moments to which

79. Padura, *Máscaras*, 105.

Conde wishes he could return in order to make things right, there were individuals Marqués is not willing to relieve of their responsibility for what occurred. Asked by Conde if it would not be easier to forget all that had happened, Marqués answers:

> –Sabe, es muy fácil decir eso porque la falta de memoria es una de las cualidades sociológicas de este país. Es su autodefensa y la defensa de mucha gente… Todo el mundo se olvida de todo y siempre se dice que se puede empezar de nuevo, y ya: está hecho el exorcismo. Si no hay memoria, no hay culpa, y si no hay culpa, no hace falta ni siquiera el perdón. Y yo lo entiendo, claro que lo entiendo, porque esta isla tiene la misión histórica de estar recomenzando siempre, de volver a empezar cada treinta o cuarenta años, y el olvido suele ser el bálsamo para todas las heridas que quedan abiertas… Y no es que yo tenga que perdonar o quiera culpar a nadie: no, es que yo no quiero olvidar. No quiero. El tiempo pasa, pasan las gentes, cambian las historias, y creo que ya se han olvidado demasiadas cosas, buenas y malas. Pero las mías son mías y no me da la gana de olvidarlas. ¿Me entiende?[80]

Marqués does not want to accuse or forgive anyone, but neither does he want to forget, which would mean there is nothing for which anyone would possibly have to account. Worse yet, forgetting would not only whitewash the injustice and its perpetrator, but also him, the victim. That would render him, and others like him, incapable of witnessing to the abuses carried out against them, which is ultimately the last resort victims have against those intent on falsifying the past, but his response to Conde goes further. Marqués maintains that the country has a tradition of ushering in new eras that are accompanied by similar attempts at collective amnesia every thirty or forty years. The action in *Máscaras* takes place in 1989, when –as indicated above– numerous artists were rescuing a literary world previously proscribed on account of its homosexual content while not holding anyone responsible for the works' previous suppression. One can only assume that by implication Marqués is alluding to abuses committed thirty to forty years before by past leaders, most of whom are still in positions of power enjoying the

80. Padura, *Máscaras*, 111.

immunity that comes from wielding that power. Marqués's insinuations are as strong as they could possibly be without pointing fingers and naming names, and Conde appears to intuit their seriousness. He decides to leave Marqués and step out into the patio after their conversation ends in search of a place to deposit the cigarette ashes that had accumulated in the cup of his hand, but the text tells us that "además quería esquivar aquella senda tenebrosa de la conversación"[81] in order to retake his train of thought concerning Alexis's case.

Whether one's reading is predicated on the assumption that Padura's work should support a radical dismantling of sexual and gender categories in order to realize its liberationist potential or advocate a libertarian society in which sexual and gender identity do not become obstacles to one's sociopolitical participation, one may find in the novel's intertextual elements a key to make sense of its multivalence. Of the literary allusions found in the text, perhaps none figures as prominently as the one to Severo Sarduy's essay *La simulación*. Published in 1982, Sarduy's work is a meditation on the nature of disguise and by implication on the masks to which the title of Padura's novel alludes. In 1960, Sarduy left Cuba to study in Paris, where he stayed and eventually became part of the circle associated with the journal *Tel Quel* with Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, François Wahl and other figures of the structuralist left. Their concern with the relationship between signifier and signified and the role of that relationship in supporting oppressive hegemonies can be seen in a work like *La simulación* that questions the unity of the subject and the stability of any identity. Severo Sarduy's explanation of transvestism provides the basis for Marqués's disquisition on the subject

81. Padura, *Máscaras*, 111-112.

as Conde attempts to discover in Alexis's cross-dressing a clue to the murderer's identity. Sarduy's text also lies behind the book about transvestites written by "el Recio" that Marqués gives to Conde to help him continue his investigation of the subject. In *La simulación* Sarduy sets out to explain what a transvestite is within the broader category of simulation, which is described as an energy or pulsation at work in transvestism and in other phenomena that can be subsumed under categories such as mimicry, trompe-l'oeil, camouflage, and anamorphosis. Although anamorphosis is not discussed in the passages from *La simulación* that "el Recio" paraphrases, it is a very apt metaphor for the way in which *Máscaras* is capable of supporting different readings attuned to the subjectivities of those approaching it with a critical eye. Anamorphosis is an optical illusion that allows an observer, depending on his or her vantage point with respect to a pictorial representation, to see or reconstitute an image otherwise not visible. I suggest something analogous is at work in Padura's novel. The reader's own interests, political inclinations, and experiences condition his perception not only of the ideological operations taking place in the novel, but also of the issues that are at stake and of how they should be addressed. I say this realizing that my own reading is also conditioned by my particular point of view.

Unlike any text, *Mascaras*'s readers included government officials whose powers of surveillance and punishment might have been strategically relaxed but not relinquished. As it is to be expected from an author whose work is intent on revisiting a period of history marked by censorship and its consequent punitive measures, Padura must have been aware of what was at stake in adopting a critical stance with respect to the regime's conduct. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, for such awareness to have led

him to adopt narrative strategies that resulted in a work that is likely to strike the reader as measured, ambiguous or contradictory. Emilio Bejel certainly recognizes that such awareness on Padura's part serves as a possible explanation for a denouement that Bejel considers "contained and ideological (in the worst sense of the term)."[82] He believes that "an ideological conflict…hindered its most daring possibilities" although he does not elaborate on whether he sees that ideological conflict taking place at the level of the author's subjectivity or between that subjectivity and society's demands.

One may see in *Máscaras* a proposal for a more libertarian society in which sexual and gender identity do not become obstacles to one's sociopolitical participation that is not any less susceptible to narrative strategies of containment, however. To wit, it is a reading that is not explicitly supported by any of the voices in the narrative; its particulars have to be inferred from situations depicted by the text or teased out by the reader from insinuations made by Alberto Marqués, the clarity of which seem to be proportional to the degree of acquaintance the reader has with how Cubans have experienced the revolutionary process in the past few decades. It is arguably a reading more accessible to someone who has been a subject of the Cuban state more than to someone who has not been directly exposed to the effects of that state's policies and consequently approaches Cuban reality simply as a disinterested observer or with preoccupations more attune to the social problems experienced in the United States during the same time. In other words, it is a reading more accessible to a cultural insider adept at sensing where the limits of what is considered ideologically tolerable to the Cuban regime lie because he or she personally has experienced the consequences of

82. Bejel, 172.

transgressing those limits. The scene at Alquimio's party constitutes from the perspective of such a reading a proposal for a society that allows differences to thrive in ways that are familiar to the majority of left-of-center citizens of most liberal democracies, and for that reason perhaps it is not so remarkably daring; it is not necessarily a reading that envisions a goal as far-reaching as that involved in dismantling the structures that buttress heterosexism, which include deep-seated cultural and mental patterns that have subsisted for generations and that a government cannot easily undo by fiat. However, precisely because it is a less radical proposal, it is more easily realizable with the state's consent and for that reason exposes more clearly the government's intransigence on maintaining the status quo. This reading of what the text proposes might be less far-reaching than its more radical alternative, but it is arguably more seditious in that it implicitly favors the development of a civil society associated with forms of government that the Cuban regime has clearly rejected for not being compatible with a one-party state. Interestingly, because the target of such a reading's criticism is not the sociocultural root of the intolerance as much as the government's responsibility for institutionalizing and making that intolerance a mark of revolutionary orthodoxy during a particular historical period, theoretical questions concerned with sex, gender and their broader sociopolitical implications, perhaps of greater import to a less vulnerable outsider, have the capacity to act as decoys that direct that less vulnerable reader's attention away from aspects that could be considered more threatening to the regime in the short term.

Regardless of the reading configured by the elements that stand out to the reader as he or she approaches the novel, there are conclusions to be drawn about the place the novel envisions for the homosexual in Cuban society. Although no programmatic views

are offered, one may infer from the statements and insinuations made by Alberto Marqués and Mario Conde as well as from the situations portrayed that, at the very least, homosexuals should not be subject to witch hunts similar to the ones that brought about the demise of Marqués and others like him. As a corollary, it can be safely deduced that the participation of the state in those witch hunts would be unacceptable and that homosexuals instead should be able to count on the state to redress any attempts to curtail their rights, should they wish to do so, even though Marqués states that he does not. To the extent that the state is the political embodiment of the sovereign nation, this reading would suggest, albeit obliquely and tortuously, that homosexuals should indeed have a place within the political order. Such a proposal represents quite a milestone for the Cuban police novel, a genre in which the homosexual had been traditionally identified with the enemy during the revolutionary period. This identification was easily established partly because the homosexual had always existed outside the boundaries used to define any Cuban collective identity, and not just the one the revolution proposed.

It is not certain to what degree the political inclusion of the male homosexual proposed in *Mascaras* will continue to evade the hegemonic control of the State. During an interview granted to a reporter of the Mexican daily *La Jornada* on August 31, 2010, Fidel Castro deplored the prejudice that made possible the repression of homosexuals and the irreparable damage it caused to the image of the Cuban revolution abroad. He explained to the reporter how the prejudice that led to the repression "se fue produciendo como una reacción espontánea en las filas revolucionarias, que venía de las tradiciones"[83]

83. Carmen Lira Saade. "Soy el responsable de la persecución a homosexuales que hubo en Cuba: Fidel Castro," *La Jornada*, August 31, 2010, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/08/31/index.php?section=mundo&article=026e1mun (accessed July 31, 2011).

and accepted responsibility for not putting an end to it, attributing his inaction to having more pressing political matters such as the Missile Crisis claiming his attention. Castro's statements confirmed at the highest level the general direction in which the regime had been gradually moving during the past decade as it tried to make some of the goals of the homosexual community part of its own social project. Mariela Castro Espín, President Raúl Castro's daughter, has been at the forefront of those efforts. Utilizing the resources and the visibility of Cuba's *Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual* (CENESEX), an agency she directs, Mariela Castro has been articulating a discourse that seeks to exonerate the Revolutionary government before foreign audiences of its repressive policies against homosexuals by casting those policies as the natural result of contradictions and prejudices that have existed in Cuban history as they have in other parts of the world. At a conference held in Montreal in conjunction with the 2006 Outgames she maintained that there was no "represión a los homosexuales en Cuba, lo que existe es una reacción sociocultural como la hay en otros países."[84] According to the same discourse, "the main stage for the struggle of sexual and gender diversity in Cuba was the 1959 revolution."[85] The Cuban Communist Party itself had recognized the errors made in the 1960s and 1970s, even though "tal rectificación nunca fue pública, se trató de una 'cuestión interna.'"[86]

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84. Alejandro Brito, "Asumen en Cuba como error la persecución a los homosexuales en los años sesenta," *La Jornada*, July 29, 2006, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/07/29/index.php?section=sociedad&article=039n1soc (accessed July 31, 2011).

85. Mariela Castro Espín, "Sexual self-determination in socialist Cuba: An interview with CENEX director Mariela Castro Espín," interview by Antonio Carmona Báez in *Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, 23 March 2011, http://links.org.au/node/2233 (accessed July 31, 2011).

86. Brito.

The struggle's success seems to be measured primarily in terms of the measures taken to recognize and integrate transsexuals dating back to 1979. That year the *Grupo Nacional de Trabajo de Educación Sexual* (GNTES), an organization that would eventually become CENESEX, was created by the initiative of Vilma Espín, Mariela Castro's mother and lifelong president of the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*. The struggle adopted a biomedical approach until 2004, when a group of transvestites and transsexuals sought help from CENESEX after being "harassed by the police and some residents of Havana."[87] That incident led to CENESEX undertaking the formation of "sexual-rights activists with an emphasis on civil rights"[88] which also involved advocacy for issues related to sexual health, including HIV/AIDS. Arguably, the high water mark in the struggle for sexual and gender diversity was reached in 2008. That year sex-change operations were included among the procedures covered by the Cuban health care system, making the island the first country in the Western Hemisphere to do so.

The regime's discourse is notable for the length to which it goes to deflect its own responsibility for past excesses. These are rationalized by appealing to indigenous cultural traditions and the need to protect the revolution from external threats. It is also a discourse that does not contemplate any changes to the status quo to be initiated outside government-sanctioned institutions, where factors that could undermine state control may play a role. In Mariela Castro's overview of the advances made in gender and sexual equality since the end of the 1970s, there is no room for organizations involved in gay and lesbian issues that are not associated with the state; neither is there room for publicly

87. Castro Espín.

88. Ibid.

voicing a position with respect to the same issues that would challenge the state as the ideological source of the rights to be sought or that questions the state's commitment to make those rights a reality. Thus gay pride celebrations are not officially condoned. Demonstrations against homophobia are acceptable because, as Castro Espín explains, "there is also a heterosexual pride, lesbian pride, the pride of trans people,"[89] or as she answered on another occasion, "Nosotros estamos luchando por la inclusión de todos entre todos. No para hacer guetos."[90]

It is probably safe to conjecture that the overtures made by the Cuban regime to the male homosexual would not likely mollify someone like Padura's Alberto Marqués. He would probably find them insufficient and too late to make any difference for those in his generation. Neither are those who oppose the Castro regime on ideological grounds likely to see the government's policies as any more than a tactical move in order to garner the good will of liberal elements in Europe and North America. However, both, supporters and detractors of the Cuban regime will find it impossible to deny that the government's conciliatory posture has succeeded in effecting a change in the ideological landscape. The regime's new openness has transformed male homosexuality into a contested field. The male homosexual will be less likely to represent, by virtue of his sexual orientation, a constituency whose support the government has to concede to its opponents, which makes for a very different discursive environment from the one that existed in the 1990s when *Máscaras* was published.

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89. Castro Espín.

90. Gabriela Torres, "La democracia todavía es un invento," *BBC Mundo*, July 6, 2006, http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/america_latina/2009/07/090704_2254_marielacastro_intw_gtg.shtml (accessed July 31, 2011).

Although, as previously indicated, homosexuality had been a topic increasingly broached by the island's literature since the end of the 1980s, in *Máscaras* we have the inclusion of a homosexual's self-affirming perspective that explicitly interpellated discourses of power and that challenged more than the regime's posture toward homosexuality. Being part of a literary genre with a wide readership that was accustomed to find in it a reaffirmation of the regime's ideological premises further drew attention to the heterodox discursive space the novel opened. The subversive quality of some of the discourses conforming the space created by the novel is not lessened by the ambiguity that other textual elements such as its denouement might have contributed; the mere public enunciation of a discourse that was not legitimated by the state constituted a challenge to the official version of reality. Taking into account José Javier Maristany's observations on the process of discursive formation and conflict in Argentina during the last dictatorship, in this chapter I have examined how Leonardo Padura's *Máscaras*, through its portrayal of the male homosexual, contributed to the partial dismantling of the Revolution's homophobic discourse and therefore to a reconfiguration of who was deemed assimilable to the nation. *Máscaras* attempts such an intervention during a period of crisis only comparable in its severity and implications for the envisioned nation to that experienced at the end of the nineteenth century when the political boundaries of what it meant to be Cuban were being set. That during another moment of crisis, in which the nature of the national project is questioned, the value of male homosexuality as a mark of who is to be excluded from the nation is being re-examined and challenged, highlights the value of the abjection ascribed to the male homosexual as an indicator of assimilability to the national family.

Utilizing the police novel produced during the post-Soviet period as a lens, I will examine in the following chapter the portrayal of the female prostitute, another abject figure. Just as the male homosexual, the female prostitute became part of the arguments waged at the end of the 1800s as a sign of what was politically wrong on the island, and by implication she became a repository of qualities to be jettisoned from the future republic. Significantly, as the police narrative of Amir Valle captures, the figure of the female prostitute as *jinetera* reemerges concomitantly with a crisis at the end of twentieth century as a sign of degeneracy and survival as Cuba's future becomes uncertain.

Chapter 2

Cavalry of Last Resort: Amir Valle's Response to Female Prostitution in Post-Soviet Cuba

> [T]he new form of sex work has provided at least some children of *jineteras* some badly needed food, clothing and medicine that can be bought almost exclusively at Cuba's "dollar stores."
>
> —Elisa Facio, "Jineterismo During the Special Period"

> "La realidad no es nunca en blanco y negro. Nada es malo malo ni bueno bueno. Todo está lleno de matices, pues en ello radica la perfección de la vida en la Tierra y la propia existencia humana."
>
> —Amir Valle Ojeda, *Las puertas de la noche*

Pondering Cuba's future at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Víctor Fowler reminds his readers in his essay "'The Day After'" of how difficult that task had proven to be in the past. [1] Many expected the Cuban regime not to survive the collapse of the Berlin Wall only to be disappointed by its resilience. To illustrate his point, Fowler points to how in the 1990s the Cuban government managed to weather the island's most severe economic crisis since the nineteenth century and to score a victory in the case involving Elián González in the ideological war in which it had been embroiled for five decades with the Cuban exile community and the government of the United States. Its resilience notwithstanding, Fowler proceeds in his essay to conjecture about a transition from Cuban-style socialism to something else and, in the process, alludes to an aspect of that transition often neglected in those transformative scenarios, namely, the change in the population's outlook on life that would have to accompany any structural changes for the result not to be a dysfunctional polity. As Fowler recognizes, the new political actors

1. Víctor Fowler, "'The day after,'" in *Cuba y el día después: doce ensayistas nacidos con la revolución imaginan el futuro*, ed. Iván de la Nuez (Barcelona: Mondadori, 2001), 37-49. Although the essay is in Spanish, the title is in English.

> tendrán que esforzarse para borrar la cultura de la vida (ideas de los derechos y deberes, de la persona, de la convivencia, del lugar del país en el mundo, de la extensión y el sentido de la nacionalidad, de la dirección y la subordinación, etcétera) interiorizada por la población en estos cuarenta años.[2]

Fowler's remarks do not actually suggest that it may be desirable to erase completely the imprint that forty years of history left on the Cuban character. Instead, he alerts readers to the importance for Cubans facing an uncertain political future of coming to terms with the fact that living in revolutionary Cuba may have altered values once thought to be inherent components of the nation's idiosyncrasy, and in that Fowler has not been alone. Like Fowler, author and journalist Amir Valle Ojeda has expressed his preoccupation with the effects that life in contemporary Cuba may ultimately alter fundamental moral values that Cubans have hitherto taken for granted, and he finds in prostitution the issue that lends itself to gauge that change in moral values. Alarmed by the resurgence and apparent acceptance of prostitution during the 1990s, Valle rhetorically asks

> ¿No es preocupante en lo ético y lo sociológico que hoy la prostituta sea vista como una figura líder en su entorno por haber triunfado, mejorado su nivel de vida e incluso haber virado (lo más preocupante) la escala social tradicional en Cuba para ocupar uno de sus más altos escalones, cuando antiguamente estaba en las escalas más bajas de esa estructura?[3]

Valle's words clearly do not convey a sense of alarm before the mere existence of prostitution as a social phenomenon regardless of how much he might disapprove of it, but before the change in moral values that seemingly leads Cubans to confuse the prostitute's access to money with a broader understanding of success. His preoccupation led him to research the subject and to wrestle with the question in a nonfictional work titled *Jineteras* (2006) and in a police detective novel titled *Las puertas de la noche*

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2. Fowler, 47.

3. Amir Valle, *Jineteras* (Bogota: Editorial Planeta Colombiana S. A., 2006), 282.

(2002).[4] Both works function as windows into the same social phenomenon, but *Jineteras* addresses the subject ostensibly from the perspective of the social sciences, whereas *Las puertas de la noche* reveals the problems related to prostitution in the course of a police investigation using the conventions of the hard-boiled narrative. Neither work can be said to answer the question that preoccupies Valle unequivocally. Nonetheless, *Puertas* suggests that the attitudes that concern Valle are the product of a historical crisis, temporary in nature, that can be overcome with the passage of time, rather than evidence of a fundamental change in values among the general population. More significant –in light of the subject of this dissertation– is the role of the Cuban hard-boiled novel in addressing a subject not treated by the island's press adequately. By seeing in the prostitute a surrogate for what ails the nation, Valle joins Cuban intellectuals who saw the female prostitute in the same light at the end of the nineteenth century, what could arguably be considered the most critical moment in the nation's history prior to the Special Period.

At the end of the nineteenth century when independence and reform were being debated as ways out of Cuba's political impasse, prostitution became one of the topics around which discourses concerning Cuban identity and the island's political future began to coalesce in the press. In 1887 a Spaniard named Francisco Moreno published *Cuba y su gente*[5] citing the visibility of prostitution as one example, among many, of the widespread demoralization that characterized life on the island, and as a reason why Cuba was not ready for independence. The response of those opposed to the colonial regime

4. Valle, *Las puertas de la noche* (San Juan, P. R.: Editorial Plaza Mayor, Inc., 2002).

5. Francisco Moreno, *Cuba y su gente (Apuntes para la historia)* (Madrid: Establecimiento Tipográfico de Enrique Teodoro, 1887).

did not tarry. A Cuban lawyer and member of the Autonomist Liberal Party named Raimundo Cabrera published in the same year the essay *Cuba y sus jueces*[6] systematically addressing every one of Moreno's arguments. By either refuting the accusations made by the Spaniard or by acknowledging them and tracing their source to metropolitan policies, Cabrera argued that it was precisely self-government that the island desperately needed. As for Moreno's remarks about prostitution, Cabrera blamed the colonial government for its increase and imputed the most cynical motives for the public health regulations imposed on women engaged in the sex trade. According to Cabrera, the increase in prostitution registered at the time was the direct consequence of the Great War,[7] a war which he thought had been justified by the abuses committed by the colonial regime.[8] Furthermore, Cabrera saw in the government's public health measures not an attempt to improve public morality or guarantee the populations' well-being, but a cynical move on the part of the authorities to exploit the prostitutes economically. The Civil Government's Hygiene Section, charged with enforcing the rules enacted to regulate prostitution, was funded by fees and fines paid by the prostitutes themselves, which amounted to the imposition of a tax that the author dubbed "el impuesto de la desmoralización."[9] Cabrera's reaction was seconded in 1888 by Benjamín de Céspedes's *La prostitución en la ciudad de La Habana*.[10] Addressing the issue in the language of the

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6. Raimundo Cabrera, *Cuba y sus jueces (Rectificaciones oportunas.)*,8th ed. (Philadelphia: La Compañía Lévytype, Impresores y Grabadores, 1895).

7. Ibid., 113. The Great War (*La Guerra Grande*) also known as The Ten-Years War (*Guerra de los Diez Años*) had been fought from 1868-1878.

8. Ibid., 97.

9. Ibid., 26.

10. Benjamín de Céspedes, *La prostitución en la ciudad de La Habana* (Havana: Establecimiento Tipográfico O'Reilly Número 9, 1888).

physician he was, Céspedes principally blamed those who were not white Creoles for the island's prostitution. According to Céspedes, Spaniards were to blame for what afflicted Cubans physically and morally because it was they who introduced prostitution in addition to syphilis, corruption, and the enslavement of non-white races. Availing himself of a medicalized discourse indebted to positivist and naturalist currents and sometimes recalling the tone of Cesare Lombroso's criminology, Céspedes described Havana's prostitutes as being predominantly of peninsular or African ancestry. If, as denounced by Cabrera, the colonial government was to blame for indirectly fostering prostitution by turning it into a source of revenue, it was also to blame for the role it played historically in connivance with some white Creoles in fostering a slave economy that had marked Cuban society in ways that politically emancipation would probably not be able eradicate. According to Céspedes, slavery, and the political and legal structures it required, had produced concubinage, ignorance, and the seduction and abandonment of women. These ills and the customs they fostered had in turn contributed to a general moral decay that made prostitution a more likely end for many women.[11] Politically, the corollary to Cabrera's and Céspedes's arguments was, therefore, the necessity to break the island's ties to the metropolis since that was the most effective way for Cubans to have a healthy society; morally, the antidote was to promote a vision of woman as *ángel del hogar*, the opposite of the prostitute.

In this environment a short-lived weekly publication titled *La Cebolla* appeared, purporting to be a medium for prostitutes to air their grievances. Each issue included articles, letters, poems, and lyrics of songs presumably authored by the city's prostitutes.

11. Benjamín de Céspedes, 60-144.

The prostitutes would resort to satire using pseudonyms to attack mainly the chief of police and the mayor, since they were the authorities responsible for the regulations that were the immediate cause of the women's grievances. Beatriz Calvo Peña, who analyzed the publications of the era dealing with prostitution in her "Prensa, política y prostitución en La Habana finisecular: El caso de *La Cebolla* y la polémica de las meretrices,"[12] states that all evidence points to Victorino Reineri being the author. Reineri, a Spanish journalist of anarchistic leanings, would have been interested in undermining the nationalist discourse of the Creole elite while criticizing the metropolitan government for the imposition of regulations on women engaged in the sex trade –regulations that went beyond the stated objective of promoting a hygienic prostitution. According to Calvo Peña, *La Cebolla* represented an instance of what Foucault called, in reference to homosexuality, a "reverse discourse," that is, a discourse initially intended to assert power that instead brings about its own subversion.[13] In Foucault's words, a

> discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.[14]

Extrapolating from Foucault's remarks about the application of discursive controls on homosexuality, Calvo Peña detects in *La Cebolla* the creation of a discursive field from which it is possible to contemplate options that were not conceivable until then. Although nineteenth-century Cuban texts are often studied for signs of the role race played in the

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12. Beatriz Calvo Peña, "Prensa, política y prostitución en La Habana finisecular: El caso de *La Cebolla* y la 'polémica de las meretrices,'" *Cuban Studies* 36 (2005): 23-49.

13. Ibid., 28.

14. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 101.

definition of a Cuban national identity, for Calvo Peña *La Cebolla* presents the researcher with the opportunity of studying a contribution to the nation-building project that takes into account the place of women in civil society. *La Cebolla* suggested the possibility of forming feminine political organizations and associations dedicated to defend the rights of sex workers, [15] and in so doing it proposed actions whose aim was to alter the political status quo not just of sex-workers, but also of women in general. Understandably, Calvo Peña notes parallels between Cuba at the end of the nineteenth century and at the end of the twentieth. In both periods the prostitute emerges as a manifestation of political crisis, and the debates the prostitute occasions reveal "una fuerte voluntad de definición de la identidad cubana,"[16] identity that Amir Valle fears will be dramatically altered for the worse with the change in moral values that the apparent acceptance of prostitution by the general population in the 1990s signals to him.

Nowhere was a change of perspective on sex for sale more dramatically evident at the end of the 1980s than in the terminology that women engaged in that activity began to use out of their own volition. Instead of identifying themselves as prostitutes, they assumed the label of *jineteras*. Rosa Miriam Elizalde, a journalist on the staff of *Juventud Rebelde*, interviewed a number of sex workers and from April through June 1996 contributed a number of articles to that publication on the reemergence of prostitution in Cuba. She noted how it was common for her interviewees to set one term against the other in expressions such as "¡Qué va, prostitutas había antes, yo soy una jinetera, una

15. Calvo Peña, 45.

16. Ibid., 46.

luchadora!"[17] Elizalde points out how an adult might say in jest to a young girl "que jineterita más linda"[18] whereas he or she would not use the term *prostituta* with the same of approval. It is evident, too, from the citation above that *jinetera* carries a sense of agency as evinced by the term *luchadora* that *prostituta* does not necessarily convey. The term *jinetera* is clearly related to the noun *jinete* (horseman) and to the verb *jinetear*. The latter is registered by the fourth revised edition of the *Diccionario manual e ilustrado de la lengua española* published by the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language in 1989 as "Andar a caballo especialmente por los sitios públicos, alardeando de gala y primor." It also registers it as an Americanism meaning "Domar caballos cerriles." The year is significant because the widespread Cuban use of the term with the current meaning does not seem to antedate the economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989.

There are several explanations for the use of the term *jinetera* to designate a woman who sells her. According to Elizalde the term has its origins in the world of those involved in illegal economic activity. She states that *jineteros* were originally those engaged in exchanging foreign currency when its possession had not yet been decriminalized by the Cuban state. From there, the term began to be used for a member of a "grupo marginal y heterogéneo"[19] who participated in the underground economy that included women who engaged in the sex trade, particularly with foreigners who paid for the service in dollars. Whether the initial application of the term to those who sold sex

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17. Rosa Miriam Elizalde, *Flores desechables: ¿Prostitución en Cuba?* (Havana: Ediciones Abril, 1996), 70. Emphasis is mine.

18. Ibid.

19. Elizalde, 70.

had anything to do with the capacity of the image of a *jinete* (horseman) to represent a sexual act is probably impossible to determine. Nonetheless, the *jinete*'s representational capacity in this respect became part of how the term came to be understood. Elizalde points out that those who engaged in the practice would say that their activity was "*jinetear, montársele al extranjero y sacarle todo lo que puedan*."[20] The image of a woman mounted on her sexual partner as a horseman also serves to underscore a sense of power and the combative aspect inherent in terms such as *luchadora* used often by *jineteras* who conceived of their lives as a struggle for survival. That was especially the case when the horseman was identified with a warrior as Amir Valle did in his explanation of the word's origin. According to Valle, the inventiveness of Cubans' sense of humor led them to identify an equestrian image of a woman mounted on a sexual partner having sex for money with that of the men who in the nineteenth century rode into battle against the Spanish army. In the same manner that *mambises*[21] then charged against the Spanish troops, Cuban women in the 1990s exerted their powers of seduction on foreign tourists who, coincidentally, were predominantly Spanish. Just as patriots in the nineteenth century had fought the Spanish to achieve their political independence, *jineteras* a century later aggressively pursued foreigners to achieve the economic freedom the dollar represented. As Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs suggest in the preface to their *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, "jockey" is the

20. Elizalde, 71. Italics in original.

21. Plural of the term *mambí*, name given to Cubans who rose against the Spanish during the nineteenth century.

term that most adequately translates *jinetera* into English.[22] Although as late as 1997 Coco Fusco states that *jinetera* is "el término popular acuñado para designar a la mujer que en Cuba intercambia una serie de servicios –que incluyen el sexo– por el dinero de los extranjeros,"[23] I use the term more narrowly in this chapter. I will use prostitute and *jinetera* interchangeably in reference to women who engaged in a broad range of promiscuous behavior in exchange for some kind of benefit in Cuba starting at the end of the 1980s, when the latter term began to gain currency. After all, that sexual exchange is what both terms, prostitute and *jinetera*, have in common –regardless of how else *jinetera* was defined, and that equivalence was the reason why, for Valle and others, the social acceptance of the *jinetera* became a troubling sign that deeply held social values were undergoing a profound change for the worse.

The references in the definitions above to tourists and dollars anchor *jineterismo* as a social phenomenon in a particular historical period by pointing to two of the measures adopted by the Cuban government in order to deal with the loss of the Soviet bloc's economic aid in the 1990s, namely the legalization of the possession of dollars and the development of the tourism industry. The economic situation and the measures adopted to weather it had repercussions on all areas of Cuban life, but they were especially felt in the domestic sphere. It became difficult to carry out the most basic routines involved in running a home. Long and frequent blackouts designed to cope with a dwindling energy supply made it impossible to depend on refrigeration to preserve the little food that was available. The power outages also played havoc with the water supply,

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22. Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, "Privileging the afro-Cuban Voice," preface to *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, ed. Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), xv.

23. Coco Fusco, "Jineteras en Cuba," *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 4/5 (Spring/Summer 1997), 53.

since electric pumps were rendered useless. The blackouts and the scarcity of the most basic consumer goods such as soap, detergent, and toothpaste turned maintaining a modicum of cleanliness and personal hygiene into a challenge for the average Cuban, but particularly for Cuban women. Inherited sexist sociocultural patterns that had made the domestic environment the province of women also contributed to turn them into the principal buffer between the country's economic situation and those in their care. Writing in the 1990s, the anthropologist Holgado Fernández notes: "como principales gestoras y proveedoras de los hogares, las mujeres en Cuba son la principal fuerza motora para amortiguar las repercusiones de la crisis en la vida familiar y social…. Ellas son sin duda las verdaderas atlantes en este especial periodo."[24] Often trapped between the broader economic debacle and the needs of the elderly and the children in the family, women experienced, as primary caregivers, a disproportionate measure of the desperation suffered by all Cubans. It is this post-Soviet Cuba, reeling from the Soviet collapse and trying to survive by dollarizing sectors of the economy and relying on tourism more than at any other time since the triumph of the Revolution that constitutes the setting for Amir Valle's hard-boiled fiction.

Attaining the recognition of being one of the finalists for the German international prize for police novels Distel Verlag in 1998,[25] *Las puertas de la noche* auspiciously marked Amir Valle's emergence as a police detective novelist on the international scene, but not without the ideological difficulties that often accompany any cultural or political project related to Cuba's 1959 revolution. The novel was censored in Cuba, where both

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24. Isabel Holgado Fernández, *¡No es fácil!: mujeres cubanas y la crisis revolucionaria* (Barcelona: Icaria Antrazyt, 2000), 12.

25. According to author, the Distel Verlag prize was awarded only once (Valle, personal communication, 3 October 2011).

the Cuban publishers Letras Cubanas and Extramuros rejected it. Even in Germany, ideological considerations interfered with the novel's publication and distribution. According to the author, Distel, a publisher identified with the German left, was interested in offering "una vision supuestamente crítica pero 'dulcificada' de la realidad cubana,"[26] and as a consequence, it intimated to him that in order for the novel to be published some of its scenes would have to be toned down or eliminated altogether. The author took no such steps, and Malamba, a small Spanish publisher that specialized in Caribbean and Black African literatures in Spanish, finally released *Las puertas de la noche* in 2001.[27] Thus the novel became the first in a hard-boiled series titled *El descenso a los infiernos* chronicling the investigations of police lieutenant Alain Bec. The series would eventually include *Si Cristo te desnuda* (2002), *Entre el miedo y las sombras* (2003), *Últimas noticias del Infierno* (2005), *Santuario de sombras* (2006), and *Largas noches con Flavia* (2008).[28]

In a manner analogous Leonardo Padura's Mario Conde, Amir Valle's Alain Bec explores the underside of Havana. Like Conde, Bec often privileges his intuition over rational thought and adopts a critical stance toward society in keeping with the characteristics associated with the hard-boiled detective. However, he falls somewhere closer to the ideal socialist investigator when compared to Padura's Conde or –as we

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26. Valle, personal communication, 3 October 2011.

27. Ignacio Sánchez, "La literatura negroafricana en España," Luke, June 2001, bottom of the page in italics, http://www.espacioluke.com/Junio2001/sanchez.html (accessed October 9, 2011).

28. Valle, *Las puertas de la noche* (Salobralejo, Avila, Spain: Editorial Malamba, 2001), *Si Cristo te desnuda* (Granada, Spain: Zoela Ediciones, 2002), *Entre el miedo y las sombras* (Granada, Spain: Zoela Ediciones, 2003), *Últimas noticias del infierno* (Madrid: EDAF, 2005), *Santuario de sombras* (Cordoba: Almuzara, 2006), *Largas noches con Flavia* (Cordoba: Almuzara, 2008). The series has not been published under the title of El descenso a los infiernos; that is a title given to it by the author in numerous interviews and essays such as "De *Jineteras* a la serie 'El descenso a los infiernos': derivaciones de la realidad a la ficción novelada' (http://amirvalle.com/?es/ensayos/de-amir-valle/de-jineteras-a-la-serie-el-descenso-a-los-infiernos-derivaciones-de-la-realidad-a-la-ficcion-novelad [accessed August 9, 2012]).

shall see in the next chapter– to Lunar Cardedo's Leonardo Martín, to the extent that the solutions to his cases, albeit the result of his initiative, are more markedly the result of team effort. Bec also differs from Conde and Martín in how he had fared materially within Cuba's political system. Bec had been raised having access to the privileges only available to Cuba's new ruling class thanks to the relatively high position his father attained within the revolutionary government. Therefore, other than the degree to which he relies on his intuition in his investigative work and the critical stance he developed vis-à-vis the society in which he operates, Bec does not share much else with Conde or Martín. Whereas Conde and Martín come from familial and social environments that became part of the revolutionary process largely by inertia, by dint of not opposing it – perhaps even by giving it passive support without necessarily making extraordinary efforts to advance its goals– Alain Bec was born into a family that had militated in favor of the Revolution from its earliest days. Bec's late father had been tortured under the Batista regime, but unlike others who made similar sacrifices only to withdraw their support from the Castro regime when it began to turn increasingly leftist, the elder Bec had remained loyal and had been accordingly recompensed. His father's loyalty to the system ironically had made it possible for the family to lead a life of privilege that ultimately may have contributed to the contradictory tendencies that distinguish Alain Bec from more Spartan investigators typical of the Socialist police novel. Shortly after 1959 the government had given the senior Bec a home in the exclusive enclave of Miramar left by "gusanitos adinerados"[29] who had left "con sus llanticos y pataleos hacia

29. Valle, *Puertas*, 54.

el Norte revuelto y brutal,"[30] so that in terms of housing, Alain Bec had lived in an environment that had more in common with the lives of the reviled former moneyed classes than with the average post-1959 Cuban. Their Miramar home was a source of further privilege not available to most Cubans when, years later, Bec's mother decided to look for a smaller apartment after her husband's death. The value of the home allowed Alain Bec to obtain two apartments after several property swaps and a payment of around five thousand dollars: one apartment for his mother in the elegant Vedado neighborhood and a smaller one to be occupied by his son upon reaching adulthood. Thus, the family would be spared the inconvenience of sharing multigenerational living quarters so common in contemporary Cuba, a boon recognized by Alain Bec when he acknowledges that they had always had "tremenda suerte en el asunto de las casas, todo lo contrario a ese pugilateo enorme que tenía lugar en aquella misma ciudad."[31] Bec's father also occupied a position in the government that had afforded him the opportunity to travel abroad frequently. That opportunity, combined with the privileges enjoyed within the island by those considered trustworthy enough to be allowed that much freedom of movement, gave the Bec family access to consumer goods and a standard of living superior to that of the general population. It is no wonder that Bec derived some comfort during his workday anticipating his return to a domestic environment that insulated him from contemporary Havana's omnipresent material and moral decay. Waxing at those moments about the vacations he grew up taking on the beaches of the province's northern coast; and the perfumed soaps, hot water, and good liquor that awaited him upon his

30. Valle, *Puertas*, 54.

31. Ibid., 61.

return home; Bec betrayed bourgeois sensibilities at variance with the spirit of self-sacrifice and dedication to the collectivity that were the hallmarks of investigators in the socialist police novel.

Bec's standard of living worsened after his father's passing. Even though they could still afford some luxuries not accessible to the average citizen, the Becs find it increasingly difficult to satisfy economic expectations created when the family enjoyed greater influence and the country benefited from Soviet subsidies. Not being able to travel abroad with the frequency of his late father, he does not have access to the consumer goods he did in years past. What he earns is not enough to maintain the lifestyle to which he had grown accustomed, which is the main source of his dissatisfaction with his job. Ideological and moral incentives are not sufficient to make up for what he needs since "las consignas, aun cuando las dijera con el alma, no alimentarían a su familia."[32] Bec's wife Camila also works, but that is still not enough. As a result, both of them are forced to work additional hours. Camila works at a hotel reception desk where she receives tips in United States dollars, while Alain works "para ganar algo más por encima del salario mensual,"[33] but the particular nature of his additional work remains a mystery. However, given that Camila is inserted in the dollarized economy by virtue of her tips and that Alain confesses to spend a lot of time trying to find consumer goods at "a buen precio,"[34] it is obvious that both of them participate in the underground economy, which adds a layer of complexity to Bec's role as a law enforcement officer.

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32. Valle, *Puertas*, 25.

33. Ibid., 75.

34. Ibid.

In addition to the differences in socioeconomic status and levels of occupational fulfillment, Alain Bec differs from Mario Conde with respect to his family life. For Bec the home is not just a place to seek refuge materially from the economic misery to which he is constantly exposed as an investigator; it is a place where he feels realized as husband and father. When there are disagreements, they can often be ultimately traced to his racism, arguably the one character trait whose virulence most distinguishes Bec from the ideal investigator of the socialist police novels promoted in the 1970s. This is not merely a character flaw whose visibility depends on holding Bec to higher standards as a law enforcement officer within a socialist state. When compared to other characters in the novel, the intensity and frequency with which he verbalizes his bias are sufficient to preclude attempts to minimize it. Bec's racism is extreme even taking into account the generalized and diffuse forms present in Cuban society. Indeed, his prejudice is even noticeable against the backdrop provided by that of others like Tomate, the police station's file clerk, who acknowledges that he himself has only "dos defectos: uno que no soporto el racismo, y dos: que no soporto los negros."[35] In the course of the novel, Bec taps into many of the discursive practices that have been commonly deployed in order to relegate Afro-Cubans to a marginal status, to portray them as a political liability, and to make them responsible for many of the island's social ills. He routinely bestializes Afro-Cubans in his descriptions, frequently comparing them to apes, as when he describes a woman as "una vieja india, casi negra, gorda *a lo King Kong*"[36]; o when he says of another one: "tenía el mentón grande, una pasa que trataba de esconder a base de peine

35. Valle, *Puertas*, 43.

36. Ibid., 29.

caliente y una nariz de *gorila*."[37] At other times, he compares them to pests by speaking of their movement, life, and reproduction in Havana's poorer tenement houses in terms of those of a "plaga verdadera y dañina,"[38] perversely attributing to them a taste for the bad and crowded spaces where they live out of necessity. Bestializing blacks also justifies regarding them as unintelligent, as when he dismisses the attitudes concerning birth and death of Afro-Cubans he knew as a child in his native Palma Soriano as "comedera de mierda de negros brutos."[39] More unsettling is that he seems to regard Afro-Cubans' influence on political life as a menace. Noting that with each passing day blacks "se creen la mayoría,"[40] Bec expresses his discomfort with what he perceives to be contemporary Afro-Cubans' unwillingness to acquiesce when their rights are infringed. Arguably what Bec fears in such an attitudinal change on the part of Afro-Cubans is the potential long-term implications for how political power might be reallocated in the future to the detriment of whites. Although it may seem anachronistic and extreme, it is hard not to see in Bec's attitude an instance of the two-centuries old fears of a Haitian-style revolution with its acts of retributive racial justice used by white Cubans to rationalize racial discrimination well into the twentieth century. Only by appealing to such terror, however irrational, it would seem that Bec can justify to himself agreeing with Tomate –his conflicted friend and colleague– who believes in the desirability of exterminating blacks, a truly contradictory suggestion for Tomate to make, and for Bec to support, considering that Bec and Tomate are close friends and that Tomate is black. Perhaps most importantly

37. Valle, *Puertas*, 29. Emphasis is mine.

38. Ibid., 11.

39. Ibid., 10.

40. Ibid., 23.

considering his occupation, Bec's tendency to bestialize blacks leads him to consider them immune to moral restraints. Clearly that tendency is at play when he describes a book mentioned by Tomate possibly titled *Oddun de Ifá* as "un libro de cuando los negros vivían en África y ya eran tan asesinos y maricones como son ahora."[41] Thinking that blacks have the propensity to engage in criminal behavior, Bec runs the risk as a police officer of turning them into suspects of crimes they did not commit and of not bringing to justice those truly culpable.

By creating a fictional world in which such a racist discourse is possible and by turning the police detective at the center of the plot into one of that discourse's main exponents, *Las puertas de la noche* manages to shine a light on the state of race relations on the island, and to cast doubts on the government's claims to have successfully eliminated a legacy of racial discrimination. Like the eradication of prostitution, that of racial discrimination became an objective of the new revolutionary government after it came to power in 1959. Identified with the pre-revolutionary past, racism was equated by the new regime with restricted access to facilities such as beaches, clubs, and schools, many of which were in private hands until then. The state sought to eliminate racial discrimination by bringing those institutions under its control while remaking the economy in accordance with a socialist model. The new regime outlawed such restrictions at the same time that it nationalized, intervened, or expropriated the facilities of those institutions that barred Afro-Cubans. The government's economic goals took precedence over exclusively racial ones, as it was thought that Afro-Cubans, who occupied a larger proportion of the economically disadvantaged classes, would benefit

41. Valle, *Puertas*, 24.

disproportionally from policies designed to eliminate large differences in income distribution. As a result of adopting this strategy, the government's economic approach to dealing with the racial question ran into difficulty when the Soviet bloc's economic subsidies dried up after 1989. The collapse of the Cuban economy forced the regime to adopt measures that until then would have been considered incompatible with its socialist project. Measures already mentioned such as promoting foreign tourism, establishing joint ventures with the participation of foreign capital, and legalizing the possession of United States dollars had the unintended result of economically highlighting existing racial differences. Unlike whites, fewer black Cubans were employed in the newly formed enterprises, and those who were hired tended to perform menial occupations not as well remunerated as those performed by their white counterparts. Not being as integrated in the economic activities that brought Cubans in contact with foreigners who often tipped for services in hard currency deprived black Cubans of the means to survive economically in a society where payment in United States dollars was sometimes the only means to acquire the most basic necessities. In contrast to their white compatriots, Afro-Cubans were also less likely to have access to hard currency as a result of not having as often as whites relatives abroad that would send them dollars. Albeit unintentionally, the remittances sent by the largely white Cuban exile community contributed, therefore, to accentuate the economic divide along racial lines even more. Therefore, although the post-Soviet economic collapse affected the entire population, Afro-Cubans disproportionally suffered its effects.

According to Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, these effects on the Afro-Cuban population contributed to an attitudinal change on the part of whites toward their

black compatriots that Bec exemplifies. They argue that decreased economic opportunity resulted in greater numbers of jobless Afro-Cubans on the streets engaged "in petty trading and prostitution" and in jail. Such a situation, according to their argument, gave rise among the white population to a "blaming-the-victim syndrome" that one can certainly see in Alain Bec's already cited characterization of the black residents of downtown Havana. As noted by Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs, the same economic hardship lay behind the restlessness of Afro-Cubans with the government for promoting measures perceived to exacerbate their penury. [42] The Afro-Cuban presence in the disturbances that took place on Havana's Malecón during the summer of 1994 is illustrative of the consequences of the economic crises of the 1990s in this regard. That summer a group made up predominantly of blacks and mulattos destroyed several government-owned stores that catered to those who paid in dollars and clamored for a change in Cuba's political situation.[43] These developments led white Cubans, whether inside or outside the government, to question the degree to which the Revolution could take Afro-Cuban support for granted. They have also led some supporters of the regime to accuse especially young Afro-Cubans of ungratefulness for what the Revolution had done for them.[44] "Are Blacks Getting Out of Control?," the statement that serves as the title of a 1997 article by Alejandro de la Fuente and Laurence Glasco addressing the impossibility of considering Afro-Cubans a monolithic group encapsulates the preoccupation to which the Malecón riot gave rise. Although attributed to a "white, middle-class, Havana

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42. Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, 7.

43. Alejandro de la Fuente and Laurence Glasco, "Are Blacks 'Getting Out of Control'? Racial Attitudes, Revolution, and Political Transition in Cuba," in *Toward a New Cuba?: Legacies of a Revolution*, ed. Miguel Angel Centeno and Mauricio Font (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publichers, 1997), 53.

44. Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, 29.

resident"[45] presumably comparable to Alain Bec, the question quoted in the article's title reflects the preoccupation of governmental authorities with the developments and the sensitivity of the topic. Indeed, according to the official report, the demographic and social composition of the rioters was the government officials' primary concern. Not surprisingly, Valle was given two reasons why his novel would not be permitted to be published in Cuba. The first was that, in the words of editor Daniel García, *Puertas* dealt "con un tema demasiado delicado: el de la prostitución infantil,"; the second, according to another Cuban editor named Elizabeth Godínez, was that it was "una novela asquerosamente racista. "[46]

Although this chapter sees in *Las puertas de la noche* a lens through which to examine the representation and the role played by the female prostitute in Cuba in the post-Soviet era, understanding the racial dynamics at work in Cuba during the same period is not extraneous to the purpose at hand. Those dynamics provide the backdrop against which the significance of Bec's racism must be read. Bec's racist tendencies are not simply another example of how the hard-boiled narrative manages to capture the less exemplary aspects of a given society. Bec's racial prejudice creates a tension necessary to propel the novel's plot development, and therefore it is crucial for the mechanics of the text as such. Although the intensity and manifestations of Bec's racism may seem to be overly emphasized, being mindful of Bec's racial bias is critical for us as readers on two counts. First, being aware of its intensity gives us a way to gauge the strength of the evidence required to persuade him during the course of his investigation when that

45. Alejandro de la Fuente and Laurence Glasco, 53.

46. Valle, personal communication, 4 July 2009.

evidence must be strong enough to overcome his antipathy of blacks as it happens in *Las puertas de la noche*. Second, and more importantly, the extent to which the text illustrates Bec's prejudice gives additional depth to the relationship that eventually develops between him and Alex Varga, an Afro-Cuban informant who becomes a catalyst for Bec's character development and investigative process, and whose judgment –as we shall see– the novel privileges.

The case Bec is called to investigate in *Puertas* initially only involves the drowning of a nine-year old black boy named Oriel, but it soon becomes one about a child prostitution net. Oriel's body had been found by fishermen in the waters of Havana's waterfront victim of an apparent drowning. The forensic report confirmed that he had been sexually violated several times by at least two men and killed with a blow to the head with a metallic object prior to being dumped in the waters off the coast of East Havana. From there the currents had presumably carried the corpse to the place where it was found. The investigation is eventually broadened to include the disappearance of one additional boy and four girls whose shared characteristics with the deceased led Tomate to suggest that they were victims of the same criminal mastermind. All the children lived in downtown Havana, most suffered from mental retardation, and most "no eran atendidos por una que otra razón ajena al deseo."[47] As the investigation progressed Bec realized that the children had somehow become pawns in a child prostitution ring. The case is resolved when the ring is disarticulated and Manín, its procurer, is set on the run, but not before an additional child dies. It is presumed that Manín eventually manages to

47. Valle, *Puertas*, 186.

leave Cuba illegally for Miami from the vicinity of the northern city of Caibarién, only to die at the hands of an unscrupulous launch pilot in a twist of poetic justice.

Las puertas de la noche conforms to the hard-boiled novel pioneered by Padura in the post-Soviet period. However, the differences already mentioned between Bec, on one hand, and Conde and Martín on the other, bear on why the novel is ultimately relevant to the subject of female prostitution. The distance that mediates between Bec and the environment where the crimes he investigates are committed is considerably greater than that between Conde and Martín and the environments where the crimes they investigate take place. Conde moves in a world that, even when partly alien, remains sufficiently intelligible to him by virtue of the social and cultural history that binds him to it. For example, in his search for the murderer of Alexis Arayán in *Máscaras*, Conde discovers a homosexual social scene until then unknown to him that nonetheless gradually becomes accessible thanks to the experiences he shares with Marqués. As mentioned in the previous chapter, those experiences include Conde's own brush with political censorship as a high school student and his interest in literature. Likewise, as we shall see in the next chapter, Lunar Cardedo's protagonist, Leonardo Martín, feels similarly connected to the people he investigates. He is the chief of police in an urban sector that encompasses the neighborhood where he was raised and where he still lives. His suspects tend to be individuals with whom he can identify by virtue of having personally known them or their families for years. In contrast, Bec often finds himself trying to make sense of a social reality unfamiliar to him and therefore frequently incomprehensible. Until shortly before the action in *Puertas* begins, Bec had been working for the economic crimes section, so that, even though he was a police officer, he did not have to deal extensively

or relate intimately with the downtown Havana (Centro Habana) population with which he would have to come in contact while investigating Oriel's death. His different socioeconomic background often interferes with his ability to understand those he investigates. Although himself a victim of the economic hardships endured by all Cubans, the degree to which the majority of downtown Havana residents endures them is not part of his personal experience. Even his co-worker Tomate acknowledges it when he states half in jest,

> *Que yo sé dónde tu vives y cómo vives y en casa como las tuyas los pe'os se tiran con el culo bien alto. Que tú eres de la* high *y nadie sabe aquí que carajo haces de policía y no de ayudante de un ministro o trabajando en una de esas firmas en las que hoy muchos sueñan ganarse unos dolaritos sirviendo de esclavitos a los ilustres extranjeritos dueños del negocio*.[48]

Further impeding a greater understanding and identification with the population to which he must gain access in order to successfully carry out an investigation are Bec's already noted racial prejudices. Although not exclusively black, downtown Havana had become in Bec's words "una ciudad llena de negros, chinos, blancos, mulatos, indios y otra vez negros y cada vez más negros."[49] These socioeconomic and racial factors constitute a barrier that would have been insurmountable had Bec not managed to gain access to a number of individuals whose testimony about the world of prostitution Bec hoped would shed some light on the more secretive aspect of that world involving children, hence the relevance of *Puertas* to an understanding of what Cuban police fiction has to say about the female prostitute at the turn of the twenty-first sentury.

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48. Valle, *Puertas*, 43.

49. Ibid., 22.

Aware of Bec's difficulties, his wife Camila suggests that he contact Justo Marqués, a former boyfriend who coincidentally was writing a book about prostitution and the lives of "street children"[50] (*niños de la calle*). As used in the novel, the term includes children who –even if not homeless– lead lives not closely supervised by adults and largely survive by begging from foreign tourists and offering to perform services for them that include those of a sexual nature in exchange for money or some other benefit. Marqués's investigation had indeed led him to become knowledgeable about the world of street children, but that only occurred as a consequence of the research he had conducted on prostitution. The fruits of his research had become the book that Marqués was about to finish when Bec contacted him and that Marqués described as being about "la prostitución en Cuba desde que Colón descubrió esta islita de América," [51] "una gran novela, una historia … que va decir muchas cosas ya dichas y otras nuevas, pero desde la vivencia de sus protagonistas: va a mostrar jineteras de todo tipo, que las hay, porque no todas andan en eso porque quieren."[52] Marqués's description of his upcoming book corresponds very closely to *Jineteras*, a text that haunts Amir Valle's treatment of prostitution by virtue of the interviews it contains and that eventually form the basis of the stories narrated in *Las puertas de la noche*. Further associating *Jineteras* with *Las puertas de la noche*; Marqués tells Bec that his book will be titled *Habana Babilonia o prostitutas en Cuba*, title virtually identical to *Habana Babilonia: la cara oculta de las jineteras*[53] under which the text of *Jineteras* is eventually published by Zeta in 2008.

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50. Valle, *Puertas*, 93.

51. Ibid., 122.

52. Ibid., 108.

53. Valle, *Habana Babilonia: la cara oculta de las jineteras* (Barcelona: Zeta, 2008).

Valle finished writing *Jineteras* in 1999, and it represents the culmination of research done during the previous five years, a period that overlaps the writing of *Las puertas de la noche*, with which it maintains a dialogue.

Jineteras is classified on the author's webpage as testimonial literature, and it was under that category that it was submitted as an entry for the *Casa de las Américas* prize in 1998. It received the 2006 Rodolfo Walsh prize for the best non-fiction police work and, just as Walsh's work, displays the hybrid nature of the nonfictional novel. The hybridity of the work finds concrete expression in the work's format. *Jineteras* begins with a section fittingly titled "Génesis" where the author tells that his motivation to write the book was his interest in the topic coupled with a fortuitous chance encounter with an old acquaintance named Susimil at Havana's José Martí International Airport. Susimil, the ex-girlfriend of an old friend of Valle who had since passed away, had become a *jinetera* by the time of their encounter at the airport. "Génesis" is followed by a preface where Valle sets down formally the reason for writing the book. He wanted to

> escribir un libro de testimonio sobre el tema, aunque la realidad que contara, para muchos que hoy tratan de minimizar un problema de un alcance social en verdad preocupante, resultara molesta, dura, conflictiva; y para otros, que viven y sobreviven mirando pero no *viendo* lo que sucede a su alrededor, pudiera parecer imaginación desbordada, loca invención, historia increíble.[54]

The remainder of the work is divided into seven chapters, each beginning with a biblical quotation that, with the exception of chapter 6, includes a warning against prostitution or fornication. Each of the chapters is in turn subdivided into sections that differ from one another in genre or structure. The first section of each chapter has no title, and –through the sixth chapter– constitutes Susimil's running testimony. It contains her account of

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54. Valle, *Jineteras*, 17.

what led her to become a *jinetera* and concludes in the sixth chapter with an intervention from the author informing the reader of her death from AIDS while an exile in France. As epilogue to that first section, the author reproduces in the seventh chapter an e-mail message received from a former *jinetera* now living abroad in which she congratulates him for having written the book and expresses her surprise at the paucity of cases he includes that end tragically. The same woman also expresses her disappointment at what she sees as a desire on his part to give the impression that the majority of Cuban women become prostitutes out of economic necessity. Lastly, she warns him of the dangers he runs remaining in Cuba after publicly calling attention to the magnitude of the problem and the degree of official connivance. The second section, titled "La isla de las delicias," is an historical overview of prostitution in Cuba that describes the contemporary situation in the segments that correspond to the last two chapters. The third section, "Las voces," gathers brief testimonies from individuals who come in contact with the underground economy that constitutes the *jinetera*'s environment. These not only include the cast of unsavory characters one might expect, such as procurers, drug traffickers, pornographers, and corrupt government officials, but also police officers combating prostitution, security guards, barmen, chauffeurs, business managers, photographers, lawyers and others who, on either side of the law, are affected by –or become part of– the economic activity that is set in motion or intensified by prostitution. In "Evas de la noche," the section that follows "Voces" in each chapter, a different type of *jinetera* is described according to a taxonomy that takes into account her appearance, comportment, and type of clientele. Next, "Los hijos de Sade" consists of an extended interview by the author of one of the types of individuals who appear briefly in "Las voces," but in contrast to what occurs in "Las

voces," where the testimonies of the informants seem to answer an implicit interview, "Los hijos de Sade" makes that interview explicit by the inclusion of the interviewer's questions in italics. Each of the six chapters ends with a section that consists of a relatively lengthy testimony of a *jinetera* whose name gives it its title. This pattern is interrupted in the seventh chapter, where "Evas de la noche" and "Los hijos de Sade" are inexplicably transposed and followed by two sections titled "Otros testimonios" and "Nota del autor." The entire works concludes with a bibliography.

This peculiar organization has the effect of imparting to the whole work a moralizing tone while safeguarding its treatment of the subject in each individual section from the same charge by having the sections invoke discourses that appeal to areas of human knowledge that do not seek their legitimacy in religious revelation. On one hand, the biblical citations in conjunction with a dedication that ends with the words "Y a Cristo, que ha luchado y vencido por mí todas las batallas que han desatado las verdades aquí escritas" provides a frame that reveals religious convictions that one may assume colored the moral lens through which the author processed the documentary evidence he obtained. On the other, the division of the text into discrete sections containing archival material and first-person accounts from a number of individuals involved in the sex trade gives each section the legitimacy of methodologies used in history, journalism, and the social sciences whose soundness may be evaluated irrespective of the religious convictions of the author or the reader.

Las puertas de la noche functions as a fictional buttress for the real-life testimonies of *Jineteras*. Therefore, given their subject matter and interrelatedness, one could conceptualize *Jineteras* and *Puertas* as two vantage points lying on a fiction-

nonfiction continuum from which the same phenomenon can be observed. Not lying at the extremes of that continuum, the characteristics of one bleed into the other. As stated, *Jineteras* is a work of testimonial literature to the extent that it contains first-person accounts of individuals whose lives have been touched by prostitution. Often their accounts are integrated partially, or *in toto*, in the plot of *Puertas*. It is a historic text to the extent that the sections titled "La isla de las delicias" offer a brief overview of prostitution in Cuba from the time of the Spanish conquest to the revolutionary period under Castro. Lastly, *Jineteras* is also a journalistic work in that it purports to investigate and publicize an aspect of contemporary life that would be addressed by the mass media in places where the press is not controlled by the state. However, even as *Las puertas de la noche* is imbued with the non-fictional character that its relation to *Jineteras* gives it in the eyes of a reader familiar with both texts, *Jineteras* is also marked by qualities that give it an air of fiction. The installments of the story of Susimil with which each chapter opens trace a narrative arc that leads the reader through the exposition, climax, and denouement of a personal drama that makes the author's remark about the novelesque quality of Susumil's life unnecessary. The author's purposeful omission of his informants' real names further adds to the fictional air of the work. Valle replaced his informants' real names with fictitious ones to ensure their anonymity and cooperation. Although a practice that is part and parcel of his formation as journalist, concealing his informants' real names can detract from the historicity of the work by making it impossible for a reader or a potential researcher to corroborate the information presented as fact. Finally, having a critical comment by Vázquez Montalbán appear on the book's front cover visually has the effect of co-opting the text into the realm of the detective

novel, especially when one may already be disposed to assume that *Jineteras* is another police novel owing to the fact that Amir Valle is also one of its main Cuban exponents. Although also a poet, critic, journalist, and essayist, Vázquez Montalbán is widely known as the author of a hard-boiled series about a gastronome and detective named Pepe Carvalho. Placing *Jineteras* and *Puertas* next to each other along a fiction-nonfiction continuum and emphasizing their interrelatedness is not intended to suggest that there are no differences between the registers in which they operate, nor that a lack of acquaintance with *Jineteras* detracts from the *Las puertas de la noche* as police narrative. The objective instead is to underscore the capacity of the Cuban police novel to reflect its sociohistorical milieu and to play the informative and critical roles that Cuban journalism does not play because, in the words of Padura, "la falta de interés de los que lo dirigen en que sea un reflejo problemático de la realidad."[55]

If Marqués, the former boyfriend of Alain Bec's wife, is significant in providing a link between *Jineteras* and *Las puertas de la noche*, he is also significant for the development of the plot of *Puertas* in that he helps Bec to overcome the barriers that impede his access to the environment he must investigate. To do this, Marqués serves up Bec as a reference to contact the informants who helped him in his own investigation. These contacts include numerous *jineteras* and, most importantly, Alex Varga, a character who becomes a distinctive feature of Amir Valle's Bec police detective series. Varga can further Bec's investigation by giving him information about what Varga calls the *brujanza*, a realm that –according to Varga– includes the world of drugs, prostitution, and street children. Varga's role as informant, however, turns out to be less ductile than

55. Marta María Ramírez, "Leonardo Padura: con la pluma y la espada," *Cuba a la mano* 8 (April 2005), http://cubaalamano.net/sitio/client/article.php?id=6383 (Accessed 17 December 2011).

one would have imagined considering that in their relationship the balance of power was ostensibly inclined in favor of Bec as a result of the latter's connection to the law enforcement establishment. As their initial conversation progresses it becomes evident that, rather than being a simple informant, Alex Varga is determined to act as the gatekeeper and guardian of the world to which he is supposed to introduce Bec. He gives Bec very general information about the workings of the *brujanza*, only promising to confirm when asked whether the investigation is proceeding in the right direction and to advise him at the very end, once he, Bec, has already figured out the questions that lead to the crime's solution. Varga's hermetism reflects an outlook on life that favors the subaltern and does not see politics in terms of competing ideologies as much as in terms of a struggle between the haves and the have-nots. That outlook would largely explain Varga's otherwise erratic choices concerning exile after 1959. According to Marqués, Varga had left the country for the United States with his money soon after the triumph of Castro's revolution. Besides hinting that it made sense economically for him to leave, the text explains his decision by pointing out that one of his daughters was already living in the United States. However, no explanation is given for Varga's leaving "todo aquel lujo"[56] and returning to Cuba in the mid 1970s, arguably one of the most repressive periods of the revolution. Since then he had been living in the same neighborhood of Old Havana where he had the standing of a town mayor and where paternalism took precedence over political ideology.

Whereas loyalty to his own –those without the backing of institutional power– explains Varga's reticence as an informant, his own background as a sleuth explains his

56. Valle, *Puertas*, 109.

ability to avoid feeling intimidated or coaxed by a law-enforcement officer. As Bec learns through Marqués, Varga had been a private investigator prior to 1959, had dealt with American Mafiosi such as Meyer Lansky, and had been paid handsomely by prominent Cubans to handle a few delicate cases, so that in a very real sense Alex Varga embodies much more the characteristics of a hard-boiled detective than Bec himself. Having been informed by Marqués of who Varga was, Bec in fact loses whatever psychological advantage he might have thought he had as a law enforcement officer, an advantage that would have allowed him to dictate to a greater degree the terms of their cooperation. Bec falls instead under the spell of the old investigator during their initial interview. According to the text,

> [d]urante su conversación, qué duró casi dos horas como si hubieran pasado sólo unos minutos porque apenas sintió el tiempo, Alain descubrió que la superioridad que nacía en cada uno de sus gestos y palabras estaba solidamente afincada en una seguridad total sobre su capacidad de sobrevivir a cualquier tormenta.[57]

The respect that Varga inspires in Bec must be regarded all the more unassailable and Bec's admiration all the more remarkable when one considers that Varga is black. Varga's positive impression on Bec must be strong enough to overcome the latter's racial prejudices, and that is exactly what we see happen in the course of their first meeting. By the end of their initial meeting Varga's firmness combined with what Bec described as "la increíble facilidad de palabra que poseía"[58] paves the way for a mutual recognition of the line that is to separate their respective spheres of influence: Bec may have access to the resources of the state's law enforcement and investigative agencies, but Varga has the

57. Valle, *Puertas*, 111.

58. Ibid.

information and skills to exercise a degree of authority over an underworld largely destined to elude the control of the police and its legitimating ideological discourse. Varga's characterization as a man of unquestionable honor in spite of the fact that he identifies with, and belongs to, Havana's underworld is ultimately important for us as we attempt to evaluate what Valle's novel has to say about changes in Cuban values with respect to prostitution. The apparent autonomy Varga enjoys with respect to the political establishment, and the respect he evokes in both, the State's law-enforcement agencies as personified by Bec and those in the *brujanza*, give his judgments an air of impartiality that turns Varga into an ethical center of gravity. His value judgments, in fact, possess an air of irrevocability that seems to transcend the limits of a literary genre in which the impossibility of demarcating good from evil is *sui generis*.

As noted above, Bec's sources of information also include a number of *jineteras*. Their testimony, combined with what he gathers from others close to the disappeared children, is the reason why a novel whose ostensible subject is the more narrowly defined world of child prostitution is also about the female prostitution. However, in the absence of a systematic approach to the subject, a portrait of the life of the *jinetera*, must be teased out of what one learns about them as the investigation about the disappeared children proceeds. At times the narrator renders the women's speech directly, and as a result we have access to what they think about a number of issues. At other times what the *jineteras* say can be inferred from Bec's ruminations about the interviews. Instead of always the *jineteras* being the source of the information about their own lives, sometimes what we learn about them comes from relatives and neighbors of the disappeared children, who are engaged in prostitution themselves in spite of their young age.

Moreover, not all interviewees speak to the same aspects of what the life of the *jineteras* is like; by dint of their age and educational level, they end up addressing different aspects of their existence. Nevertheless, from the interviews there emerges a general picture that reveals, in what is almost an impressionistic way, aspects of these women's lives. Taken as a whole, the women's comments tell us something about their backgrounds and the motivations that eventually led them to a life of prostitution, and that in turn gives an idea of the degree to which their decision was the result of a profound ethical change, or an ad hoc response to what is perceived as an extreme situation.

First, it is evident from the information obtained by Bec that there does not exist a correlation between being a prostitute and belonging to a family of doubtful ideological credentials. In other words, there is no connection between prostitution and dissidence. Though not all, a number of the women engaged in prostitution hail from families –or they themselves were– sufficiently supportive of the political system to put that matter to rest. One of Marqués's informants, a twenty-two year old not identified by name, is a case in point. She was the daughter of a Cuban ambassador with all the privileges that position entailed for the entire family. A second *jinetera*, an eighteen-year old also not identified by name, was the daughter of a captain of a tank unit in the Cuban army. She acknowledges her former level of support for the system when she admits having participated only a few years before in the acts of repudiation[59] organized by the government against those who chose to emigrate through the port of Mariel. As she

59. "Acts of repudiation" is the English translation used by Amnesty International for what the Cuban government has termed in Spanish *actos de repudio*. These are demonstrations carried out by groups of government supporters with, at least, the tacit consent of law enforcement authorities that are designed to intimidate and humiliate publicly those who have adopted a position not in agreement with government interests. Sometimes such acts have involved physical violence directed against their targets. That was the case in 1980 against those who planned to abandon the country as part of what became known as the Mariel Boatlift, which is the occasion to which Bec's interviewee refers.

expresses it, "cuando lo del Mariel partí unas cuantas cabezas de gusanos a pedradas,"[60] and as if not to appear ungrateful for her life under the revolution, she goes on to attribute to the revolution having received a university education.

Second, low educational levels or lack of sophistication do not seem to account for their decision to become *jineteras* in contrast to how the revolutionary government has traditionally described prostitutes before the revolution. The twenty-two year old mentioned above had a degree in Art History and spoke five languages, and the eighteen-year old was studying psychology and spoke French, English, and Italian. Later, as if to purposely contradict the officially sanctioned descriptions of a pre-revolutionary society in which only the privileged had access to higher education, the eighteen-year old informs Bec that she had been taught from a young age to speak those languages fluently by her mother "que era profesora universitaria, graduada de filosofía y letras antes de la Revolución"[61] thanks to her grandmother's hard work sewing slippers (*zapatillas*) and her grandfather's toil as a traveling salesman. Bec had encountered numerous similar examples among the *jineteras* to whom Marqués referred him to conclude that the majority in fact "no eran mujeres brutas, guajiras venidas del campo a buscar mejorías, como pensaba mucha gente,"[62] and certainly some would not have been if the Revolution had not triumphed.

Third, the *jineteras* interviewed, with only one exception, do not like selling their bodies. Alain Bec became convinced that "podían existir justificaciones, teorías socializantes y moralistas, un montón de prejuicios, pero ninguna de ellas, o muy pocas,

60. Valle, *Puertas*, 125.

61. Ibid., 126.

62. Ibid., 173.

hacían aquello por el simple gusto de putas."[63] That brings us to the fourth conclusion one may draw from their portrayal: women who become *jineteras* do so as a result of what they perceive is a situation that leaves them no choice. Equivocatingly, perhaps as a result of the mistrust Bec as a police officer might still have inspired in her in spite of Marqués's references, the eighteen-year old informant states that all those who say everything is bad in Cuba are lying, and she justifies the country's bad economic situation appealing to reasons such as "el bloqueo y toda esa mierda que se sabe."[64] Nonetheless she says that she became a *jinetera* because she got tired of living like an indigent. More specifically, she alludes to the financial hardship caused by her mother's recent ischemia. Even though her mother was receiving money from social security as a result of her health condition, it was evidently still not enough. An economic need similarly perceived as dire also seems to have motivated Alina Bengochea Catalán, alias Lina la Tigresa. Identical in all things but her family life to one of the prostitutes in *Jineteras*, Lina was one of the disappeared children –in reality a young adolescent– that Bec was trying to track down. As Bec was able to learn from the family's closest friend and neighbor, Soleida, Lina's decision to become a *jinetera* could be traced to the moment when Laudelina, Lina's grandmother and only live-in relative, had returned from the hospital to convalesce after a fall that had left her blind and confined to a wheelchair. Soleida tells Bec that social security was giving Laudelina assistance in the form of some money, but the money from the state was insufficient considering Laudelina's needs after the accident and Lina's desire not to see her grandmother institutionalized. What Lina

63. Valle, *Puertas*, 174.

64. Ibid., 125.

earned as a jinetera provided the income needed and caused Soleida to say "gracias a esa vida, Laudelina, que es mi mejor amiga desde hace más de cuarenta años, ha vivido y está viviendo como una reina."[65] It is easy to see how these two *jineteras*, the eighteen-year old woman informant and Lina, embody the type of motivation to sell themselves sexually that motivates Paddy, one of the informants whose testimony appears in *Jineteras* and who says to the author/interviewer "Si me preguntas por qué estoy en esto, esa es la respuesta: hay cosas que la vida te obliga a hacer para bien de la gente que amas."[66]

However, *Las puertas de la noche* does not depict women choosing to prostitute themselves only as a result of an illness suffered by a family member. As noted above, the eighteen-year old informant states that she chose to become a *jinetera* because she was tired of living like an indigent, a term that connotes poverty more broadly and that must be understood contextually. In Cuba, it is perhaps best exemplified by the rationing book in existence since 1963, which explains why the women interviewed by Holgado Fernández view the revolutionary process economically as a series of "special periods" of which the one recognized as such by the regime was the worst and most recent one, not different in substance, only in intensity.[67] Indigence in this case may include lack of food, but it goes beyond that. As Reynaldo Escobar, journalist and husband of well-known blogger Yoani Sánchez, asserts in *Encuentro de la cultura cubana*,

> No sólo se pasa hambre cuando se llega al nivel de inanición de un náufrago abandonado sobre una roca estéril. Hambre es también no elegir los alimentos, no poder condimentarlos a nuestro gusto, no tener una dieta balanceada. Pero además

65. Valle, *Puertas*, 99.

66. Valle, *Jineteras*, 143.

67. Holgado, 44.

> las necesidades humanas no son sólo digestivas. Una persona necesita asearse, vestirse, rodearse de objetos útiles.[68]

Arguably, Escobar's description of hunger captures much more faithfully the economic ups and downs that Cubans have experienced in the last five decades. This is how the eighteen year old informant expressed to Bec how the scarcity of essential consumer goods can gradually lead one to do what in other circumstances might have seem unthinkable.

> Hay. . . cositas que fastidian y te van obligando y llevando a hacer lo que tú nunca pensaste hacer. Por ejemplo: ¿sabes que estuve casi seis meses bañándome con un poco de médula de henequén que conseguí en Cienfuegos con un amigo? Y no sé cuántos trapos me puse cuando me caía la menstruación. Fíjate que tuve que pagarle a una mujer medio loca que iba mucho por mi barrio para que me buscara trapos en los basureros. Ella me los traía, yo los lavaba, los hervía y los cortaba en cuadritos para ponérmelos cuando me tocaba la regla porque a mí los chorros de sangre me corren más que las cataratas del Niágara.[69]

As evinced in the informant's remarks, money was not enough to acquire basic consumer goods that could not even be found in the black market.

There are two remaining general conclusions that one may draw from the portrayal of the *jinetera* in *Las puertas de la noche*. They are related to each other in that both represent aspects of a breakdown in the system of incentives the regime could count on to ensure a disciplined citizenry: 1) *jineteras* have become inured to the regime's calls to further sacrifice, and 2) *jineteras* are not likely to leave a life of illegality and questionable morality for the promise of the social mobility attainable through the acquisition of higher education as was the case in the past. Arguably both assertions can be made currently about large sectors of the general population. Their significance in the

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68. Reynaldo Escobar, "Los ángeles perdidos," *Encuentro de la cultura cubana* 4/5 (Spring/Summer 1997), 67.

69. Valle, *Puertas*, 125.

case of *jineteras* is that these assertions demonstrate the government's incapacity to dissuade them from a way of life that Cubans once found censurable regardless of their position with respect to the existing sociopolitical system. A statement of Bec's eighteen-year old informant proves again particularly illuminating. Right after telling Bec of her support for the system at the time of the Mariel exodus, she says of the present "Mi problema es que estoy harta de que me pidan austeridad, principios, dignidad, y resistencia."[70] She then immediately proceeds to tell him how much she fears what could happen if her mother does not receive the appropriate care while convalescing from ischemia. The care requires food and medications that can only be obtained by paying exorbitant prices that she cannot afford. She considers the moral demands as unreasonable particularly in light of the economic problems she faces in her everyday life. The implication is that those demands perhaps would not seem as onerous, were she better able to weather the economic difficulties brought about by her mother's illness. There is also a time factor involved; years have passed since the Mariel exodus took place, and the system continues to call for austerity, principles, dignity, and resistance. In other words, her being disgusted is not simply a function of having to put up with the demands placed on her by the system, it is also the result of how long those demands have been made and of the economic context in which they still continue to be made. One could say that her being discontented is indicative of the violation of a pact –no less real for its implicitness– that had existed between the regime and a sizable portion of the population whereby austerity, principles, dignity, and resistance could be demanded of the people as part of the moral fortitude required to build a socialist state that would

70. Valle, *Puertas*, 125.

eventually result in the material improvement of society. The fact that with the beginning of the 1990s the end of economic hardships seemed more elusive than ever created a crisis of legitimacy for the system in the eyes of people like Bec's informant that made it impossible for her and others like her to respond to government calls with the same level of support. Simply put, the *jinetera* portrayed in *Puertas* is no longer responsive to a governmental rhetoric that invokes the need for personal sacrifice.

If shunning ways of improving one's economic situation through prostitution does not seem a viable option for the *jineteras* in *Las puertas de la noche*, it is partly the result of the inefficacy of education as a means of social mobility. Whereas a university degree represented a better standard of living in former times for those willing to become sufficiently integrated in the political system, that was not the case after 1989 and the subsequent legalization of the dollar. The lack of correlation between educational level and economic wellbeing becomes plainly visible to Bec when he starts to investigate the death of Oriel, nicknamed Vivaya, by questioning Marina, the child's mother, and Teodoro, his granduncle. Bec was visibly frustrated with them because, even though they should have been interested more than anyone else in finding the people responsible for the child's death, Marina and Teodoro seemed to conceal from him information that could prove useful in finding those responsible. After Bec's frustration boils over, Teodoro explains to Bec why it might seem that they are not as forthcoming as he would expect others in similar circumstances to be. According to Teodoro, the difference in attitude is linked to the difference in socioeconomic conditions that color the way in which the child's family and Bec, as a police officer, perceive each other. It is obvious that the child's family leads a marginal existence. Teodoro limns the nature of their

socioeconomic condition precisely by pointing out how impervious it had proven to be to the benefits of a formal education. Acknowledging Bec's frustration, he says

> —Es molesto, mi'jo, muy molesto. . . . Ponte a pensar en qué sentirán los más cercanos a Vivaya, pero es así. ¿Ya averiguaste que yo fui contador de General Electric. . . ? ¿Qué Amalia, esa negra gorda que viste, fue maestra de inglés y francés?; ¿no te dije qué era mi mujer en esos tiempos? ¿Y que Marina, la madre de Vivaya, es ingeniera? ¿Viste dónde y cómo viven? ¿Tú crees que puedan pensar de otra forma?[71]

Both, the mother and great-uncle live in tenements (*solares*) whose squalor is only mitigated by a desire to maintain a modicum of order and cleanliness that is not always successful and by the presence of a number of items clearly obtained in the black market. The implication is that for the child's family and others like them an academic degree in contemporary Cuba confers no material advantage. Granted, none of those interviewed in Oriel's circle include *jineteras*. Nonetheless, the conclusion to be drawn from Teodoro's remark is that if there were, they would not be likely to give up prostitution for the possible material benefits they would gain from pursuing a formal education.

More direct in this regard, for her being a *jinetera* and experiencing that reality first hand, is what Yumari, the mother of another missing child, tells Bec. She is no different from Olier's family in terms of her economic status. She also lives in a tenement house, but her rough manners, foul language, and immodest style of dress make her more alien to Bec. Those characteristics, combined with her combative tone, give her words to Bec an unappealable quality that leaves Bec questioning himself about the usefulness of an education in a country such as Cuba.

> En este país esos pe'os de estudio ya pasaron. En este solar de mierda viven tres ingenieros, y ya por fuera viste cómo viven, y tú entras a su casa, si quieres te

71. Valle, *Puertas*, 40.

> llevo ahora mismo, y no hay ningún equipo de éstos. La consciencia es muy linda para el que le guste, pero no se come, niño.[72]

By "ningún equipo de éstos" Yumari means the appliances and electronic equipment Bec noticed upon entering her home. Their presence in Yumari's home, even though she does not hold a regular job, combined with their absence in the homes of the three engineers – if Yumari's prediction held true– would be tangible evidence of the relative material advantages conferred by a university degree.

It is difficult, relying exclusively on the characterization of the *jinetera* offered by *Las puertas de la noche*, to answer the question that troubles Amir Valle: whether Cubans' seemingly widespread current acceptance of prostitution signals a fundamental change in the population's moral values. Nonetheless, somehow the text leaves one optimistic about people's ability to make ethical choices, even if, under the dire conditions in which Cubans live, the choice are not always clear-cut and the right course of action may simply be that which ensures one's survival. The text also leaves one optimistic about the fact that all that is needed to dispel Valle's fears is a change in the circumstances that brought Cuban society to a crossroads at the end of the twentieth century. I suggest that the key to why the text creates that impression is related to the character of Alex Varga. As already noted, Alex Varga occupies a unique place in the novel. Rather than being identified with a particular posture for or against the regime, which would have rendered his judgments easier to dismiss by those on either side of the political divide, Varga is identified with those who do not have access to power, whether during the revolution or before. That is why, even though he disapproves of much of what those in the world of the *brujanza* do, he believes in their right to try to improve

72. Valle, *Puertas*, 88.

their material situation, something they would most likely never be able to achieve within the legal parameters of the world they inhabit. Not surprisingly, Bec walks away after his first interview thinking that Varga had only been clear about his belief that "se podía ser una mierda en la vida si en ello le iba el mejoramiento, pero que no tenía perdón echar esa mierda sobre los demás, usar a los demás hundiéndolos en el mal, para mejorar la vida propia."[73] Varga is not amoral, but he is someone who feels that what is legal does not always coincide with what is just, and when that happens he does not hesitate to lean in favor of the latter, an element that confirms his identity as a detective in the hard-boiled tradition. In addition to having lived in Cuba as an adult prior to the revolution and having accumulated a great deal of experience about the human condition, he is portrayed as ethical and ostensibly unbeholden to a power structure. These qualities give his judgments a claim to impartiality that those of other characters lack, and that is reflected in the respect Varga elicits from Bec, Marqués, and from those involved in the world of the *brujanza*. I suggest that for these reasons the text presents his remarks concerning prostitution as commanding a special attention within the world Valle has created in *Puertas* and therefore his views on the matter, perhaps more than those of any other character, are relevant in determining what *Puertas* says about the issue that troubles Valle.

Speaking of how prostitution had manifested itself since 1959, Varga ascribes to the revolution having transformed women from sexual objects into something more, even though he quickly adds that he would not characterize the revolution's work in that

73. Valle, *Puertas*, 115.

regard as "ese tan cacareado papel de vanguardia en la sociedad."[74] According to him, in those early years "la mujer que era puta lo fue porque le dio la gana."[75] Then Varga proceeds summarizing the development of prostitution during the revolutionary period thusly:

> Después, la situación cambió. Aparecieron las primeras jineteras: mujeres que se juntaban o se casaban con funcionarios para mejorar la vida; o con los rusos, que fueron los extranjeros que mejor vivían en este país; o se acostaban con los estudiantes africanos para que les compraran ropas y aretes de fantasía en aquellas tiendas, las Cubalse. . . . Más tarde, el turismo, la descojonación. Por el bien, buscando su propio bien o el de su familia, instinto de supervivencia, . . . empezó a vivir dentro de esos males sociales un grupo grande de gente. Crecieron. Mientras el turismo crecía y el dólar se metía en todas las casas y las mentes, crecía la sociedad de las brujas y brujos de la noche.[76]

Varga applies the term *jinetera* to women who sought to improve their standard of living in exchange for sex prior to 1989. The categories of *jineteras* he mentions include groups roughly associated with the terms *titimanía*, *putishas*, and *afroputas* respectively,[77] in use during a period running from the 1970s to the end of the 1980s. Varga's reconceptualization of the *jinetera* according to a different timetable has two effects. First, it transforms the post-Soviet collapse of the Cuban economy from an unfortunate consequence of the end of the Cold War into one more instance in a long chain of economic failures attributable to the deficiencies of the Cuban economic model. For if the term *jinetera* has been associated with the dire economic conditions of the Special Period and beyond, it follows that using the same term for women involved in forms of prostitution in previous decades has the effect of emphasizing the continuity that existed

74. Valle, *Puertas*, 114.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. *Jineteras*, 197-201. In these pages Valle elaborates on the taxonomy of prostitutes to which Varga alludes.

between the way the average citizen experienced Cuba's underperforming economy before and after the disintegration of the Socialist bloc. Second, and more relevant to Valle's preoccupation, it relativizes the importance one may attribute to Cubans' current acceptance of the *jinetera* by reminding Bec, and the reader, of previous manifestations of prostitution that enjoyed, albeit to a lesser extent, a measure of acceptance from the general population during the 70s and 80s. However, third, and most important for this essay, is that Varga attributes prostitution in post-Soviet Cuba to a *survival instinct* on the part of women who might seek their own survival, but often also the survival of their family, those for whom they are responsible. By emphasizing the instinctual aspect of the practice Varga partly releases the *jinetera* from the responsibility that making a moral choice entails. By highlighting that the women feel compelled sometimes to become prostitutes because that is the only way they see to provide for those who depend on them for sustenance, Varga relativizes the moral choice involved in opting to become a *jinetera*. The choice they face is no longer one between suffering from economic necessity and remaining chaste versus satisfying those necessities and transgressing a moral code; instead, it is a choice between not being able to ensure the survival of their children or other dependents with a similar moral claim on them while preserving their chastity versus becoming a prostitute and being able to feed and provide the medical care for the same dependents. In other words, Varga presents them as having to make a choice not between good and evil, but between two evils. Emphasizing the *jinetera*'s desire to help her family and help herself, without going into the details of what that may involve in concrete situations, Varga casts the actions of the *jinetera* in terms that anyone would be hard-pressed to say that it represents a collapse of traditional moral values instead of

the ability to make choices in a morally ambiguous environment that is the result of others' actions.

Though, as Varga points out, there was prostitution in Cuba during the revolutionary period in spite of the government's early efforts to eradicate it, it was not until 1987 that contemporary prostitution became a topic of public discussion with the publication of Luis Manuel García Méndez's article "El caso de Sandra" in the magazine *Somos jóvenes*.[78] García's article told the story of a young woman from a dysfunctional family who becomes a prostitute and leaves the sex trade by the time she turns twenty-two. The story caused a sensation at a time when prostitution had not gained the notoriety that would acquire during the 1990s by revealing an aspect of Cuban life that many thought to have disappeared in the 1960s. Other publications followed. Between April and May of 1996 Rosa Miriam Elizalde wrote a number of articles for *Juventud Rebelde* about the *jinetera*. That year her articles were compiled and published in book form as *Flores desechables: ¿Prostitución en Cuba?* The title recalls Silvio Rodríguez's song titled "Flores nocturnas" on the same subject.[79] In 1998, Tomás Fernández Robaina, researcher and specialist on Afro-Cuban issues, also broached the subject in *Historia de mujeres públicas*.[80] Combining a historical perspective with a testimonial approach, Fernández Robaina's book casts a backward glance by devoting the first half of the book to excerpts of publications and personal testimonies documenting prostitution prior to

78. Luis Manuel García Méndez, "El caso de Sandra," *Somos jóvenes* 93/94 (September 1987): 68-81.

79. Silvio Rodríguez, "Silvio Rodríguez: 'trabajo mucho todo,'" interview moderated by Fernando Ravsberg in *BBC Mundo*, 16 September 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/misc/newsid_4246000/4246124.stm (Accessed 21 May 2010). Silvio Rodríguez is not the only exponent of the *Nueva Trova* who has referenced *jineterismo* in his work. Frank Delgado's "Embajadora del sexo" constitutes another example. (Frank Delgado, "Embajadora del sexo," *Trova-Tur*, AAC audio file, 1995).

80. Tomás Fernández Robaina, *Historia de las mujeres públicas* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1998).

1959. The second half gathers the testimonies of present-day *jineteras*. However, in contrast to the degree of visibility that prostitution acquired as the 1980s came to a close, the coverage in Cuban publications did not reflect the magnitude of the problem, no doubt in part because the topic was a sensitive one. According to Valle, the publication of "El caso de Sandra" "resultó un escándalo y motivó depuraciones, expulsiones, castigos y censuras sobre el tema."[81] Even though Elizalde addressed the topic in the 1990s, she did so according to perspective in accord with the editorial policy of *Juventud Rebelde*, the newspaper of the Union of Communist Youth. As noted by Holgado Fernández, Elizalde seemed to be blind to the government's role in contributing to the conditions implicated in the rise of prostitution and predictably adopted an apologetic tone towards the regime that led her at times to contradict herself.[82] In this atmosphere Fernández Robaina's acknowledgement that contemporary prostitution in Cuba was "el resultado de desajustes sociales y económicos con causas similares a la anterior en sus esencias"[83] was quite candid even if the political impact of that assertion was cushioned by the credit he gave in the introduction to the revolutionary government for its previous steps to eliminate it. He also included in the first half of the book a testimony offered by pre-1959 prostitutes who acknowledged the government's work in making a new life for them possible. Nonetheless, there were simply limits placed on what could be said publicly about the subject, and Valle's works transgressed those limits.

Neither *Jineteras* nor any of its avatars have been able to circulate freely in Cuba. *Jineteras* was one of the finalists for the 1999 Casa de las Américas prize in the category

81. Valle, *Jineteras*, 17.

82. Holgado, 250-251.

83. Fernández, 8-9.

of testimonial literature with the title of *Sade nuestro que estás en los cielos o Prostitutas en Cuba*, but that year's prize for that category that year was declared vacant. The author learned subsequently through unofficial channels that it had not been acceptable for extraliterary reasons in the opinion of at least one member of the jury to give the prize to a book that dealt with a subject that reflected so negatively on Cuba. The book managed to have a reading public within the island because one of the copies submitted for the Casa de las Américas prize was photocopied, and subsequently fragments were posted on the Internet. Of the three copies the author had submitted for the contest only two were returned to him after it was over. The third copy, which included markings from whomever had read it prior to posting it, presumably provided the basis for the unauthorized copy.[84] Although Cubans' access to the Internet is strictly curtailed, a document downloaded from it only once can be reproduced innumerable times, ensuring that way its circulation.

The fact is that a discussion on the existence of prostitution in revolutionary Cuba was bound to be controversial regardless of the motivations of those engaged in it. The revolution made the prostitution that existed prior to 1959 emblematic of the economic relationship between the United States and Cuba and its elimination one of the government's early objectives. That is why the resurgence of prostitution on the island at the end of the twentieth century could easily become a target of criticism from those inside and outside the island who wanted to underline the revolution's failures while appealing to the regime's own standards of success.

84. Valle, personal communication, 4 July 2009.

In 2004, years after the world documented by *Las puertas de la noche* had appeared, the George W. Bush administration hosted in Tampa, Florida, the first-ever national training conference to combat human trafficking. Under the name of "Human Trafficking into the United States: Rescuing Women and Children from Slavery," the conference drew members of federal, state, and local agencies involved in stopping the movement across national borders of human beings destined to work against their will as prostitutes, domestic servants, child soldiers, and sweatshop and quarry workers. Regardless of how praiseworthy such humanitarian goals might have seem to the general electorate, the event's political significance in shoring up support for President George W. Bush cannot be overstated. The conference took place from July 15 through July 17, in the midst of the 2004 presidential campaign, and the issues it addressed had been for years a central foreign policy concern of Evangelical Christians,[85] a key bloc in the president's party. More relevant to the role that prostitution can play in Cuban political discourse was the apparent usefulness the administration must have seen in using the subject for its own political ends this side of the Florida Straits. Demonstrating its sensitivity to the politics of an electorally key state with a history of closely contested elections often decided by a few thousand votes, the president managed to appeal to the Cuban-American community's long-standing opposition to Castro by accusing the island's regime of promoting sex tourism in his speech on the occasion.

> The regime in Havana, already one of the worst violators of human rights in the world, is adding to its crimes: The dictator welcomes sex tourism. Here is how he bragged about their industry: "Cuba has the cleanest. . . . and most educated prostitutes in the world."…My administration is working toward a

85. Robert McMahon, "Christian Evangelicals and U.S. Foreign Policy," Council on Foreign Relations (August 23, 2006), under "How influential are evangelicals on U.S. foreign policy," http://www.cfr.org/publication/11341/christian_evangelicals_and_us_foreign_policy.html (accessed June 10, 2010).

> comprehensive solution to this problem: The rapid, peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. We have put a strategy in place to hasten the day when no Cuban child is exploited to finance a failed revolution and every Cuban citizen will live in freedom.[86]

Further tipping his hat to the exiles, he linked any measures of his administration against the Castro government as a potential natural outgrowth of his commitment to eradicate human trafficking.

Castro's response came a few days later, on July 26, during a speech commemorating the attack on the Moncada Barracks. After dedicating a substantial part of his speech to address how the White House had handled the words attributed to him and to further discredit Bush's judgments on the basis of Justin A. Frank's psychological profile titled *Bush on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President*,[87] he concluded addressing Bush's remarks by declaring that in Cuba there were none of the commercial establishments and publications that in the United States and in Western Europe – particularly Spain– cater to the needs of tourists looking for sexual gratification.[88] Lest one takes issue with Castro's asseveration, it should be noted that the commercial ventures and media outlets he cited as examples of sexual commerce in other countries had no counterpart in Cuba to the extent that they are legally sanctioned commercial enterprises or publications whose contents are protected under the laws of the host country. Notably, Castro did not allude in his speech to the existence of the prostitutes of

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86. George W. Bush, "Remarks at the National Training Conference on Human Trafficking in Tampa, Florida," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), 2:1311.

87. Justin A. Frank, *Bush on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President* (New York: Harper, 2007).

88. Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente de la República de Cuba, en el acto por el 51 aniversario del asalto a los cuarteles Moncada y 'Carlos Manuel de Céspedes,' efectuado en la Universidad Central de Las Villas, el 26 de julio de 2004," Discursos e intervenciones del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2004/esp/f260704e.html (accessed June 10, 2010).

which he was accused of bragging by the Bush administration in spite of the fact that his speech had explicitly taken the shape of a response to the statements made by the White House a few days earlier. To have acknowledged the existence of prostitution on the island would certainly have been difficult when, as he did again during the speech, the regime had prided itself of having eliminated it as a legacy of what it considered a neocolonial past. For, even though the subject was ostensibly prostitution, it was clearly the legitimacy of the Cuban government that was being debated.

At the end of the twentieth century the voice of the *jinetera* in testimonial literature and most particularly in the hard-boiled novel activates a discursive field that manages to question, challenge, subvert, and ultimately defy Cuba's revolutionary discourse. Arguably driven by necessity more than by choice, a segment of the population created a discursive field and set in motion behavioral patterns that undermined the fundamental economic tenets used by the regime to define itself ideologically. Within a system that increasingly did away with private ownership of the means of production, the prostitute managed to assert her right to that ownership by turning her most elemental possession, her body, into a means of economic survival and of desire for a future no longer accessible through the channels formerly sanctioned by the regime. The *jinetera*'s ubiquity made it possible for Cubans, regardless of their moral disapproval of prostitution, not only to imagine, but also to experience elements of an economic system of which the majority had no previous first-hand knowledge, even if it unfortunately was that system's most perverse manifestation. The abject figure of the *jinetera* became the catalyst for a reassessment of what had marked the limits of the national political project until then and at tool to gauge a possible change in national

values, and the hard-boiled novel with its focus on the margins of society became in Valle's hands an ideal medium to capture the process. The next chapter will examine how the police novel of the post-Soviet period handled another marginal character, the suicide. Like the female prostitute, the suicide became part of Cuba's nationalist discourse at the end of the nineteenth century, but instead of being jettisoned from the national family, it was assimilated. Close readings of Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo's *Polvo en el viento* will reveal the effects of another moment of crisis on this abject figure a century later.

Chapter 3

Youth in Flight: Self-Destruction in Lorenzo Lunar's *Polvo en el viento*

> Los cubanos no se suicidan, se matan. No es lo mismo, aunque parezca lo mismo. . . . En buena parte del mundo el suicidio se considera una cobardía, una debilidad, una claudicación al menos. En Cuba no. De eso nada. Matarse, en Cuba, no es rendirse sino todo lo contrario: matarse en Cuba es vencerse.
>
> —Eliseo Alberto, *Informe contra mí mismo*

There is in Reinaldo Arenas's novel *El portero* (2004)[1] a character named María Avilés who desperately wants to kill herself, but her suicide attempts always end in failure. Shortly after the triumph of Castro's revolution, she had gone with her family as a newborn child into exile in Venezuela, where the Avilés family remained until eventually settling in Florida. However, by the time Mary, as María Avilés was later known, becomes part of the events narrated in *El portero*, she had been living in New York City by herself for years. Her determination to commit suicide had led her to shoot herself, overdose, jump from considerable heights, and ultimately attempt to hang and immolate herself. However, the gunshot had not mortally wounded her, the overdose had not proved lethal, something or someone had cushioned her fall, and her attempt at suicide by hanging followed by immolation had failed: the rope had not slid as it should have done for it to strangle her, and the gasoline had snuffed out instead of fueled the candle flame that was supposed to consume her corpse while hanging from the rope. Having failed repeatedly to bring her suicidal plans to a successful conclusion, she resigned herself to courting dangerous situations that she hoped would result in her demise. She worked at the Bronx Zoo feeding the most vicious wild animals, posed for photographs with her

1. Reinaldo Arenas, *El portero*, 1st ed. (Tusquets: Barcelona, 2004).

back to the edge of precipices, cleaned the outside windows of her twenty-eighth floor apartment without a safety belt, and kept a pet rattlesnake loose in her Manhattan apartment in the hope that a misstep, an accident, an oversight, or the instinct of one of nature's creatures would bring about her death.

Although there is no small a dose of hyperbole and dark humor in Mary's suicidal obsession, she is one of the many Cubans who attempt suicide and, unlike Mary, become part of the unusually high suicide rates found among her compatriots inside and outside the island.[2] In this chapter I intend to examine how Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo depicts the suicide –that is, the person who attempts or commits suicide– in his novel *Polvo en el viento* (2005).[3] At the end of the nineteenth century the abject figure of the suicide was assimilated into Cuba's nationalist's discourse contributing a political dimension to the suicidal act. In contrast, *Polvo en el viento* portrays a younger generation for which the suicide's defining act has lost its capacity to be articulated to larger social and political concerns. Instead, the meaning of suicide is found within the much narrower context of the domestic sphere and the much deeper realm of the individual's inner life that eroticism, according to Georges Bataille, makes accessible to him or her.[4]

Bataille's insight into the relationship between eroticism and the dissolution of the individual human being provides a useful avenue to approach *Polvo en el viento*. The connection that he establishes between eroticism and death, which ultimately makes possible that between eroticism and suicide, has as its basis the relationship that he theorizes between eroticism and reproduction, even though –as Bataille himself

2. For a comparative analysis of suicide in Cuba and Miami see Maida Donate-Armada and Zoila Macías, *Suicide in Miami and Cuba* (Miami: The Cuban American National Council, Inc., 1998).

3. Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento* (San Juan: Editorial Plaza Mayor, 2005).

4. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 29.

maintains– the two are independent of each other.[5] The capacity to reproduce characterizes all living beings as biological entities, but only in human beings does one find an erotic component to reproduction. Nonetheless, Bataille anchors on reproduction his reflections on eroticism because he sees in the potential to procreate "the key to eroticism," regardless of whether the sexual activity is motivated by the desire to have offspring or eventually sexual activity actually leads to having them.[6] Bataille defines eroticism as "a psychological quest" that accompanies human reproductive function. According to him, reproduction takes place between what he terms discontinuous beings, that is, beings that are separated from each other by a vital chasm. Explaining reiteratively what he means in his *Erotism: death and sensuality*, Bataille writes:

> Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity.[7]

The gulf to which Bataille refers is not a type of separation that may preclude solidarity between human beings. It has to do with a much more fundamental aspect of existence that he attempts to capture when he illustrates the nature of his discontinuity with respect to his reader's by drawing attention to the fact that if the reader were to die, his death would not result in Bataille's death.[8] Bataille partly identifies the gulf separating two discontinuous beings involved in reproduction with a concept he terms continuity, a

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5. Bataille, *Erotism*, 11.

6. Ibid., 11-12.

7. Ibid., 12.

8. Ibid.

reality opposed to discontinuity in which everything seems to be subsumed and which is partly identified with death.[9] The French theorist asserts that we, as human beings, are driven by two opposite impulses with respect to these two concepts. On one hand we cling instinctively to the discontinuity that guarantees our integrity and survival as discontinuous beings. On the other, we have an "obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is."[10] As we negotiate these two impulses, we pursue continuity provided death is not the inevitable result.[11] Eroticism is the desire whose function is to destroy the discontinuous nature of lovers. That desire can be physical, emotional, or religious, depending on the nature of the relationship.[12] However, regardless of the nature of the relationship, to the extent that love is part of the union sought by becoming discontinuous, any eroticism "involves the idea of death," of which suicide is a modality.[13] Bataille´s insights into the links between eroticism and death, which includes death by suicide, help make sense of the meaning of suicide for individuals in *Polvo en el viento* given the degree to which the suicide scenes in the novel have erotic undertones. Those insights, however, do not shed light on why Lunar Cardedo´s portrayal of suicide may be significant for Cuban society as it projects itself in history. That has to be sought in the historical processes that make the island's struggle for independence possible.

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9. Bataille, *Erotism*, 13.

10. Ibid., 15.

11. Ibid., 19.

12. Ibid. 15.

13. Ibid., 20.

The relationship between suicide and the affirmation of a larger social entity such as the fatherland that validates suicide as a meaningful action can be traced to the Cuban patriotic discourse of the end of the nineteenth century. Guillermo Cabrera Infante addresses the links existing between suicide and patriotism by intimating in his essay "El martirio de Martí" that Martí's death in Dos Ríos was the result of a suicidal act, that there was in him "un ansia de immolación que era en realidad una voluntad de martirio" (154).[14] As far-reaching as Cabrera Infante's interpretation of Martí's death may appear, he was only reaffirming what others before him intuited and maintained. Gonzalo de Quesada y Miranda, thoroughly familiar with Martí's opus, including his correspondence, firmly believed that "la muerte de Martí no fué tal «trágica casualidad», sino que por el contrario fué un sacrificio consciente de su parte."[15] However, as the historian Louis Pérez, Jr. points out in his work on suicide in Cuba,

> Whether Martí chose to die at Dos Ríos perhaps matters less than the fact that his death provided an enduring model for the enactment of death as duty. . . . Of far greater importance is the degree to which the formulations Martí fashioned as ethical imperatives corresponding to Cuban, central to which was death as duty, insinuated themselves into the larger narratives of nationality.[16]

Martí's ethical imperatives insinuated themselves into a national narrative because they responded to the historical needs of a people engaged in a process of liberation and

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14. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "El martirio de Martí," in *Mea Cuba* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1999), 154.

15. Gonzalo de Quesada y Miranda, *Alrededor de la acción en dos ríos* (Havana: Imp. Seoane, Fernández y Cía, 1942), 8. His father, Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui (1868-1915) was a close collaborator of José Martí, and was named by Martí his literary executor. It was de Quesada y Aróstegui who first edited Martí's works. De Quesada y Miranda (1900-1976) continued his father's work disseminating Martí's work and eventually directing the Editorial Nacional de Cuba's publication of Martí's *Obras completas*.

16. Luis A. Pérez, Jr., *To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 91.

national formation under such uneven conditions with respect to the colonial power that in fact the wars of independence were nothing short of a suicidal enterprise.[17]

With the end of the war and the establishment of the new republic in 1902, the discursive formulations of what it was to be Cuban, including the duty to sacrifice one's life for the fatherland, did not lose their nationalist value, but it would undergo a process of adaptation that reflected the people's circumstances in peacetime. The fact that voluntary death had been sanctioned as a possible response to a set of historical circumstances in wartime, allowed for the gradual insinuation of the same ethic off the battlefield. The result was not a nation in which people killed themselves for reasons different from those that prompted people in other nations to voluntarily end their lives, nor simply a nation of suicides. As Pérez correctly characterizes the Cuban case, what one finds in it are "the circumstances of disposition, the frame of reference that appears to have lent general endorsement to the efficacy of suicide as an appropriate solution and that has served to lower the threshold at which this solution enters the realm of the admissible."[18]

The historical record shows that such a solution entered the realm of the admissible repeatedly. According to the Cuban psychiatrist and writer Pedro Marqués de Armas, rates remained generally high throughout the twentieth century, sometimes higher, in fact, than those of European nations that traditionally have had that grim distinction, and well above those of most nations in the rest of the world, the exception being Sri Lanka, rural China, Japan, and a few Pacific islands. The Cuban case is further

17. Pérez, 77.

18. Ibid., 7-8.

characterized by high indices of female suicide. Unlike most western societies, where the proportion between males and females who choose to end their own lives tends to be 3-4/1, in Cuba the proportion of men to women was very close and their respective rates showed an increasing convergence, with the rate among women between 15 and 24 years of age having been the highest in the Western world for an extended period of time. Lastly and significantly, how suicide is manifested in Cuba cannot be attributed to the nation's racial and ethnic makeup since it has similarly marked the experience of Spaniards, Chinese, and Cubans, regardless of whether they are white, black or mestizo, in contrast to the pattern in neighboring lands with a comparable racial composition.[19]

The unusual frequency with which Cubans of all social extractions seemed to take their own lives did not escape the attention of many of those who in the early decades of the twentieth century were concerned and expressed their preoccupations about the new republic's viability. Even though suicide was not an object of their specialized research, the popular press's coverage was a constant reminder to many of them of the degree to which taking one's own life had become part of life in the new nation. Novelist, poet, and journalist Joaquín Nicolás de Aramburu Torres in 1911 laments what he sees as Cubans' contempt for their own lives and interestingly seems to intuit its connection to the struggles for independence, even though he fails to establish a causal relationship. [20] Searching for an adequate explanation for the many suicides reported by the press, Aramburu compares what drove Cubans to take their own lives to a disease caused by an unknown microbe that, having emerged from the blood-soaked battlefields, had spread

19. Pedro Marqués de Armas, "El suicidio: ¿una cualidad de lo cubano?, *Encuentro de la cultura cubana* 45/46 (Summer/Fall 2007):121-137, http://www.cubaencuentro.com/revista/revista-encuentro/archivo/45-46-verano-otono-de-2007/el-suicidio-una-cualidad-de-lo-cubano-69074 (accessed March 23, 2010).

20. Juaquín Nicolás Aramburu Torres, "El suicidio," *Vida nueva* 2, no. 2 (1911): 7.

through the war camps and years later was infecting individuals who had weak constitutions.[21] Perhaps less metaphorically, but appealing to causes easily traceable to the recently concluded war of independence, Aramburu also points to *matonismo* as a possible reason for the phenomenon.[22] From the term *matón*, meaning "thug," especially one not adverse to killing (*matar*) someone when a conflict arises or when he has been hired for that purpose, and the suffix *ismo*, used in Spanish to indicate an attitude, it is a quality that Aramburu links to the familiarity children seemed to have at the time with weapons –as corroborated by the number of knives and switchblades confiscated in schools and of youngsters who ended up in correctional facilities as a result. Undergirding his conclusion was the belief that "familiarización del individuo con elementos de muerte, predispone al desprecio de la vida," and, he continues, "tenemos casi explicado que el matón instintivo, cuando no puede acusar a otro de su infelicidad, se hiere a sí mismo: todo es volver hacia el cráneo el arma que otras veces apuntó hacia fuera."[23] That he considers a moral malaise to be at root of the prevailing state of affairs is further confirmed when he bemoans the general changes taking place in Cuban customs, including the increase in gambling and prostitution. Yet, those concerns do not blind him in the early twentieth century to the structural challenges the population was facing. The recovery of the sugar industry after the war ironically contributed to the rise in unemployment. The establishment of newer and more mechanized sugar mills coupled with the rebuilding and expansion of the railroads made sugar production less labor intensive which, combined with the decline of the tobacco industry and other agricultural

21. Aramburu Torres, 6.

22. Ibid., 7.

23. Ibid.

loses, contributed to the economic penury of large sectors of the population that sought in suicide a way to deal with their desperation.[24] However, Aramburu was not only preoccupied with suicide. In the same article he voices his consternation with what he perceives to be a rise in mental illness and ends his essay asking "¿Por qué la libertad, la república y la cultura social no evitan el desequilibrio?"[25]

With that question Aramburu's essay inserts itself in a discourse preoccupied with the decadence of Cuban culture that periodically made its presence felt during the first few decades of the twentieth century, and that saw suicide as a sign of the gap that existed between the expectations the republican project had generated and the country's actual situation. Another one of the exponents of this discourse was Fernando Ortiz, who in 1924 points to the high frequency of suicide as a sign of the decadence of Cuban culture. In a lecture before the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, Ortiz calls on its members to mobilize and raise their voices in favor of policies that would address the need to reverse the increased illiteracy, foreign control of the economy, crime, gambling, prostitution, and other ills that –in his words– threatened to disintegrate Cuban society and plunge it in a state of barbarism, and which included an elevated number of suicides in a country where "todo debiera ser himno a la vida." [26]

In the same vein Jorge Mañach in 1931 also expresses his horror at the number of suicides revealed by the official statistics and reported in the press. However, he ventures an explanation for why Cubans choose to end their own lives that accounts for another

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24. Aramburu Torres, 6-7.

25. Ibid. 7.

26. Fernando Ortiz, "La decadencia cubana: Conferencia de propaganda renovadora pronunciada en la 'Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País' la noche del 23 de Febrero de 1924." *Revista bimestre cubana* 19, no. 1 (1924): 21, 35.

dimension of suicide on the island, and in so doing he also manages to relate suicide to the patriotic discourse at the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that many of those who committed suicide left explanatory notes in which they confessed to kill themselves because they were bored with life, constituted for Mañach something distinctively Cuban that was responsible for the island's statistical anomaly.[27] He recognizes that Cubans killed themselves for many of the same reasons citizens of other nations did, reasons that included the desperation to which the most abject poverty gives rise. However, he attributed poverty in Cuba to a governmental ineptitude that also contributed to foster a social environment that offered no place for men of exemplary qualities who therefore succumbed to boredom. It was a society that might have been described as one in which self-actualization was not possible. For, as Mañach saw it, boredom was the emotional state affecting a society that did not provide a space in which Cubans could realize their goals, apply their aptitudes, or take care of their duties.[28] Skillfully recalling that he had previously stated that liberty is "algo más que poder votar y dar mítines," that it is "la condición social que permite a cada hombre realizar en actividad lo mejor de sí mismo." Mañach then goes further. By pointing out that liberty is necessary for there to exist a society in which human beings can fully realize themselves, Mañach is able to conclude that the reason that so many of his compatriots experience such a profound sense of boredom is lack of liberty, and that they were simply killing themselves "por hambre de libertad." In fact, Cubans were responding to similar historical circumstances in a similar way. If hunger for freedom had led them to wage a suicidal war during colonial times,

27. Jorge Mañach, "Un pueblo suicida," *Pasado vigente* (Havana: Editorial Trópico, 1939) 102.

28. Ibid., 103.

hunger for freedom was also leading them to choose self-immolation in the republican period.[29]

Just as it survived the historical watershed marked by 1902, the centrality of the nationalist discourse that emerged from the struggle for independence proved its resilience by surviving the transition marked by the Castro revolution of 1959. In many respects it was reinvigorated as the new regime sought legitimacy by eventually presenting itself as the heir and culmination of the wars for independence that began in 1868. Its eventual slogan disjunctively proclaiming *Patria o muerte* unmistakably tapped into the same formulations that had galvanized Cubans in the previous century. However, at this moment, to the idea of sacrificing one's life in order to bring the fatherland into existence, the Revolution added the idea of a continuous sacrifice in order to protect the revolution and economically develop the nation.[30] In addition, as in other aspects of Cuban life, the Revolution's increasing tilt to the left during the 1960s led to changes in how taking one's own life began to be seen from the State's perspective when the nation's imminent survival was not at stake. In the new political context after 1959 suicide was no longer an acceptable option for individual subjects that committed the act for personal reasons. It was incompatible with the "new man" the revolution was attempting to forge, for whom the interests of the collectivity were supposed to transcend his own.[31]

In contrast to the social concerns highlighted in the criticism voiced by publicly concerned Cubans about the high incidence of suicide during the first half of the

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29. Mañach, 104.

30. Pérez, 341.

31. Ibid., 350.

twentieth century and in the motivations of the "new man", Lunar Cardedo uses the police novel to highlight the internal turmoil that drives young people to kill themselves in *Polvo en el viento*. His body of work, like that of Padura and Valle, deviates from the socialist version of the genre the Cuban state began to promote in the 1970s and reflects the island's political and economic state of affairs beginning in the late 1980s. Like theirs, Lunar Cardedo's novel documents the disillusionment caused by the public acknowledgement of corruption and rifts among those called to exemplify the new man and the economically catastrophic "*Periodo Especial*." It was in that style that Lunar Cardedo wrote the novel *Échame a mí la culpa* (1999).[32] He submitted it, ironically, as an entry to compete for the 1996 prize *Aniversario del Triunfo de la Revolución* in defiance of the literary aesthetic the prize was set up to promote. Interestingly, the novel was the winner, signaling how much the old aesthetic directives for the police detective novel had been relaxed. In spite of that success, *Échame a mí la culpa* was an early effort with which he was not completely satisfied, so he rewrote it a few years later to give it "mucha más enjundia y un lenguaje realmente musical y barriotero, plenamente cubano,"[33] and the new work was published in 2003 with the title of *Que en vez de infierno encuentres Gloria*. His subsequent novels included *Cuesta abajo* (2002), *De dos pingüé* (2004), *Polvo en el viento* (2005), *La vida es un tango* (2005), *Usted es la culpable* (2006), and *Donde estás, corazón* (2009).[34]

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32. Lunar Cardedo, *Échame a mí la culpa* (Havana: Editorial Capitán San Luis, 1999).

33. Ibid., personal communication, 3 September 2008.

34. Ibid., *Que en vez de infierno encuentres Gloria* (Granada: Zoela Ediciones, 2003); *Cuesta abajo* (Santa Clara, Cuba: Editorial Capiro, 2002); *De dos pingüé* (Santa Clara, Cuba: Editorial Capiro, 2004); *La vida es un tango* (Cordoba: Editorial Almuzara, 2005); *Usted es la culpable* (Cordoba: Editorial Almuzara, 2006); *Dónde estás, corazón* (Cordoba: Arcopress, 2009).

Although inspired by Leonardo Padura, whose *Vientos de cuaresma* had already appeared in 1994, Lunar Cardedo's novels differ in that the action does not take place in Havana, and in that the protagonist is not an investigator but a regular member of the police force. They are set in Santa Clara, a provincial capital in central Cuba, and perhaps for that reason the novels seem to cast an inward look when compared to Padura's –if by inward one means immediate surroundings. One may be tempted to attribute that quality to the city's relative size with respect to the capital. After all, as Lunar Cardedo himself acknowledges, "no tenía a mi alrededor una Habana con sus dos millones de historias,"[35] but there are other differences between the environments that Padura and Lunar evoke in their works in addition to the characteristics attributable to the size of the works' respective urban settings. There is a sense in Padura's hard-boiled fiction that the issues broached are intimately connected to a broader historical narrative and that they have the nation's life as their backdrop, not simply a small social circle. Even when social relations and memories bind some of the characters to a childhood and adolescence lived within the confines of the same neighborhood, once they became adults, they moved on and their lives led them in different directions in spite of the close friendships that some may still nurture among themselves. In contrast, Lunar Cardedo's characters lead lives that seem fundamentally immune to their broader political context. The social, political, and economic changes that took place in Cuba over the past fifty years shaped their lives, but in a very real way, forces that antedate those changes have greater influence on their lives.

35. Lunar Cardedo, personal communication, 3 September 2008.

In addition to the perspectives one may associate with different geographical settings, most of Lunar Cardedo's novels also differ in having a police officer in charge of the investigation instead of a detective. Instead of the investigator Mario Conde we find in Padura´s fiction, in most of Lunar Cardedo's work we have Leonardo Martín. He is an investigator, too, in the sense that he is responsible for solving the crimes at the center of the narrative, but not in that of existing somewhat removed from the daily grind that consumes the life of an ordinary police officer. Martín is the chief of police of an urban sector that includes the neighborhood where he grew up and where he still lives. More importantly, it is the same neighborhood from where the crimes he investigates take place and from where those who commit those crimes hail. Consequently, he is much closer to those he investigates not only spatially, but also socially. He is enmeshed in the web of human relationships and histories of the families that make up the community to an extent that leads him to conceptualize the neighborhood as a monster that will not relinquish control of its offspring, regardless of how far they think they can travel socially or geographically. Whereas Conde's memories of his old neighborhood and his childhood friends seem to constitute a refuge where he can seek protection from the disappointments suffered since his years in high school (*preuniversitario*) and from the cynicism engendered by his occupation, Martín's memories remit him to a community perennially afflicted by the social ills he is trying to eradicate. Prostitution, contraband, murder, blackmail, incarceration, misery, drug addiction, and drug trafficking have been the lot of the neighborhood residents from time immemorial. A sense of the inertia that characterizes the neighborhood is captured in a conversation in which Martín asks his mother Fela if she thinks illegal drugs circulate in their community. In spite of her son's

interest in the neighborhood's current situation, without hesitation Fela responds affirmatively alluding to the drug overdose that had caused the death of one of her cousins many years before.

> –¿Tú crees que en el barrio haya drogas? –le pregunto. . . .
> –Siempre la ha habido y ahora no tiene por qué dejar de haberla. ¿Sabes de qué fue que murió mi primo Jorgito?
> –Yo no había nacido cuando aquello, vieja.
> –La droga, hijo. Cocaína. . . .
> –Pero eso fue antes del cincuenta y nueve.
> –No estamos hablando de años, hijo. Estamos hablando del barrio. Aquí siempre ha habido de todo. Cuando se acabó la prostitución esas mujeres siguieron recibiendo hombres en sus casa. Cuando cerraron los garitos la gente siguió jugando a escondidas. ¿Tú te piensas que eso de la bolita con el número de la lotería americana se inventó el otro día cuando empezó el Período Especial? No, hijo. Eso ha estado siempre. Lo que pasa es que ahora se nota más.[36]

In the neighborhood the lives of several generations of the same families seem to intertwine, perpetuating behaviors straddling the limits of what is legal and what is not, regardless of who is or has been in power. Theirs is a marginal existence with very little social mobility irrespective of the prevailing social system or the ideologies used to explain or justify its ills.

Consistent with investigators traditionally found in hard-boiled fiction, Lunar Cardedo's regains the central place that had been denied to him by the socialist version of the genre. Leonardo Martín is not simply a member of an investigative team that, supported by mass organizations, strives to eliminate criminal activity the State will not distinguish from counterrevolution. Martín's life has been largely the result of the inertia that characterizes the neighborhood. In fact, it is to inertia that he attributes having joined and stayed in the police force, not to duty or vocational inclination. His family life, unlike Alain Bec's does not compensate for lack of fulfillment in his profession; if anything, it

36. Lunar Cardedo, *La vida es un tango* (Cordoba: Editorial Almuzara, 2005), 50.

contributes to his sense of failure. He lives with his elderly mother after his marriage ended in divorce, and he fears that his ex-wife's current husband may supplant him as a father figure with respect to his daughter. Not being a police officer, the stepfather has a more reliable work schedule that enables him to be part of the child's life far more than Martín ever was. Frustrated as a father and lacking the emotional fulfillment he thought would be found in a stable romantic relationship, Martín succumbs to the ravages of loneliness and depression, which he tries to alleviate by getting drunk on large quantities of liquor sometimes illegally manufactured, and by having relationships with women who are often prostitutes.

Martín is the embodiment of what characterizes the detective in hard-boiled fiction. However, he is not the only variant of the hard-boiled detective that Lunar Cardedo has created. In *Polvo en el viento* Lunar introduces a different type of investigator with police lieutenant Julio César Sánchez. The neighborhood, the same as Martín's, casts the same shadow over his life that it does over Martín's, but Sánchez occupies a position much more problematical with respect to the establishment. Julio César is part of this establishment and has a vested interest in its preservation to the extent that he attributes to it his social position. The reader familiar with Lunar's work already knows César's name from other novels, and in fact, *Polvo en el viento* mentions that César considers Leonardo Martín his best friend on the force. At one point they had occupied the same rank, but César had risen to chief of the Department of Criminal Investigation, and he attributed his social mobility to the policies of the Revolutionary government. He came from a very humble background. His father had been "un negro

limpiabotas y analfabeto,"[37] who after the Revolution had learned how to read and write and presently was the leader of a local labor union. At his most thankful, César was gratified by earning a better salary than a medical doctor, having the right to buy once a month a bag of articles of personal hygiene, and being able to visit the Ministry of Interior's Club with his family every three months.

Taking into account the miserable state of the Cuban national economy against which the value of those benefits is measured, one would be tempted to think that all César feels towards the system that made them possible is unadulterated gratefulness, but we soon find out that his gratefulness is tempered by the recognition of how little they mean when a different criterion is applied. He is living now in an apartment instead of the passageway in which he grew up; but the apartment has leaks, has no running water, and is subject to the power outages that affect the general population. He has the use of a car, but the car is an old Soviet-era Lada that ultimately remains the property of the police department. Moreover, the fact that gasoline is rationed deprives him of the greater mobility the car was supposed to provide, giving another one of his privileges the character of an empty promise. In view of the limitations that accompanied his social position, César was quick to conclude that what he owned and the status he enjoyed was ultimately "la misma mierda."[38] His disenchantment would be greater when he considered how much more he endeavored to meet the system's expectations in comparison to others who enjoyed greater material benefits and status. In his youth he had followed the government's aesthetic directives because –as his Marxism-Leninism

37. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento* (San Juan: Editorial Plaza Mayor, 2005), 138.

38. Ibid., 31.

professor had told him– "era necesario una nueva educación estética de las masas. Y ésta no era fácil pues según Lenín 'la lucha más dura de una revolución socialista es la lucha contra los viejos rezagos y costumbres.'"[39] He disliked rock music, a style that had been considered ideologically diversionary. He had listened to Cuban national music, protest songs, the music of the socialist countries, and the new songs of the kindred peoples of Latin America because it was the music sanctioned by the Communist Youth, even though he disliked all of them except the Cuban "sones, guarachas y guaguancós."[40] With respect to reading he had also complied with the system's expectations. His reading as a young man had consisted primarily of police novels published as part of the Radar Collection, as "la novela policial era 'un instrumento de superación ideológica, como debe ser todo arte revolucionario.'"[41] In the meantime, with the passing of time and the ideological changes that had taken place in the last decades, individuals who exemplified in their youth characteristics associated with the enemies of the revolution had climbed the social ladder and begun to exercise their influence to the detriment of what César considered his interests. Such was the case of Aníbal and Mañengo, who became a writer and a public defender respectively. The former lectured on issues of interest to César's boss, and the latter endeavored to thwart the efforts of Cesar's department at prosecuting thieves, delinquents, and smugglers, all considered counterrevolutionary elements given the system's ideological tendency to conflate common and political criminality. As young men they had been culturally marked in César´s eyes as ideologically unreliable by their love of rock music, their knowledge of English; and their awareness of the capitalist

39. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 136.

40. Ibid., 135.

41. Ibid.

world's happenings, technological advances, and consumer goods. Moreover, their intelligence and occupations contributed to their being considered "intelectuales de mierda"[42] in César's view, a characteristic that together with effeminacy he considered worthy of contempt. More significant to César and his attempts to explain the most unfavorable aspects of his situation is that they are white, and César is not. As may have already become evident in his appreciation of his father's rise from illiterate black shoe-shiner to labor union leader, César is conscious of the extent to which race in Cuba plays a role in determining social status, and it is to his blackness that he attributes the relative disadvantages he sees in his current situation. It is true that the characters in the work are generally racially marked and race is a prism that distorts how others perceive him as both a social and sexual being, but his insatisfaction cannot be fully explained without taking into account the extent to which he has internalized racist notions of whitening. He tells us how he had felt excluded as a young man by black women who sought mulattos as boyfriends and by mulatto women who were interested in white men, but he also complained that his wife "aunque…fiel y no tan fea, era negra."[43] Neither can it be explained without reference to his conduct. It is hard to characterize him as a good law enforcement officer when he breaks the law, not because breaking it may serve to uphold a higher ethical principle, but for personal gain or pleasure. He routinely frequents prostitutes and, while stationed in a rural district in the past, he accepted bribes in exchange for not interfering with the local contraband. In light of his behavior, his less than stellar acumen, and his performance as a detective as revealed by the disciplinary

42. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 33.

43. Ibid., 31.

action to which his equally black commanding officer subjects him at the end of the novel, it is difficult to lay the blame for his frustration to the deleterious effects of Cuban racism. Nevertheless, one can see why owing his social mobility, in large part, to an establishment he blames for his own shortcomings, and whose authority he undermines with his behavior, may have contributed to a cynical worldview that maintains that "la única verdad es la información que se obtiene en una confesión,"[44] and where the latter is "la única diferencia entre un sospechoso y un culpable."[45] These characteristics make it difficult for us as readers to identify with the novel's detective as we might do with Padura's Conde or Valle's Bec.

In Julio César Sánchez we find an investigator not common in detective novels that causes us to reevaluate what we thought we knew of the hard-boiled genre and its protagonist. Sánchez's does not seem to posses a compass that allows him to tell the difference between what is legal and what is just. However he is an investigator whose personality traits express themselves in motivations that help to move the plot along. His insatisfaction with the position he occupies in the political order and his resentment towards those within the same order who had been able to climb higher on the social ladder in spite of not being as assiduous in following the political system's ideological directives, will negatively predispose him towards those he is called to investigate in *Polvo en el viento*.

The crime lying at the center of *Polvo en el viento* that César is in charge of investigating is the disappearance of Bianka, an Italian tourist passing through the center

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44. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 121.

45. Ibid.

of the island. Most of the action takes place in La Ciudad (The City). Known only by that appellation and written with initial capital letters, the inspiration for La Ciudad is provided by Santa Clara, the author's hometown, as suggested by references to specific architectural and geographic features. Lunar Cardedo does not give any indication of when the action in his novel takes place, but it is obvious that it takes place in the "Periodo Especial en Tiempos de Paz" after a number of economic concessions to capitalism promoted by the Cuban State had been in place for a while. Even though César does not have any concrete evidence, he is convinced that Yuri is connected to Bianka's disappearance as a result of a spurious accusation made by a security guard. Yuri and his twin sister Yenia are children of Communist Party militants who feel they always took second place to their single mother's political priorities and who, according to César, had rejected their parents' values. More broadly, however, the novel is about the disintegration of a family and about a young generation eager to escape lifestyles sanctioned by the ruling establishment.

Feeling ignored by a mother for whom position and responsibility as party member overshadowed parental considerations, Yenia and Yuri sought to survive as well as they could given their mother's absence by relying on coping mechanisms deemed unacceptable by the social system she supported. They tried to forget their situation by losing themselves in the joy they derived from painting. Yuri as a painter and Yenia as his aide and model spent long sessions during which bodies and canvasses would end up drenched in color. They also tried to forget by immersing themselves in the deafening sound of metal music (often by the group Metallica), by drinking heavily, and by consuming large quantities of illegal drugs. They lead a nocturnal existence since, as Yuri

says, everything becomes shadowy and dark at night, even memory, and he considers forgetting his only act of freedom. Besides forgetting, they tried to mitigate their feelings of abandonment by leaning on each other emotionally and developing an incestuous relationship that seemed to afford them the only place where they could experience a sense of familial belonging.

The twins move in an environment in which affection is frequently expressed sexually, and therefore their relationships with each other and their friends often have an erotic undertone. Other than Yuri, Yenia only loved Susy, a friend to whom Yenia occasionally expressed her affection sexually as well. Susy, and a gay couple only known by the nicknames of El Flaco and El Ripiao constitute the twins' social circle. It is with them that the twins often spent the night and early morning hours drinking, taking pills, smoking marihuana, and engaging collectively in sexual practices where one of the few limits observed was Yuri's refusal to be sexually intimate with anyone other than his sister. Much of their behavior, however, far from being exceptional, reflected that of other patrons of the Club Paradiso where they usually socialized. With a name that harks back to the eponymous novel by José Lezama Lima suppressed in the 1970s for its homoerotic content, the Club Paradiso is a marginal space. Part cabaret, part social center, it is reminiscent of Santa Clara's El Mejunje,[46] and it is precisely in Club Paradiso

46. Variously described as urban space, meeting place, gay bar, and center for the promotion of art, El Mejunje shares characteristics highlighted by all those terms. It has been part of Santa Clara's cultural scene since 1984, the year in which actor and director Ramón Silverio started it as a cultural project at a place he managed to obtain from the government with the purpose of commemorating the lives and works of Cuban cultural figures that had passed away. Suspicions and unease among those whom Silverio describes as bureaucrats caused the government to rescind the use of the space it had granted. For that reason Silverio moved the meetings to his home where they continued as *peñas*, informal get-togethers of music, poetry, and dance aficionados. Silverio's efforts to find a new location eventually bore fruit, and the meetings began to take place during 1991 in the ruined house of nineteenth-century patriot and philanthropist Marta Abreu, where El Mejunje has been since [Félix López, 2002, "El Mejunje," *La Jiribilla*, no. 37 (January), http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2002/n37_enero/943_37.html (accessed February 25, 2010)]. El Mejunje's musical programming includes son, *danzón*, salsa, rock, *filin*, and contemporary *trova*. It is also a space to read poetry, show films, present books, and host cultural activities for children on Sunday mornings. [Magda Bandera, "El

where two of three episodes that I intend to examine take place. I examine them principally for what they reveal about the significance of suicide for the Cuban youth depicted in the novel take place. The presence of roughly the same characters in similar circumstances gives these three episodes the quality of a triptych. Rather than injecting something foreign, Bianka, the Italian tourist who eventually disappeared, acts in these episodes as a catalyst. She sets in motion a series of events that reveal the group's –but particularly Yuri's and Yenia's– attitude with respect to suicide.

In the first episode Yuri, Yenia, and the others are drawn to Bianka upon seeing her even though they had not previously met her. Either because of the exoticism that a foreigner constitutes in the interior of the island or because of the liberality with which Bianka shared her marijuana cigarettes, the five youths soon befriend her and include her in their group. As the night advanced, the patrons and the inhibitions began to disappear until, after the doors closed, only the five of them remained sitting in a circle, naked, with the consent of the club's night guard. The night guard was accustomed to their behavior and would consent to it in exchange for sexual favors, alcohol or pills. It was then that

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Mejunje," Magda Bandera Weblog, entry posted July 20, 2004, http://www.magdabandera.com/archives/000318.html (accessed February 25, 2010)]. However, El Mejunje is perhaps best known for its gay and lesbian programming on Saturday nights, including its drag shows [Sue Herrod, "Ramon Silverio and El Mejunje: A Beautiful dream," *Cuba Absolutely*, September 2007, http://www.cubaabsolutely.com/articles/feature/article_feature.php?landa=22 (accessed October 7, 2012)]. Indeed, judging from Silverio's testimony, one of the project's main goals from the beginning was the creation of a safe space for Cuba's gay and lesbian community, but, as Silverio himself acknowledges, to call attention to that goal, would have endangered the project: "Sabíamos que si lo proclamábamos como un sitio exclusivo para homosexuales no lograríamos otra cosa que marginarnos más. Durante mucho tiempo este lugar estuvo marcado en toda la ciudad como la cueva de los maricones. Lo cierto es que aquí viene todo el mundo, y siempre hemos tenido un público mayoritariamente homosexual." (López)

Although Silverio is quick to add that he would never associate the place with "politiquería," (Ibid.) the political dimension, especially within the Cuban context, of a space such as El Mejunje cannot be overlooked. A place where concrete steps were taken in defiance of what had been the government's cultural policy for decades was bound to make a political statement. That was certainly a detail not lost to some of its patrons who would notice on the walls around the stage slogans that "sonaban a subversión en la isla de Castro," and would ask themselves "cómo podía existir aquel oasis" (Bandera). That, as well as the manner in which El Mejunje has managed to be articulated with other areas of Cuba's official cultural establishment, however, lies outside the purview of this dissertation. That a place modeled after El Mejunje is a place of ideological and moral liminality that attracts foreign tourists accounts for the role it plays in *Polvo en el viento*.

they abandoned themselves to the orgiastic behavior that often marked the end of their evenings. The difference this time was the presence of Bianka, "the shade," as she is identified throughout the narrative, recalling the inhabitants of Hades. Indeed, Lunar Cardedo identifies her with death, but instead of emphasizing solely death's most abject qualities, he manages to imbue her with an air of charm and magnetism as well. She is lethal and captivating, as the following description reveals.

> La sombra, desnuda, es divina. Se transfigura en la penumbra. Ahora es una navaja de plata, después una serpiente emplumada, un pincel. . . la sombra es la pura imagen de la muerte, con sus huesos plateados que brillan en la luz de la luna, debajo de su piel transparente.[47]

Saying that she is transfigured into a plumed serpent, Lunar Cardedo implicitly compares her to Quetzalcoatl, the Mesoamerican deity who bled himself in order to infuse life into ancestral bones to bring forth a new human race.[48] It is an image therefore that alludes to the regenerative quality of self-destruction. The reference to the silver bones sparkling in the moonlight beneath a transparent skin performs a similar function by evoking the realm of the dead inherent in the figure of the bones at the same time that it points to a potential for life by recalling the nocturnal environment in which lovers give themselves to each other. The destructive and creative potentials of the "shade" are further highlighted by its capacity to become a brush, an instrument used to create by painters like Yuri, and a switchblade, the weapon suggestive of the razor blade that ultimately brought an end to their orgiastic delirium.

That night Bianka rose from the floor, and standing up in the midst of their young intertwined voluptuous bodies, cut her wrists with a blade she had carried in her handbag.

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47. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 39.

48. Michel E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 221.

She then proceeded to smear her body with the blood flowing from her wrists. The scene stunned Yuri. He stared at Bianka enraptured, unable to move. Yenia reacted when she tasted a blood clot that had glided down the Italian's body that she was licking lustily. Meanwhile Bianka was as in a trance, smiling and talking to herself while the others attempted to stop the blood flow with tourniquets they managed to make out of Yuri's socks. The scene captures self-destructive behavior as something erotic and not easily distinguishable from either pain or pleasure. It defies and transcends either classification and induces in human beings a state of ecstasy in which they may easily and imperceptibly pass from life to death. The scene seems to enthrall Yuri. He, whom Bianka seems to have captivated more than anyone else, appeared to be entranced as much as Bianka by the aesthetic overtones of the experience. Hence his immobility before what was to all others a life or death situation requiring an immediate reaction. To Yenia, Bianka's self-destructive behavior was startling, and, as the plot subsequently revealed, self-indulgent and unwarranted.

The second scene takes place the following night and is also marked by Bianka's nonchalance towards suicide. The five youths and Bianka decide again to remain in the club after it closed, naked and sitting in a circle, after securing from the night guard his authorization with the required bribe. In contrast to the previous one, they do not gather this night as a prelude to an orgy. Instead, they pass around a marijuana cigarette and a bottle of rum, sharing it as if it were Port wine after a meal. This time Bianka reaches for her handbag and, instead of retrieving a razor blade, extracts a revolver and invites the group to play Russian roulette. The narrator describes the handgun as a small revolver with a short barrel and a grip made of a material that resembles mother-of-pearl. As the

narrator points out, its good quality is reminiscent of a museum piece. Faced with what seemed an improbable revolver, the group members do not take Bianka seriously. Rather than frightened, they seemed amused. Nonetheless, Bianka persists and inserts a silver bullet in one of the chambers after having spun the gun's cylinder. She closed the cylinder, pointed the gun at her temple, and pulled the trigger. The hammer made its metallic clicking sound but the weapon did not fire because the corresponding bullet chamber turned out to be empty. Everything happened too quickly for them to react, and they only managed to smile nervously when they realized it had been a false alarm. Next, Bianka again offered them the gun, but no one took it, and she continued walking naked around the circle reciting verses by Baudelaire. One more time she turned the cylinder, pulled the trigger, but the gun failed to detonate again to the relief of those present. She returned to the circle after her unsuccessful attempts, sat among them smiling, and pointing the gun up pulled the trigger a third time causing it to discharge with a deafening sound terrifying all those present.

On this occasion Bianka's suicidal behavior does not evoke a Bacchic rite, but a game instead. Russian roulette is after all a game of chance, but there is something more to it than that. There is something carefree, albeit inappropriate, in a young woman smiling while contemplating the possibility that someone may die if a weapon's hammer coincides with the chamber containing a loaded bullet. There is something childlike in her circling the others while reciting verses from Baudelaire's "Autumn Song" during what seems to be a game of musical chairs, even if by evoking a suicidal poet she lends a tragic note to the proceedings. There is too something playful in Bianka's weapon; if its size and ornamentation give it the aspect of a museum piece, they also impart to it a toy-

like quality. Lastly, the reference to the silver bullet and the mother of pearl grip give the scene a touch of luxury that suggests a vane attempt to impress those present.

The last and third scene of the triptych takes place the following day in the course of a Sunday afternoon and evening when the group attends a rock concert at La Loma (The Hill). Known in the novel by its common noun, its description seems to coincide with the Loma del Capiro, an elevation occupied by the revolutionaries under the command of Ernesto (Che) Guevara during their offensive against the Batista government in 1958. The actual elevation, as well as the novel's fictionalized version, is consecrated as a monument and provides a space for political and artistic acts such as the one the young people were attending. Once the concert ended, the six of them remained sitting on the stage, perspiring from dancing, and in different stages of undress. After having spent some time smoking marijuana, drinking rum, and having sex, they decided "to play death" (jugar a la muerte), but this time it was Yenia who suggested it. The reader then learns through the narrator that they were used to playing that game before meeting Bianka. However, their version of the game lacked any ludic elements. It simply consisted of attempting against one's own life. The winner was he or she who successfully killed him or herself rather than waiting to die eventually as the victim of an accident or of any other event over which he or she had no control. Suicide here is seen as a form of empowerment. The philosophy of life that seemed to animate the players was "La vida es una mierda. La gente ni siquiera puede morirse de la manera que desea. Por eso es mejor morirse que estar vivo."[49]

49. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 99.

It becomes clear then that what seemed to upset Yenia in Bianka's actions when she had slit her wrists or played Russian roulette had not been so much that Bianka had attempted something that Yenia thought unthinkable, but rather that Bianka's attempts at self-destruction did not answer a vital necessity. For Yenia suicide is not a game. What she perceived in Bianka's attitude and actions is revealed when she says of the Italian woman: "A ver si es dura de verdad. Cualquiera se da un tajo en la muñeca y suelta un poco de sangre. Quién sabe si la bala del revólver era una salva. Quizá lo hizo nada más que para impresionarnos. A ver si tiene valor para morirse ahora mismo."[50] The narrator further describes Yenia's state of mind as follows: "Está resentida contra la sombra, que se cree mejor porque es extranjera, tiene un revolver con empuñadura de nácar y puede liar porros, descaradamente, en público."[51] Yenia appears to think that to Bianka attempting suicide was only a way of pushing a quasi-aesthetic experience to its limit; it was more a luxury than a necessity felt by someone who does not see any other alternative to the life she is destined to live. Understandably, her words reveal that part of the resentment that she feels is elicited by the privileged status of foreign tourists in Cuba, but it goes beyond that. It seems to be related to her perception that for Bianka suicide is not commensurate with the importance of the issues that would drive Yenia and others like her to do it because Bianka's life experiences would not resemble those that lead them to conclude that "la vida es una mierda."[52]

Once they assumed Yenia's challenge, every one of them left the hill to attempt against his or her life as he or she had chosen. Yenia decided to die of "droga y alcohol,

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50. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 98.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 99.

de hambre e inanición, de soledad y de frío"[53] and to drown if nothing else worked. To accomplish this she covered her otherwise naked body with a large blouse that reached half way down her legs, and she took a northerly direction with only a couple of marihuana cigarettes, determined to reach the coast even if she had to crawl. Barring collapse, she intended to walk into the sea until the waters covered her and she disappeared. Similarly, Susy took off barefoot and almost naked, but in a southerly direction. El Ripiao resolved to hurl himself down from the hill where the concert took place, and to improve the probability that his attempt at suicide was successful he removed the bicycle's hand breaks and chain. He also removed his shoes to ensure that the pain would keep him from instinctively trying to stop the bicycle with his feet. El Flaco, wanting to be shot and aware of the response his actions would elicit from the state security apparatus, decided to walk up to a police officer and start insulting the government. He was ready to threaten the officer with having a bomb detonate in order to provoke his wrath. We later learn that they all failed in their attempts.

Yuri and Bianka remained standing at the verge of the precipice that bounded the hill on one side after the others had left, Bianka perched as if she were a bird intending to take flight. It was then that Yuri begged her not to leave him alone. He explained that he did not want to die until he had the opportunity to stamp her image on a canvass, and he ran downhill frantically screaming the name of Yenia. The text indicates that the young man "sintió a sus espaldas el sonido de un cuerpo que se despeña[ba] en los riscos,"[54] and the reader is left to assume that Bianka had plunged down the steep hillside. Yuri would

53. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 99.

54. Ibid., 105.

be the last known person to have seen Bianka alive, which contributed to why César was willing to contemplate a scenario in which Yuri was the prime suspect of Bianka's disappearance.

How Bianka's acquaintance with Yuri and Yenia manifests itself in the course of these three scenes has the effect of highlighting different elements involved in the twins' suicidal tendencies that would otherwise remain indistinct, making it more difficult for us to conjecture how their suicidal behavior may be related to a broader cultural context. In this respect, Bianka's role is analogous to that of a prism with respect to light. Just as a prism is capable of dispersing the spectral components of a ray of light, Bianka in her relations to the group is capable of clarifying the issues prompting them to seek to end their own lives as belonging to roughly two categories. One set of issues concerns primarily family relations, while the other seems to be related to the quest for a transcendent fulfillment that can only be reached in –or through– death. The result is a picture far more nuanced about the motivations behind their actions than that conveyed by César when he refers to Yuri and Yenia dismissively as simply "un par de locos,…un par de suicidas de mierda,…marihuaneros y alcohólicos,…los hijos que crían los dirigentes del partido,…la mierda."[55] Pointing out the relative improvement that a death freely chosen represents for the young people with respect to a life in which they are powerless to follow their desires, the text in the third scene redirects the reader's attention to the realm where power relations are played out, the political sphere. Because the broader realm of politics seems to affect Yuri and Yenia most to the extent that it impinges in the much more intimate world of the family, politics refers in this case to

55. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 186.

power relations within the family. Therefore, while their criticism implicates the larger society and institutions such as the government, its focus remains primarily the domestic sphere, particularly the twins' relationship with their mother.

From a very early age Yuri and Yenia's family situation was not an ideal one. Their father, Arsenio Padrón, had left illegally for the United States to avoid facing the legal consequences of having embezzled resources belonging to the state enterprise he administered. Mirta Sardiñas, the twin's mother, who had married Arsenio for the benefits that accrued to his position in the Communist Party, suddenly found herself facing a set of unattractive choices. She could have followed Arsenio into exile with the children as he had initially proposed, but she was unwilling to start a new life in a foreign country without the privileges to which she had grown accustomed as a party militant; or she could have resigned herself to face the lower social status and political stigma to which she would have been exposed if Arsenio had ended up in prison. In either case she had not been willing to go through the ordeal with the children. Had she decided to leave the country she would have had to "cargar con los muchachos"[56]; had she stayed and Arsenio had been imprisoned, she would have been left "para colmo de males, criando sola el par de chiquillos (¡otra vez los chiquillos!)."[57] At the end she had decided to shield herself as much as possible from political repercussions by staying in Cuba and calculatingly adding her name to the list of Arsenio's accusers. Choosing that course of action allowed her to distance herself from the counterrevolutionary elements with which her husband's name would be associated henceforward not only as a result of the

56. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 116.

57. Ibid., 117.

embezzlement of which he was accused, but also as a result of leaving the country if he managed not to be caught. Recognizing that to many her denunciation of Arsenio at that stage might appear insufficiently contrite, she also submitted herself to an autocritique in which she confessed her shame at having benefited from his shady business deals and promised to make of the children "paradigmas de jóvenes revolucionarios."[58]

As revealed by how burdensome she considered the children to be, it is evident that the family was not an overriding concern for Mirta. This would partly explain why she had chosen to characterize Arsenio to the children as a traitor to the fatherland without regards for the impact that such a course of action could end up having on family life. However, it is not until the narrator reveals the events surrounding Yenia's expulsion from school that we begin to have an indication of what the children feel about Mirta's particular way of reconciling her duties as parent and party militant. It is also then that it becomes clear how Mirta's choices may have contributed to her children's rejection of her and their eventual recourse to suicide as an escape from what they considered to be an untenable living situation. As an adolescent Yenia had been expelled from the state boarding school she attended accused of committing "immoral acts" with another student with whom she maintained a lesbian relationship. An argument between mother and daughter ensued the day Mirta learned of the incident, and they had not talked to each other since. Significantly, that day Mirta had found Yenia in her bedroom reading a book of poems by Alejandra Pizarnik. There is nothing unusual about a parent's disappointment and anger when confronted with the expulsion from school of one's child. Neither is it unheard of, given Cuba's social history, for a Cuban parent to be angry

58. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 118.

and disappointed upon discovery that one's own child is homosexual, especially when the child's homosexuality becomes publicly known and causes a scandal such as the one that resulted in Yenia's expulsion. The familial context of Mirta and Yenia's argument and how their disagreement is manifested, however, seems to suggest that there is more to their conflict, that perhaps there is another source of hostility. Yenia hints to that other source of hostility when she subsequently hangs a sign on her bedroom door that read "Es preferible ser inmoral que tener una moral doble."[59] Mirta responded by tearing the sign down, which only provoked Yenia to replace it with one much larger and brighter.

The sign could have been a way for Yenia to affirm the relative decency of acknowledging before others her homosexual relationship instead of concealing it from public view as she had done before being discovered and expelled, or it could have been a way to impugn Mirta's morality, an indication of how much Yenia attributed Mirta's general conduct to a benefit/cost analysis and not to firmly-held moral convictions, political or otherwise. Given Mirta's initial reaction toward the posting of the sign and the resulting dysfunctional environment that prevailed in the home, one has to assume that Mirta understood it to be a denunciation of her conduct, a denunciation that Mirta felt incapable or unwilling to refute in light of Yenia's imperviousness to the social or political consequences of a scandal. Interestingly, Mirta's abstention from pursuing a more confrontational course of action with Yenia lends credence to Yenia's accusation concerning Mirta's modus operandi, since a more confrontational posture would have most likely caused Yenia to react in ways that would have been more difficult for Mirta to conceal and keep from damaging her own public image.

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59. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 81.

Yenia's opinion of Mirta's integrity is confirmed by the relish she took when contemplating the potential negative consequences that Yuri´s arrest would have on her mother. As Yuri's only available parent and guardian, Mirta had been contacted and forced by the police to become involved in the ensuing investigation and legal process. Yenia was convinced that the stress her mother was undergoing had more to do with how negatively a child's arrest would reflect on a Communist party militant's career than with any genuine pain felt by a woman in similar circumstances. One can only conjecture how much it had to delight Yenia to see Mirta facing the possibility of losing the privileges for which she had not hesitated to sacrifice the family. Now it was family obligations that threatened to undo what Mirta had accomplished at their expense, and it was truly ironic that Mirta could not evade acting in a manner becoming of a mother without also risking causing a bad impression before those, like César, who wielded some power over her son's, and her fate.

To avoid the temptation of thinking that Yenia's reading of her mother's predicament was the result of wishful thinking on Yenia's part, one only has to examine how the text describes Mirta's exchange with César when she visited the police station following Yuri's arrest. She felt that she had to act as firmly and disinterestedly as her position within the Communist Party ideologically required, while mollifying César sufficiently to keep the scandal involving her son from gaining greater notoriety and endangering her career. However, she does not succeed on either count arguably because those two objectives were at cross-purposes in César's mind. César began to form an opinion of her from the moment she is announced. The text describes Mirta Sardiñas as "el nombre con que la gente tiembla cuando el Partido avisa las inspecciones de control a

los municipios. Mirta la dura, la que apodan Margaret Thatcher y que se siente feliz con la comparación que refuerza su imagen férrea."[60] Her authority is conveyed by her handshake, which defied the sexist stereotypes that César certainly held. She shook his hand firmly, "como lo hubiera hecho cualquier otro hombre"[61] instead of as a woman, who, according to César "entrega su manita y se la deja aprisionar por el macho."[62] Her image as a dedicated Party member was further enhanced by her fastidious concern with the avoidance of any action that might communicate an appearance of partiality when she refused to see her son in jail saying to César "No muchas gracias. Supongo que eso sería violar alguna regla y no debemos. ¿No cree usted?"[63] Unfortunately, in light of her initial objective, Mirta overplayed her hand when she refused. What she could have gained in probity as party militant she lost in César's eyes as mother and human being. All César managed to think was "¿Qué cojones quiere esta puta que puede rehusar fríamente ver a su hijo preso? ¿Qué cojones busca esta puta que no ha sido capaz de decir la palabra *hijo* ni una sola vez en toda la conversación?"[64] At that point César started to realize that Mirta was willing to sacrifice the family for a political system that she must consider a greater good, and her attitude scandalized him.

However, it is not until the end of her visit that César perceived that the greater good for her was defined by self-interest rather than by the ideological purity her conduct

60. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 48.

61. Ibid., 49.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., 50.

64. Ibid.

and reputation seemed to proclaim. The narrative voice describes what transpires in the following manner.

> Mirta se inclina sobre el banco. Abre su portafolio y saca su tarjeta de presentación. Una modesta tarjeta blanca, de cartulina rústica y con caracteres en negro. . . .
>
> Él toma la tarjeta en la mano y la observa por un instante. Le sorprende que ya hasta los funcionarios del Partido usen tarjetas de presentación.[65]

This scene provides an insight into what Mirta considers a greater good, and therefore, into her value system. There is in César´s surprise the acknowledgement that the use of business cards is alien to what communist officials ware once supposed to be. Lest one is tempted to assume that business card use is in any way remarkable to César because it represents an excess formerly shunned by party militants but indulged in now, one should point out that the text reveals that César was aware of the privileges enjoyed by members of the Party before receiving Mirta's business card. Moreover, that the card described is rather ordinary as business cards go further detracts from its possible significance as a sign of privilege. The card is said to be modest, with black characters printed on ordinary cardboard; it is not engraved on high-quality paper stock. The card causes César to be surprised not because it is indicative of a party member's indiscipline, but because it represents fundamental changes alien to the party's ideology that have been affecting Cuban society as a whole, and are now creeping into the organization until then responsible for leading the efforts to construct socialism. With *paladares*, the promotion of foreign tourism, and the dollarization of the economy, the use of business cards signals the adoption of ways of doing business formerly associated with capitalist economies, and this undermines the ideological purity the revolution once promoted. In Mirta's hand,

65. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 51.

the card has the effect of identifying her with a posture of ideological capitulation, which undermines the firmness and resolve that she had endeavored to project as party militant in her dealings with César. More importantly, insofar as the card is an indication of her willingness to compromise principles, it is equally an indication of Mirta´s willingness to subject her actions to the amoral benefit/cost analysis with which Yenia imputes her. Seen this way, César's pause upon receiving her card signals his realization about whom Mirta really is, a realization that –again– lends further credence to Yenia's opinion of her mother.

For Yenia, the most immediate consequence of Mirta's willingness to compromise for personal gain was the loss of a home life that she still idealized in childlike fashion, thus for her

> Una verdadera casa debe tener una puerta en el centro y dos ventanas a cada lado. . . . Una casa perfecta debe tener un caminito que sale de su puerta y conduce a un río. Una casa debe tener al frente un jardín con flores y hierbas medicinales. . . . En la cocina de una casa que se respete debe haber calor y vaho de frijoles negros sazonados con comino.[66]

The description resembles a child's drawing of a house, an image that probably originated in her childhood when she most likely began to wish for the family life that never materialized. Mirta's feverish dedication to her career and advancement within the system had resulted in her abandonment of the children. Only Yuri could palliate the sense of loneliness she felt in a house devoid of family warmth. He was her entire family. They shared the same experiences, which is why they can both laugh when Yuri compares how cold their home's hearth (*fogón*) is with the prose of Virgilio Piñera. He is the one who, absent anyone else, became Yenia's entire family fulfilling the role of lover

66 Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 84.

as well as that of brother. That is why to some extent it should not surprise us that, upon learning of Yuri's arrest, Yenia resolved to kill Mirta in retaliation. Although the manner she chose to retaliate is excessive, to make Mirta the object of her retaliation is not. For Yenia any danger that befell Yuri at that point had to result from either the dysfunctional home life created by Mirta, or from Mirta's not doing everything in her power to intervene on Yuri's behalf if she thought her own interests would be compromised. Therefore, in Yenia's eyes, she was responsible for Yuri's fate. At the end, Yuri commits suicide while in police custody, and Yenia kills her mother before killing herself, thus avenging his death.

Just as faced with a dysfunctional home life Yuri became the object of Yenia's familial affections, Yenia fulfilled a similar function for Yuri. She was her twin sister, but her protective posture turned her into a mother figure. Additionally, she was his lover. However, even though sexual attraction is a component of their relationship, it does not account by itself for the nature of Yuri's attachment to her since –as Yuri admits– he is really neither attracted sexually to women nor men, only to Yenia. The most significant difference between how Yenia and Yuri conceptualized the family is that he considered his paintings his family as much as he considered Yenia family. In fact, to the extent that the paintings share in Yenia's identity "sus cuadros son una extension de Yenia. Ella es parte de sus cuadros."[67] Yennia was present in his painting as a subject in works that the narrative voice sometimes finds evocative of El Greco and the satirical drawings of Goya. Works such as a photographically realistic drawing of Yenia naked, crucified with penises instead of nails, wearing a crown of pieces of broken glass that grip her flesh, and

67. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 11.

showing a snake coming out of her vagina, combine grotesque images with otherworldly concerns. She was also present in his paintings in very physical terms, for Yuri made her part of his medium. He would paint her body. He would also incorporate her physically to his work by mixing her vaginal fluid and menstrual blood with his pigments. Sometimes with their bodies painted, they would make love and roll on the surface to be painted, thus creating a work of art that would be the trace left by the violence of their sexual act. One cannot avoid the impression that it is arguably the capacity of his paintings to capture and communicate the erotic dimension of their relationship that allows Yuri to consider his paintings an extension of his sister.

Taking into account Bataille's observations about the nature of eroticism, it is the erotic dimension of their relationship that pulls Yuri towards his objects of desire, Yenia and –by extension– his paintings. The erotic pull promotes his dissolution as Yuri transcends the boundaries of his discontinuous existence and comes closer to death as a result. For Yuri, however, death is not simply a byproduct of his desire for her; it is a door that he consciously comes to identify as giving him access to a realm where his erotic quest can be fulfilled. Rather than seeing in suicide an escape from an unbearable existence, from this perspective suicide appears to be a conscious way of attaining something more. Ironically, it is Yenia who gives voice to this conception of suicide when she consigns to writing her reverie about Yuri's ideal death after finding out he has been arrested. In a written monologue that clearly presupposes their previous conversations and from which one may infer Yuri and Yenia's agreement on the matter being addressed, Yenia says to Yuri rhetorically "Vas a la muerte eterna. Porque nada

más puede haber. Nada más grande, perfecto y glorioso."[68] Although no elaboration is made about what lies beyond, clearly death is seen as something to which one flees, and not simply a way escape an undesirable situation. To the extent that what lies beyond is transcendent, that is, to the extent that it belongs to a realm which we cannot hope to know through ordinary experience, we are dealing with a religious reality and an experience that resists being apprehended adequately in words. Thus understandably Yuri resorts to painting as a way to approach it.

As Bataille argues, eroticism may be thought to be as a special form of reproductive activity that involves assenting to life to the point of death,[69] a quality aptly captured by Yenia when she describes the postponed orgasm in which her and Yuri's sexual act ends as a "bendición inevitable"[70] y "como la misma muerte."[71] These descriptions remit the reader to a religious register. Human beings reach erotically the point of death through the violence of the sexual act, a violence that in human consciousness constitutes an internal disequilibrium leading them to call their own discontinuous beings into question as they lose their identity in a process of identification with their lovers that causes them to reel towards annihilation.[72] Bataille considers the process nothing less than a moment of decisive religious feeling.[73] However, for eroticism to exist the object of desire must have been previously forbidden. Bataille

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68. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo en el viento*, 176.

69. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 11.

70. Lunar Cardedo, *Polvo*, 66.

71. Ibid.

72. Bataille, 31.

73. Ibid., 113.

theorizes that prohibition emerged in the course of human evolution by setting limits and taboos that excluded the sexual act and its inherent violence from the area of life dedicated to work. It was necessary for the development of civilization that order prevail at the expense of the pursuit of imminent pleasure, which, without restrains, threatened to overwhelm the rational calculus required to postpone immediate gratification for the sake of a latter reward.[74] Clearly, the stronger the desire that propels a human being towards his object of desire, the more he experiences the deterring power of taboos used to circumscribe sexual activity. Eroticism demands of the individual "sensitivity to the anguish at the heart of the taboo"[75] as well as "to the desire that leads him to infringe it."[76] This is a sensitivity that is religious, according to Bataille, and that links desire with terror.[77] In light of Bataille's conception of eroticism, one may see in the twins' obsession with death, in the superlative attributes he and Yenia ascribe to it, and in their flirtation with suicide a desire to experience, through suicide, a reality that would not only deliver them from the alienation they felt as a result of their family life, but also a door through which they could access a religious dimension of existence. Having sexual relations with each other would have intensified to a higher degree their anguish at crossing the boundary socially set to limit sexual activity. Such an experience would sensitize them to the religious dimension involved in merging with the transcendent reality that Bataille subsumes under the term "continuity."

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74. Bataille, *Eroticism*, 40-42.

75. Ibid., 38.

76. Ibid., 39.

77. Ibid.

What strikes the reader of Lunar Cardedo's *Polvo en el viento*, whether one looks at suicide as a way to escape and avenge through death an intolerable family situation, or as a way to reach a transcendent state, is the extent to which Yuri or Yenia's decision to commit suicide ultimately avoids engaging Cuba's sociopolitical context even when the pervasiveness of that context could have easily justified the engagement. Yuri and Yenia consciously withdraw into an intimate world, and only a disruption of that intimate world proved strong enough to suggest suicide as an option. Both Yuri and Yenia suffer neglect from a mother who dedicates her time and energy to advance her position as worker and Communist Party member, but one is left with the impression that the state industry that benefits from her job performance and the party that benefits from her dedication are just incidental to the family dysfunctions. The criticism the children level at Mirta has more to do with her character. Therefore, one is convinced that the decisions she made with respect to work, the family, or the political institutions would have had a similarly negative effect on her relationship with the children regardless of the place or political system within which she ended up making them. The extent to which the novel divorces the twins' decision to commit suicide from its sociopolitical setting would not be remarkable, were it not for the sensitivity this particular novel otherwise displays to the political and economic challenges faced in everyday life. For example, through the narrator and some of the characters we become aware of the effects on society of the dollarization of the economy, the privileges enjoyed by foreign visitors, the inaccessibility of goods and services, the high level of drug consumption by Cuban youth, widespread prostitution, the corruption of public officials and party members, and the persistent discrimination of gay people even though almost three decades separate the

period in which the action takes place from the UMAP camps. It is remarkable too because the Cuban detective novel has long been a consciously ideological genre, first as an experimental exercise in the creation of the socialist detective novel, and later as an instrument in the hands of younger writers to dismantle and question the socialist novel that the government promoted since 1971. Lastly, the degree to which the twins' decision to commit suicide avoids engaging any aspect of the Cuban sociopolitical reality is remarkable because of the degree that voluntarily ending one's own life became a part of Cuban nationalist discourse since the nineteenth century.

Just as it survived the historical watershed marked by 1902, the centrality of the nationalist discourse that emerged from the struggle for independence proved its resilience by surviving the transition marked by the Castro revolution of 1959. In many respects it was reinvigorated as the new regime sought legitimacy by eventually presenting itself as the heir and culmination of the wars for independence that began in 1868. Its eventual slogan disjunctively proclaiming *Patria o muerte* unmistakably tapped into the same formulations that had galvanized Cubans in the previous century. Moreover, to the idea of sacrificing one's life in order to bring the fatherland into existence, the Revolution added the idea of a continuous sacrifice in order to protect the revolution and economically develop the nation.[78] However, as with other aspects of Cuban life, the Revolution's increasing tilt to the left during the 1960s led to changes in how taking one's own life began to be seen from the State's perspective when the nation's imminent survival was not at stake. In the new political context, suicide was no longer an acceptable option for individual subjects that committed the act for personal

78. Pérez, 341.

reasons. It was incompatible with the "new man" the revolution was attempting to forge, since the interests of the collectivity were supposed to transcend his or her own.[79] Suicide became politically stigmatized.

Although the limited concessions to a market economy introduced in the 1990s, when the action of *Polvo en el viento* takes place, represent a departure from previous State policy, similar ideological adjustments did not take place to remove the stigma attached to suicides. Yuri and Yenia's suicides show the strength to overcome one of human nature's most instinctual drives –that of self-preservation– a strength that constitutes an asset to a political system that has call on its citizens for decades to resist whatever imperiled its own existence and a strength to which Eliseo Alberto alludes when he states that "matarse en Cuba es vencerse."[80] Nevertheless, their suicides are incompatible with the ethics of the new man. For that matter, none of the suicide attempts that take place in the course of *Polvo en el viento* would be compatible, but that would not be necessarily of consequence for the Cuban polity, as long as the acts of suicide are not imbued with a political significance that challenges the regime. Far more significant is the apparent lack of relevance that the world, outside the most immediate environments represented by the family and romantic interests, seems to have for their decision to take their own lives. That lack of relevance would seem to reveal a voluntary turning away from narratives involving larger communities such as the nation, hometown, or any other collectivity more amenable to political mobilization where one would expect the galvanizing power of nationalist discourse still to exercise its power. Deprived of a way to motivate the citizenry by way of the rhetoric inherited from the earliest days of a

79. Pérez, 350.

80. Eliseo Alberto, *Informe contra mí mismo* (Mexico: Extra Alfaguara, 1997), 55.

Cuban political consciousness, the revolution would seem to be increasingly incapable of enlisting the support of the general population in the face of further sacrifices without an apparent end in sight. That is the cautionary message provided by Yuri's, Yenia's, and the other suicides in *Polvo en el viento*.

Conclusion

> …I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*.
>
> —Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*

The loss of economic support from the Socialist bloc after 1989 forced the Cuban government to choose between ideological orthodoxy and political survival. Either the government made strategic concessions in favor of an economic model that it had rejected until then, or it risked collapsing as it tried to subsist in a global environment at the mercy of free-market forces. Understandably, the Cuban leadership chose a path of strategic economic reforms that included the promotion of foreign tourism and the legalization of the United States dollar. Although such a choice promised political survival, it also presented ideological contradictions that would reverberate in Cuba for the rest of the century and beyond.

The reforms began to produce positive results by 1996, and domestic products previously only available through the state's rationing book began to appear in private markets. With the aim of gaining access to the foreign currency in circulation, the state opened special stores where Cubans could purchase products previously unavailable with the recently legalized United States dollars. The influx of hard currency from increased foreign tourism and from the surge in remittances from abroad –primarily from Cuban exiles– began to change the economy in more fundamental ways. A social hierarchy and a second-tier economy developed predicated on having access to the dollar. Those in occupations that brought them in contact with foreign tourists able to remunerate them in hard currency became members of a privileged class regardless of past educational and political achievements. Some of them were free-lance professionals and artists. Others

were simply ordinary Cubans with relatives abroad. They too could insert themselves in the new economy by virtue of the remittances received from those relatives whose departure from the island had relegated them in most instances to the category of undesirable counterrevolutionary elements in another era. The economic improvements notwithstanding, the reforms became a source of anxiety for the regime as soon as its survival seemed assured. Apprehensive of the changes that it had set in motion, the government tried to rein in the incipient capitalist forces that were changing Cuban society by increasing the tax rates on the emergent private sector and by intensifying its supervision of state administrators who occupied privileged positions in Cuba's new socioeconomic landscape.[1]

However, the consequences of the reforms introduced in the 1990s were not strictly economic; they were also discursive and posed an ideological threat. As the economic shortages of the early 1990s forced the government to shrink its role as cultural patron in order to dedicate its diminishing resources to meet more immediate needs, social spaces opened where conforming to the officially sanctioned ideology was not as crucial to the average Cuban's subsistence. Emphasizing previous revolutionary discursive formulations of nationality had the potential of interfering with the state-sponsored reforms on the success of which rested the likelihood that the island would overcome its economic challenges. If up until the outbreak of the Special Period Cubans had been asked to identify the nation with a community defined by a Soviet-style socialism coextensive with the national territory, in the future Cubans would increasingly be asked to look for their unifying elements in their cultural tradition. The need for hard

1. Ariana Hernández-Reguant, "Writing the Special Period: An Introduction," in *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*, ed. Ariana Hernández-Reguant (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5-7.

currency and international legitimacy after the fall of the Berlin Wall led the state to seek external support by casting a broader identitarian net that would include –albeit hesitatingly– a part of the exiled community and that would accord more with "multicultural trends internationally in vogue."[2]

The government's response to the exigencies of the international environment in the 1990s eventually disappointed observers who expected structural changes that would mirror those that led to the demise of the regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Once it became apparent to the government that it would be able to survive the worst of the crisis thanks to the economic reforms, it took steps to curtail any of the byproducts of those reforms with an oppositional potential. Starting in 1994 it raided rooftops and dismantled the antennas that Cubans had installed in order to receive transmission signals from United States radio and television stations. Later, beginning in 1995, it closed spaces such as the Pablo Milanés Foundation and the Centro de Estudios de América that could inure Cubans to state-enforced discursive practices. It also approved legislation in 1996 and 1999 designed to crack down further on the exercise of free speech.[3] In short, the government left no doubts about the reasons why it had approved certain reforms. The reforms' goals had been to ensure the regime's survival, not to liberalize it.

However, unlike economic reforms and human conduct, which can be criminalized, the effects of discursive changes that touched on what it meant to be Cuban turned out to be less easily undone by edict. Perhaps for that reason, according to Ariana

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2. Ariana Hernández-Reguant, "Multicubanidad," in *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*, ed. Ariana Hernández-Reguant (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 70.

3. Ibid., "Writing the Special Period: An Introduction," in *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*, ed. Ariana Hernández-Reguant (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7.

Hernandez-Reguant, "anxiety over identity filled the revolutionary government"[4] as late as 1998. The object of this study has been to analyze how that anxiety made itself felt as a preoccupation with sites of social abjection in three representative works of detective fiction produced during the post-Soviet period. The relevance of abjection to the constitution and maintenance of a particular collective identity, such as the nation, is predicated on a Kristevan understanding of the psychopolitical role of the abject. The fact that, according to Kristeva, the abject lies at the edges of the symbolic order gives individuals embodying that abjection the capacity to mark the boundaries of the group that sustains that order. I focused on three embodiments of the abject –namely, the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide– because they played a critical role in the formulation of Cuba's nationalist discourse in the nineteenth century. As such, their role may be used as a reference point to establish the degree to which the nation conformed to its ideal. Two factors contribute to the suitability of the detective novel as a window into the identitarian anxieties affecting Cubans during the post-Soviet period. The first is the capacity of the genre (especially its hard-boiled variant) to reveal reality at the social margins, where the abject lies. The second is Cuban detective fiction's prominent role as a politically marked literary genre. Having been explicitly promoted by the government as an instrument of socialist propaganda in the early 1970s, Cuban detective fiction was susceptible to reflecting changes in the relationship between the state and the cultural establishment during the post-Soviet period perhaps to a greater degree than other literary genres.

Chapter one of this dissertation analyzed the reassessment that Leonardo Padura's *Máscaras* undertakes of the place occupied by the male homosexual in Cuban civic life.

4. Ibid., "Multicubanidad," 70.

The chapter reaffirmed *Máscaras* politically contestatory character relaying on José Maristany's insights into the strategies used by Argentina's writers during that country's last military dictatorship. Often presented as Padura´s attempt to dismantle Cuba´s homophobic discourse, *Máscaras* has also been criticized for allegedly being complicit with that discourse by having a plotline that reaffirms the heterosexist ideology that made it possible. Chapter 1 made it clear that the contradictory plotline might be read as a strategy of containment implemented to avoid censorship similar to the strategies used by Argentines in the 1970s and 1980s. The chapter then urged the reader to go beyond the plotline in order to see in Padura's text a proposal for a pluralistic society where the participation of the homosexual in civic life is not questioned.

Chapter 2 examined the preoccupation caused by the public reappearance of female prostitution during the post-Soviet period. More specifically, it attempted to answer a question lying behind much of that preoccupation: do the visible emergence and the apparent acceptance of the prostitute –or *jinetera*– in the 1990s signal a fundamental change in the moral values of the Cuban people? In other words, has the moral features of the national character changed sufficiently to affect a change in the nation's identity? Chapter 2 looked for an answer to that question in Amir Valle's novel *Las puertas de la noche*. Although *Jineteras* –the hybrid work comprising much of the research on which the novel is based– only registers the severity of the problem, *Las puertas* suggests that *jineterismo* is a temporary symptom of the dire economic situation the country suffered at a given historical juncture.

Lastly, chapter 3 examined Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo´s treatment of suicides during the same period in *Polvo en el viento*. The chapter traced the reasons for the assimilation

of suicide to Cuba's nationalist discourse during the independence struggles of the nineteenth century and suicide's subsequent transformation into an appropriate response before some of life's circumstances in times of peace. It then proceeded to find in *Polvo en el viento* evidence of a contemporary generation for which sacrificing one's life has become disconnected from any socially sanctioned political project. Instead, those who attempt against their own lives in the novel are largely motivated by more personal concerns that include familial relations, erotic attraction, and the attainment of a transcendent fulfillment that eludes them in the realm of the living. Relying on the work of Georges Bataille, chapter 3 limns the connection between erotism, death, and religion that turned suicide into a self-actualizing path for the young characters depicted in the novel.

Each of the works in this dissertation registers a change in perspective with respect to a marginal figure whose place with respect to the national project seemed to have been settled approximately a century before. However, more important than what these works tell us about the male homosexual, the female prostitute, and the suicide, it is when, and how insistent these works are in their treatment of these figures. Although marginal characters abound in hard-boiled fiction, their prominence in the works examined here leaves the reader with the impression that they were written with the sole purpose of providing a vehicle for their authors' reflections about these characters place in contemporary Cuba. That can even be said about *Polvo en el viento*, whose author, Lunar Cardedo, acknowledges not noticing the centrality of the suicide in his novel until he was about to finish it.[5] These doubly marginal figures became, almost reflexively, sources of preoccupation under the strains of a crisis that tested the meaning of what it

5. Lunar Cardedo, personal communication, 3 September 2008.

meant to be Cuban in the post-Soviet period. Firstly, the figures are marginal because their conduct had either been previously deemed incompatible with a model nation or else because –in the case of suicides– its compatibility with public virtue had been limited by conceptions of patriotism and honor that do not obtain in the contemporary instances examined. Secondly, they are marginal because they blur the boundaries of symbolic categories according to Mary Douglas's insights into the nature of ritual pollution and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. While Stephen Wilkerson and Persephone Braham have recognized Cuban detective fiction as a window into the state of the country's society and culture, I propose in this study that identifying the location and role of social sites of abjection is essential in determining what the state of the country's society and culture are. According to Kristeva, excluding the abject is necessary to support the symbolic order. To the extent that the symbolic order includes the nation, excluding those who embody abjection would be crucial to the maintenance of the nation's identity and therefore to the nation's society and culture. Indeed, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva broadens the scope of the exclusionary movement of the abject she outlines in *The Powers of Horror* by theorizing the necessity of the foreigner for the existence of the nation-state. However, Kristeva proceeds to lay down a framework for an ethics based on the recognition that the abjection we associate with those whom we exclude is already a part of our psychological constitution, of our unconscious.[6] Relying on Heidegger's idea of the nothing, Kristeva's realization can contribute, according to Noëlle McAfee, to an ethics –and a politics– of respect for irreconcilable difference.[7] In

6. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 16.

7. Noëlle McAfee, "Abject Strangers: Toward an Ethics of Respect," in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Rutledge, 1993), 130.

that case, locating social sites of abjection in Cuban detective fiction would not only help us determine what the state of the country's society and culture are, but also what the state of the country's society and culture could be.

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